“Capital,” for the Chinese entrepreneur, “. . . was a tool of circulation rather than a tool of accumulation” (348). Buried in one of the chapter summaries, this line pithily sums up the author’s much understated contribution to our historical understanding of Chinese commerce in colonial and contemporary Southeast Asia. The historical dominance of Chinese commerce in Southeast Asia has invariably been attributed either to the strength of Chinese culture and networks or to their political collusion with the colonial powers’ need for an outsider group to service the indigenous economy. As far as I know, this is the first attempt to ground a study of nineteenth and twentieth century Southeast Asian Chinese commerce, as the author stresses, “in the ‘how’ instead of ‘why,’” and, in so doing, to argue that, whether Dutch or Chinese, “those participating in trade were in it for the money” (403). It might sound, at first hearing, like a circular argument for a study of commercial action to conclude that merchants set out to make more money. In fact, although he stops short of making this larger theoretical claim, the author has marshaled more than enough sources and case studies to suggest that the very logic of capitalist circulation required the recycling of accumulated wealth as commercial capital rather than as an end in and of itself. Eschewing the well-worn culturalist or colonial-Chinese patrimonial explanations, Claver shows that Chinese mercantile success was based precisely on the merchants’ understanding and rapid assimilation of this newly emergent logic of modern capitalism.

A conceptual distinction, central to the author’s research framework, is in place. Claver trains his analytical focus on the Dutch and Chinese private traders, excluding both the colonial government-owned semi-feudal plantation concern behind the Cultivation System and the government-licensed Chinese revenue-farmer responsible for the sale of opium and other commodities and services in the hinterland. He has good reason for doing so, for, as he points out, “government and private exports already equaled each other in value in 1860,” and, by 1885, “the value of private exports was ten times higher than that of the government” (26). Drawing creatively and extensively on the Indonesia-based archives of the Javaasche Bank and the metropole-based archives of several Dutch-Indies trading corporations, Claver judiciously reconstructs the commercial strategies and actions of private Dutch and Chinese trading corporations, sticking closely to the money trail.

The chapters are divided chronologically into five periods that saw Chinese and Dutch private trade characterized by patterns of rapid expansion
(1800-1884), crisis and adaptation (1884-1890s), a redefinition of commercial relations (1890s-1910), further expansion (1910-1930), and crisis and resilience (1930-1942). Each chapter is prefaced with sections that reconstruct the macro-economic structure (monetary, political-economic) that then form the bases for the author’s analysis of more specific case studies and patterns of Dutch and Chinese private trade. We learn that the colonial state’s ownership and control of monopolized semi-feudal cash crop production never completely crowded out private entrepreneurship, and was in fact rapidly overtaken by the private sector from 1860, a decade before the formal dismantling of the Cultivation System. Until the 1880s, Dutch and European private trading corporations dominated the wholesale market. They brought Dutch textiles to Java’s coastal cities in exchange for coffee and sugar produced on mainly European and some Chinese-owned plantations. After 1900, and especially after 1914, Chinese and Japanese trading corporations became important regional players, with the rise of China and Japan as markets for Java’s cash crops, and Japan as a new source for cheaper manufactured consumer goods.

Within this broader context of global and regional production and exchange, Claver reconstructs and unravels the complex strategies of wholesalers, creditors, planters, and the intermediate traders that plied the space between the colonial cities and the Javan hinterland to distribute manufactured goods in exchange for the agricultural products. A major constraint on the actions of both the wholesalers and the intermediate traders was the longer cycle of agricultural production that necessitated the wholesalers’ extension of credit to the intermediate traders, while the latter advanced goods to the peasant in return for the crops come harvest time. Interestingly, alongside the Cultivation System, Chinese entrepreneurs were not only limited to trade but also advanced capital from colonial banks for investment in steam-engine mills, and were more adept than Europeans at attracting indigenous labor for their sugar plantations. Where Chinese corporations handled the intermediate trade, Dutch textile wholesalers were eager to extend credit to these traders for access by the latter to the hinterland market. But Chinese traders sometimes undersold the textiles in order to use the money for speculative advances in their own rice and gambir trade. The Dutch wholesalers’ dependence on and distrust of Chinese traders were manifest in their willingness to extend only short-term credit to their partners in trade (Chapter Two).

The interdependence of Dutch creditors and Dutch and Chinese private planters and traders came under severe strain with the global collapse of the price of sugar and the attendant crisis, which lingered on into the 1890s. In fact, it was only after the wave of bankruptcies of the 1880s that the mode of production and circulation in Java was revealed, reviewed, and reformed from the creditors’ vantage point. Between 1883 and 1887, the Chinese consistently