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The Origins of Chinese Maritime Expansion

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One of the key issues we need to think about when we look at Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 18th century is the question of labor, or manpower, or population in general. All estimates (Reid 1988) of the period (and they are very rough) show a relative dearth of population in comparison to East Asia, South Asia and the Mediterranean basin. This was particularly true of the parts of Southeast Asia washed by the South China Sea, with the possible exception of the upper Gulf of Tongkin region. Thus the need to gather together and control population was always one of the main concerns of states.

Akin Rabibhadana's classic study of the Thai state in the early Bangkok period shows the deep concern of the Siamese rulers for concentrating, enumerating and classifying all of their subjects. In the aftermath of the Siam-Burma wars, Rama I issued a stream of orders demanding that the people who had run away into the forests be gathered together again and settled down. The *prai luang*, (the king's slaves, or subjects) were registered, classified and made liable for military service, corvée and taxation. They were tattooed to mark their status. (Rabibhadana 1969 :16, 57) Those subject to his court officials and provincial magnates, the *prai som*, were awarded to them according to their *sakdina* rank.

Throughout mainland and island Southeast Asia, wars were usually fought with the objective of capturing the enemy's population. Thus the accounts of wars in the Thai chronicles are full of references to the "sweeping up" of the populations of towns and villages by marauding armies. The town which I am studying as a part of this project, Chantaburi, was subject to this experience on several occasions in the past. It was also repopulated with people "swept" from other parts of the country on at least one occasion. (Cushman 1996)

At the beginning of the 18th century we see, for the first time in the region, the emergence of a new phenomenon which would permanently change the old calculus of statecraft. That was, to put it simply, the importation of large numbers of Chinese to specific locations, usually these were previously empty ones. There was a caveat, however, for while they solved one aspect of the labor problem, they brought new problems. One of these was the fact that this new labor force was highly specialized, in relative terms. Another was that it was often beyond the agency of the Southeast Asian rulers. The workers came of their own volition, if you like, and could just as easily leave. They often remained a separate social category for at least the first and second generations, if they stayed. Their children, if they married locally were still usually classified as Chinese and were treated as a separate group from the "native" subjects of the rulers.

These laborers were usually young men, unaccompanied by women, who were expected to work at the production of some particular cash-earning product. In the initial stages, the main agricultural products seem to have been pepper, gambier, sugar and tobacco. As miners, they produced gold and tin. These products were mainly

intended for shipment back to China and intended to be sold into the Chinese consumer market. By the nineteenth century, their repertoire of products expanded as opportunities presented themselves.

The arrival of these groups, or colonies of laborers, represented a new phase in Southeast Asian history and in the history of the Chinese diaspora. They helped to fill the chronic manpower shortage in Southeast Asia and they created wealth both through their products and their consumption. They formed the foundation upon which much of the nineteenth century economic expansion of the region was based. Together with the merchants who capitalized their ventures and the mariners who brought them, these Chinese created a new economy, which linked China and Southeast Asia and which, in the nineteenth century would link them to the world. (Trocki 1990)

Clearly the labor vacuum in Southeast Asia was only a small part of the reason why these men began arriving in the region when they did. It appears that the main cause had to do with what was happening in the economy of China at that time. There was an increasing demand in China for the products of the region, in addition to the products mentioned above, there were also forest and maritime products. This increase in demand was one aspect of the general prosperity which the Chinese economy was experiencing during the early Qing period as has been well documented by Pomeranz and Wong (Wong 1997; Pomeranz 2000) It was also a time which saw an unprecedented increase in population.

James Warren has argued that the increased demand in China had already inspired Southeast Asian rulers to boost their production of export goods. He sees the rise of the Iranun state in the Sulu Archipelago during the eighteenth century as a response to this demand. As a result, the Iranun embarked on extensive raids, kidnapping population from the Spanish-held islands to the north and sweeping the coasts of Borneo. They either sold the slaves in to the Dutch, or else resettled them in their own territories to produce goods for the China trade. (Warren 1981; Warren 1990) This was probably typical of the earlier Southeast Asian pattern.

This sort of kidnapping was still going on in the Gulf of Siam in the late eighteenth century. Akin cites the directions given to the new Governor of Nakorn Sri Thammarat in 1784 from Rama I, cautioning him to be on the alert for Vietnamese pirates:

> If the Yuan (Vietnamese), pirates, enemies, come to take away our people, the Governor must fight against them…Do not let the enemy take away any of our people. If the Governor and officials are negligent, and omit to patrol the bay as ordered, so that the pirates or Yuan are able to take away any of our people, the Governor and officials will be punished according to the Decree. (Rabibhadana 1969 : 17)

It is difficult to determine the exact beginnings of the movement of Chinese labor into Southeast Asia. There are three instances which draw our attention. The earliest was not really in this region at all, but in Taiwan. Ng Chin Keong, in his study of the Amoy maritime networks has described the settlement of Taiwan organized by Fujian merchants who moved rice and later sugar planters from the mainland to the "open" lands of the island during the 1680s. This was the first systematic establishment of off-shore Chinese laborers' settlements of which I am aware. (Trocki 1979; Ng 1983) It is also important to recall that there were already significant migrations within China (or what is considered China today). In particular, gold and

copper miners were moving into areas such as Yunnan and northern Vietnam in the late seventeenth century. (Nguyen 1970:87-8)

The earliest settlement of laborers within Southeast Asia seems to have been the settlement of Chinese sugar planters in the outskirts of Batavia. This has been discussed in some detail by Leonard Blussé. Initially, this seems to have been the result of the activities of Chinese slaves who had been brought there to dig canals. It is not clear that they remained slaves for very long. Once the canals were dug, many took up the cultivation of sugar. Chinese laborers settled in the *ommelanden*, the outskirts of Batavia. The cultivation is reported as early as 1649. This entire enterprise collapsed after the slump in the sugar market. The resulting hardship led to armed conflict between the Dutch and the Chinese and ended with the Dutch massacre of Chinese in 1740. (Blussé 1981; Blussé 1988)

The second set of instances was the settlement of three groups of Ming loyalists. First about 3,000 fugitives arrived at Danang under two officers, Yang and Chen. The Nguyen ruler, Hieng Vuong passed them to the Cambodian ruler of Saigon, Ang Non. Some of them were settled at Bien-Hoa where they began an agricultural settlement and those under Yang went to Mytho where they became pirates and were later attacked by the Nguyen. Another group under Mac Cuu settled in Hatien sometime around 1690. This settlement grew as an entrepot for the trade of Cambodia, and Mac himself had received official status as a gambling farmer by the ruler of Cambodia. He also later was recognized as the "governor" of the area by the Cochinchinese king and apparently also sought recognition as a tributary of the Siamese king. It is probable that he gained this status following the sack of Hatien by Siamese forces in about 1720. (Sellers 1983; Rungswasdisab 1994) Mac Cuu was also seen by some as a pirate.

Neither of these settlements, Batavia or Hatien, entirely fit the pattern which typified colonies which appeared throughout the Malay world, Siam and Cambodia during the eighteenth century. It may be argued that the Batavian settlement was the result of Dutch initiative and was created to serve Dutch needs. The question of initiative here is not clear. Some of the Chinese may have come from the Dutch settlement on Taiwan as slaves or captives. The establishment of Chinese sugar planting in Java, however, may not have been organized by the Dutch, but was probably the work of locally-born or more permanently-settled Chinese.

All three of the Vietnamese settlements (Bien Hoa, Mytho and Hatien) seem to have been linked to the collapse of the pro-Ming maritime efforts in the 1680s under Zheng Chengong and his son Zheng Chenggong. Nevertheless, it may be that the Hatien settlement served as a base from which later settlements in Siam and the Malay world developed. There is evidence for eighteenth century links between Hatien and Chantaburi.

It is important to recognize the role of maritime Chinese at this time throughout the Gulf of Tongkin and the Gulf of Thailand. As Robert Antony and Dian Murray have shown, the Cantonese sea peoples dominated the coast of China and Vietnam, from the Pearl River estuary to Camau. The Chinese under Mac Cuu were also Cantonese. It is of interest, however, that the sea-farers who seemed to dominate the Gulf of Siam, were Fujian and Chaozhou people, locally known as Hokkiens and Teochews. In fact, the appearance of the laborers, particularly pepper planters in Chantaburi and Trat seems to have been the result of activities by these maritime peoples. We should also not discount the role of somewhat assimilated Chinese (later called Babas or *peranakans*) in the region. These latter individuals often had close connections with indigenous and local chiefs.

A unique feature of this labor force is that it was in large part free. These men were not slaves. Until then, much of the hard-core economic production of the region had been carried out by captive slaves or slave-subjects. Akin quotes cites John Crawfurd who noted that in 1821 in Bangkok, "…there existed no such thing as free labor, for the labor of every individual was appropriated by some chief or other, without whose approval he could not work" (Rabibhadana 1969 :81 citing The Crawfurd Papers, Bangkok, 1915, p 135) Crawfurd's claim however, did not include Chinese.

The Chinese laborers may have been, even at this time, in some sort of debtor relationship with capitalists, but they were not slaves, and they were outside of the local systems of bondage and debt bondage. They may have been indebted for their passage, and may often have had very little freedom of movement or choice, but their obligations were seen by the British as contractual and freely assumed. By British standards of the time, they seem to have been the first free laborers in Southeast Asia. T.S. Raffles may take credit for being the first to abolish slavery in Southeast Asia, but these men were already free.

What is more, they worked for cash. Even at this juncture, they were producing for a market and their goods were being exchanged for cash. They also purchased their necessities from a market. They were thus a key node on an entire network organized to move in labor and consumables and to move out certain commodities. It is difficult to be sure about the type of labor organization that existed in places like Chantaburi in the period before 1767, but from what we know about other similar Chinese settlements which existed at the same time, I think we can assume they were either paid a wage, or else they worked for shares.

The business of working for shares in an enterprise is another important aspect of the early stages of the Chinese diaspora that should draw our attention. This practice was usually associated with the Chinese partnership, or *kongsi*. Again, the kongsi seems to have been a truly exotic institution to the region. It may be that it was also unknown in China at the time, but this remains to be seen. It is possible that it was an institution created by Chinese overseas, if not actually in Southeast Asia. In any case, both planters and miners of a variety of Chinese sub-ethnicities in Southeast Asia organized their enterprises as kongsis. This was a form of cooperative economic organization apparently pioneered by the officers and crews of the merchant ships in Zheng Chenggong's fleet. (Wang 1977; Wang 1995) As Wong Tai Peng and my own work have shown, these were not only economic enterprises; they were also political and social. In some respects they made it possible for some of these Chinese communities to approach self-government. (Trocki 1979; Wang 1995)

My current project on the "Water Frontier" in which I am working with Li Tana and Nola Cooke, is looking at the northern part of the Gulf of Siam. My own particular interest is in the area of southeastern Siam, the coastal strip stretching from the town of Chonburi to Trat, on the Cambodian border. The region is problematic because there are so few sources of information about it prior to the late eighteenth century. The main town of the area, Chantaburi, formerly known as Chantabun, sprung to fame as the regrouping point for Phya Taksin, the half-Chinese adventurer who drove out the Burmese following the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767.

Taksin, who had been among the defenders of the old capital, broke through Burmese lines when he saw that the cause was hopeless and retreated to the southeast. The region was the only part of the country which had not been devastated by the conflict with the Burmese. Throughout the country the towns were in ruins and the

populations had been scattered or "swept up" as the Thai chronicles put it, by one or another of the several armies roaming the countryside.

In Chantaburi, he found a thriving settlement made up not only of Siamese and Khmers, but of Chinese, Malays and Vietnamese. By chance, or so it seems, many of the Chinese were of the same language group as Taksin's father. They were Chaozhou or Teochew people. Likewise, similar, but smaller populations had gathered at the nearby centers of Tung Yai (the modern Trat) and at Rayong. Thai sources report that Taksin came to Chantaburi with about 500 men in July 1767. He left, several months later, with over 5000 men and about 100 ships. His ground force had increased at least ten-fold and he had acquired the beginnings of a substantial naval force. With these troops he was able to defeat the Burmese at Thonburi and establish his capital later that year. This force was then composed mainly of men from Chantaburi and Trat, who thus constituted about ninety percent of his army. There is not much indication in the Thai sources that would tell us how this population came to be.

Chantaburi was a key town on the land route between central Siam and the coastal strip leading to the mouths of the Mekong and the heartland of eastern Cambodia. Aside from being nearly mid-way between the mouths of the two major rivers of the region, Chantaburi was also a port on the Gulf of Siam. Economically the town served as an outlet for the products of the mountainous regions that formed its hinterland. Traditionally it exported forest products, gemstones, cardamoms, and products such as hides, horn, cattle and elephants much of which moved across the mountains from the interior of Laos and Cambodia. As such it commanded alternative land routes linking towns such as Battambang and Khorat to the coast. It thus had access to an important interior region of the Indochinese Peninsula.

With only a few exceptions, European traders too, tell us little about the region. When Gemelli Careri passed by there in about 1695, he mentioned only the Cambodian town of "Pontay-pret" which he claimed was the capital and "port of Puntaimas, at which the barks of Siam pass." (Careri 1745) Alexander Hamilton, the Scottish country trader, sailed along the coast of southeastern Siam in about 1720. The only town of any significance, according to his information, was Bang Pla Soi ("Bankasoy", the modern Chonburi). Between there and "Pontemas" (the modern Hatien) he made only a passing reference to Chantaburi, identifying it only as "Chiampo", but claimed "…for fifty leagues and more along the seashore [of Siam] there are no seaports, the country being almost a desert." This suggests that Chantaburi, while it existed at the time, was of only minor commercial importance and offered little to attract the foreign trader. Likewise, Hamilton makes no mention at all of towns such as Rayong or Trat. (Hamilton 1727:104)

Obviously between then and 1767, there seems to have been something of a population boom. It is also clear that the region had attained considerable economic significance. According to Thai reports, Taksin found a fleet of over 100 Chinese junks anchored in the harbour at Trat at that time. Other sources report that the region was known for a high level of piracy. There was also an active fishing industry and the area was well known for its exports of dried and salted fish. Chantaburi and Trat were thus important maritime centers for both legal and illicit traffic.

It is somewhat strange that the Siamese chronicles of Ayutthaya are silent on events in this part of the country. At least two major campaigns against Cambodia were launched by Ayutthaya between 1704/5 and 1722[1]. The towns on the southeast coast must certainly have served as staging areas for these expeditions, in much the same way as they did in the nineteenth century. There is, however, no mention of activities in these towns or any indication of their involvement in the wars in the

available Siamese sources. There is also no hint here that such populations as those found by Taksin were in existence before 1720.

There are alternative sources for this part of the country. Bass Terwiel has called attention to the records of the French Catholic missionaries of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) who were active in the region during the eighteenth century. These provide yet another perspective on the region at a time when Ayutthayan sources are silent. (Terwiel 1984)In an effort to lay the foundation for a recovery of the history of Chantaburi, Terwiel has examined a series of letters from French missionaries who were in Chantaburi and Ayutthaya between the early eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. They show that a significant community of Vietnamese (or Cochinchinese as they were called in the correspondence) had come to settle in Chantaburi. Some of these had come with the missionaries before 1702 as refugees fleeing persecution in Cochinchina, but Christians appear to have constituted only a small part of even the Cochinchinese population. Many Vietnamese actually seem to have arrived before the Christians, and it was probably their presence that encouraged the French to bring their congregation there in the first place. (Terwiel 1984:3)

From comments about these settlers, it appears that a large proportion of them were people of the sea: fishermen, small traders and pirates who had apparently moved along the coast from the Mekong delta and the Bassac region. Other comments give the impression of an active movement of various types of people along the coast of the Gulf of Siam. There were also Chinese, notably Teochew sea-farers also said to be pirates; Malays, or people the Siamese called "*khaek*" were also there in some numbers as well as Siamese, Cambodians and Laotians.[2] One French source notes that the "governor" or the Chao Muang of Chantaburi in the early eighteenth century was a Malay.

It may be safe to conclude that although Chantaburi was theoretically subject to Ayutthaya, it was largely autonomous during the earlier part of the eighteenth century. It was a thriving sea-port and economic center during the eighteenth century, but relatively little of either its trade or the profits of the trade went directly to Ayutthaya. Where then, did they go? Within what system of exchange did Chantaburi function? The answer to this question, I believe, concerns not only Chantaburi and the other nearby towns, including Bang Pla Soi/Chonburi, Rayong, and Tung Yai/Trat, as well as the more distant settlements of Kampot and Hatien to the east and the towns of Songklah/Singgora and Nakorn Sri Thammarat/Ligor on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. (Map 1)

John Crawfurd made the point in the early 1820s, that the cities around the Gulf of Siam constituted a more or less integrated economic community. In fact, it may be sensible to extend the range of this community along the coast of the Malay Peninsula down to Riau and across the Karimata Straits to the coast of northern Borneo, including Sambas, Brunei, Tempasuk and Kudat. The latter three towns had links to the Sulu Archipelago and the Philippines and to the east coast of Borneo. It is important to connect this region with the remainder of maritime Southeast Asia. There had come to be an extensive chain of Chinese settlements stretching through the Malay world at this time. They formed a more-or-less continuous belt of colonies stretching from Cochinchina, along the Water Frontier, south to Trengganu, Riau, Sambas, Pontianak, Bangka, Palembang and Batavia. They also continued up the west coast of the Malay Peninsula to Perak, Kedah and Phuket. In the Malay world, there was a confluence of interests between the Chinese junk traders (many of them

Hokkien), Chinese laborers (both Teochews and Hakkas) and the Bugis traders who dominated the local trade of the region as well as many of the Malay states.

What bound this region together? What was the essence of the community that Crawfurd noted? The entire region was not only dominated by Chinese junk traders in the eighteenth century, but its very integrity as an economic region was largely the result of the activities of the junk traders, and more to the point, of its Chinese settlers. For the Gulf of Siam and the region it is important not to underestimate the role of the port of Hatien. It appears that much of the commerce of the immediate region was drawn to Hatien before export to China. Paul Van Dyke's researches in the records in Macao and Guangzhou indicate that junks coming from Cochinchina, which usually meant Hatien in the eighteenth century, carried large quantities of pepper and sugar. Since Hatien did not produce pepper, it seems logical that this came from other places. Certainly some came from Brunei, Trengganu and Riau, but Chantaburi was also an important producer. It may be that Hatien had come to function as an important entrepot in the Gulf of Siam, challenging even Ayutthaya in the years between 1720 and about 1770. Certainly the Siamese attack on Hatien (Puntaimat) in about 1720 was not only to strike at Cambodia or the Vietnamese.

Another important aspect that seems to have characterized many of these settlements was their tendency toward self-rule, if not actual government. The institution, or group of institutions known locally as *kongsi* seem to have been important elements of these largely Chinese communities. We know that the Chinese of Bangka, western Borneo and Riau (miners in the first two places and pepper and gambier planters in the third) organized their settlements around these social and economic forms. Many of these seem to have been set up as share-holding brotherhoods, held together by sworn oaths of mutual allegiance drawn from the mythology of rural southern China. Economically, laborers and capitalists would accept shares in the mines or plantations as their return from the venture. Socially, they gave a measure of solidarity to the community and made possible the mobilization of military forces for self-defense. In the Malay world they were sometimes capable of challenging the power of sultans and local chiefs. In colonial settlements, such as Singapore, the triads were capable of a high degree of autonomy.

This tendency toward autonomy distinguished them from other forms of labor in Southeast Asia at the time. Europeans remarked on the difficulties of dealing with Chinese labor, particularly those organized in kongsis. They found these quite different from those wealthier merchants and traders who inhabited the port cities. Ultimately, Europeans came to identify the kongsis as dangerous societies and identified them with the secret societies which were also banned by the Qing government. Certainly, as Europeans established governments of their own in the region, it is perhaps natural that they would see these organizations as a threat. By the middle of the nineteenth century there were movements by both colonial and indigenous governments to check the power of these groups.

In terms of its economic and social universe during the mid-eighteenth century Chantaburi appears to fit into the scheme of the Water Frontier of Chinese commerce and settlement around the Gulf of Siam as argued by Li and Cooke. There is no evidence that institutions such as the kongsi existed there during the eighteenth century. The first documentary evidence of secret societies in Siam and Vietnam dates from the 1830s, but this does not mean that they were absent earlier. Chantaburi participated in the commerce of the region and was an important link in the web of trade that bound together the coastal towns of the Gulf in the eighteenth century. There is every reason to assume that Chinese institutions in Chantaburi were

comparable to those in the Malay world This period was one during which the major states – Siam, Cochinchina (Dang Trong) and Cambodia – were all rather weak and on the verge of collapse. They had other interests. This weakness of the mainland states seems to have allowed a window of opportunity for the maritime peoples as well as a power vacuum for institutions such as the kongsi, which also seems to have originated among maritime Chinese.

This was a time when the junk trade was flourishing, largely because of the economic expansion of Qing China. Chinese seafarers and others could trade throughout the region with little fear of regulation or taxation from royal capitals. These coastal towns were a wide open frontier with settlers and sojourners from the various points of the South China Sea. With mixed populations of Vietnamese, Malays, Chinese, Siamese, Cambodian, Lao and others the towns looked quite different than they would become by the nineteenth century.

New groups of settlers could arrive and take up residence with little interference from capital cities such as Ayutthaya and Lovek. Thus, we see in Chantaburi and perhaps Trat, the foundation of fairly large Chinese colonies made up largely of laborers engaged in pepper planting. The presence of two significant Chinese settlements along this coast, one in Chantaburi and the other in Hatien is of considerable interest. One assumes they were both visited by junks coasting between China and Siam, but we know little about the links between the two settlements, or between them and other towns around the Gulf.

All of this is to stress the extraordinary maritime expansion of Chinese from both Guangdong and Fujian in the period starting in about 1680 and lasting until the 1830s. This is, of course, looking at the expansion as carried out in Chinese junks. Clearly a number of more or less "random" or unique historical circumstances seem to have come together to start the movement of Chinese mariners, traders and workers to Southeast Asia. The resistance of the coastal peoples to the Qing advance and the flight of the anti-Qing forces to sanctuaries in the south were important factors. However, it is also clear that this extraordinary human movement, was already there and ready to sweep into the empty spaces of the Nanyang. As soon as the dust of dynastic change had settled and the Qing were firmly in control, the migration began in earnest.

Ng Chin Keong's study of the "Amoy Network", which was the main port trading with Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, reports large numbers of "emigrants" on board the ocean junks leaving China after 1683. He claims that each junk generally carried between 200 and 300 migrants. These were not members of the crew and they were not traders, so it seems logical to assume that a considerable number of them were laborers. So numerous were those going abroad in this manner that the government attempted to stop, or at least reduce the number of ships sailing to Southeast Asia, but the movement of people, legal or not, continued. By 1729 there were 21 ships leaving Amoy on the northeast monsoon. This number increased considerably in succeeding years. In 1733, 28 to 30 junks left Fujian and in 1755, 74 vessels returned to Amoy from the Nanyang. This migration, together with the trade conducted in these ships represented "a commercial boom which surpassed any in the past." (Ng 1983:56-7)

What seems even more extraordinary is that there seems to have been relatively little sign of continuing animosity between those who had fled the Qing and the dynasty. As soon as the Qing had re-established themselves in southern China after the rebellion of the Three Feudatories, the shops were open and it was business as usual. Very often there was a resumption of exchanges with the very rebels who

had just been driven out. The rebels, that is, the new Chinese settlers in the Nanyang, continued to form secret societies and proclaim their support for the Ming; but they too were deeply involved in trade with the enemy Qing regime. This was the beginning of the long-term movement of the Chinese to the region that continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The End of the Frontier

The arrival of Taksin in Chantaburi in 1767 marked the beginning of the end of the Water Frontier. It signalled the beginning of extensive large-state involvement in the region. This was marked by Siamese and Vietnamese armies moving back and forth through the various towns between Hatien and Rayong on a more-or-less continuous basis between 1767 and 1840. Many of the Chinese settled here were either assimilated or simply wiped out in the successive waves of conscription, invasion, massacre, rebellion and other types of random violence that passed over the region.

In the end, powerful and expansive states were entrenched in Bangkok and Hue which developed far more rigorous systems of administrative control and taxation. The states now assumed control over the produce of the remaining and other newly arrived Chinese and learned how to employ Chinese tax farmers to milk both the working class Chinese as well as their own "native" subjects. Ambitious Chinese saw that it made sense to settle in these new capitals and to make common cause with the new rulers, whether Southeast Asian or European.

By way of examply, it is important to note that the new center of Chinese activity in Southeast Asia became the British settlement of Singaproe. As the British ensconced themselves in the Straits Settlements, particularly at Singapore Chinese settlers were drawn there in increasing numbers. Another important aspect of the British presence in the Straits was the increasing amounts of Indian opium that were now thrown into Southeast Asian and Chinese markets. The exploitation of Chinese workers was facilitated by opium. Much of the opium marketed in Southeast Asia was consumed by Chinese laborers working on the mines and plantations of the region.

Opium imports from India had remained relatively constant between 1780 and 1820, averaging at about 4,000 chests annually or about 240 tonnes.[3], After the foundation of Singapore, however, British opium exports from India rose sharply. By the time of the Opium War (1839-1841) with China, British India and the "Malwa" states of western India together were exporting about 30,000 chests annually (over 2,000 tons). About twenty percent of the opium exported from India was consumed in Southeast Asia, much of it by Chinese.

Despite the growing wealth, both in production and in taxation, that came to these new states from the Chinese migrants. There came a time when their skills of organization would work against them. It is of interest that reactions against the growing Chinese presence in both Siam and Vietnam date from the 1830s. Vella follows Prince Damrong in claiming that there were no Chinese secret societies in Siam before the Third Reign. This may indeed have been the case, it may also be possible that they were simply not noticed, or perceived as a threat earlier. Given the presence of Chinese kongsis in other parts of Southeast Asia and given the presence of large numbers of laborers in towns like Chantaburi, it is likely that some sort of kongsi-type group had existed in southeastern Siam since the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, in 1824, and on several occasions during the 1840s the Thai government took actions against secret societies. In some cases, the societies were involved in opium smuggling and in other cases rioting and outright rebellion. In1848,

after killing the owner of a sugar mill in Chachoengsao, the members of a Chinese secret society took over the town itself. In the suppression of the revolt and the reaction among Siamese that followed, thousands of Chinese were killed. (Vella 1957) Vella speculates that aside from overt crimes committed by members of these societies "…the mere existence of well-organized groups of individuals numbering in the hundreds or even thousands, may well have been viewed by the government as a threat to security." (Vella 1957)

Similar reactions against organized Chinese groups also provoked reactions from the Vietnamese state. In the 1830s, Minh Mang decided to tighten administrative controls over Saigon and other southern cities. After the death of Governor Le Van Duyet, who had controlled the town since the time of Gia Dinh, he deposed Duyet's followers and replaced them with his own men. He also had Duyet's remains dug up and desecrated. The reaction to this move led to an outright rebellion that spread from Saigon to other cities in the south, including many of the settlements of the old Water Frontier which continued to be Chinese strongholds: Hatien, Rach Gia, Chaodoc, and Mytho. The rebels sought their own independence and also sought to depose Minh Mang. It was the spectacle of this disorder, and the invitation to intervene from the rebels that encouraged Rama III to launch an attack on Saigon and Cambodia.

This final outbreak of warfare devastated both Cambodia and southern Vietnam. In the initial attack in 1833, Rama III and his commanding general Chao Phraya Bodindecha fielded an attack force numbering over 100,000 men and descended on Cambodia and Cochinchina by land and by sea. The Vietnamese defeated this attack, but intermittent warfare between the two countries continued from 1833 until 1847. Much of the fighting took place in Cambodia and along the southeastern coastal regions largely depleting the Chinese population of that region.

These events had much to do with destroying the last remnants of what remained of the Chinese character of the Water Frontier towns of southeast Siam, the Cambodian coast and Cochinchina. Chinese continued to reside in these places, but the main centers of Chinese commercial activity were relocated, with those in Vietnam focusing on Saigon and Cholon and those in Siam centering in Bangok, but for the Chinese of Southeast Asia as a whole, Singapore and Penang became the major centers of the Chinese diaspora in the region.

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Endnotes:

[1] Alexander Hamilton (
Hamilton, A. (1727). A New Account of the East Indies. London.claims the second attack took place in 1717 and that he saw the ruins of Hatien when he visited the place in 1720. Ademand Leclerc,
Leclere, A. (1914). Histoire du Cambodge depuis le premier siecle de notre ere: D'apres les inscriptions lapidaires, les annales chinoises et annamites et les documents europeens des six derniers siecles. Paris, Librairie Paul Geuthner.citing Cambodian and Vietnamese sources, places the attack in 1722. In addition, Nicholas Sellers
Sellers, N. (1983). The Princes of Hà-tiên (1682-1867) The Last of the Philosopher-Princes and the Prelude to the French Conquest of Indochina: A Study of the Independent Rule of the Mac Dynasty in the Principality of Hà-tiên, and the Establishment of the Empire of Viêtnam. Hanoi, Thanh-Long.mentions two successive Siamese attacks on Cambodia, one in 1715 and another in 1717, and he quotes Hamilton's account of Hatien in regard to the second.

[2] The usual Thai term for pirates *jone talay*, or "sea robbers", but in this area, the term used was *jone salat*, or "robbers of the straits" which calls to mind the *orang laut*, also know as *orang selat*, a term usually applied to the sea peoples of the Riau-Lingga Archipelago.

[3] Opium cultivation and preparation was under a monopoly of the East India Company during this period and was grown in several districts of Benares and Bihar states. It was processed in factories in the towns of Benares and Patna, thus the names of these two major varieties of Indian opium. It was shaped into "balls" of about 1.5 kg. Forty of these balls were packed into mango-wood chests weighing about 130 to 140 lb. or roughly 60 kg.