From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, Southwest China experienced remarkable political, economic, demographic, and cultural changes. To fully understand these transformations requires coming to terms with a number of crucial variables, including geographical space. To date, however, our understanding of geography continues to be limited by long-standing conceptual and methodological approaches. Most notably, there are still too few studies that challenge the concept of “macroregions.”\(^1\) In a series of extraordinary articles in *The City in Late Imperial China*, William Skinner argued that by the late nineteenth century, China comprised nine separate urban systems, each occupying a major physiographic region of the country (see map 1). Each “macroregion” contained core and peripheral areas. Within a macroregion, each settlement—from marketing towns in the periphery to the great cities at the core—was linked in an interlocking marketing hierarchy. These urban systems developed along largely autonomous paths primarily because of high interregional transport costs.\(^2\)

Over the years, the macroregion model has attracted both critics and defenders, but recently there have been well-articulated arguments that question the model’s weakness in regard to long-distance trade and historicity.\(^3\) In a particularly trenchant critique, Carolyn Cartier notes how the macroregion model emphasizes geography and distance over human agency, an approach now deemed problematic and potentially ahistorical by many geographers.\(^4\) These findings are important for understanding Southwest China since the concept of macroregion has been used to shape our knowledge of early modern (Ming-Qing) developments there. In his brilliant work on southwest demography and economic transformation, James Lee drew from Skinner’s conception to argue that migration helped transform the south-
west (Yun-Gui) macroregion from “congeries of small, fairly autonomous enclaves into an integrated regional hierarchy of central places and their hinterlands.”

Lee includes long-distance trade analysis, but trade is envisioned primarily as a process of transferring resources from peripheries to cores, the implication being that historical transformations are best understood through the core-periphery model that is at the heart of the macroregion concept. As in Skinner’s work, core and periphery were determined according to population density. In Lee’s analysis of Yunnan Province, he created four categories—“inner core,” “outer core,” “near periphery,” and “outer periphery”—to simplify the conception of space and emphasize the orientation of the province toward the macroregional core in Yunnan and Chengjiang prefectures (the Kunming metropolis).

My own work has revealed a far messier landscape of human activity, particularly long-distance trade, which leads me to challenge the limitations of the macroregional approach to Southwest China. I begin with the assumption that the geographical patterns of human society and economy are shaped by human agency. Geography and climate do play a role, of course: a good harbor, a navigable river, plentiful rainfall, a strategic mineral deposit—any of these factors might prove advantageous for a location. How-
ever, as the literature on economic geography reveals, major events and the creation of human institutions to facilitate trade shape economic and social change. In nonindustrial societies, the human ability to radically alter economic geography is perhaps weaker than in industrial ones, but it did have an impact. This is particularly clear in Southwest China, where human institutions, networks, and historical events shaped long-distance trade and radically altered economic geography.

To demonstrate these changes, I focus on the “circulation” of copper and cotton, two goods that were central to the Yunnan economy during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The concept of “circulation” comes from a recent study of South Asia in which Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam defined it as the “movement to and fro of men and goods between one part of the subcontinent and another.” Circulation is more than mobility or trade, for circulation implies long-term relations of repeated flows that transform society. The goal of investigating circulation, then, is to gain new insights into forces that change a society. As initially envisioned by Markovits et al., this approach emphasized the placement of society (India) in a larger global perspective in order to examine the connections and interactions of the subcontinent with the wider world. I adopt this approach in order to evaluate the circulation of goods between Yunnan Province and three other regions: South China, Tonkin, and Burma. The idea is to remove the concept of a Yun-Gui macro-region and to instead look at how miners, merchants, and others were linked through circulation to the You/Yu/West River basin, South China, and the Guangdong ports; to the Red River basin, Hanoi, and the port of Haiphong; and to the overland routes of Burma and Siam (see map 2).

These circulation patterns were intimately related to the great transformations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Long-distance circulation linked specific towns and mines to consumers and producers far away in China and Southeast Asia. Circulation was influenced by and changed according to demographic, political, economic, and technological changes, and not all of these changes emanated from China itself. Circulation shaped historical change, including remarkable population growth and urbanization in areas usually labeled “peripheral” in the macroregions model. Networks and institutions that facilitated circulation differed from place to place, but the overall tendency was for states and merchants to innovate and develop techniques for facilitating circulation across the long distances and rough topography of the regions discussed here. In the end, Southwest China’s remarkable transformations are best understood not in terms of
autonomous macroregional growth alone but in terms of patterns of inter-regional circulation.

The period under consideration spans the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, when millions of settlers made Chinese the majority throughout Southwest China. Among those many migrants were merchants and miners, the central actors in this story of change. Others have noted the importance of these developments, including Victor Lieberman and Sun Laichen, who have linked Southwest China’s population explosion and commercialization to profound transformations in mainland Southeast Asia.9 I reverse their line of inquiry, asking not how Chinese developments affected Southeast Asia, but how commercialization throughout Eastern Eurasia (Southeast and East Asia) influenced Southwest China. While I build on the work of those who examined mining and copper transport, as well as those who examined the caravan trade between Yunnan and Southeast Asia, my approach nevertheless diverges from earlier work in several important ways.10 First, I consider the trade from Yunnan to South China alongside Southeast Asia trade. Second, I provide an initial inquiry into the dynamics of merchant institutions and state policies that facilitated circulation. The level of state intervention into the Southwest China economy increased dramatically in the aftermath of the Three Feudatories rebellion (1673–1681). In a some-
what (but not entirely) related development, Chinese merchant practices in Southwest China and upland Southeast Asia seemed to change dramatically over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the greatest growth and elaboration being from the early to late nineteenth century, a trend paralleling the expansion of the export fishing industry in Cambodia, in which Chinese were deeply involved (see Cooke, in this volume). Thus far it has proven challenging to clarify and analyze these transformations with precision, although they seem to reflect the extension of family and native place-based business practices at the heart of Chinese business structure since the early nineteenth century. Third, I argue that the important demographic and economic changes in Southwest China were not purely southwestern or even Chinese phenomena, meaning that southwest history cannot be written without reference to other parts of the Qing empire and Southeast Asia. The strong version of this argument therefore claims a central role for long-distance circulation in the major transformations of Southwest China.

Copper Circulation: Yunnan, Tonkin, and South China

From Tang and Song times, if not earlier, there were extensive exchanges between Yunnan, Tonkin, and South China. In Ming and Qing times, the scale of trade increased dramatically, and four main routes connected Yunnan to a larger world. The routes to Tonkin went from Yunnan via Yuanjiang or Mengzi, down the Red River valley to Hanoi and Haiphong. A second set of routes connected Yunnan via Baise (Bo’se) and Nanning to Beihai (Pakhoi) and Qinzhou, two bustling ports on the “Dragon Gate Sea” (Beibu Gulf). By the Daoguang reign (1821–1850), Qinzhou had a dense population and was importing Vietnamese rice along with betel, pepper, sugar, and leather. It attracted merchants from Guangxi, Yunnan, and Guizhou. A third set of routes to the maritime world also crossed overland from Yunnan’s Guangnan Prefecture through Baise and Nanning before following the You River (右江) as it flowed into the Yu River (郁江) through Guangxi into the West River and on to the Guangdong delta. A fourth route, used to transport copper from Yunnan to China’s prosperous eastern provinces, followed the You and Yu Rivers to Wuzhou city. The boats then turned north, going upstream to Guilin; eventually the copper was transhipped to the Xiang River and on to Changsha, Hankou, and Jiangnan.

One of the key commodities that drove these circulation regimes was copper. It is well known that growth in marketing and commerce during the late Ming and Qing periods fueled Chinese demand for money, whether silver (imported from the Americas), copper (some imported, some mined
domestically), or, increasingly, paper money and credit. It is also known that the new Qing regime assumed that state control of copper coinage (bronze “cash,” 銀) was central to maintaining order. Thus, the Qing created two metropolitan mints, the Baoyuan ju under the Board of Works and the Baoquan ju under the Board of Revenue, to oversee the casting of coins.14

The difficulties of managing the money supply were complicated by a number of factors. Before the 1680s, the Qing prevented coastal trade for strategic reasons, and the regime frequently experienced copper shortages because domestic supplies were weak. From 1684–1715, after coastal trade was permitted, the Qing relied on imported copper, mostly from Japan. However, China was not the only market for copper. By the late seventeenth century, demand for copper was high throughout Eastern Eurasia, much of this demand fueled by Chinese economic activity throughout the South China Sea (a phenomenon that has led Tony Reid to label the eighteenth century in Southeast Asia a “Chinese Century”).15 At this point, Southeast Yunnan mines increased output, and Tonkin merchants came to purchase copper at Lao Cai near Hekou.16 Both China and Vietnam relied on copper imports, and both states’ coinage was undermined when Japan began to limit copper exports in 1715. Copper became increasingly dear, and the eighteenth century was thus a period in which there was a copper coinage shortage in China and throughout the South China Sea trading world.17

Demand for copper was thus an important issue from the seventeenth century onward. From early on, the Qing and its agents sought to exploit Yunnan copper deposits, and Wu Sangui’s Yunnan-Guizhou regime (1662–1681), nominally under Qing suzerainty, promoted mining and traded copper coins in a market just to the north of Hekou on the Red River. Cantonese merchants sailed up the Red River to purchase these coins, which went into circulation in the Southeast Asian trading networks and, presumably, can be counted among the coins exported from China to Cochinchina (Li, this volume). In 1682, immediately after the Qing destroyed Wu’s autonomous government, Governor-General Cai Yurong initiated a program to expand Yunnan copper mining and coin minting in order to help pay for the conquest and reconstruction.18 Cai encouraged merchants to open and administer mines, rewarding them with government titles; the state taxed the mines at a 20 percent rate, leaving merchants free to sell the rest on the market.

Cai’s efforts marked the beginning of an era in which the central government tinkered with copper mining policies. In 1705, the state revamped its policies to make sure it captured the 80 percent of copper production that was previously sold on the open market. Local officials gained con-
control over mines, which had to provide at fixed prices all copper to the state. Whereas the 1682 policies led to increases in copper production, the 1705 policies curbed production. In 1723, as copper imports declined, the Yongzheng regime again permitted some private sales, and this helped ignite a major expansion of mining in Yunnan. Although China never stopped importing Japanese copper, Yunnan copper came to supply all the needs of the central government mints by 1738. Provincial mints, meanwhile, still relied on some Japanese copper, but increasingly they too were turning to Yunnan. In general, as the circulation of copper from Japan declined, the state and consumers in China began to look elsewhere for copper and coin supplies, and Yunnan gradually became the biggest supplier.

Qing China was not the only state to intervene in mining. Like China, Vietnam relied on copper (and zinc) imports to mint the coins that fed commercial growth (Li, this volume). When Japan curtailed copper exports, Tonkin’s Trinh rulers also turned to the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands, where veins of copper are found from the hills of Northeast Yunnan to those of northern Vietnam. The Trinh promoted mining in their territories and attracted tens of thousands of Chinese miners. Victor Lieberman has argued that Chinese mining settlements in Tonkin were crucial to helping Southeast Asia’s booming economy meet its needs for money. Chinese-run mines, in fact, may well have been the main non-agrarian industry in Vietnam.

It was becoming a central industry in Southwest China, too. From the 1720s through the mid-nineteenth century, Yunnan provided almost all the copper for the empire’s metropolitan and, later, the provincial mints, and the output was truly immense. In the 1720s, Yunnan was producing approximately 650 short tons (1 million jin) of copper annually; by the 1740s, it was producing over 6,500 short tons (10 million jin). Those who have studied copper mining estimate that output peaked in the late 1760s, at nearly 9,500 short tons (about 14.57 million jin), but high production levels continued into the early nineteenth century. Approximately 4,000 tons annually were earmarked for the metropolitan mints, and much of this was shipped from the great Northeast Yunnan mines via Sichuan and then down the Yangzi. The rest was kept for Yunnan provincial mints or shipped to other provinces. Since previous studies have emphasized the copper sent to the metropolitan Baojuan and Baoyuan Mints, I focus on the copper transported to the provincial mints.

By the 1730s, provinces around the empire were reporting severe coinage shortages. Sufficient foreign copper was no longer available in the coastal markets, and provincial officials petitioned for access to Yunnan copper.
By 1740, ten provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangxi, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, and Guizhou) had received permission to periodically send representatives to Yunnan to purchase copper (cai mai 採買 or cai tong 採銅), which would be used for minting coins in the provincial mints. These copper-buying missions were extremely important. Government-minted coins were used throughout the expanding commercial economy; people of all backgrounds and statuses needed coins. Thus, the copper purchases were vital to two government missions: providing for the people and paying the military. If the government could secure enough copper for casting coins, moreover, it could prevent the illicit casting of coins by private individuals, which was widespread in the mid-eighteenth century.24 Illicit coin production was so lucrative at this time, in fact, that it fueled zinc exports to Vietnam, which were crucial for the counterfeit coins imported into Guangdong (Li, this volume).

When provincial officials purchased Yunnan copper, they sent representatives to both northern and southeastern Yunnan mines. Quite often they were directed to the Jincha mine (金釵廠) in Lin’an Prefecture’s Mengzi County, a mine that was designated for cai mai. No matter where the copper was purchased, however, each province (except Guizhou) was required to ship it via Guangnan in Southeast Yunnan and on to Baise and Nanning in Guangxi.25 These shipments were huge, the smallest being 10,000 jin (6.5 short tons) while most were about 40,000 jin. From 1740–1811, Yunnan’s largest copper customer was Guizhou, but close on its heels were Guangxi and Guangdong, purchasing a minimum of 20 million jin (approximately 13,000 tons) over this seventy-two-year period.26 All of this was transported via Southeast Yunnan and Nanning, Guangxi.

Mining was thus central to the circulation regimes that both linked and divided China and Southeast Asia. The Trinh and Qing sought to intervene to control circulation in ways that benefited their respective regimes. With a significant exception of ca. 1705–1723, Eastern Eurasia’s growing commercial economy and state policies helped increase the copper supply. The significance of these findings lies not only in the fact that Yunnan’s copper was exported first to Tonkin and then around the Qing empire, but also in the major transformations in demographics, urban landscapes, and indigenous (non-Chinese) livelihoods. To satisfy the demand for borderland copper, thousands of Chinese migrated to Southeast Yunnan (and Tonkin). To measure these changes, we can examine the mining areas of Mengzi County and the trade town of Guangnan.

Within Mengzi lay two important mine complexes: Jincha, a copper min-
ing area, and Gejiu, which produced silver, tin, and copper. Neither mine was new (there was mining near Gejiu as early as the Han dynasty), but early modern commercialization in Eastern Eurasia, followed by state promotion of mining, encouraged the opening of mines throughout Yunnan, and both Jincha and Gejiu mines expanded rapidly.\textsuperscript{27} Expansion attracted an influx of miners, and by the late Qianlong period (1736–1795), an estimated 10,000 migrant miners worked these deposits; by the 1750s, the Gejiu sky was thick with smoke from the many smelting furnaces that contained their hard-won copper ore. As was so often the case, most migrant miners hailed from Huguang and Jiangxi, although some came from Shaanxi and Shanxi.\textsuperscript{28}

Following patterns that existed elsewhere, Mengzi expanded its role as a trade entrepôt as the miners arrived. Migrant merchants from Jiangxi, Fujian, and Huguang established their associations (huiguan) in the county seat. Jiangxi was actually represented by three merchant associations, one established by merchants hailing from Ji’an, another by merchants from Fuzhou and Ruizhou, and a third by merchants from Nanchang. In the Gejiu mining area, these merchants established branch associations. The earliest date for any of these institutions belongs to the Shoufo Temple of the Jiangxi natives, first built in 1704.\textsuperscript{29}

Merchant organizations and networks were directly linked to mining in four important ways. First, the state recruited investors and managers for copper mines, and often the recruits were merchants from outside the province. Second, both before 1705 and after 1723, private sales of copper were permitted, and merchants handled this trade.\textsuperscript{30} Third, while the Qing government managed copper transportation, merchants handled the transport of tin, lead, and silver, often using the same Guangnan-Baise route.\textsuperscript{31} Finally, the influx of miners to any site led to numerous opportunities to meet increasing local demand for clothing, food, and other goods.

This influx of miners and merchants transformed the landscape of Mengzi County. A town emerged at the foot of the Gejiu hills; meanwhile, nearby Mengzi town expanded in size and importance. The physical environment began to change as miners built elaborate tunnels and shafts, and smelting specialists erected furnaces and sought charcoal to help extract copper from ore. This need to fire the furnaces led to widespread deforestation. By the nineteenth century, most of the hills around Gejiu were bare, their trees turned into charcoal and thus sacrificed to commercial development in faraway places such as Hanoi, Hankou, Guangzhou, or Fuzhou.\textsuperscript{32}

The demand for charcoal provided new, though limited, opportunities for local peoples. In surrounding villages, indigenous families, probably Yi,
Sha, Nong, and Tuliao (the latter three groups now classified as “Zhuang”), erected huts for preparing charcoal. To the northwest and north, in the areas around Lin’an and Amizhou, indigenous peoples, probably Yi and “Woni” (Hani or Akha), worked coal deposits, another fuel for the smelting furnaces of Gejiu. By the 1870s, the Gejiu mines imported charcoal from indigenous producers who lived ten or more miles from the mines. In addition to providing fuel for the smelters, indigenes often carried the copper on the gruelling overland transport legs. This brief examination of Mengzi’s Gejiu area demonstrates how mining was linked to demographic and environmental change, urbanization, and the integration of indigenes into production for the market. The promotion of copper, silver, and tin transport, however, touched more than just the mining towns.

The Jincha and Gejiu mines were linked to patterns of urbanization and change even further away. State interest in exporting Yunnan copper via Guangxi seems to have originated in 1728, and Kent Smith has reported that Governor-General E’ertai invested in roads and water transport in southeastern Yunnan. This impacted towns such as Guangnan, which lay along the transport route. In the decade between E’ertai’s initial investment and the time when copper began to be shipped, Guangnan underwent important changes. The Qing state increased the number of civil officials dedicated to Guangnan and also increased by four hundred (a significant number) the number of soldiers stationed in the region. With central government approval, moreover, the local government brought a local indigenous leader’s revenue under imperial management. Such a move was rare, and it provided the Qing state with tremendous control over the indigenous power structure in Guangnan. While the evidence is circumstantial, it seems that the Qing state was securing this region not only as part of E’ertai’s general expansion of state power, but also because Guangnan would be the site where copper was stored during the shipping process.

This expansion of the state presence in Guangnan was paralleled by a growing merchant and settler population. As an important stop on the caravan route that exported copper and other metals to South China, Guangnan attracted a diverse population of merchants and peddlers, who were soon followed by land-hungry migrants. These sojourners and settlers arrived during the same period in which the state promoted copper transport via Guangnan, and by the early nineteenth century, Guangnan boasted a local population that included people from Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangdong. Many of these sojourners and settlers were involved in commerce with South China, but also with Tonkin. As the migrant popula-
tion increased, they had profound and unintended (from the state’s point of view) impacts on indigenous societies. By the 1730s, Qing officials had become concerned that Chinese merchants were gaining ownership over indigenous lands. This meant that local Sha and Nong peoples were simultaneously experiencing greater state control and competition from Chinese migrants who, increasingly, held the leases to their lands.

Places such as Mengzi and Guangnan were clearly experiencing tremendous changes as mining, the state, and mine-related commerce transformed their communities, landscapes, and livelihoods, but how should we understand the source of these changes? James Lee employed the macroregional core-periphery model to contextualize and analyze important changes in late imperial Yunnan (see map 3). For example, he argues that population growth in Lin’an (where Mengzi County was located) and Guangnan Prefectures led to a population density that placed them in the category of “near periphery,” meaning that their population density relegated them to the third of four ranks within Yunnan Province. The first rank, boasting the highest population densities (129–52 people per square km), was the “inner core” and included Yunnan and Chengjiang prefectures in north-central Yunnan. Next in rank was the “outer core,” including Dongchuan, Dali, and Menghua prefec-
tures (37–57 people per square km). Third was the “near periphery”: Chu-xiong, Guangnan, Kaihua, Lin’an, Qujing, and Wuding (15–28 people per square km). Kaihua’s 15 people per square kilometer is, for some reason, distinguished from Tengyue’s 13 people per square kilometer, which was the most densely populated of the next tier, the “outer periphery” (which included nine other districts). I do not dispute Lee’s figures, and he is careful to emphasize that these categories are for “heuristic purposes only,” but the ranking system implies a potentially misleading relationship.

A powerful implication of the core-periphery model is that the peripheries were oriented toward the “inner core.” One would expect, therefore, that Guangnan’s or Mengzi’s changing demographic density, economic activity, and political infrastructures were due to their stronger economic relationship with the macroregional core in what is now metropolitan Kunming. However, it is clear that Mengzi’s and Guangnan’s population growth, economic transformation, and political changes were closely related to circulation patterns that connected these areas to South China and Tonkin.

Instead of using a core-periphery model to understand important transformations, one might do better to examine state policies, merchant networks, and the creation of circulation corridors linking Yunnan to South China and Southeast Asia (see map 2). Eastern Eurasian demands for copper were first met by exporting Yunnan coins via the Tonkin corridor. This provided the initial boost to mining in the seventeenth century. The Qing state then created transport and administrative infrastructures to capture copper resources for the empire; in the process they took advantage of and encouraged merchant activity along the Guangxi-Guangdong corridor. As Peng-Sheng Chiu has argued, imperial policies designed to expedite copper extraction helped merchants expand their businesses in Yunnan and elsewhere. The economic activities promoted by the state and carried out in part by merchants contributed to the transformation of Yunnan. To build their networks, merchants often relied on the imperial state’s power to protect communications routes. Merchants were not mere agents of empire. Neither were they limited by the territorial boundaries of the Qing realm, and their growing networks helped expand other circulation corridors, too.

Cotton Circulation: Yunnan and Burma

The circulation of goods, ideas, technologies, and religion between Yunnan and Burma can be found at least as early as the third century B.C.E. It was not until the eighteenth century, however, that bulk goods such as raw cotton began to be carried in large volumes. Responding to increasing demand
among the growing migrant communities in Yunnan, Chinese merchants imported tremendous amounts of raw cotton, kapok, and cotton textiles. They purchased cotton at the large markets in Burma’s suzerain areas of Ava, Bhamo, or Hsenwi and pioneered relatively new routes to find cotton markets in Siam’s suzerain territory. At times, the Qing government sought to control or curtail the circulation of goods and merchants to Burma. The most important example was a postwar trade embargo placed on Burma after 1770.

Once the embargo was lifted in 1790, merchants rapidly rebuilt the cotton trade. By the 1830s, Chinese mule trains transported large amounts of Chiangmai and Kengtung cotton into southern and central Yunnan. Some cotton merchants also went further in search of profits—to Luang Prabang, Nan, or Phrae. The Ava and Bhamo cotton markets sprang back to life as Chinese caravans returned. The caravans transported into Burma Chinese silk and manufactures, such as porcelain and bronze implements. There are a few widely reported statistics that confirm the tremendous volume of the Yunnan-Burma trade. In the 1820s, John Crawfurd interviewed Chinese merchants in Burma and made the following estimates: Chinese raw silk exports to Burma totaled approximately 162,000 pounds annually. Burmese cotton imports to China ranged from about 7 million to almost 21 million pounds annually. In 1855, Henry Yule visited Amarapura and learned that Yunnan’s annual imports of Burmese cotton totaled approximately 14.6 million pounds while silk exports had increased to approximately 242,360 pounds. In addition, Yule estimated that Burma’s suzerain Tai areas (Hsenwi, Bhamo, etc.) were exporting an additional 547,000 pounds of cotton annually to Yunnan.

This remarkable trade volume could not have been produced without the merchants and caravaneers who plied the tracks between Burma and Yunnan. Of particular importance to this trade were the institutions and firms of Chinese merchants, for, in many cases, they reached from Kunming and Dali to Ava, Mandalay, and Amarapura. A particularly powerful set of institutions was the merchants’ native place organizations, which proved successful in overcoming some of the disadvantages of the long distances. Elsewhere I have argued that they provided the Chinese with a tremendous advantage over local indigenous elites and Southeast Asian merchants who vied to control long-distance trade flows.

The merchant’s organization (huiguan) was created when Chinese from the same hometown or region pooled resources to purchase land, erect a lodging house, and build a temple housing a distinctive deity. Members
and new arrivals from the home region could use the organization’s storage facilities and other services. These organizations were found throughout China and overseas. They were particularly important to Southwest China. In mining towns, for instance, the merchant associations became critical local institutions. By the late eighteenth century, Mengzi and the Gejiu mines had a tremendous number of merchant associations. The high level of merchant organization can be seen by the fact that there were five different associations representing Jiangxi merchants alone. These institutions would have been in contact with their brethren along important routes, whether to the Yunnan capital or to Guangxi Province, where each major trade town had merchant associations.

Merchant associations were therefore far more than local institutions. Their members could travel to other trade towns, where similar associations had been formed, thus linking trade areas together in networks based on native place. For example, in the late seventeenth century, migrant merchants from Jiangxi and Hunan established associations in the provincial capital, Kunming. The Jiangxi men built their Wanshou Temple while the Hunan merchants built their Shoufo Temple. These were the same temples that Jiangxi and Hunan merchants established in frontier towns such as Mengzi. One can trace the expanding reach of Jiangxi and Hunan merchants by the dates of the Wanshou and Shoufo temples throughout the region. Once established, the network could be used to manage long-distance trade. Such links were extremely important to maintaining the networks into the mining regions and from Yunnan to Guangdong; they were also central for the cotton merchants who worked between Yunnan and Burma.

In Burma, Chinese merchants clustered in well-organized communities or neighborhoods, and they created networks to manage long-distance trade. At Ava and Bhamo, merchants built temples, much like the native place association temples in China. In Ava, for example, the Tengchong (Tengyue) merchants who dominated the Burma trade built a temple to Guanyin in the 1770s. This temple seems to have become a center for social and economic life in the Chinese community. It provides further proof that Chinese merchants continued to operate in Burma even during the Qing embargo of Burmese trade. When the Burmese capital was moved to Amarapura, moreover, a new temple was built. One of the few accounts we have that provides an insight into how these temple/merchant associations operated comes from Henry Yule. Yule visited Amarapura in 1855 and met with the chief Chinese merchants at a central Chinese temple, which served “not merely as a place of worship, but as a house of resort or club.” The temple
was therefore a central meeting location for Chinese commercial agents who represented merchant businesses based in Yunnan.

What Yule was observing was a set of business institutions that had become increasingly sophisticated and complex. Historians of Yunnan date the founding of Yunnan’s first large-scale family-run firms (shanghao 商號) to the early nineteenth century. The earliest were founded by men from the major western trade towns, Dali and Tengchong, although there are also examples of them operating out of Guangxi and trading with Tonkin. These family firms, however, still maintained important connections to the merchant associations. According to Yule, five or six of the “agency-houses” (the shanghao) dominated the Chinese trade with Amarapura, while there were an estimated two dozen smaller firms whose business amounted to about 10 percent of the big houses. All were linked through the temple and its affiliated businesses, including Amarapura’s Chinese shopkeepers who sold imports purchased on credit from the major agency-houses.

The merchant-agents in Southeast Asia were connected to Yunnan through a network of settlements along the trade routes. Representatives seem to have lived in Bhamo, Manyun, and other small towns on the caravan highways to Tengchong and Dali. Even in the smaller towns, the role of the agent was to make money for the company. The permanent Chinese agents in Kengtung, for example, purchased and prepared cotton for the arrival of the caravans, thus speeding the turnaround time.

Merchant organization seems to have originated in native-place organizations and family ties—a finding that is predictable both for China and for Chinese operating in Southeast Asia. As these institutions developed, though, they became more specialized, particularly in the transport industries that were so crucial to Southwest China and Southeast Asia. At Mengzi, for instance, merchant associations provided a base for men who then developed firms serving the local mining industry. The French adventurer J. Dupuis provides a few insights into how these businesses operated. Although he journeyed to Mengzi during the Panthay Rebellion (1856–1873) and found that trade had declined, Dupuis located merchants willing to do business. Local merchants, moreover, had developed specialized businesses for handling the challenges of shipping copper and tin over long distances. At Lao Cai, merchants had organized a system for transferring goods from Tonkin barges to Yunnan barges during the winter months when water levels were low. The Yunnan barges were smaller and more nimble for passing over the rapids above Lao Cai. Dupuis was also able to contract with a local merchant to help him procure copper and tin from the Gejiu mines; he concluded a
separate contract with another merchant to provide warehousing and shipping services. Clearly the transport and service industries were fairly specialized.

The tendency toward increased specialization in transport was apparent throughout Yunnan, not just Mengzi. As time went on, the Yunnan-Burma caravan infrastructure became more elaborate as supporting businesses were developed. Dali, a major trade hub, expanded in the early to mid-nineteenth century as merchants built warehouses and shops to accommodate growing cotton commerce. In many caravan towns, enterprising merchants built inns to accommodate the mule trains. Whereas eighteenth-century caravaneers seem to have camped out, the nineteenth century saw an increasing number of caravanserai devoted to housing muleteers and their pack trains. In late-Qing Ganyai, for instance, there were seven inns with the capacity to house 2,000 people and their pack animals. Contemporary Manyun Market had five inns and four temples, which could accommodate 5,000 people. Lijiang town topped them all, with seventeen inns that catered to the tea caravans.

Merchant organization through the family firm and association was the key to Chinese domination of the caravan trade. This does not mean that Chinese were alone in benefiting from the trade, for the Southeast Asian courts and local Tai rulers (tsaufás) could sell monopoly contracts or trade permits, collect caravan tolls, or even engage in some trade themselves. Nevertheless, it was Chinese merchants who developed and operated the most important business institutions that linked Yunnan, Southeast Asia, and South China across a terrain and in a climate that might generously be called “challenging.” Through their firms and associations, they mobilized capital, created regulations for managing mines, cooperated with the Qing state at times, and developed new businesses to meet the challenges of topography and environment.

Under the influence of these changes in merchant institutions, southwest Yunnan underwent important transformations. As merchants knitted together networks that linked Southeast Asia and Yunnan, local Chinese and indigenes began to buy and sell products that circulated through Yunnan and Southeast Asia. Although the Yunnan-Southeast Asia trade connections were ancient, it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that so many became incorporated into regional trade. By the early nineteenth century, indigenes throughout the borderlands—but especially those living in the circulation corridors—produced goods for sale in China or Burma. This economic geography, so dependent on copper and cotton, was changing Yunnan, but it was not permanent.
After Rebellion: Changing Circulation Regimes

In the mid-nineteenth century, regional and global events helped transform the circulation regimes described above. These changes included an initial obstruction of long-established circulation patterns and the rise of new patterns and routes under the influence of changing transport technologies and colonial relationships. These changes are important because they demonstrate how the economic geography of Southwest China could be transformed by historical developments, both within and outside China.

As the site where the Taiping uprising (1851–1864) originated, Guangxi Province’s Yu River basin succumbed to banditry in the 1850s. This reduced traffic along the river, thus cutting off the trade routes. There were reports that only armed trading parties could conduct Nanning’s trade with Beihai. There is also evidence of significant destruction. In the port of Hengzhou (横州), for instance, the entire town was destroyed, including the powerful Guangdong merchant association (huiguan). The destruction of the association deprived the town of a commercial institution that was crucial to maintaining the flow of goods between Yunnan and Guangzhou. Yunnan suffered even more from the Panthay (Hui) uprising of 1856–1873, a massive civil war pitting Muslims and non-Chinese against the Qing state and Chinese inhabitants. Centered in Dali, this massive rebellion interrupted the cotton and copper trades and left the province devastated.

After the rebellions, long-distance circulation from Guangdong to Yunnan was the first to revive. By 1880, Baise had regained some of its earlier prosperity. Its merchant associations recovered as Cantonese merchants regained their foothold as the most important of sojourner traders. Once again those living in Guangxi Province could buy Yunnan exports, including Pu’er tea, which was carried to Baise via the Guangnan route. To provide transport along these routes, boat operators and mule caravans went back into action. Guangnan markets again entertained Cantonese and Hunanese sojourners. Marketgoers again had the option to purchase simple luxuries shipped from Guangzhou, including imported Tanstikkor matches and China-made mirrors.

However, older circulation patterns were not simply restored. Before the Taiping and Panthay uprisings, Yunnan had exported cotton and copper to the Guangxi and Guangdong river basins. The uprisings first interrupted this trade, and then changes in the global trade patterns reversed the flow. By the 1880s, steamers transported cotton from Rangoon to Canton, where some of it was shipped upstream to Baise and then overland by horse to Yunnan.
Merchants also began to import cotton via the ancient routes that linked the Beibu Gulf ports with Yunnan via Nanning, Baise, and Guangnan. Increasingly, the chief exports were not copper, but tin and opium.

The volumes of goods shipped were still very large. In 1889, Imperial Maritime Customs (IMC) officials estimated that 50 percent of Beihai’s (Pakhoi’s) imported piece-goods and 67 percent of its imported cotton yarn found their way inland to Yunnan’s markets. In 1889, this meant that an estimated 62,000 piculs of imported Indian yarn were shipped via Nanning broker agents to Yunnan. The estimated value of this yarn was 1,180,000 haiguan taels or, based on the 1889 exchange rate of US$1.15 per tael, $1,357,000. One reason that the Beihai route was profitable, IMC officials and other observers believed, was that the post-Taiping domestic transit duty (lijin, likin) stations, operating along the Yu/West River, drove up costs, while the Beihai-Baise-Yunnan route was relatively free of transit duties.65

Rebellion and changing patterns of global trade and imperialism, combined with new shipping technologies, influenced the circulation patterns of Yunnan. Evidence suggests that the Yu/West River route from Guangzhou flourished initially, but then declined. Similarly, the Beihai to Nanning to Guangnan route initially became a major trade corridor. In the aftermath of France’s conquest of Tonkin, both were eclipsed by the Red River route, which linked Haiphong to Mengzi. Although Beihai continued to be an important point of entry for some goods, most of the Hong Kong textile dealers moved their branches from Beihai to Haiphong—important evidence that the real action had shifted southwest toward Tonkin.66

Gradually, cotton shipped via the Red River from Tonkin increased in volume and began to dominate, a finding first reported by Chiranan.67 This trade was managed from Lin’an, a small Yunnan port on the Red River. Lin’an merchants had agents or partners in Hong Kong who purchased cotton goods and arranged for shipping from Hong Kong to Haiphong and then up the Red River to Mengzi. French steamers carried the cotton to Lao Cai or Manhao; it was then off-loaded and shipped overland to Mengzi and on to Kunming via caravan. The transition to cotton imports via the Red River was an important transformation of Yunnan’s relationship with maritime trade, and it represented a profound shift in merchant networks and cotton circulation.

In the aftermath of the Panthay uprising, the Burma cotton trade was slow to rebound. By the 1890s, overland cotton imports from Burma fell to an estimated 725,000 pounds annually. This was about 5 percent of the estimated volume for 1855.68 A series of developments worked to diminish this
route of circulation. The Panthay uprising hit the west more seriously than it did southeastern Yunnan. Even a decade or more after the fact, travelers reflected on how many urban areas had not recovered their original populations or economic vitality. Particularly hard hit were some of the central trade entrepôts such as Tengchong, in western Yunnan, and Dali, which, along with Kunming, had been one of the province’s two largest urban areas. In other words, the urban areas that had grown along with the circulation patterns of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth lost population; marginalized from the main circulation regimes of the post-rebellion era, they did not return to their previous population and trade levels.

This demographic disaster, however, was followed by other problems. Andrew Forbes has argued that the British seizure of Upper Burma and the French occupation of Tonkin resulted in these colonial powers seeking to redirect trade.69 The Qing, moreover, subjected the overland routes from Burma to Dali to numerous lijin and prefectural tax stations, a fact that led some observers to believe that internal Qing levies, rather than the cost of transportation, caused the decline in overland routes from Burma. Merchants who transported Chinese cotton into Yunnan from Hubei and those who transported Indian, Burmese, or English cotton through Mengzi were subject to a single tax fee only, whether the lijin levied at the station on the Sichuan-Yunnan border or the import tariff levied at the Imperial Maritime Customs station in Mengzi.70

Thus, the remarkable decline of the Burma cotton routes resulted from major changes both within China (the Panthay Rebellion, the rise of the lijin revenue system) and in global patterns of colonialism and trade. The decline in trade directly affected the ability of certain urban areas to rebound from the economic and demographic losses during the Panthay Rebellion. The British missionary G. W. Clark, who lived in Dali during the 1880s, knew that the Burma trade was down because the British were redirecting cotton exports to Rangoon and, via steamer, to Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Clark met merchants who lamented their business losses, and he also reported that many local Minjia (Bai) men, who had once earned money as muleteers and peddlers in the Burma trade, were now left without livelihoods.71

Throughout the Qing period, Yunnan Province was involved in important patterns of circulation that linked it to coastal China, Tonkin, and Burma. As Li’s and Cooke’s papers demonstrate, if we are to understand the impact of Chinese merchants and the commodity flows they controlled, we must broaden our approaches to include inland circulation corridors and their connections to the coast, whether in South China or Southeast Asia. We must
also examine state policy and its impact on circulation. For Yunnan, the circulation patterns of copper and cotton influenced migration, urbanization, and local economic changes. Yet these circulation flows were also subject to endogenous and exogenous events; once the circulation flows were transformed, moreover, they in turn transformed demographics and local economics. In order to understand fully the changes in Southwest China, therefore, we must place regional history within a larger global framework. The macroregional model may highlight some important aspects of regional society, but it lacks the type of dialectical analysis that David Harvey has found so necessary to the study of geography and perceptions of space.

The rising demand for copper that affected all of Eastern Eurasia had a profound impact on Yunnan and northern Tonkin, where tens of thousands of Chinese miners migrated in the eighteenth century. Their arrival instigated important demographic and economic changes. Local urban areas attracted merchants who organized the long-distance transport of the precious metals. Local indigenous peoples sometimes reoriented their economies from subsistence to market production in order to sell grains or charcoal to the mining operations. The circulation of copper drew states into close relations with merchants and miners, leading to significant state activity in frontier regions, including the Qing mandate that nine provinces ship their copper via Guangxi. Networks and institutions were developed to make long-distance overland trade more efficient. Merchant associations helped orient and support migrant merchants who participated in transporting copper or cotton. Merchant associations and merchant houses began to place agents in key trade towns along major routes. Whether in Burma or, later, in Hong Kong, agents handled the purchasing and packaging of goods so that caravan leaders or ship captains could quickly load up and move on. Over time, industries became more specialized, and the number of businesses devoted to transport, servicing caravans, or storage increased.

In the aftermath of the great rebellions, there were fundamental transformations of Yunnan’s circulation patterns. As new patterns emerged, they were shaped by both old and new conditions. Demand for cotton was a perennial condition, but this demand was met through new circulation corridors shaped by British and French colonialism, steamship technology, and the Qing internal tax regime. The goods that flowed out of Yunnan in exchange for these imports were changing, too; copper was replaced by tin and opium.

With these changes in circulation flows, western Yunnan was increas-
ingly marginalized. These were the areas that had once been central to the import of Burmese cotton and to the export of silks. After the destruction by the Panthay and then marginalization from the older circulation patterns, some of these towns did not fully recover in terms of population or trade, even decades afterward. Investigating Dali’s population in the 1930s, C. P. Fitzgerald noted how the ruins on the town’s southeast side attested to its former size and importance. According to James Lee’s calculations, Dali had over 100,000 people by the 1820s, but government figures placed the population at 89,720 in 1939. To understand this decline, as well as the rise that had preceded it, we cannot focus on intraregional or macroregional changes alone, for it was interregional circulation patterns, managed in part by the Chinese merchants who traded with South China and the Nanyang, that also shaped the destinies of so many people in Southwest China.

Notes
1. To the best of my knowledge, the first significant challenge came from Chiranan Prasertkul, Yunnan Trade in the Nineteenth Century: Southwest China’s Cross-Boundaries Functional System (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1989).
8. Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchevadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Introduc-


16. Lu Ren, Yunnan dui wai jiaotong shi, 213–16, 240–44.


19. Yunnan daxue, Yunnan yejin shi, 32–35, 49–55; Yan, Qingdai Yunnan tongzheng, 8; Smith, “Ch’ing Policy and the Development of Southwest China,” 188–90; Sun, ‘Ch’ing Government and the Mineral Industries,” 840–41.
22. Ibid., 47, 436.
25. Wu and Xu, Yunnan kuangchang tulu, juan 2xia, 84a; juan 7:3a, repr. in Xuxiu sikuquanshu, vol. 880 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995–1999).
26. Yan, Qingdai Yunnan tongzheng, 21.
27. Yunnan daxue lishi xi, Yunnan yejin shi, 1–6, 31–35.
28. Xuxiu Mengzi xianzhi, juan 3:45a–52b; Mengzi xian zhi (Kangxi 51), cited in Fang Guoyu, Yunnan shiliao mulu gaishuo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 3:1268.
33. For historical ethnic geography, see You Zhong, Yunnan minzu shi (Kunming: Yunnan daxue, 1994), 532, 555–58.
35. Wu and Xu, Yunnan kuangchang tulu, juan 2xia, 84a.
37. QSL, 3:27.
38. Wu and Xu, Yunnan kuangchang tulu, juan 2:71a–72b.
41. QSL, 3:27.
43. Palace memorials (Zhupi zouzhe). Beijing Number One Archives. doc. 112–7, QSL 31 03 29, Yang Yingju; doc. 1733–2, QSL 11 05 09, Zhangbao; doc. 142–1 QSL 34 01 19,
Fuheng; Zhou Yu, Congzheng Miandian ri ji, 9a, in Ming Qing shiliao huibian, ed. Shen Yun-long, vol. 8 (Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1967).

44. Giersch, Asian Borderlands, chaps. 4, 6.

45. Ibid., chap. 6.


47. Henry Yule, A Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855 (London: Smith, Elder, 1858), 144, 148, 149.


53. For a discussion of the embargo and Chinese merchant activity, see Giersch, Asian Borderlands, 106–8, 176.

54. Yule, A Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855, 143.


56. Yule, A Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855, 144, 150.


60. Hu Yangquuan, Yunnan mabang (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1999), 92.


64. Clark, The Province of Yunnan, 16–17.


67. Chiranan, Yunnan Trade.


72. A finding reinforced by Yang’s recent work. See Between Winds and Clouds, 225–29.
