A SINO-SOUTHEAST ASIAN CIRCUIT
Ethnohistories of the Marine Goods Trade

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The renowned sociologist Georg Simmel has famously written of the paradoxical nature of “the stranger”—at once alien and uncomfortable in any given local society, but also able to use this status to further economic and even occasionally political ends, often associated with trade. Simmel was building on the work of others who had thought about these processes, most notably Max Weber and his interrogations of the so-called Protestant ethic, with all that this historical “ethic” supposedly signified. Many contemporary scholars have seized on these ideas to study the mechanics of “stranger communities” in their own academic bailiwicks, encompassing Indians in East Africa, Jews in Europe, and even Armenians spread out across the Middle East. Scholars of overseas Chinese communities have been no exception: some of the most important analytic writing about diasporic communities and their linkages with trade and long-distance commercial enterprises has focused on these populations. The reasons for this have been disparate, but one of the most important among them is that the Chinese—and those who conducted business with them—have often left very good records, though accessing these records across the bandwidth of societies and languages that Chinese traders visited has not always been the easiest of tasks.

In this essay I look at overseas Chinese networks through one window: the historical and contemporary trade in marine produce, which linked China and the many countries of Southeast Asia in an economic embrace for hundreds of years. In the first third of this essay, I note some of the theoretical, historiographical, and historical outlines for examining these communities and processes across historical time. This is done in fairly shorthand form, as I have written about these connections in more detail in other places. The second two-thirds of the essay link these historical peregrinations with
how the marine-goods trade works now between China and Southeast Asia. This portion of the essay is based on published academic literature, but also significantly comprises my own oral-history interviews with these traders throughout East and Southeast Asian ports, as well as visits to collecting and transshipment sites of these commodities too. I hope to show the broad dimensions of this commerce in both historical and contemporary terms, as a crucial connective link between China and Southeast Asia over the past several centuries. Far from being an antiquated trade in strange and often exoticized objects culled from the sea, the traffic in marine goods can be seen as an important vestige of historical transoceanic connections. This commerce echoes the past in nostalgic and interesting ways, but it also continually evolves into the future, as the statements of these traders reveal when they speak into the record on their own terms.

Marine Goods in the Past: Woven Threads

Scholarship on the historical dimensions of the Chinese economy has come a long way in the past several decades in attempting to explain how and why Chinese commerce expanded in the last three to four centuries. Some of these studies have focused on guild and clan associations, the famous gōngsī that G. William Skinner and others researched in such fine detail in the 1970s and earlier. Other studies have combed the Ming Shi-lu (or Ming Veritable Records), as well as the archives of particular provinces, such as Fujian, for clues as to how commercial activities expanded in the early modern period before exploding in number, importance, and volume in the nineteenth century. Most of these earlier studies looked at the oceans when the tendrils of commerce were scrutinized as moving away from the Chinese polity, but now such research also deals with overland connections in detailed and sophisticated ways as well. There has even been an effort more recently to highlight particular commodities and to follow them as “tracers” in unraveling these processes, with goods such as opium proving to be particularly useful in this regard. If analyses of the Chinese historical economy used to be the realm of dry number-crunchers and arcane local archives, more recently these inquiries have sprouted off in new and different directions, to the profit of Chinese historiography as a whole.

One of the most pressing contemporary research agendas on the nature of Chinese social and economic history has been the role of Chinese merchants in trans-Asian networks. This research has built on some of the foundational work of Skinner, R. Bin Wong, Peter Purdue, and William Rowe, and...
now asks a range of questions on how commerce has worked in China, but particularly as one of several strands of commodity movement that became important during the last two centuries. The connections with Western firms have been queried in this regard, as well as links and commercial piggy-backing with Japanese business concerns as well. Some of the research has looked at particular dialect subgroups as windows into these processes on both a micro and a macro scale, while other studies have examined how the efforts of many different actors—Chinese, French, Dutch, British, Spanish, and even Persian—have combined to push and pull certain items through Asian geographies on an unprecedented scale. It is clear that the old story of a more or less “sealed Chinese economy” via dictate of the Ch’ing state is no longer tenable, as more and more research is brought to bear on the way networks have expanded outward from China proper to other places, some as far away as Chicago and Peru.

Though Chinese did indeed end up in places as far afield as this, it is clear that the locus classicus for both Chinese emigration and Chinese commercial expansion during this period was the Nanyang, or “South Seas” (Southeast Asia). This is particularly true for the history of marine-goods procurement, but it is also true on the whole for most fields of business and endeavor, as the numbers of Chinese who eventually left for these places attest to over many years. French scholars (writing in French) have been particularly good at theorizing these connections, showing how the South China Sea acted as a fulcrum for movement and radials of contact and dispersion, even as far away as the distant island of Java. English-language scholarship has also worked on these connections, either via longue durée histories or through the vantages of particular institutions, such as Chinese revenue farming as a connective strand between China and Southeast Asia. Japanese writers (translated into English) and Chinese scholars have also become involved, ensuring that not all attempts at explanation of these phenomena are grounded solely in Western social-science paradigms. Taken as a whole, the collective has set up very useful parameters in helping us understand the template of historical travel, whether this was for commercial reasons, such as the trade in marine goods, or for any other rationale.

IN SOUTHERN WATERS

One of the most important destinations in the Nanyang for Chinese traders and immigrants was Java. Java had long had contact with China, but the establishment of a Dutch presence in Batavia around the turn of the seventeenth century increased the demand for Chinese merchants, artisans, and
workers in far greater numbers than had previously arrived. The autocratic Jan Coen was the despot of the town, but Dutch-language scholarship shows us that Chinese kapitans were quickly established to look after the Chinese population, especially with regard to regulating commerce along lines of which the Dutch approved. Things went fairly smoothly at first, but by the eighteenth century there were significant troubles, including massacres of these same Chinese populations. When the Chinese inhabitants were not being periodically culled in such ruthless ways by the colonial overlords of the island, they were used to expand Dutch commerce in many sectors of the economy, such as petty trade, agriculture, and increasingly, the sale of chandu, or retail opium. Intermarriage with local women took place on a fairly large scale, and the Chinese on Java gradually phased into both a separate community as well as a mestizo society that was mixed with the indigenes themselves. Many Chinese were, in fact, scattered in the port towns and on other parts of Java’s coasts, and they played a large part in the buying, selling, and transport of marine products to these larger towns, where such commodities were consumed or packaged for export to other places.

Dutch-language scholarship shows us how quickly the Chinese, and Chinese marine-goods traders in particular, spread into the rest of the burgeoning Dutch Indies as well, away from the center of Dutch authority on Java. Economically, this community began to serve a crucial feeder role for the Dutch via all things that the latter needed to make their colony profitable—dried fish, pearls, and fish maws among them. The most famous Chinese fishing station in the archipelago was located at Bagan Si Api-api, off the coast of north-central Sumatra, and the amounts of sea produce collected, dried, and packaged for sale here reached huge quantities by the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. Proximity to British-controlled Singapore, with that island’s huge port and transregional shipping connections, was at least as important as Bagan Si Api-api’s connections to the Dutch primate port city of Batavia, further south and away from the mouth of the Straits of Melaka (see fig. 1). Yet Chinese appeared elsewhere as well, on the long outstretched coasts of Borneo, for example, in Sulawesi, in Eastern Indonesia, and especially in Riau, as fishers, driers, collectors, and packagers of marine goods. Ethnic business connections with other Chinese merchants and with Dutch colonial officials ensured that much of this produce reached Dutch and foreign markets quickly and fairly efficiently. Chinese communities were so important in this respect that the Dutch undertook extensive surveillance on these populations to ensure that Batavia would always get its cut of moving merchandise.
Further north in the waters of the British dominions of Malaya and Borneo, a similar state of affairs existed with respect to Chinese communities and the collection of ocean produce. On Borneo, both in today’s modern Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, as well as in the sultanate of Brunei, Chinese took on busy roles as the organizers and collectors of ocean produce in a variety of places. The coasts of Borneo were found to be under-exploited compared to many other places, so Chinese merchants and occasionally small business concerns often had their pick as to where to set up shops, drying facilities, purchase points, and other institutions to make these businesses run. Revenue-farming syndicates with primary interests in other products, such as opium or alcohol, sometimes helped in smoothing out some of these arrangements. On the Malay Peninsula in places such as Penang, where Chinese syndicates such as the well-studied Khaw Group held economic sway, the connections between marine produce and efficient forms of Chinese business organization were even more in evidence, especially with large populations of Chinese and other ethnic laborers nearby needing to be fed. The buying, sorting, packaging, and eventual shipping of marine products were a crucial part of the local economy in places such as Penang, connecting the British port to Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Siam, and even Burma in one large, maritime economic arena.

Finally, in the Philippines, first run by the Spanish and eventually run for
half a century by the United States, we see a similar story, though with different local permutations. Chinese had been coming to the Philippines for many centuries and often in larger numbers than in other parts of Southeast Asia, as the archipelago was closer and easier to reach using prevailing wind and current patterns of the monsoons. With more than 7,000 islands, Chinese became heavily involved in the marine-produce trades of the colonial Philippines very easily, often using ships that they had originally piloted to the Philippines, first as vessels of transport and eventually as carriage containers for marine produce heading back to Fujian. The ocean produce trade from the Philippines was extremely important, first for supplying cities with food (such as Manila and Cebu), but also in mining the exceedingly plentiful waters of Sulu in the southern parts of the archipelago, where pearls, mother-of-pearl, shark fins, and fish stomachs could be procured in very large quantities. Chinese crews sailed from South China to take advantage of these riches, but they eventually also came from Singapore and other Southeast Asian ports, all in an effort to make a living off these fecund seas. Though the Spanish, in particular, periodically legislated against Chinese over-involvement in regional trades outside of the cities, the rules often went unenforced because of Spanish weakness, and because of the outstretched geography of the islands. Even into the early twentieth century and after the arrival of the Americans, Chinese involvement in these trades was maintained, though other agricultural staples—often fetching very high prices on world markets, at least until the Great Depression—later drowned marine goods as one of the most important items of commerce in maintaining long-distance commercial connections.

Marine-Goods Connections in the Contemporary Period
THEORIES, CONTEXTS, AND THE CHINESE “HEARTLAND”

Fast-forwarding to the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first century, a remarkable picture of change and continuity appears in the transit of ocean commerce between China and Southeast Asia. If the period between roughly 1780 and 1860 was a high point of this commerce, followed by a lessening in importance of this trade as it was swamped by the much larger movement of goods in the so-called high colonial era, then the last two to three decades have seen a resurgence in these items, as the record-growth economies of both China and many Southeast Asian states have spun off the charts. If the worldwide depression of the 1930s, the Second World War, and the early years of Southeast Asian nation-states after decolonization continued the pattern of marine goods
living in the shadow of other, more important lines of commerce since the late nineteenth century, then the explosive growth of economies in East and Southeast Asia since the 1980s has revitalized this traditional conduit of trade between the two regions in new and interesting ways. Much of this growth has been attributed to the overall dynamism of regional economies, which has encouraged a brisk flow of goods between subregions that have traditionally traded with one another for many hundreds of years. Yet it is noticeable that the passage of marine goods has become an important subrubric of this larger economic success story, begging the question as to why and how this trade fits into a larger story of growth. I address this question both through social-science literature on the topic, and through my own interviews with Chinese marine-goods merchants in various parts of China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia itself. Both avenues of inquiry are supplemented as well by my observations from field trips to marine-collecting sites scattered throughout the region (see map 1).

Certainly the success of Chinese business in reasserting itself throughout Southeast Asia since the fall of the colonial powers at midcentury has drawn no lack of interest from social theorists seeking to explain this success. The reasons put forward for this dynamism have been various in nature, from the importance of clan associations and language-dialect groups, to notions of guanxi and transnational networks, to an interesting thread reflecting on the nature of “Chinese capitalism” itself as a modus operandi for a range of ethnic Chinese merchants scattered throughout Southeast Asia.31 Some of these explanations have been more sophisticated than others, but all of them point to an opinion and a worldview that Chinese business has been in a growth mode not only in “Greater China” (the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, and Taiwan, over the last twenty-five years or so), but also in Southeast Asia, a traditional field for Chinese merchant activity over the centuries (known collectively as the Nanyang).32 Several important scholars have looked specifically at the dynamics of these interactions from China down to Southeast Asia itself, both historically and in the years leading up to our own time.33 Others have concentrated more on the Southeast Asian side of things, analyzing patterns in the receiving countries of these flows, rather than from the source areas of migration and merchant movement in East Asia as a whole.34 Regardless of the approach chosen, it is clear that marine-goods movements between the two spheres connect these literatures very well, and help show some of the mechanics of commerce and ethnicity in action. The business radials operate over a very large field and are
therefore instructive in showing how an old trade such as the one in marine goods survives and changes over time.

China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are mostly end-destinations for the flow of goods, as the majority of items come from Southeast Asia, but sometimes also from further afield than this. Interviews done in these places with shop owners show how truly transnational their contacts can be: owners signaled their entrenchment in much larger geographic systems in interesting ways. Some shops, such as the Kin Sang Dispensary in Kowloon, Hong Kong, are very low on the chain—they are merely bottom-rung outlets for these goods, and sell such products only in very small quantities per package, and only to local consumers.35 These stores are common in Hong Kong, but also in China proper, where comparatively small numbers of large-sized concerns deal with the outside world. This was certainly true in Xiamen, Fujian (one of the most “networked” places in China), but it was also true in Guangzhou,
Guangdong, and even in Ching-ping Market, where dried sea products are sold by many dozens of merchants side by side. Their connections with the outside world of marine goods tend to be mediated by larger concerns that have better contacts with the government and can get the necessary licenses. Back in Hong Kong, and only a few blocks away from the Kin Sang Dispensary, Citiherb is a very different kind of place: gleaming and impressive, its wares are shipped from far and wide in the Nanyang. The fish maws alone (dried fish stomachs, used medicinally) were among the largest and best-preserved specimens that I saw anywhere in my interviews in Asia. Yet even this apothecary paled in comparison to the Ho Sheng Tang Company, headquartered in Taipei, Taiwan. Ho Sheng Tang obtained its shark fins from the large fleets of Taiwanese fishing ships that comb the world’s seas, and its abalone came from Mexico and California, across the vast Pacific itself. Its edible-sea-cucumber stocks not only had various grades of Southeast Asian holothurians, but even tiny, extremely expensive specimens from Japan, selling at NT$9,800 (or at US$300 per specimen). This was the high end of end-destinations, and therefore representative of a different kind of access to the outside world compared to some of the previously mentioned shops.

**THE COASTS OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN MAINLAND**

Marine produce and dried goods come to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from many parts of the Nanyang, but certainly the coasts of mainland Southeast Asia have a very long history of shipping such products north. Vietnam is China’s closest neighbor in Southeast Asia, and because of its long, extended coastline, fish has very often been transported to South China, frequently by ethnically Sino-Vietnamese merchants. Even fishermen themselves do this on occasion, evading customs patrols, as they know where they can land their boats to quietly unload large holds of precious fish. Observers of Vietnamese economic life have often commented on the importance of the Sino-Vietnamese community, centered on Cholon in Ho Chi Minh City, but present in large stretches of the rest of the country too, in connecting the Chinese and Vietnamese economies. It is clear that, in the realm of marine goods and dried natural products, these binding commercial sinews have been very important. In Cambodia, too, the marine industry has been vital both in feeding Cambodia’s own population and as an export industry for profit, often to China. Nola Cooke has studied some of these patterns over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly as they related to fish and marine life coming from the Tonle Sap, Cambodia’s great lake. This lake is said by scientists to have the greatest density
of fish in the world, and some of that density is shipped off to China every year in dried form, both by Sino-Khmer merchants and by Chinese traders who know to come to Cambodia’s markets on a seasonal basis to pick up their supplies.

In Thailand, the picture is little different. Ethnically Sino-Thai merchants are also important in this country, and help to form an economic conduit between the kingdom, which also boasts a large, extended coastline, and China, which is often a market-destination for sea produce caught both in the Gulf of Thailand and in the Andaman Sea. From fieldwork done on the docks of Songkhla, on the gulf coast in the south, it is clear that very large specimens of fish—including shovel-nosed sharks and various species of rays—are being sold to China for the feeding of both humans and animals alike (for the latter, some of these fish species are ground up to make animal feed).41

On the Indian Ocean coast of southern Thailand, astride the Andaman Sea, slightly different dynamics rule the market in these goods. In places like Ao Phra Nang, a Muslim fishing village just north of Krabi, a small resort town catering to Western travelers (as opposed to tourists, who tend to flock to Phuket and other offshore islands), much of the fishing economy is also geared toward export. Here, shellfish are collected seasonally and with the tides, mostly by women in the mud-flat shallows, and then boxed and transported to collection depots for eventual resale to the Chinese market.42

Further north along this same coast, and at the bottom terminus of Burma, the border town of Ranong is also an important fishing and collecting center for marine exports from Thailand. Here, as opposed to Ao Nang, the industry is just that—industrial—with large, oceangoing fishing trawlers setting out each day from Ranong’s docks, the boats fishing for catch in Thai waters, international waters, and sometimes (illegally) in Burmese or Malaysian waters too (see fig. 2). Here too, I have been told in interviews on the docks, a large portion of the eventual catch is dried and shipped to Hong Kong and China to meet demand.43

Finally, in Burma, too—one of the world’s most isolated countries, because of the coup that brought the Burmese military to power, in 1962—traditionally sought marine goods are shuttling en masse to China, and only sometimes in officially recorded fashion. Here, as in the shops and dispensaries of Hong Kong, there are different kinds of concerns with different kinds of reach into the marine-goods trade. Small shops, such as the one in Yangon (Rangoon) owned by U Myint Thein, have traditional roots in the trade and have been passed on from generation to generation. One of
Figure 2  Burmese and Thai fishing boats: Ranong and Songkhla (Andaman Sea and Gulf of Thailand). Photos by author.
U Myint Thein’s parents were ethnically Burmese, but one was also Yunnanese Chinese, and it was from this generation that he learned how to conduct his business in the buying and selling of items inside this pharmacopeia. A nearby shop, also in Yangon, had firmer roots in this commerce, and because Burma is still relatively isolated, many of the wares on view in this store were new to me, and I had not seen them in markets outside of Burma. These included items such as several species of dried fish (some black in color, others white), though there were also very expensive species of holothurians on offer, which was surprising for a country as economically poor as Burma.

Fieldwork done on the Arakan coast, not too far from the Bangladesh border, also confirmed that the fishing was on a small-scale, community basis, and not just by large fishing boats owned by industrial concerns. In one village alone, I saw huge drying mats set out with fish of several different species (Commerson’s anchovy [Stolephorus commersonii]; Silver Pomfret [Pampus argenteus]; and Lonfin Mojarra [Pentaprion longimanus]), all baking in the sun.

When I asked a Chinese merchant in town where these small species of dried fish were heading, he told me that some were used for local consumption, some were eaten in Yangon and in other big cities of Burma, and that others were on their way to China, though that was certainly very far away.

SOUTHEAST ASIA’S ISLAND WORLD

If these patterns are discernible on the coasts of the mainland world of Southeast Asia, then they are nearly omnipresent in insular Southeast Asia, where the sea is literally everywhere, and its bounty is readily available for transport. A large literature has sprung up to study the tendril of Chinese commerce in the contemporary Philippines, for example, where Chinese families have mixed into mestizo communities with local Filipinos for hundreds of years. Some of these networks are centered on Manila, the “pri- mate city” of the Philippines and by far its most important economic engine, but there are also important Chinese merchant interests in the provinces as well, especially in places such as Iloilo in the Visayas. Chinese marine-goods sellers in the warehouse districts of northern Manila (Binondo and Divisorio) told me of huge orders that they received for ocean produce from China, from both Hong Kong and the PRC proper. Most of these merchants are Hokkien speakers whose ancestors came to the Philippines from Fujian, and many of them still have good contacts and family scattered throughout southern China, as well as more formal business associates in Hong Kong.

It is a noticeable attribute of these Filipino-Chinese families that sons and
daughters help with the business, especially because so many of them can speak good English, and this connects them to wider radials of procurement than merely the Chinese-speaking contacts allow. Because the Philippines is one of the world’s largest archipelagos (with some 7,000 islands), there is no lack of maritime environment from which to find supplies for this outstretched commerce, either. Contacts of these families stretch all the way south to Zamboanga and the Sulu Sea, one of the richest historical marine grounds for maritime-goods procurement, going back to at least the fifteenth century.50

If this state of affairs holds true for the Philippines, then it is even truer for Indonesia, the world’s largest archipelago bar none. Scattered among Indonesia’s 13,000-plus islands is also a large ethnic Chinese merchant community, some of whom have been there for centuries, and others who are more recent arrivals from elsewhere in East or Southeast Asia (China, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.). Chinese merchants have been involved in the sea-products trade of this region for a very long time, and their tendrils of business and association extend far and wide.51 It is not only Western social scientists who are interested in this phenomenon, but Indonesian scholars too—many, but not all, of them of Chinese ancestry—and the latter have also written about this phenomenon, sometimes in English, but also in Bahasa Indonesia.52 Fieldwork done in harvesting areas such as Lombok in Nusa Tenggara, Makassar in Sulawesi, and Ternate and Banda in Maluku, Eastern Indonesia, shows that Chinese capital finances sea-products collecting on a grand scale, across large parts of this scattered archipelago.53 Jakarta is often the national collecting depot for such products, but the items can also be sent directly to Singapore, or occasionally to Hong Kong to bypass layers of middlemen.54 The commodities are almost always harvested from the sea by local indigenes, but as soon as they get to market, they go through various rungs of sorting and sale through ethnic Chinese merchants, often locally born, but based progressively further and further away from acquisition sites. This is, in fact, a broad pattern throughout Southeast Asia, whether it is mother-of-pearl, sea cucumbers, fish maws, or other items that are being collected.

In Malaysia, having conversations with Chinese marine-goods merchants is easy: there is little of the occasional discomfort (or even downright fear) that pervades Chinese Indonesians during interviews, and there is plenty of commercial activity in the sea-products arena here, too. Speaking to these traders throughout Malaysia’s major cities is an exercise in tracking the Chinese diaspora over time, and seeing the fullest expression of its breadth,
all in dealing with one product line. In Kuala Lumpur the majority of these traders are Cantonese, in keeping with historical migration patterns to the city, while in Penang and Ipoh they are Hokkien for the most part. In Malaysian Borneo, where Chinese migrants came from different parts of China, and for different reasons, the majority are Hakka. Yet despite these varying sub-ethnicities among the merchants, many of them seem to be buying and selling the same goods, though often along dialect lines when they can. In other cases these traders use Mandarin as a lingua franca among other ocean-products businessmen scattered throughout Malaysia, in Southeast Asia, and back to East Asia itself. Quite a number of these Malaysian Chinese merchants spoke of doing their business along “traditional lines”; they do indeed use computers, faxes, and telexes in their daily transactions, but they also make use of abacuses and good tea when doing business, as their fathers before them would have done, and perhaps their fathers’ fathers before that. These links to the past are interesting and widespread, and they also seem to be of both sentimental and utilitarian value to many traders who are still concerned with this highly traditional line of Chinese commerce. This may be not only the case in the marine-products trade, but may also be true among other product lines, according to studies on Chinese business in that country.

Singapore Redux: Back to the Center

Yet perhaps the best place to study the warp and weft of the traditional (and modern) Chinese marine-products trade, as well as its connections and dissonances with its own long past, is probably Singapore, then—as now—the central organizational axis for this commerce in Southeast Asian waters. Singapore has been a favored place to study the ins and outs of Chinese commerce for several reasons, not least of these being that China was closed to such study for a very long time, and Singaporean merchants’ facility with the English language meant that research could be conducted in both Chinese and English, side by side. As a result of this, the literature on Chinese commerce in Singapore is particularly rich, including several somewhat recent dissertations that achieve a level of detail that would previously have been very difficult to achieve in a mainland Chinese context. Sophisticated theories of Chinese merchant behavior have sprung from Singaporean field examples, and often have been put forward as being representative in some ways of Chinese business practices as a whole across wider regional geographies. There has been some truth to these assertions, but also—perhaps—some overreach, in figuring out how emblematic Chinese business in this
one small place may be of the larger dynamics and mechanics of Chinese commerce generally, in East and Southeast Asian waters.

For marine- and dry-produce sellers, these patterns are very much in evidence, though they are only infrequently mentioned in the actual literature on trade and ethnicity among Chinese communities. In Singapore, the main area for these trades is scattered around South Bridge Road and its cross streets, near Singapore’s traditional Chinatown area, and north of the modern-day financial complex centered around Shenton Way. Walking into these shops, in some senses, is like walking into a different time. Big burlap sacks of samples sit scattered on the floor, and on the burlap of the sacks one can see stenciled the ports of many countries: Dobo (in Aru, Eastern Indonesia); Davao (in Mindanao, the Southern Philippines); even Australia (some sea cucumbers make it all the way north from Darwin, which has a monsoon climate and is more connected to Southeast Asia’s maritime rhythms than to those of Australia). You can touch and taste specimens of the produce, even though these are company headquarters with modern communications equipment and orders are coming in (or going out) to the four corners of the world. The fact that many Chinese marine-goods sellers have kept their shops in this area is important in and of itself—it is a continuity with tradition, a conscious choice, though other real estate (for all intents and purposes) would now be just as good. Dialect-group preferences still manifest themselves in this community, though Singapore’s Chinese population is more diverse (sub-ethnically) than most other places in Southeast Asia, simply because it is so large.

Yet the changes are just as noticeable. Fifty or one hundred years ago, it was a good bet that many of these shops would have had sons involved with the business, learning the trade and helping out with day-to-day operations—this is no longer the case in most of these concerns. Most shop owners with whom I spoke lamented the fact that their sons would not follow them into their line of work, though some were glad of this, citing it as too competitive a way to make a living. Others were more philosophical: they wanted their children to receive better educations than they had, so that their lives would not be taken up with pushing odoriferous, salt-caked merchandise around Asia as a means of making ends meet. Singapore is still the center of these trades in Southeast Asia; it is still a collection and transshipment point for large quantities of these goods, which are collected elsewhere in Southeast Asia and eventually transited up to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Yet even this competitive advantage—and link to the past—is disappearing, as ethnic Chinese concerns in various other Nanyang coun-
tries are now making their own deals with East Asia, to obtain products to market quicker and without the rising costs of Singaporean middlemen. The trade has a remorseless logic to it—the passage of marine goods must compete (like all other lines of trade) in the ferocity of today’s global market. Though sea cucumbers, seahorses, fish maws, pearl products, dried-fish varieties, abalone, and many other commodities of the traditional trade still pass through Singapore, the days of the port city acting as the arbiter of this trade may now be numbered. Singapore has competed too well, in a sense, in the global economy; it has bypassed these trades in its own economic lifecycle. The men I spoke with over the last eighteen years may in fact be the last generation to control this trade, as it passes from Singapore into the periphery, and is guided by other Chinese hands.

Conclusion

It seems a truism that the development of the global political economy in the last two to three centuries had much to do with the spread of capitalism, as new ways of conducting commerce filtered to nearly every corner of the known world. These processes have been discussed within the larger structures of colonialism and existing patterns of trade, with scholars such as Philip Curtin and others showing how this happened in a variety of places, and at a variety of times, over the past several hundred years. Critical to this discussion has been the role of ethnic middlemen, those who competed and later collaborated with the advancing imperial projects of the West, but who also carved out their own niches within the new parameters of commerce that came into being. These racialized networks have been visible across a number of empires and creeping colonial projects, showing that there were indeed interstitial spaces within the larger economic structures where such communities could carve their own niches of importance. Chinese marine-goods sellers were one among these many groups, moving from a position of early significance in the centuries before imperial rule to compradors in the nineteenth century and early twentieth, before being reborn yet again into new post-independence roles after the end of the Second World War.

Many of these networks still have salience in the economic world of East and Southeast Asia today. Though marine-goods traders possess only an echo of the importance they once had in helping to prop up intraregional systems of exchange, in numerical and value terms these trades are actually larger and richer than they have ever been. This is in keeping with the growth of Asian and global markets, and it is also in keeping with the rising abilities of human beings to elicit the varied riches of the sea in ever-larger
numbers. It is clear that some of the centuries-old ways of “doing business” in this arena are still with the Chinese marine-goods sellers of East and Southeast Asia, and that some of their own specific traits and traditions as a community have been lost, or are quickly being lost right now. This has to do with the passage of time, but it also has much to do with shifting perceptions of what is important, profitable, and desirable for Chinese families and Chinese family firms, whose interests used to overlap, possibly more so than they often do today. The outstretched community of Chinese marine-goods traders is a very useful population to question and map some of these changes in commercial history, as this trade—like many others—tries to fit itself into the dictates of the modern commercial world. Using a combined approach of historical and ethnographic methods makes visible these changes over time and space, and allows us to watch as the members of these families and diasporic commercial concerns continue an avenue of commerce that has been important for a very long time.

Notes


5. For a good overview, see, for example, P. J. Golas, “Early Ch'ing Guilds,” The City in Late Imperial China, ed. G. W. Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 555–80.


27. See the contributions by R. Bernal, L. Diaz Trechuelo, M. C. Guerrero, and S. D.


35. Interview, Kin Sang Dispensary, Hong Kong, 4 April 2005.
36. Interviews were done in Xiamen, Fujian (PRC) in the spring of 2005. Fieldwork in Ching-ping Market, Guangzhou, took place in January 1990. The range of goods available in this market, in particular, was truly astounding: marine produce from the four corners of the globe could be found here, though usually from Southeast Asia (via ethnic Chinese networks).
37. Interview, Cititherb Chinese Medicine Clinic, Hong Kong, 4 April 2005.
41. Fieldwork notes, Songkhla docks, Songkhla, South Thailand (Gulf of Thailand coast), December 1989.
44. Interview with U Myint Thein, Yangon, Burma, 4 January 2007.
45. Interview at unnamed spice and marine-goods shop, also in Yangon, Burma, four streets over from U Myint Thein’s apothecary–marine goods–spice store, 4 January 2007.
49. Interview, Inter-Asian Pacific Company, Manila, the Philippines, January 1990.
general manager of this dry-goods concern, Vicente Co Tiuong Keng, gave me this information during a long interview on the premises of his shop in the warehouse district of northern Manila.


53. The fieldwork to support this observation was done in scattered parts of Indonesia over several years, always in coastal communities: in Lombok, Nusa Tenggara, summer 2005; in Makassar, South Sulawesi, summer 2005; in Ternate, North Maluku, spring 1990; and in Banda, Central Maluku, spring 1990.

54. Fieldwork and interviews with sailors, Jakarta docks (Sunda Kelapa), spring 2000.

55. For Kuala Lumpur, see interviews with Fook Hup Hsing Sdn Bhd, Tek Choon Trading Sdn Bhd, and Tai Yik Hang Medical Hall, all completed in November 1989; in Penang, see interviews with Kwong Seng Hung Pte Ltd, and Soo Hup Seng Trading Company Sdn Bhd, completed in November 1989; and in Ipoh, see interview with Wing Sang Hong Sdn Bhd, also completed in November 1989.

56. For Kuching, see interviews with Syn Min Kong Sdn Bhd and Voon Ming Seng Sdn Bhd, both completed in March 1990; fieldwork done in coastal areas of Sabah, in and near Kota Kinabalu, was also useful for uncovering these patterns in 2004.


4. See interviews completed in Singapore with Fei Fah Drug Company and Ming Tai Company Pte Ltd, both in October 1989.


