SINGAPORE AS A NINETEENTH CENTURY MIGRATION NODE

Carl A. Trocki

This essay looks at the emergence of Singapore as a key migration node for Chinese. In addition to being a major destination for Chinese leaving China during the nineteenth century, Singapore itself became a major staging area for further Chinese migrations, both labor and otherwise. The first aim of this paper is to look at the port’s function as a labor market. In addition to acting as an entrepot for goods, it was also an entrepot for labor—importing “coolies” from China and exporting them to other destinations both in the Archipelago and the western parts of Southeast Asia, and also to points beyond such as Western Australia, Mauritius, etc. In addition to Singapore, the other Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca, to some extent, had acquired a similar function. Nevertheless, Singapore emerged as the main migration node in the region feeding the flow of humanity to the other two settlements as well as the rest of the region.

The second aim is to examine the other migratory stream that flowed out of Singapore: that of the “Baba” or Straits-born Chinese. They represented the opposite end of the social and economic scale from the coolies. Born in Singapore or the other Straits Settlements, they were generally from the well-established, often well-to-do families that had already found a measure of success in the Singapore economy. Many even traced their roots back to Malacca and Java where their ancestors had lived since as early as the seventeenth century. The coolies were new-comers or sinkeh and were often first-generation migrants. The Straits Chinese were the old timers in Singapore, often the children of generations of serial migrants. The coolies were the bottom of the economy and the Straits-born were often close to the top. The Straits Chinese migration was also one driven by economic motivations, but in their case it was to extend their businesses and to develop family networks.
The Water Frontier

The beginnings of these migrant streams had come into existence nearly a century before the foundation of Singapore by the British in 1819. It was located on the strategic site of the Srivijaya Empire’s Temasek that had declined in the fourteenth century. For several decades it was not at all certain that Singapore would assume the role it did by mid-century. As a number of recent works have shown, the foundations for Singapore’s success as an entrepot for both goods and labor, were fashioned in the mid-eighteenth century. It was a direct beneficiary of the “water frontier,” the new Chinese economy in Southeast Asia which was based on the production of commodities for shipment back to China. One of the unique aspects of this new economic system was the fact that the commodities (initially tin, gold, pepper, gambier, and sugar) were produced by Chinese labor.

A number of factors seem to have fed into the development of this economic system. First, a number of fairly large settlements of Chinese had been established in parts of what is today southern Vietnam, the area then known to Europeans as Cochin-China. The most significant of these seem to have been the towns of Mytho, Bien Hoa, and Hatien, all established by fairly large groups of Ming refugees. A second factor, related to these, was continuing and active presence of significant numbers of maritime Chinese following the defeat of the forces of Cheng Cheng-gung, or Koxinga, by the Qing in 1661. Reports of Chinese “pirates” in the Gulf of Tonkin and the Gulf of Siam during the eighteenth century suggest that many Chinese sea-farers had moved off the China coast and sought their fortunes in Southeast Asia. A third factor, related to the above trends, was the emergence of Hatien as an important entrepot serving Cochin-China and the Gulf of Siam and linking the region to Canton. During the eighteenth century

\[1\] Nola Cooke and Tana Li, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region 1750–1880* (Singapore, 2004).

\[2\] Gambier is a plant needed for tanning. If grown with pepper, the different harvesting cycles permit year-round employment of labor and the pepper plants’ leaves serve as fertilizer for the gambier plants.