Chinese Circulations is a synthesis of current research on China-Southeast Asia interactions. Mirroring the diverse specializations and backgrounds of the contributors, this conference volume provides a kaleidoscopic overview of China-Southeast Asia interactions from a long-term perspective. Intended as an update to earlier foundational work on Chinese migration and trade in Southeast Asia and China-Southeast Asia interactions in the 1990s, the contributors to the volume make up a who’s who, old and new, in the fields of Southeast Asian, China/East Asian, and Chinese overseas history.

As the editors point out, this volume was intended not only as a ‘summarizing [of] where our knowledge now stands’, but also ‘where future directions of research may wish to go’ in the face of an expanding field requiring vast knowledge of different ‘languages, archives, and sources […] beyond the grasp of any one person’ (p. 1). As such, it is no mere summary, but an attempt at the reorientation of the field by adopting new macro-perspectives and terminologies, and juxtaposing new aggregations of research on China-Southeast Asia interactions.

The use of ‘circulations’ in the title of the book is crucial in this regard. Rather than seeing the movements of people, commodities, ideas, and cultural objects between China and Southeast Asia as a unidirectional process, as implied by concepts such as ‘migration’, ‘circulation’ encapsulates traditional migration, as well as various types of sojourning behavior, as well as return migration to China. It is not only the flow of commodities to China, that has predominated in most studies of China-Southeast Asian trade, but also the flow of Chinese goods (including labour) and capital to Southeast Asia.

While commodities and capital and their mobility form the central axis of this book, trade is not the sole or primary concern. Instead, the focus is on the ‘total trajectory’ of these commodities, from production (including finance) through exchange and distribution to consumption. Drawing on the ideas of Appadurai and Kopytoff about the ‘social histories and cultural biographies’ of commodities, most of the essays in the volume track various
commodities and their ‘chains’ (Heather Sutherland) of production and
distribution through Southeast Asia and the China-Southeast Asia frontier,
like tortoise-shells (Heather Sutherland), gems and precious stones (Sun
Laichen), coinage (Li Tana), textiles (Kwee Hui Kian), marine goods (Eric
Tagliacozzo), processed fish (Nola Cooke), birds’ nests (Bien Chiang),
Chinese luxury goods (Matsuda Erika), Chinese printed books (Lucille
Chia), Bibles (Jean DeBenardi), cotton and copper (Paterson Giersch), and
labour (Adam McKeown).

The remaining essays explore other dimensions and contexts of China-
Southeast Asian circulations. In his essay on the Ryukyu tributary trade
network, Takeshi Hamashita examines the role of diplomacy and the
Ryukyu polity in facilitating these inter-regional exchanges. Lin Man-
houng’s chapter also examines the role of culture in Taiwanese merchants’
transacting of these commodity flows. Leonard Blusse’s paper also moves
beyond commodities per se and examines the Chinese junk ships carrying
them between Java and southern China in the eighteenth century. Anthony
Reid and Carl Trocki moved beyond specific temporal case-studies and
examined longue durée patterns of production, consumption, and circula-
tion of key commodities between China and Southeast Asia, from tin and
gold in the mining frontier to opium in the Nanyang trade.

This volume has certainly achieved its stated objectives of providing
the reader with a state-of-the-art survey of the field of China-Southeast Asia
interactions. The diversity of the field means that this was always going to
be a formidable project in terms of covering the different thematic, geo-
ographical and chronological dimensions of these interactions. In this
respect, the editors have done an excellent job of integrating the different
regional and commodity specializations of the contributors, providing a
long-term historical approach that skillfully balances not only maritime
and overland Southeast Asian interactions with China, but also China and
Southeast Asian (as well as maritime and overland frontier) commodities
and networks.

The authors have also posited an important alternative way of approach-
ing and framing China-Southeast Asia interactions, beyond the fields of
Chinese overseas studies and Chinese business history that had hitherto
dominated the study of these relations. The trails of commodities provide a
more nuanced and complex picture of these interactions, and highlighted
the connectedness of Chinese trading and business networks with other
business networks, be it in co-operation or in competition. This is an important step towards avoiding cultural determinism and ethnic exclusivity in the study of these interactions, as well as the study of Chinese business and migration, by contextualizing the role of Chinese traders and networks in facilitating these flows.

This is an important landmark contribution to the study of China-South-east Asia interactions highlighting the possibilities of synthesis and synergy and the reframing of these interactions through new concepts and approaches. It will be of interest and appeal to readers from a broad range of fields, from Southeast Asian economic and socio-cultural history to the history of Chinese migration, trade, and business in the region.

Yet, commodity chains or flows in Southeast Asia and the overland and maritime frontiers between China and Southeast Asia have predominated in this volume. It will be useful to more closely examine the networks of production and distribution within China handling commodities imported from or exported to Southeast Asia, and their connections to those without. It might bring a greater geographical balance to the themes of circulation and networks, as well as raise interesting questions about the impact of these forces on the histories and historiographies of these regions and of intra-Asian connections in general. Much as these circulations and connections have encouraged us to re-think Southeast Asian history, can they also help us rethink current historiographies of China and Chinese-ness?

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