Chinese Circulations

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PART V — Postcolonial

CHINA

Timber (Burma)

Jade (Burma and Thailand)

Birds’ nests (Sarawak)

Sea products (Pan-Southeast Asia)
Edible birds’ nest, or 燕窩, ranks among the top of the long list of Chinese delicacies-cum-tonics. A large majority of Chinese people have likely never seen nor consumed any edible birds’ nests before, but almost all have heard about them and can claim to know a few things about them. To most Chinese, edible birds’ nest carries the aura of royalty, extravagance, luxury, and exoticism. People usually have only a vague idea about the origin and the zoological and medical details of birds’ nests, but all are aware of the legendary amount of labor and money involved in their procurement.

Birds’ nest is well known to scholars of Southeast Asian studies as an exotic commodity that caters to the Chinese market. According to an estimation done by the Singapore-based ASEAN Birds’ Nest Traders Association, the annual export of edible birds’ nest from Indonesia alone, which contributes 70 percent of global production, is worth between US$200 and US$250 million. In 1997, Indonesian exports of edible birds’ nest weighed 170 tons, with a projected 10 percent growth for 1998. Other major birds’ nest-producing countries include Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand. Environmentalist and international wildlife conservation agents keep a close watch on this trade, fearing endangerment of the two species of swiftlets that are credited with building these nests.

Nowadays it is common knowledge to scientists and general consumers alike that the edible ingredient of these nests comes from the saliva of the birds. One does not need exceptional curiosity to be intrigued by the source of “value” of this saliva-based commodity. What sociocultural values and political economic realities have been joining forces to keep this transnational trade in birds’ nest going? Some angles for investigation are evidently in order. On the one hand, on the consumer side, the body of Chinese medici-
nal knowledge has apparently sanctioned the “subjective value” of birds’ nest. On the other hand, the well-known difficulty in procuring birds’ nest no doubt warrants an examination along the line of “labor theory of value.” However, it is not my goal in this essay to defend one value theory against the other. Rather, based on textual as well as ethnographic data, I present an—admittedly not yet complete—picture of how value is constructed respectively on the production and the consumer ends of the birds’ nest trade. I also show how the value of birds’ nest on both ends is related to social production and reproduction.

Scholarly, business, and public attention notwithstanding, systematic studies of the modes of production and trading of edible birds’ nest are relatively few. The few noteworthy articles are either solely descriptive or policy oriented. In contrast to these works, Leonard Blussé’s article “In Praise of Commodities: An Essay on the Cross-cultural Trade in Edible Bird’s Nests” is written with a much clearer scholarly goal. In the article, Blussé hopes to shed light on “the true nature of Oriental Trade” through an examination of trade in birds’ nest. Relying on various historical documents, Blussé examines the patterns of collecting and trading birds’ nest in four places—Eastern Kalimantan, Java’s South Coast, Batavia’s countryside, and the Champa Islets—from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth. The organization of production differed from one case to another. In eastern Kalimantan, native Bornean “slaves” worked the caves owned by Sulu grandees. In Java’s South Coast and the countryside of Batavia, birds’ nest-producing caves were owned, variously, by local rulers, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), the colonial government, and private Dutch landowners, but the mode of production at the base remained the same: the caves were worked by the local population as a kind of corvée duty. In the Champa Islets, the Nguyen regime set up brigades, “which were allowed to exploit the resources under payment of heavy annual taxes.” The brigades, in turn, taxed the nest-collecting fishermen either by ship or by head.

Significantly, these various arrangements in birds’ nest production gradually gave way to a Chinese monopoly in the trade by the mid-nineteenth century. According to Blussé, this was due to Chinese tax farmers moving inland, as close as possible to the production region, and providing the natives with the much sought-after Chinese industrial products at a highly competitive price. The Chinese also sent home birds’ nest as a substitute for silver to fulfill their familial obligations. In Blussé’s words, “A once cross-cultural trade network had now effectively become a mono-cultural one.” Further-
more, if we “focus on the power struggle surrounding the mode of production and the production areas of a specific commodity,” we notice that the “Western expansion of power meant paving the way for Chinese expansion of trade.”

This “Sinification” of trade in specific commodities is echoed in Heather Sutherland’s study of Indonesian tortoiseshell trade in the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth. The picture presented by Sutherland is a more complex one: the Chinese monopolization of trepang trade, in which only the Chinese own the cultural knowledge of its use-value, results in the penetration of the Chinese into the “upstream levels of the trade, once dominated by Sulawesians,” such as the trading of tortoiseshell, which was used more widely in local handicrafts before the coming of Chinese traders. Sutherland’s conclusion is applicable to a broader range of phenomena: “Ethnic differentiation was important in that it related directly to relevant knowledge about production and consumption, and to social capital embodied in networks of trust.”

In a similar vein, I explore further the knowledge that the Chinese traders command regarding the production and consumption of edible birds’ nest—how their knowledge of the commodity’s use-value allows them to manipulate its exchange value. Also, I demonstrate that the local communities responsible for the actual collecting of birds’ nest are not without agency in the trade. Their agency is shown in the more or less successful conversion of the profit from their involvement in the birds’ nest trade into means of social production and reproduction.

Birds’ Nest in Chinese Medicinal Tradition

Not So Ancient a Tradition

The prominent position of edible birds’ nest in Chinese medicine and cuisine notwithstanding, documentation about its origins and attributes is surprisingly scanty. Contrary to some literature that conceives of birds’ nest consumption as an “ancient Chinese custom,” the mention of birds’ nest in historical documents appears no earlier than the fourteenth century. Blussé accepts the opinion of the Japanese historian Shinoda Osamu that “the first reference to edible birds’ nest is the entry in Chia Ming’s Yin-shih hsü-chih (‘What we need to know about food and drink’), a book that appeared in the early years of the Ming dynasty.” In this book, the author simply noted, “Yen-wo tastes sweet and has a mild quality; the yellowish, blackish, and rotten ones are poisonous and should not be eaten.”
Throughout the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), however, references to birds’ nest are rather sporadic. As Blussé notes, “Neither Wang Ta-yüan in his Tīcl (1350) nor Ma Huan, who in the Yṣyl described the famous travels of the eunuch Chen Ho to Southeast and South Asia in the early decades of the fifteenth century, mention edible bird’s nests as an import-commodity from the Nanyang.”¹⁴ Chang Hsieh in his Dung Xi Yang Kau [Investigation of the east and the west oceans] (1618) did record edible birds’ nest among the local products of Jiau-zhe, Champa (Vietnam), Pahang, Melaka, Kelantan, Johor (Malaysia), Aceh (Sumatra), and Cambodia. Under the entry for the kingdom of Jiau-zhe, Chang noted, “The swiftlets feed on seaweed and then spit it out to make nest. The nests are attached to the walls of grottoes. In the nests, the swiftlets lay eggs and rear broods. It is therefore full of feather. The natives climb ladders to collect them.”¹⁵ For Champa, he said, “The swiftlet is about the size of pigeon. They come back to grottoes or cliff to make nests every spring. . . . The island natives wait for them to leave in the autumn, fixing spade to pole, collecting the nests and eating them. The nest is referred to as yen-wo, a delicacy in feast.”¹⁶ Except for the size of the bird and the building material of the nest, Chang’s description is not very far from the facts. What is worth noting is that he seems to be indicating the habit of eating birds’ nest among the natives and at the same time the existence of a market for it in China. Other than mentioning edible birds’ nest as a local product, Dung Xi Yang Kau provides no detail of its use as medicine or a tonic.

Nor does the famous encyclopedia of Chinese herb medicine written by Li Shih-chên (1518–1593), Pen-ts’ao kang-mu [Compendium of materia medica], list birds’ nest. Only in the supplement to this work, Pen-ts’ao kang-mu shih-i [Supplement to Compendium of materia medica], which appeared almost two hundred years later, in 1765, did birds’ nest receive extensive coverage. The author of the supplement, Chao Hsüe-ming, compiled a substantial amount of firsthand as well as secondhand information about the healing effects of birds’ nest and remarked, “The pity is that it is not listed in Pen-ts’ao and rarely used in prescription.”¹⁷ Among the literatures that Chao Hsüe-ming cited, the earliest is Čüan-nan Tsa-zhe [Miscellaneous notes on southern Fujian], written by a Ming officer, Chen Mau-ren.¹⁸ According to Chen,

Far offshore of Fujian and closer to the aborigines’ territory, there is a kind of swiftlet called chin-si [golden thread]. Its head and tail look like that of the swallow, but it is much smaller in size; the feathers are like golden threads. Before laying eggs and rearing broods, the whole flock would descend on a beach that is sandy with scattered rocks and feed on
the “silkworm conch.” The seafaring trader I interviewed claims that, according to the aborigines, inside the flesh of the silkworm conch there are two “ribs,” white and sturdy like the silk of the “maple silkworm.” Taken internally, the “rib” is replenishing to asthenia and can stop diarrhea. The swiftlet eats the conch, digests the flesh but not the “ribs,” spits out the “ribs” along with saliva and uses them to build nests on grotto walls. As time passes, the swiftlets fly away with the new fledglings, and the coastal peoples collect the nests in season. This is called yen-wo.19

The edible birds’ nest was not mentioned in earlier Chinese medicinal literatures. Both Dung Xi Yang Kau and Cüan-nan Tsa-zhe, on the other hand, suggest the possibility of it being consumed originally by the native peoples of Southeast Asia. It is still uncertain as to the dates of its initial introduction into China. It seemed to be quite rare in the Ming dynasty. What is certain is that starting from the early Qing dynasty, the number of times yen-wo is mentioned increased dramatically. It is listed among the royal tributes from Southeast Asian polities, mentioned as a taxable commodity, referred to in popular novels, and served on the imperial table. It was also during the Qing dynasty that more systematic knowledge about yen-wo’s healing effects began to accumulate.

HEALING AND THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS

The entry on yen-wo in the “Grand Dictionary of Chinese Medicine,” compiled and published by the Jiang-su New Medical College in 1986, lists its healing effect as “nourishing the yin element, moisten the malign dryness inside the body, strengthening the chi and replenishing the middle warmer. It provides remedy to asthenia, impairment, pulmonary overstrain, coughing, respiration with phlegm, bloody sputum and hematamesis, chronic diarrhea, chronic intermittent fevers, frequent dysphagia and regurgitation.”20 This is basically the same range of effects listed in Pen-ts’ao kang-mu shih-i. Birds’ nest is considered beneficial to the pulmonary and digestive systems. It can be boiled into “juice” either by itself or in combination with other herb medicines. In addition to naming these principal healing effects, Pen-ts’ao kang-mu shih-i mentions that birds’ nest can cure micturition; that it is capable of strengthening the yang element, supplementing the chi, regulating the middle warmer, improving appetite, adding the essence of life, and replenishing the marrow; and that the red ones can cure dysentery with bloody stools.21

In some of the literature cited by Pen-ts’ao kang-mu shih-i are explanations
as to the healing effects of birds’ nest. A common opinion is that it has something to do with the food of the swiftlets. In addition to “silkworm conch” and seaweed, small fish are also considered to be part of the swiftlet diet. The most significant remarks, however, are the following.

On the surface of the rocks by the seashore, “sea powder” gathered like moss. The swiftlets feed on this powder and spit it out to make nest. . . . The sea powder is cold in nature; being taken in and spat out by the swiftlets makes it warm. The sea powder tastes salty; being taken in and spat out by the swiftlets makes it sweet. Its appearance and quality are totally transformed; therefore, it has the effects of resolving sputum and improving appetite. The nests come in either black or white; the red ones are hard to come by. Since the swiftlet belongs to the category of fire, the red nest is especially the essence.

The swiftlet carries sea powder in its mouth for nest building. With the help of the mild chi from the sun and the wind, the saltiness and the coldness are transformed into sweetness and neutrality. This will cause the mutual generation between the metal and the water elements, elevate the chi of the kidney to nourish the pulmonary system and also to calm the chi in the stomach.22

The “Grand Dictionary of Chinese Medicine” states, “The sea powder is salty and cold. After the swiftlet carries it in the mouth and into the high wind, it becomes sweet and neutral. . . . The birds’ nest replenishes without causing malign dryness, moistens without causing sluggishness; it is the mildest and fairest of all medicines.”23

It is now well established that the edible component of the nest is actually the swiftlet’s saliva, rather than transformed foodstuffs.24 In the systematic knowledge of Chinese medicine, however, the transformative capacity of the swiftlet is considered the key factor in the therapeutic effects of birds’ nest. Being classified as “fire,” the swiftlet transforms things from the sea, which are “salty and cold” by nature, into something mildly cool and having calming, cooling, and cleansing effects on the pulmonary and digestive systems.

On the other hand, among Chinese consumers, there is always an aura of mysticism surrounding the therapeutic effects of birds’ nest. In the 31 October 1964 issue of the Sarawak Gazette, an author named Chu Chin Onn contributed a short essay entitled “Birds’ Nests: Sarawak All-Cure.” Chu was a Chinese Sarawakian with a background in traditional medicine and was working with the Sarawak Museum at the time.25 In this essay, Chu offered his own rather unique interpretation of birds’ nest’s therapeutic effects.
It is logical that the person who wishes to take birds’ nests, he himself should not do the work—cleaning, picking, etc., for this is a tedious job, which requires time, concentration and energy; and also this work is liable to exhaust health, breath and energy which may be absorbed and radiate to the birds’ nests, so that he takes away his own energetic health instead!

In olden days persons were exceptional and cunning. They used to engage healthy young and unmarried person to do the job and to prepare the steaming at a quicker pace, as special preparation for health sake. Quicker pace saves a lot of time, avoids the birds’ nests remaining (dipped) in water to soak away the good properties. Healthy young persons possess stronger health, energetic heat and breath. These can warm the birds’ nests through contact of body heat, circulating around the working area at the time of concentration, when the young clean and pick the nests, which can then absorb the healthy heat and energetic process from them, the young.26

Chu’s opinion is not in line with those of the Chinese medicinal classics; and presently it is difficult to decide how much it can be considered as representing the popular folk notion. His idea of radiating breath and energy is more like a crude imitation of the chi theory. However, the Sarawak Gazette, though not a scholarly journal, is a well-respected magazine that has been in press for over a hundred years. Chu’s English writing leaves plenty of room for improvement but carries the flavor of colonial “Chinglish.” In the same issue, next to Chu’s essay, the editor of the Sarawak Gazette published another article entitled “Cave Swiftlets and Birds’ Nest.” The author, Michael Fogden, wrote in a naturalist’s manner about the varieties of the swiftlets, the components of the nest, the birds’ ecology and breeding patterns as well as some sociocultural background to the collection of birds’ nest. The juxtaposition of the two essays revealed the editor’s intention of providing a balanced report that included both the point of view of a naturalist and that of the major consumers. Once published, Chu’s explanation became public knowledge and could not be casually brushed aside.

In a sense, Chu’s point can also be viewed as a parable—it tells the truth about the huge labor input in birds’ nest production. It is well known that the collecting and processing of birds’ nest is extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming. Birds’ nest collectors need to ascend high into the chimneys of caves or descend down formidable cliffs with very simple gear, and accidents are often fatal. The cleaning and feather removing works are,
furthermore, both tedious and taxing on workers’ eyesight; these processes are usually handled by Chinese traders, rather than the collectors, while the real work is always done by hired young female laborers. These women come from all ethnic groups and are usually not very well paid. In a home video on the processing of house-farmed birds’ nest in Indonesia, one sees rows of female workers in uniform sitting in a room about the size of a classroom. In front of each worker is a bowl of water containing unprocessed birds’ nests and another small dish of water in which to rinse feathers off the tweezers. The room is filled with clinks as the women rap the tweezers against the ceramic dish to rinse off the feathers. When the male boss, hands behind his back, walks down the aisle to inspect the jobs of the workers, the scene becomes rather oppressive. In other words, the preparation of birds’ nest requires a huge amount of labor input, a fact of which consumers are aware. Both objectively and subjectively speaking, therefore, consuming birds’ nest is essentially consuming behind-the-scenes labor.

Now we should turn to another aspect of the value of birds’ nest that is also based on, and sanctioned by, Chinese medicinal knowledge. Retail stores carry a kind of dark-reddish birds’ nest that commands the highest price; this is the so-called blood nest. We have already seen that, according to Pen-ts’ao kang-mu shih-i, the red ones can cure dysentery with bloody stools. The traditional explanation holds that the swiftlet, having built two nests continuously and having had both removed by a collector, is so exhausted when building the third nest that it spits blood. These reddish nests are considered the most nourishing and the most exquisite, and are therefore the most expensive among all the types of birds’ nest. Although we now know that the tints in birds’ nest, be they reddish, brownish, or yellowish, result from the different minerals in the rock on which the swiftlets choose to build their nest, the legend of the “blood nest” remains prevalent.

For scientists and birds’ nest collectors, the blood nest category does not exist. In Sarawak, only two kinds of birds’ nest have commercial value. Those built by Aerodramus maximus are called the “black nest.” The “black” refers to the large number of feathers that cover and intermix with the “substance” that is the saliva. Before being cleaned, the whole nest looks blackish. After the feathers and other particles are cleared away, the birds’ nest substance looks white, yellowish, or reddish. The price of black nest on the production site—between middleman and collectors—is determined by the portion of the nest substance that each piece contains. The more feathers and less substance, the lower the price. The price here actually reflects the ratio between the labor that would be needed in the cleaning process and
the amount of substance that can be recovered. In fact, according to Charles Leh, a zoologist and curator of Sarawak Museum, the reddish ones command a lower price.30

The other kind of nest is built by Aerodramus fuciphagus and is called the “white nest.” It contains very few feathers and needs less cleaning. The bare birds’ nest substance generally looks whitish, but is also susceptible to the tints from rock. White nest commands a higher price at the production site. In retailer’s shops, however, the price ranks among different categories of birds’ nest are almost totally reversed. Three retail stores in Kuching City, the capital of Sarawak, price birds’ nest categories as listed in table 1. We can compare these with the price list of an Internet retailer as listed in table 2.

In both cases, blood nest fetches the highest price; the yellow nest comes in second, and the white nest the lowest. Nowadays, the yellow nests on the retail market are mostly house-farmed birds’ nests from Indonesia. They are generally better in shape and are considered by some consumers to be cleaner. As for the blood nest, the Internet retailer claims that it is “the most nutritious of all swiftlet nest. Best for pregnant women, patients after surgery. Healthy Nest Bloody is a house type nest. Hence, Healthy Nest Bloody is much more delicate and tasty than the Cave type Bloody.”31 It is not at all clear how house-farmed birds’ nest can be reddish, since such nests are built either on cement or wooden walls. But during a conversation, the third-largest shopkeeper in Kuching City assured me that “our blood nest is one hundred per cent natural color. The redness is original. Unlike some other shops who use artificial color to turn the nest dark red.” However, he avoids

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**Table 1 Retailer Price of Birds’ Nests in Kuching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Retailer #1</th>
<th>Retailer #2</th>
<th>Retailer #3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood nest cup</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>500^ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood nest cake</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light reddish and yellowish cake</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White nest cake</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

i. “Cup” refers to the original shape of the nest.
ii. Prices are in Malaysian ringgit (1 US$ = 3.8 ringgit, as of September 1999). All items come in 37.5g packs.
iii. “Cake” refers to the way in which the nest breaks up into strips of jelly-like substance after cleaning, which are then dried and molded into oval-shaped pieces.

Source: Field data.
confirming that the “original redness” is from blood. “We Chinese have this old belief that it is from the blood spat by the swiftlets, but I am not sure. I think it has something to do with the food of the birds.” According to one middleman at Long Lama, near the cave sites along the middle Baram area, artificial colors are widely used during the processing, either to turn the white one whiter or the brownish and reddish ones redder.

In short, at the production end, the price is decided more by the estimated labor that is needed to process the raw nests. At the consumption end, the price is decided by a long-established conceptual framework that, based on its own understanding of bird ecology, connects a color classification with a system of nutrition evaluation (red signifies blood). In the present time, helped by much more effective communication technology and wrapped in a new set of technical jargon and biochemical terminologies, birds’ nest remains at the top of popular health and food therapeutic discourse for many Chinese. “Scientific” revelation of the “true nature” of coloring (or discoloring) of the nests has not been very successful in discrediting the conventional framework of evaluation.

Early History and Folklore of the Birds’ Nest Trade in Sarawak

Sarawak is presently a state of the federation of Malaysia, and is located in northwestern Borneo. The name Borneo derives from the name of the sultanate of Brunei. Since the thirteenth century, Brunei has been documented in various sources as a major player in maritime trade; its influence covered the entire coastal area of Borneo and extended to the Philippines and the Sulu Sea. Its power began to wane after the Spanish took over Manila, in

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Table 2  Retail Price of Birds’ Nests from an Internet Advertisement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merchandise</th>
<th>Price per tael (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood Nest Whole Nest Grade 1</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Nest Whole Nest Grade 2</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Nest Ungrouped Small Piece</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Nest Whole Nest</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Nest Regrouped Large Piece Grade 1</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Nest Regrouped Large Piece Grade 2</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nest Regrouped Large Piece Grade 1</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nest Regrouped Large Piece Grade 2</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nest Regrouped Large Piece Grade 3</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1571, and invaded Brunei Bay, in 1578. After 1777, the Taosug from the Sulu started attacking Bruneian ships and settlements on the northeastern coast of Borneo, and by 1820 had formally driven the sultan’s influence out of the area. Their losses on the eastern front notwithstanding, before 1842, Brunei still nominally controlled the area that was to become Sarawak. In 1842, Sultan Omar Ali asked for the help of the Englishman James Brooke to put down a rebellion along the Sarawak River and granted him the title “Raja of Sarawak.” For the following half century, the Brooke regime managed to annex all the regions of Sarawak at the expense of the sultan of Brunei. Even Brunei itself would have been annihilated had it not been for intervention by the British government in 1906.

Major power in maritime trade as Brunei was, neither Chinese sources, such as Dung Xi Yang Kau (1618), nor the observation of the Dutch admiral Olivier van Noort, who visited Brunei around 1600, mentioned birds’ nest as among the trade or tribute items. The documentation that Blussé cites regarding birds’ nest production in the Sandakan area of northeast Borneo dates back to 1849. The earliest documentation of birds’ nest production in Sarawak points roughly to the same period of time. There were, and still are, three major birds’ nest production sites in Sarawak: the Bau area in Western Sarawak, the Niah Caves, and the Middle Baram area in northeast Sarawak.

The caves at Niah produce black and yellow nests. According to local folklore, the original inhabitants at Niah were the Preban. After floods destroyed the Preban settlement at Niah, the Penans from Beluru, Bakong, and upper Bintulu migrated into the area. On hearing of the arrival of the Penans, some of the Preban returned to Niah and formed a large village called Manong, where people of different ethnic groups lived together, including the Segans, Bakongs, Bruneis, and the Chinese. The first Chinese trader was a certain towkay, Moh Khim, from Brunei. According to Benedict Sandin, “It was really a Penan named Nyerulang who first discovered the Subis cave. This discovery was made by him while shooting with his blowpipe along the Subis stream. When Nyerulang first brought the edible birds’ nest home, Moh Khim told him that the stuff was eatable and exportable. It was from this time that many traders from Brunei and Bintulu started to come to Niah to buy bird’s nest.”

Another story started with the people who lived in Suai, whose leader was Dudop. After having lived there for some time, the people were forced, due to sanitary problems, to desert the village and stay separately in small huts in the jungle. Stricken by epidemic in the jungle, they moved back to Suai, only to be afflicted again by diarrhea. This time, some people moved back

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to the jungle, while others went to live in the caves at Niah. Many, including Dudop, died at the Niah Caves.

After this epidemic ceased, Dudop’s son, Murai, afterwards moved downriver and lived at Pelalid, below the present site of the Niah Fort.

Some years after Murai had lived at Pelalid, a Brunei official came to enquire whether the people of Niah agreed to purchase from Brunei Government foodstuffs which the latter would sell to them. Murai and his people agreed to buy them if they were brought to Niah.

After this had been agreed, the official returned to explain to the Sultan his successful mission. In due course the foodstuffs were brought to Niah. As there was no money in those days, the natives bartered these foods with rattan, bezoars-stones and *kulat dalam batu* (edible birds’ nest). To regulate the trading in these foods, a special agent was appointed in Niah. About fifteen years afterwards the people of Niah became more civilized. Twenty years later, the trade became more flourishing, and Niah was ceded to Sarawak with Baram.  

In both accounts, the origin of the collection and sale of birds’ nest is preceded by disasters and diasporas. It is not clear at the moment whether, in a demographic sense, birds’ nest production and exportation actually contributes to the formation of a more or less sedentary lifestyle among the local populations. The Punan (Penan) of the Niah are now dispersed again throughout the area for different reasons. Nevertheless, in both cases, the collection and sale of birds’ nest is recounted as a major event in economic development. In the first case, it attracted traders from different places to come to Niah, where the birds’ nest operation today is still a significant part of local life. In the second case, birds’ nest was remembered as a factor that brought “civilization” to Niah through trading connections with Brunei.

**Birds’ Nest Production at Niah**

**The Niah Caves and the Practice of Birds’ Nest Collection**

The Niah Caves are located in the Subis limestone massif, on the north coast of Sarawak. The total area is 10.5 hectares and divided into many branches and sections. Among the many entrances and openings, the West Mouth is the biggest one, with an opening 250 meters wide and 60 meters high. The archeological evidence of human activities at the West Mouth covers a time span from 40,000 to 2,000 years before the present. Presently, the archeological sites are under the administration of the Sarawak Museum, the birds’ nest
operations are controlled by the forest department, while the caves themselves are managed by the national park agency. Niah is 109 kilometers from the city of Miri. A bus ride of a little more than two hours takes one from Miri to Batu Niah; from there, it is a fifteen-minute boat ride to the park entrance, followed by a forty-five-minute walk to the West Mouth of the Main Cave. The place is easily accessible and located near a fairly populated area. The settlement closest to the West Mouth is an Iban longhouse, Rumah Chang.

Boardwalks are constructed along the main tourist path that cuts across the national park area. Before arriving at the West Mouth, one comes to a rock shelf about 200 meters wide, 50 meters deep, and 7–10 meters high. This is the Traders’ Cave, which used to shelter tens of roofless housing units—some connected in rows, some detached—on piles. According to local records, until 1985 a bustling community would fill the place for a period of two months during the collection season. Chinese and Malay traders, from either nearby towns or as far as Brunei, would come and stay in their own quarters, wait for the nest collectors on their way back from the caves, and purchase the nests directly from them. There was a common water spring, a big earthen stove for communal use, and even a coffee stall in this cave. According to Cranbrook,

The pattern of ownership of cave rights and the nature of the harvesting contract thus lends itself to corporate (if not cooperative) enterprise. Traditionally, the nest harvest at Niah occurred twice annually, for two 60-day periods, during which all interested parties assembled at the lower cave (Traders’ Cave), in the famous roofless village, to participate and no doubt to monitor all aspects of the proceedings. Under such arrangements, collective decisions must be made and the community itself can check infringement of the accepted conventions.41

Lord Medway also noted that “the biggest crowd came at the pupol tahun, the New Year season (January and February), when the collection was mostly better than the August pupol merai, the Moult season.”42 Today, the Traders’ Cave is totally desolate; only the belian hardwood skeletons of those housing units remain.

Another few minutes’ walk from the Traders’ Cave brings one to the West Mouth. In addition to the sheer size of the opening and the stalactite pillars, the most stunning scene in the West Mouth is no doubt the many bamboo and belian masts for birds’ nest collection. At the same time, one is also struck by the strong smell of guano. According to Medway’s estimation, at
that time, there were one and a half million swiftlets in Niah Caves. Like birds’ nest, guano was also a source of income for the local people, but with a much lower value.

Inside the main caves, the clefts and many of the chimneys, where the swiftlets build their nests, are often more than sixty meters above the ground. The collectors usually work in teams of two, a tukang julok, who climbs the mast and scrapes down the nest, and a tukang pungut, who stays on the ground to pick up the fallen nests. Medway provides this vivid description of the scene.

The most striking sights in the big cave at Niah are the tall tiang (masts) of bamboo or belian that reach up to or hang from, respectively, the roof two hundred feet above. They lead to thick clutters of spiders’ web scaffolding, again belian or bamboo, wedged in the clefts and chimneys where the swifts nest. When climbing a tall tiang, the collector first knots a cloth over his insteps, to tie his feet together in such a way that if he opens his knees, the downward pressure of his weight will increase the grip of his soles on the pole.

The rising bamboos are built before the hanging belian. Lengths of a conveniently strung local bamboo, buloh betong, that grows in single stems about forty feet high, topped by a palm like tuft of fronds, are cut and brought to the cave. A stem is stood upright and guyed with rotans; another may be hauled up, and joined to it, male and female-wise, and again stayed with rotans. Ultimately the roof is reached. A prepared beam of belian is wedged again among the rock, and from it is hung, on belian pegs, the tiang of the square cut lengths of belian joined by belian pegs, not lashed. The belian structures are permanent; there are about 50 of them in the 26 acres of cave. Some have fallen, some are no longer safe, but others are still in regular use, although they may have been first erected 50 years ago. . . . Bamboo tiang do not have a life of more than two years, in the damp cave air, and are stood up whenever needed, and left standing after use. A crowd of them on Bukit Bungkok, between the main East and the main West mouths, look like Trafalgar relics, sinking in the sea of guano.

On top of these masts and the crisscross beams, the tukang julok uses a penyulok to scrape loose the nests: “The penyulok is made of light, dry bamboo, bound at the joints with patterned whippings of split rotan. It is in four long sections, which can be joined end to end; the head is a hoe-like, but straight, steel blade, also rotan bound, and just below the head is a loop,
rotan again, to take the long beeswax candle that lights the wavering rod.”\textsuperscript{45}

Except that the beeswax candle is nowadays replaced by an electric flashlight, the tools of today’s birds’ nest collectors are basically the same as those described by Medway some fifty years ago. On the ground, the tukang pungut is responsible for the gathering of the fallen nests. At places where the nests might tumble irrecoverably to the bottom of a crevasse, a light net (selambau) is installed on the ground to catch the nests.

From the West Mouth, walking deeper into the caves, one sees the tiang standing here and there, some on the side of the boardwalk, some farther away. A few of them have people working on the tops, and invariably there is someone waiting underneath. Further away from the boardwalk and in the total darkness of the caves, here and there one sees dim camp lights accompanied by music that comes from either a guitar or a cassette player. These are the guardsmen who are hired to watch each designated area against thefts. Theft is a serious problem at Niah. This is only partly due to the accessibility of the location; the more important reason lies in the social relations of birds’ nest production here.

\textbf{Ownership, Lease, and Hired Labor}

The Punan are officially recognized as the earliest inhabitants of Niah. After settling down at Kuala Tangap, however, these Punan gradually converted to Islam. They changed their residential pattern into independent houses and claimed to be Malay. Many of them moved out of the area, some to Miri or Bintulu. After the Second World War, when the Sarawak government launched the registration of birds’ nest collection rights, they were first turned down by the then curator of Sarawak Museum, Tom Harrisson, on the ground that they were not Punan, but Malay. Only after they had managed to produce genealogies to demonstrate their Punan heritage were their rights officially recognized. Currently, every birds’ nest producing section of the Niah Caves is registered under individual Punan-Malay families.

The actual operation rights of birds’ nest collection at Niah, however, have almost entirely been leased by the Punan-Malay owners to different Chinese traders, at prices ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 ringgit per year, depending on the production of the specific section concerned, and for the duration of ten to fifteen years. The Chinese traders, however, do not work the caves themselves either; they hire the local Iban, Malay, and Bugis to do the guarding and collecting jobs. It is said that many Chinese traders like to hire Bugis as guardsmen because of their reputed fierceness.

The Iban in both Niah and the Lower Baram migrated into these areas.
from southeastern Sarawak during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Iban longhouse Rumah Chang, which is the nearest to the West Mouth, moved here from Bintulu about fifty years ago. When the settlers first arrived here, there were only twelve doors (bilek). Now Rumah Chang has seventy doors, which form two parallel blocks. Except for the very old and the very young, almost every male at Rumah Chang works the caves at one point or another, either as guardsmen or collectors, or both. The households in Rumah Chang are divided into several working units; each unit is contracted by a Chinese towkay to work in one or several sections in the caves that the Chinese towkay leases from respective Punan-Malay owners. The biggest working unit in Rumah Chang consists of forty-two households. All the able-bodied males of the forty-two households are grouped into teams of three. Each team works a half-day shift, guarding as well as collecting the nests. Although the government regulations stipulate that there should be only two harvest seasons per year at Niah, workers at Rumah Chang say that the Chinese towkay would push for more frequent, even monthly, harvesting, each time from a different part of the sections that he leased.

The Iban workers are not paid by fixed wages. After each harvest, the working unit is entitled to half of the sale. According to my informants at Rumah Chang, between 1988 and 1990, when the price of birds’ nest was at its highest, one kilogram could fetch 1,000 ringgit, and each harvest could amount to 40 kilograms. During that period of time, each household could earn 400 to 500 ringgit, sometimes even 1,000 ringgit a month. In 1999, however, both the harvest and the unit price declined. Nowadays each harvest of birds’ nest amounts to only 15 kilograms, and the price is 600 ringgit per kilogram. The monthly household income from birds’ nest sales are therefore down to 80 to 200 ringgit. The Iban of Rumah Chang have never given up rice cultivation; there are both hill and swamp paddies in their territory. When birds’ nest operation was at its peak, women were almost entirely in charge of the agricultural works. When the price of birds’ nest was good, it was the sole source of cash income for the household. Now the major sources of cash income are pepper planting and working oil palm operations.

“Working in the caves” actually includes three kinds of work. The climber-cum-scraper is called tukang julok. This is the most difficult and dangerous work in birds’ nest collection. The one who stays on the ground and collects the fallen nests is called tukang pungut. The third kind of work, which is seldom mentioned in birds’ nest literature, is the guardsman (jaga). If one walks deep into the darkness of the Great Cave, one will see the entire area
is dotted with dim lights of candles or oil lamps. Each titled section in the
cave is guarded by a hired jaga, who wards off trespassers. While the role of
jaga is a year-round job, climbers and collectors work, in theory, only dur-
ing the harvest season that is stipulated by the authority and agreed on by
the cave leaseholders. Therefore, the jaga can also work as tukang julok or
tukang pungut during the collecting season, and vice versa. The cave needs
to be guarded due to an extremely high rate of trespassing and illicit collect-
ing. Because of the size, openness, and accessibility of the caves, the birds’
ests in Niah Cave are highly susceptible to theft. According to some Chi-
nese traders in Batu Niah and veteran tukang julok from other villages in the
region, theft started to become a serious problem only after 1975, and the
people of Rumah Chang were in fact the original perpetrators. They recalled
that, in the years after the Second World War, the birds’ nest trade, although
it enjoyed a stable regional market, was not highly lucrative. Everybody
honored regulation of the harvest season and the individual rights of owners
and leaseholders over particular sections of the caves. Starting around 1975,
the people of Rumah Chang were granted permits to collect guano in the
caves. After becoming familiar with the caves and learning the technique
by observing veteran tukang julok at work, they started to collect birds’ nest
illegally and recklessly. The birds’ nests thus collected were continuously
brought down to the bazaar in small amounts and sold to “crooked” Chinese
towkay. By 1985, as the situation was getting out of hand, Chinese lease-
holders asked the police force to intervene and track down the perpetrators.
The police operation was met with armed resistance staged by the people of
Rumah Chang. In the late 1980s, the leaseholders were forced to seek recon-
ciliation with the Rumah Chang people and start hiring year-round guards to
protect their interests. Rumah Chang has since become the main supplier of
jaga, tukang julok, and tukang pungut to the birds’ nest industry at Niah.

The people of Rumah Chang have a different point of view regarding this
episode. One informant says, “Last time when the Malay were the owners of
the caves, we Iban were free to collect whatever [was] useful in the caves.
After they leased the caves to the Chinese, we could not do that anymore.
Nowadays we have to work as julok or jaga to earn wages. We are becoming
coolies to the Chinese. We Iban were definitely not coolies to the Malay.”

This might be the case in the eyes of Iban Rumah Chang, but one can
also see the people of Rumah Chang, with their agency, as having created an
unprecedented job opportunity for themselves through their energetic and
aggressive exploitation of the caves. The regional commodity market might
be beyond the control of local communities, and its encroachment unavoid-
able. At the juncture when the regional or global system needs to be articulated with the local, however, the chaos created by the people of Rumah Chang has successfully forced the birds’ nest trade to come to terms with them. They earn their share (though not the biggest one) in the profit that is generated from this regional trade and use it to embellish their community life.

**FROM BIRDS’ NEST COLLECTION TO LONGHOUSE AND REGIONAL SOCIAL PRODUCTION**

The Iban of Rumah Chang did not spoil their once brilliant financial opportunity. They put their money effectively in the renovation of the longhouse and they did this in a collective way. The present longhouse, beautifully renovated in the mid-1990s, has a uniform appearance for each bilek (family apartment), spacious open walkways with sitting areas, and verandas. The outside of the entire longhouse is painted light blue. Electric wiring is professionally done throughout the house. Many households have ceiling fans, and one bilek even has an air conditioner. My informant, showing me around and pointing at all the things in sight—including the air conditioner—said unhesitatingly: “Birds’ nest money.”

The longhouse of Rumah Chang won the third prize in a 1998 subdistrict longhouse contest. People of Rumah Chang often comment about their longhouse—always with traces of pride and contentment detectable underneath their cultivated modesty—that although it is not the most beautiful and modern longhouse in the subdistrict, all the bilek were finished around the same time: “Unlike most other longhouses, where some of the bilek are finished while others are still skeleton.” This indicates both the financial might of most of the households and the spirit of community solidarity. The rebuilding was proposed by the tuai rumah (longhouse head) in 1990, after he visited some modern longhouses near Bintulu. The old building was already fifty years old at the time and deteriorating. Tuai rumah Chang brought the idea to the people and, after a thorough discussion, won the support of the entire village. Two Iban architects from Bintulu were commissioned to prepare the blueprint. It was agreed that all the units of the two blocks of the longhouse would follow basically the same design. Minor variations in terms of the quality and style of wooden planks, doors, and windows were allowed, but there were only a few designated varieties to choose from. According to some villagers, after the decision to rebuild the longhouse was made, there was a preparation period that lasted about three years. Even though Rumah Chang was already a well-off community, not every family could immedi-
ately come up with enough cash for the completion of the project. During the following three years, almost all the households had someone working somewhere for money. Some villagers went to work in the oil industry in Miri or Brunei, some in commercial construction. The most available source of cash income close to home, however, was the birds’ nest industry in the Niah Caves. When the rebuilding was completed, each household had spent from 20,000 to 60,000 ringgit.

The two blocks of the longhouse of Rumah Chang now look absolutely polished and neat, with sturdy common staircases on both ends, wide and bright ruai areas, and similar-looking ceiling fans in front of almost all the bilek. Beside the one bilek with air-conditioning, most bilek are equipped with a television, a VCR or VCD player, a stereo, a gas stove, and a refrigerator. Nowadays, sitting on the ruai for late afternoon or evening chatting, people still occasionally compare and comment on the different quality and price of the building materials that each bilek uses. Out on the ruai of Rumah Chang, one experiences and witnesses the realization and perpetuation of the core Iban value that emphasizes both the spirit of community solidarity and individualistic competition.

A ritual called semah used to be performed annually to appease the spirits of the caves and to ask them to protect the birds’ nest and guano collectors working in the caves. It is considered a Punan ritual, to be performed every year before the opening of the first formal harvest season, in April. A spiritual medium (dayung), who has exclusive knowledge of the names of the spirits and can perform the chanting, conducts the ritual. After the dayung communicates with the spirits, a chicken is sacrificed and various kinds of rice cake are offered to the spirits. After the performance of the ritual, no one is to enter the caves for three days, so the spirits can enjoy the offerings in peace; there are stories relating the breaches of the taboo and their fatal outcomes. By the early 1990s, the ritual had already been discontinued for a long time due to the dispersal of the Punan and the unavailability of dayung. In 1998, the Punan community managed to have an aging dayung, Pa’ Udek Seman, conduct the ritual. Several hundred people, including Punan Muslims, Malays, Iban, and Chinese, attended the ceremony. The Chinese traders community is said to have contributed a significant amount of money to cover the expense of the ceremony, but there is talk of disputes inside the Punan community regarding their share of financing the ritual. Unfortunately, Pa’ Udek Seman passed away in late 1998. Under the current worldwide trend of nativistic movements, the desire to “revive” the ritual is rather strong both in the government and among the various parties concerned, but it is not
certain whether or not the Punan community can produce another dayung to continue the ritual in the future.

**THE PLAGHT AND PROSPECT OF BIRDS’ NEST ENTERPRISE AT NIAH**

There is unavoidably a dark side of the birds’ nest enterprise at Niah. The decline both in the swiftlet population and in birds’ nest (and guano) production is evident. Evasion of the stipulated harvesting schedule by the Chinese towkay is compounded by the problem of theft. Hiring full-time guardsmen does not solve the problem, since many of the “thieves” are either the guardsmen themselves or their friends and relatives. Presently almost all the locals coming out of the caves—off-duty guards, designated collectors, and people just “visiting”—have some birds’ nest in their pocket. Each one would have 20 to 30 ringgit worth of “pocket money birds’ nest.” In the short run, this appears to be a swindling of the Chinese towkay. In the long run, however, everybody loses.

In addition to the accessibility of the place, Niah’s plight also has something to do with the once huge population of the swiftlets and the low price of the black nests. Large amounts of harvested nests were needed to make the sale profitable, and very few parties really work to protect the diminishing swiftlet population. It is also closely related to the social relation of production. The real owners of the cave rights, the Punan, are by now mostly absentee landlords. The Chinese towkays have the capital and business connections to process and market the nests, but they do not have the skill or the will to work the caves themselves. The onsite workers do not have much of a personal interest in following conservation guidelines or in safeguarding the interest of the Chinese towkay. The manifold administrative arrangement at Niah results in a virtual vacancy of authority to enforce the policy stipulated by laws. The problems foreseen by Sarawak lawmakers in the first half of this century are now emerging.

Amid this highly commoditized and rather alienated productive relation, traces of sociality survive. Some may lament the disappearance of the once lively seasonal multiethnic community in the Traders’ Cave. But the material well-being of the Iban worker at Rumah Chang is certainly a demonstration of the underlying sense of community and cooperation. Most significant of all, despite the predominance of Chinese capital and Iban (and others’) labor, the Punan still retain the authority of ritual sanction over birds’ nest production. The semah ritual contains the potential for sustainable multi-ethnic social production. This is especially so in face of mounting international pressure on the birds’ nest trade. While more effort and enforcement
in conservation is definitely crucial and beneficial to all the parties involved, including the swiftlets, the continuation or revival of a traditional ritual that unites different peoples to establish a harmonious and productive relationship with the spiritual beings in the cave is probably no less effective as a means to neutralize or disarm the stiff gaze of international wildlife agencies, at least to a certain extent. Some of the Sarawak government agents, such as the Sarawak Museum, are certainly aware of this prospect and are taking an encouraging attitude toward its continuation. Now it is largely up to the Punan to maintain the transmission of their ritual knowledge.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the value of birds’ nest is constructed and sanctioned by Chinese medicinal tradition. This includes both the general therapeutic effects of all kinds of birds’ nest as well as the especially fabulous effects of the “blood nest.” Judging from the expanding scope of the Southeast Asian transnational birds’ nest trade, one may say that neither the demythification of the true quality of birds’ nest nor the disapproving gaze of the environmentalists is deterring the consumer’s enthusiasm for the yen-wo. The use-value (subjective value) of birds’ nest thus determined is further differentiated into several grades, with “blood nest” on the top and white nest regrouped at the bottom. This value categorization is conspicuously different from the categorization at or near the locations of production, where whole white nest fetches a much better price than do the colored ones. There is ample room for the middlemen, almost exclusively ethnic Chinese, to manipulate this discrepancy to their benefit. This is because they have a much better comprehension of what Sutherland calls “relevant knowledge about production and consumption.” The situation is also a vivid illustration of what Arjun Appadurai says about transactions in the precapitalist context.

In precapitalist contexts . . . the translation of external demands to local producers is the province of the trader and his agents, who provide logistical and price bridges between worlds of knowledge that may have minimal direct contact. Thus it is reasonably certain that traditional Borneo forest dwellers had relatively little idea of the uses to which the birds’ nests they sold to intermediaries have played in Chinese medical and culinary practice. This paradigm of merchant bridges across large gaps in knowledge between producer and consumer characterizes the movement of most commodities throughout history, up to the present.

Problems involving knowledge, information, and ignorance are not
restricted to the production and consumption poles of the careers of commodities, but characterize the process of circulation and exchange itself. In a powerful cultural account of the Moroccan bazaar, Clifford Geertz has placed the search for reliable information at the heart of this institution. . . . Much of the institutional structure and cultural form of the bazaar is double-edged, making reliable knowledge hard to get and also facilitating the search for it. . . . [To put it] in a more general form: bazaar-style information searches are likely to characterize any exchange setting where the quality and the appropriate valuation of goods are not standardized, though the reasons for the lack of standardization, for the volatility of prices, and for the unreliable quality of specific things of a certain type may vary enormously.47

While the birds’ nest example might serve as a strong case in favor of the subjective value theory, it also represents an interesting cultural twist to the labor theory of value. The use-value recognized by the Chinese consumers in birds’ nest is actually based on the recognition of huge labor input behind the procurement of the commodity. Derived from a reputed holistic cosmology, both professional and folk ideas in Chinese medicinal tradition regard the therapeutic effects of birds’ nest as substantiated by the life essence of other living things, in this case including both working human beings and the nest-constructing birds themselves. In other words, in the case of this commodity, birds’ nest, the subjective and the labor theories of value actually merge.

On the other hand, the communities that occupy the laborer position in this commodity chain are not entirely exploited passive players. Their agency is not negligible in the processes. At Niah, in appearance, each group involved in the production is alienated in different ways: the cave-owning Punan-Malay do not manage the operation; the Iban that work the caves are only wage earners; and the Chinese traders do not have the legal status to own the cave or the physical capacity to work the cave, but can only lease it from the Punan-Malay and hire the Iban as laborers. However, a trace of sociality or communalism is produced, or at least shows the potential of social production at a different level. This is demonstrated in the multiethnic celebration of the semah ritual. The Iban of Rumah Chang, on the other hand, have successfully converted the cash income generated from their participation in the birds’ nest trade into capital for their social production, as represented in the building of their prize-winning longhouse.
Notes
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1. Literally meaning “swiftlets’ nest.”
6. Ibid., 332.
7. Ibid., 334.
8. See Heather Sutherland’s essay in this volume.
9. Ibid., 191.
10. Ibid, 191.
11. See, for example, the Trade and Environment Database (TED); and Barbara Harrison, “Niah’s Lobang Tulang: ‘Cave of Bones,’” Sarawak Museum Journal 7.12 (1958): 596–619.
13. Chia Ming, Yin-shih hsü-chih [What we need to know about food and drink] (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1988). The Ming dynasty lasted from 1368 to 1644, while Chia Ming lived between 1268 and 1370.
16. Ibid., 57.
18. Chen Mau-ren’s biodata is not clear. In this work, however, he listed a number of his colleagues who all started their service during the third decade of the Wan-li reign (1573–1620). Fujian is one of the southeastern coastal provinces of China.
20. Jiang-su New Medical College, Chung-yao ta tz‘u-tien [Grand dictionary of Chinese medicine] (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue chishu chubanshe, 1986), 2, 654. Chi is one of
the focal concepts in Chinese medicine and can be roughly translated as “vital force or vital energy.”


22. Ibid., 428–29, emphasis added.


24. For example, Cranbrook, “Report on the Birds’ Nest Industry in the Baram District and at Niah, Sarawak,” 146. Bernard E. Read, however, still regarded the edible part of birds’ nest as being “made out of certain species of Gelidium and other seaweeds” (*Chinese Materia Medica: Avian Drugs* [1932; repr., Taipei: Southern Material, 1982], 54).

25. This is based on personal correspondence with a veteran Museum worker.


27. This home video was taken by one of my Middle Baram informants, who had recently visited this house-farmed birds’ nest operation in Indonesia. I viewed the video with my informant in his house.

28. One of my colleagues, a senior scholar of Chinese history and a regular birds’ nest consumer, asked me to bring him some top-quality birds’ nests on my next trip to Sarawak. “Bring me some of the best ones, the blood nests,” he said.

29. The Earl of Cranbrook reports, “One feature of note, here [the Baram] as at Niah, is the occasional presence of rusty red stain in the nest-cement forming the base (i.e. attachment) of the nest. At both locations this discoloration (termed *salai* in the Baram) is attributed by nest collectors to a character of the parent rock of the cave. Its effect on quality (judged from expected sale value) may be either neutral or, if the stain is invasive, detrimental” (“Report on the Birds’ Nest Industry in the Baram District and at Niah, Sarawak,” 155).


34. Robert Nicholl, ed., *European Sources for the History of the Sultanate of Brunei in the Sixteenth Century* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Museum, 1990), 95. In contrast to the absence of birds’ nest, officers following Olivier van Noort on his visit did record large amounts of bezoar stones for trade, as well as an active Chinese merchant community.


37. In most of the later literature, the Penan in this area are renamed Punan.
38. Towkay is Southern Fujian dialect for “boss.” The term is commonly used by native Sarawakians to address or refer to Chinese, shopowner or not.


40. Ibid., 662.


43. Ibid., 260.

44. Ibid., 256–57.

45. Ibid., 252.

46. Women do not work in the caves, not even as tukang pungut. The reason given for this is that the work is too filthy and no woman would want to go. In the semah ceremony held in 1998 at the West Mouth to appease the cave spirits, however, both men and women, the elderly as well as children participated.