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Eric Tagliacozzo & Wen-Chin Chang (Eds.). *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2011

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The field of literature on the commercial activities of the Chinese overseas, particularly in Southeast Asia, is by now large and crowded. Given its title, it would appear that *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities and Networks in Southeast Asia* is yet another addition to this corpus—and it is, but it also has much more to offer than a simple economic narrative.

Bringing together an array of experts in Chinese overseas and Southeast Asian studies—from historians to anthropologists, from established doyen(ne)s to a new generation of junior scholars—this volume provides several revisions and expansions of longstanding assumptions in this field. A reconsideration of William Skinner’s micro-regions, of beliefs regarding the pre-British presence and influence (or lack thereof) in Southeast Asia, and of the conceptualization of ‘coolie’ or semi-enslaved labor as a commodity are but a few examples of such re-examination. These re-imaginings are detailed and subtle, and some are more in-depth than paradigm shifting, but they are no less interesting or important for that fact. Although the central themes of these essays are the routes of Southeast Asian commerce and commodities (themes that were identified by one of the authors as a deliberate counter-balance to the prominence of ethnic- and kinship-based studies in Southeast Asian history) (Sutherland, p. 172), this volume nonetheless provides valuable and sometimes unexpected insights into socio-cultural and political dynamics.

In their introduction, the editors situate this book within and beyond existing studies of Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia. Their collection builds on the idea of networks and global connectivity, observes patterns (over the *longue durée* and across diverse physical and human geographies), and engages in the longstanding debate over the existence and nature of Chinese capitalism. The editors identify as a crucial issue the question of whether there has been any such thing as “Chinese capitalism” in Chinese history, and if so, how it operated (p. 3). Whereas the existing debate has focused on proving or disproving this phenomenon, Tagliacozzo and Chang take a different approach. The essays they have compiled are each rooted in the empirical specifics of their particular topics: tin mining, rice milling, fish products, and so on, and from there, the essays are expanded to consider not only the economic but also the sociological and human implications of such mercantile activities. In so doing, they both sidestep and complicate the “Chinese capitalism” debate. The density and diversity of mercantile activity in Southeast Asia, shaped by changing indigenous and colonial factors over time, indicate that if there can be one generalization about this region and its Chinese merchants, it is that there is little that can be said to be general or uniform about it.

Chinese Circulations is divided into five parts, in chronological order: Theoretical/*Longue Duree*, Precolonial, Early Colonial, High Colonial and Postcolonial. Each part contains four chapters, each of which addresses a particular commodity or element of commodity-exchange mechanics (such as junk ships). The various essays offer expansive but detailed considerations of commercial exchange, from its most basic and literal meanings, to more nuanced or metaphoric ones. Commodities such as precious metals (e.g., copper, gold), plant and animal products (e.g., marine goods), and manufactured items (e.g., textiles) are well-known items of trade in Southeast Asia. But what about less frequently examined commodities or things and even people that are seldom thought of as commodities, such as ‘coolies,’ Bibles,

and coins? What about the fact that these items were not simply objects of trade, but historic enablers of or even necessary factors of production in trade?

Some of the most thought-provoking chapters in this book stem from such questions. In “The Social Life of Chinese Labor,” Adam McKeown builds on Arjun Appadurai’s theory about the social life of things to argue that the persistent dichotomy of free versus enslaved labor has in fact masked some important nuances about the realities of Chinese labor exchange. In his analysis, Chinese labor was less “unfree” and involved more complex forms of obligation, control, and private organization than typically thought. This approach overturns two major limitations of the conventional view, first by showing that ‘coolie’ labor was not purely shaped by European political, economic, and social control and second by challenging the resulting stereotype of Chinese labor and society of the time as unfree and corrupt. In another chapter, examining cases of citizenship and merchant family networks, Lin Man-houng argues that during the period of Japanese colonization, most Taiwanese were a *de facto* part of the Chinese overseas diaspora. This is a view that runs counter to assumptions, both past and present, about the conformity and universality of Chinese cultural and political allegiances.

In terms of methodology, several other authors use commodity chain analysis as a starting point for their discussions. Heather Sutherland’s authoritative discussion of the Sino-Indonesian tortoiseshell trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Kevin Woods’ research on conflict timber along the China-Burma border in the late twentieth century are two fine examples of the use of such analysis. Instead of limiting the conversation to largely economic dimensions, these approaches in fact embrace socio-cultural and political factors. Such factors include the flexibility of ethnically based business specializations in the case of the former, and the erasure of local violence in the regional-global reach in the case of the latter.

The chronological organization of these discussions is helpful for tracing China-Southeast Asian linkages over time, particularly as shaped by the specific circumstances of an era, such as the precolonial or high colonial periods. But interesting insights also result when different chapters are placed in conversation with each other. For example, in their discussions of mining and the opium trade respectively, Anthony Reid and Carl Trocki observe that Chinese laborers went to Southeast Asia to help produce commodities that were in demand not only in colonial markets but in China as well. Both Sun Laichen and Wen-Chin Chang address the trade of precious stones—particularly jade—across the border between China and Burma, but each author prioritizes different aspects of such trade. The former emphasizes the crucial role that Chinese demand played in motivating large-scale jade excavation in Burma’s Kachin province. The latter, on the other hand, looks at the jade trade but focuses on avoiding state-centered limitations in studying transnational flows by looking at legal and illegal networks linking China’s Yunnan province, Thailand, and Burma. By detailing Chinese book printing technologies in the early Spanish Philippines and Protestant missionary efforts to place a translated Bible in the hands of every person in China, Lucille Chia and Jean DeBernardi each provide fine-grained accounts of how mercantile and evangelical motives intertwined with colonial and Sino-Southeast Asian trade networks.

The chapters in the postcolonial section bring the reader up to the present. They focus on certain commodities that have remained popular in the Chinese market and beyond, and have perhaps even increased in monetary value as environmental pressures make them scarce. The authors trace the historical paths of medicinal products that are increasingly hazardous to obtain (e.g., edible birds’ nests from Sarawak), maritime Southeast Asian marine goods (e.g., sea cucumbers), whose ethnic Chinese purveyors are only now beginning to lose their dominance of

the trade after more than a century and the “extra-legal” extraction and trade of government-banned products such as jade and timber along the Burma-China border. In this section, more clearly than in any other, the authors tie in the commercial histories of these goods with ethnographic and socio-political dynamics in each region. This is welcome coverage, which in almost all cases is based on an author’s field work—joining expeditions to collect birds’ nests from perilous caves in Borneo or interviewing jade smugglers in Burma—and which may also attest to the difficulties of recovering such detailed information from older archival sources. Several essays, particularly Nola Cooke’s on fish processing in Cambodia, Eric Tagliacozzo’s on the marine goods trade, and Bien Chiang’s on birds’ nests reflect an acute consciousness of the role that ecology has played in these transnational flows and, conversely, the impact that Chinese mercantile activity has had on the natural environment and indigenous populations.

In the foreword to this volume, noted scholar of the Chinese overseas Wang Gungwu declares that studying Southeast Asian economic development over the last millennium is a vital way of understanding why the region is what it is today (p. xiii). One might go a step further to say that exploring how Sino-Southeast Asian commercial networks have innovated, adapted, and transmitted goods and ideas in both directions is also a useful way of understanding the multifarious nature of global linkages. For that reason, this book is a relevant and valuable read for scholars and advanced students of not only Chinese and Southeast Asian studies, but also of global, economic, environmental, diaspora and socio-political histories. By combining the usually disparate sub-fields of Southeast Asian studies—the wide range of Asian and European languages alone required to tackle primary sources renders any kind of regional expertise near impossible—and linking them with the twisted strands of Chinese commercial activity, this volume is reminiscent of Silk Road studies in its scope and richness. The multi-dimensional, diverse, yet mutually informed perspectives offered by this book are perhaps its most significant contribution, and this is precisely what an edited volume such as this is supposed to achieve.

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