

Chinese Capitalism and the British Empire

By

Carl A. Trocki

A paper presented to the International Association of Historians of Asia, Conference, Taiwan, Taipei, 6-10 December 2004

Introduction

The historical moment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Southeast Asia can be characterized as the meeting of two great waves of global expansion. On the one hand, coming from the east were the Chinese junk traders in search of cargoes of pepper, spices and the products of the forests and seas of Southeast Asia. On the other, from the west, were the British: the East Indiamen coming to buy tea in China and the “country traders”, based in India coming with increasingly large cargoes of opium. We should understand this as a clash of empires, despite the differences in the manner in which we have typically interpreted imperialism and colonialism.

We all, I think, know the story of how the opium trade came to finance the tea trade, since it was an import for which the Chinese would pay silver. By the early nineteenth century, opium purchases by the Chinese had come to equal the cost of tea purchases by the East India Company. Most historians have seen this trade as the frontier of British expansion in Asia and the first thrust of imperial expansion, but most have concentrated on the role of opium in China and have tended to ignore its role in Southeast Asia.

Fewer still have seen the Chinese movement as a kind of colonial expansion. Because Chinese traders and migrants came without the support of their government, and in most cases were not seen to be organizing political domain over the region, they have not been portrayed as the frontiersmen of empire. There is likewise, little evidence that the Chinese involved, at least at the beginning, had the intention of forming an empire. Nevertheless, if we look at what had come to be in Southeast Asia at the end of the nineteenth century, it is clear that a Chinese empire of sorts had been created. It may have lacked navies and governments and may not have seemed unified, but it was one of traders, colonies of population, an economic system and a set of cultural characteristics that gave it a sort of cohesion. If we strip away the soldiers and administrators, the Chinese “empire” in Southeast Asia was not so different from the British Empire. What really drove it were groups of traders who were bound together by family connections, voluntary organizations and place-of-origin links.

What I would like to do with this paper is to examine the manner in which this “clash” occurred and to trace its permutations over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In most cases it did not seem to be a conflict. Many have treated it as partnership, or have even tended to argue that the Europeans themselves created the Chinese presence. I would take issue with those propositions and argue that there were two quite distinct movements in progress. Over time, both changed their character and objectives over time, and both shifted their strategies as conditions changed. There were gains and losses on both sides and there were periods of truce and cooperation as well as of conflict. It is also important to understand that neither “side” represented a fully unified front, and that subgroups could, from time to time, switch sides and ally with the “enemy”.

In the final analysis, the empire itself was a joint enterprise, but the purposes of all actors were not the same. Chinese relied on the European umbrella of security and found it possible to exploit the global reach of the European infrastructure. Europeans found they needed the Chinese to produce wealth for them and to manage the mundane tasks of retail and second-level wholesale trade. Neither could have prospered without the other but each was guided by their own aims. Each

was capable of taking measures to frustrate or divert the projects of the other. We could say that Chinese and Europeans were sleeping in the same bed, but were dreaming different dreams.

Chinese labor colonies in Southeast Asia

The Chinese wave, in the first stages, had little to do with the Europeans. The junk traders were a relatively old phenomenon. These Chinese, mostly based in Fujian, had been sailing to various parts of Southeast Asia since Song times. The chaos that swept China during the Ming collapse and the Qing takeover only partially disrupted this trade. The maritime Chinese of the Fujian and Guangdong coasts had always lived in a relatively insecure world. The rebel leader Zheng Chenggong, added yet another problematic element to the situation, but he was also one of them. (Yamawaki 1976) When the dust had settled and the Qing government permitted a resumption of trade with the region, there appears to have been a considerable demand in China for the products of tropical Southeast Asia. It was a demand which could not be adequately met by the production of Southeast Asian labor on its own. As a result, a new element entered the situation; this was the introduction of Chinese labor into Southeast Asia.

It is important to understand that the migration of “coolie labor” from China to Southeast Asia was a relatively recent phenomenon. There is no record of Chinese laborers coming to the region until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. (Blussé 1981) It is also important to understand that this migration seems to have begun largely as a response to the growth of the Chinese domestic economy and an increasing demand, in China, for products such as tin, gold, pepper and sugar. During the period 1680-1720, we find the first appearance of settlements of Chinese laborers in various parts of Southeast Asia who were there expressly to produce these commodities for shipment back to China.

The forerunners of these seem to have been the settlement of Ming refugees in southern Vietnam, in what was then really Cambodian territory, but which the Nguyen rulers of Dang Trong saw as “open” land. This was the region known to Europeans as Cochinchina. Of particular interest here was the trading settlement and virtually autonomous city-state of Hatien, located at the top of the western coast of the Camau Peninsula. This was founded by the Cantonese refugee/pirate/tax farmer, Mac Cuu, sometime around 1690. (Gaspardone 1952; Sellers 1983; Rungswasdisab 1994; Sakurai 2004) At some point, Mac Cuu paid tribute to the Cambodian king, who recognized him as the gambling farmer of the town; to the Nguyen ruler; and to the Siamese king. During the eighteenth century, the town became an important entrepot for the products of Cambodia, Cochinchina, and possibly for the Siamese towns along the shore of the Gulf of Siam. It was also in touch with the Straits of Melaka, Borneo, the Riau-Lingga Archipelago and Java. It was the core of what a number of scholars are now calling the Chinese “Water Frontier”.

Ng Chin Keong has studied the “Amoy Network”. Amoy or Xiamen was the main port trading with Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. He reports large numbers of “emigrants” on board the ocean junks leaving China after 1683. 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) Although there is no clear statement in the sources, it seems logical to assume that the commerce was to a great extent generated by the products of the migrant laborers.

By the 1780s a quick look at the map of Southeast Asia shows that similar settlements had popped up all around the Gulf of Siam, the coasts of the Malay Peninsula, Borneo and Sumatra. Of

particular note were the pepper and gambier planters in Riau, tin miners in Bangka, gold miners in Sambas and Pontianak, sugar planters in Kedah, and pepper planters in Brunei, Chantaburi and elsewhere in the region. In addition to the production and export of these products, Chinese traders were increasingly involved in developing the rice trade between Southeast Asia and China. (Trocki 1997:67)

Chinese Labor Organization

One of the key features of these early settlements was their organizational structure. While it is difficult to make blanket statements about all of them, so far as we know, most had developed some sort of self-rule organized around the “kongsi” principle. That is, they were organized as share-holding partnerships along the Chinese principles of brotherhood and represented a pooling of capital and labor.

Since most of these were in isolated areas (particularly the mines) Chinese settlers were left very much on their own and often had to provide for their own defense. Even though many of them were founded with the support and cooperation of local Malay or Siamese rulers, they often stood outside the domestic political and economic life of the local state. What is more, as they grew, they often came to represent a presence of greater strength and solidarity than many of the local governments.

Following Wang Tai Peng’s observations on the Borneo kongsis and my own research on the kongsis in eighteenth century Riau and nineteenth century Johor, it seems that a general organizational framework may have characterized many of these settlements in the initial stages. (Trocki 1990; Wang 1995; Trocki 1997) Mary Somers Heidhues has also studied the kongsis of Bangka as well as those in Borneo. (Heidhues 1993) The kongsis were originally set up as partnerships in which all or most of the laborers and taukehs or headmen and capitalists were members. Since these partnerships were often confirmed as ritual brotherhoods, there was little to distinguish them from secret societies, and in fact, there was little difference. These were not usually involved in criminal activity, but they did begin to take on the trappings of a state over time and were thus seen as a threat by local government authorities. Likewise, they were not necessarily secret except in a ritual sense. Where they formed the basis of community, as they did in Borneo, Bangka and nineteenth century Johor, they were in fact, very public bodies. (Trocki 1979; Trocki 1997)

Wang argues that the kongsis oversaw relations among the planters, or miners and the capitalists who financed them. Each participant had a share in the profits of the venture whether he contributed labor or capital. In the early stages, these kongsis were usually made up of men who were related to one another or who came from the same villages; and initially, the kongsi could be quite small. My own work on Johor indicates that kongsis were often formed by a group of men all bearing the same surname. (Trocki 1979) A typical pepper and gambier kongsi in Johor would thus begin with a small group of closely associated planters and usually with a capitalist or taukeh. Each member would hold at least one share and the taukeh might hold 5 out of 10. Generally speaking, in Bangka and in Borneo the headman of a kongsi was usually known to Europeans as the *tiko*, or *teko* or *taiko*, all of which appear to be corruptions of “older brother”, a title typical of the head of a secret society in later times.

In the Hakka gold-mining kongsis of western Borneo, the small kongsis that ran each mine ultimately consolidated into very large kongsis that collected taxes, raised armies and fought wars. Early nineteenth century reports, such as that by George Windsor Earl, describe these as “democratic” in that decisions affecting the group were taken only after extensive public discussion and votes. (Earl 1837) Wang too agrees that these represented a native form of Chinese democracy. He argues that there was a strong egalitarian ideology underlying the kongsi principle which was rooted in the popular beliefs of ritual brotherhood that were common among rural Chinese. He also associates the origins of these kongsis with the officers and crews of the ships in Zheng Chenggong’s navy (Wang 1995). James C. Jackson, who has studied the kongsis both in Borneo

and those on the tin island of Bangka, generally agrees with the idea that the mines were communal and democratic. (Jackson 1969; Jackson 1970)

Newcomers could enter to the mining fields, work for a while and once they had paid off their passage, they too could acquire shares in mines. They could also join with their colleagues and open new mines as joint ventures. In all of these enterprises, capital was necessary. The miners needed food and provisions to support them until such time as the mine paid off. These matters were arranged with a taukeh who would “stake” the miners with provisions in exchange for his own share in the mine and often with a guarantee that he could purchase the produce at a fixed price.

While the kongsis may have been ritually egalitarian, economic relations were characterized by inequality. The arrangements for financing and providing support for these mining and planting communities were usually to the disadvantage of the laborers. Foodstuffs were provided at inflated prices, sometimes four to six times their market value and the products of the mines and plantations were usually undervalued by nearly the same proportions. Nevertheless, it was still possible, at least during the peak periods of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for the laborers to make enough to satisfy their ambitions and many were able to gather together enough profit to return home wealthier than when they had left.

If capital was scarce in the mining fields, so too was labor. The miners and their backers, whether they were Chinese merchants or Malay chiefs, needed each other. Despite the technological advances that Chinese miners brought to Southeast Asia, mining was still a labor intensive business and the whole purpose of bringing Chinese laborers to the region had been to fill the labor shortage in the first place. Labor was expensive, not only because of its scarcity, but also because with organizations like the kongsis, workers could use their solidarity to demand at least a living wage. While they may not have had direct access to the market, they were not far from it, and they at least had to be paid enough to cover their living expenses. Laborers could easily strike or simply walk off the job and find another mine; moreover, as their numbers increased, they could and did organize their own military forces.

By the late eighteenth century, these mining and planting settlements had become considerable establishments. Jackson estimates that the mining community on Bangka had come to number about 25,000 people and was producing about 3,500 tons annually. (Jackson 1969:35) In the early nineteenth century, the Chinese population of the west Borneo gold fields was probably in the neighbourhood of 40,000. (Jackson 1970:24) The population of pepper and gambier planters at Riau in the 1780s has been estimated as about 10,000. (Trocki 1979) When Phraya Taksin arrived in Chantaburi with a ragged force of 500 men, he was able to raise an army of 5,000, with which he returned to Thonburi to oust the Burmese invaders. One must assume that the majority of these were the pepper planters who had settled there earlier in the century. Not only were the numbers of Chinese laborers large, but they were beginning to have an impact on the politics of the region. (Cushman 1996)

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 communities quite different from those of wealthier Chinese 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 was 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. Interestingly, these came at the same time that the control of opium began to become a major issue in the region.

What we might call the British campaign against organized Chinese labor was a major phase in the long-term struggle for control of the empire. To win it, the Europeans needed allies, and they found them among the Chinese traders who settled in the colonial port cities. The most important of these were the Straits Chinese, the peranakans, some of whose families had been

resident in Southeast Asia for generations. Individuals such as Tan Tock Seng and Tan Kim Ching in Singapore as well as Koh Lay Huan of Kedah and Penang and many others like them were the go-betweens who assisted the British in bring the “unruly” Chinese masses under control. These taukehs, however, needed something in exchange for their services, and that was opium.

British opium trade and expansion

Muslim, Portuguese and other European country traders had been carrying opium to Southeast Asia and to China for centuries before the eighteenth century. The major shift in the trade came with the British seizure of the opium fields of Bihar and Varanasi following the battle of Plassey in 1750. With the acquisition of the “dewani” or the right to collect taxes in the territories of the Nawab of Bengal, the East India Company servants in Patna and Ghazipur seized the monopolies over the opium cultivation in those districts. From then on British merchants and British ship captains dominated the opium trade of Asia and opium became the primary business of the British Empire in Asia. After a period of private control of the opium fields, Warren Hastings, on behalf of the Company, appropriated the monopoly, and from 1780 onwards the EIC assumed full control of opium production in its territories.

Since opium was already illegal in China and had already been recognized as a “dangerous” drug, and was indeed being “abused” by significant numbers of Chinese, the EIC found it inappropriate to carry the drug to China in their own ships. As a result, after gathering in the opium produced under its monopoly from Patna and Ghazipur, the Company brought the drug to Calcutta and auctioned off the entire crop. The drug was purchased by speculators and other merchants and shippers who then contracted with one of the group of British country traders to bring it to China.

The country traders were only allowed to operate east of Suez and the Cape of Good Hope. They traded in India under the license of the EIC and they needed the approval of the Company to do business in Canton. Aside from that, they were usually on their own. Their ships were well-armed and when they sailed out from Calcutta or Bombay, no one asked too many questions about their itineraries or activities. From the 1760s onward, opium came to make up increasing amounts of their cargoes. They also carried rather mixed cargoes which included Indian cloth, gunpowder and guns, tools, and other goods from Europe, the Middle East, and the subcontinent. They stopped at numerous locations throughout Southeast Asia before arriving in Macau. A vessel from Calcutta might stop at Aceh, Kedah, Melaka, Riau, Palembang, Batavia, Banjarmasin, Sulu, Trengganu, and Brunei. They exchanged what goods were in demand in the region for goods they could trade in China or India.

Over time, the amounts of opium they carried tended to increase until the Company decided to cap production at between 4,000 and 5,000 chests annually.¹ This remained the rough annual output for nearly 40 years, between about 1780 and 1820. The aim of the Company was to maintain a steady income at what they saw as an optimum level. They feared that overproduction would drive down the price. By 1820 however, a number of factors began to change the dynamics of the trade.

On the one hand, the Napoleonic wars had concluded and with the French out of the picture, the British and the Dutch were reaching a new *modus vivendi* in Southeast Asia which would see Britain emerge as the major European power in the region. Secondly, the price of opium was rising to alarming levels reaching about \$1,000 a chest, which was double the price of a decade earlier. This price rise tempted a number of newcomers into the opium business. These included the Americans who were already active in the Sumatran pepper trade and the northwest Pacific fur trade. They began bringing Turkish and Persian opium to China and Southeast Asia. More serious competition came from the independent Indian states of the western part of the subcontinent,

¹ A standard chest of opium from the EIC factories at Patna and Ghazipur weighed about 140 lb. or about 60 kg. It contained 40 balls of raw opium each weighing about 3 lb. or 1.5 kg. 4,000 chests was equivalent to about 280 tons.

particularly the Malwa area. This was often carried by Bombay country traders. Also, although not fully recognized at the time, Chinese growers had also entered the market.

To meet the Malwa competition, the EIC, among other things, ultimately decided to increase its own production, and by 1830 production coming from both sides of India (Bombay and Calcutta) was beginning to flood the market. Although the price was now dropping, the quantities were increasing at unprecedented rates, so that by the late 1830s, (the time of the Opium War) India was exporting more than 20,000 chests annually and by 1880 it would top 100,000 chests. (Trocki 1999)

The focus here is on the role of the country traders in Southeast Asia. As early as the 1770s, they had been frequenting the ports of Southeast Asia in search of cargoes for China. They had already been purchasing the production of those colonies of Chinese laborers in the region. They were trading at Riau for the pepper of Bentan and for the tin of Bangka and the gold of Sambas and other parts of western Borneo. In addition to weapons and gunpowder, opium was one of the major exchange commodities in this trade. It is also clear that Riau was distributing this opium to Java and the Malay world and to Siam and Cochinchina in exchange for rice and other products. Much of this trade was carried in Chinese junks, and it is perhaps not surprising that opium began to find its way into the supplies going to the Chinese coolies in jungles of the region.

Opium and the kongsis

Opium was an attractive consumer item for the coolies. In fact, it came to be seen as a virtual necessity. In the nineteenth century, there are regular reports that mining coolies would desert the diggings if the opium supply failed. In most cases they had few opportunities for relief or entertainment. They lived in all-male communities where even prostitutes were scarce. They worked long hours in very difficult conditions: clearing the rainforest; digging out the hills; keeping their crops clear of weeds and pests; constructing and maintaining mining equipment and often standing in bone-chilling water up to their knees shovelling the ore through the sluices. Opium killed their pain and eased their loneliness. Opium was also their only form of medicine, a fact which was true of most of the world at the time. Not only was it a sovereign pain-killer, but it stopped up bowels loosened by dysentery and relieved the fevers of malaria and other tropical microbes. If it were not addictive and potentially fatal, it would have been the best thing possible for the laborers in these isolated situations.

The flow of opium to the Chinese coolies gradually became an important aspect of the general commerce of the region, and it also became a part of the larger political economy. In the first place, opium changed the political and economic dynamics of the kongsi. This was one more provision which the coolies purchased from the taukehs and although it must have been a luxury in the beginning, it quickly became a necessity. As such it became an ideal vehicle for keeping coolies permanently indebted to the taukehs. Over time, coolies would be required to give up their shares, leaving the taukehs with the ownership of the mines and plantations. Thus, the coolies got poorer and the taukehs became wealthier.

The laborers also lost control of the kongsis. Without their shares, they ceased to have a voice in the affairs and profits of the ventures and became mere wage laborers. Caught in "company store" situations it was even more difficult to stay out of debt and to avoid working for nothing. In the end, in fact it appears that most coolies did work for nothing since their wages went to cover their debts which were never paid off. The ability to mark up prices and to offer below market prices for the products of these enterprises ensured that the taukehs got marketable commodities at prices well below their actual value.

As they took control of the kongsi, the taukehs also gained control of the kongsis' security forces, the samsengs or thugs who were available to both keep the coolies in line, and at the same time to protect the monopolies of the taukehs. The most important monopolies were the opium farms which allowed the taukehs to retail opium to the coolies. Conversely, if a powerful taukehe failed to win the monopoly contract, he could use the secret society thugs to smuggle and destroy

his competitor. The monopolies provided an important economic resource, both for the taukehs as well as for the states.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, it appears that the egalitarian principles and generally communal nature of the kongsis may have prevailed. Certainly in Borneo, the kongsis managed to hold out against the Dutch, fielding their own armies and maintaining a high degree of autonomy. (Wang 1995) As the Dutch came to ally themselves with the taukehs, giving them the right to hold monopolies on the sale of opium, spirits, gambling concessions and other economic resources, the taukehs deserted the kongsis. The British, who, in the eighteenth century, had freely sold arms throughout Southeast Asia, now refused to sell them against Dutch prohibitions, although they continued to sell them to “legitimate” states. (Crawfurd 1987: 547-8).

Colonial states throughout Southeast Asia as well as indigenous states employed Chinese merchants as tax gatherers. Opium monopolies were one of the most lucrative concessions which were rented to the wealthier taukehs as “farms”. These provided a secure income stream from the coolies to the states. In this way, opium integrated the power structure of the overseas Chinese communities into the colonial states. With their commanding positions within the kongsis, the taukehs were able to use them to police their monopolies.

The kongsis did not fade easily from the scene. The Chinese workers understood that control of opium meant control of their own political and economic destinies. Even though the odds were generally against them, they continued resist domination by the taukeh/state alliances in Siam and the European colonies. It is possible to read the wave of so-called “secret society riots” in places as diverse as Siam, Singapore, Riau, Borneo, and Cochinchina as signs of a primitive class struggle. While some may not find it convincing, it is, nonetheless, an idea too intriguing to let go. (Trocki 1990) It would be foolish to suppose that Chinese laborers did not know when they were being exploited, and that they did not resist. The names of several Chinese secret societies in the Malay world have some reference to justice (e.g. Ngee Heng, or Ghee Hin, means “justice rising”). The entire mythology of the triad is rooted in a struggle for justice.

There is the issue of simultaneity when we see the same scenarios played out in a number of distinct and separate places across the region at roughly the same time. Either the secret societies organized rebellions, or the state moved to crack down on what they claimed was illegal activity by the societies. In more cases than not, the issue at the bottom of the dispute was the control of opium. The first reports of secret society activity in Southeast Asia seem to date from the period between 1825 and 1850. Colonial administrators also saw the simultaneity in these events, but their impulse was to see them as aspects of a vast conspiracy rather than as a reaction against their own greed.

Interestingly, it seems quite certain that the kongsis, or what later were identified as secret societies, had probably been in existence for quite some time earlier. We know, for instance that the Borneo kongsis dated back to the early eighteenth century. It seems evident that some sort of kongsi organization existed at Riau prior to 1780, and if it did not, it certainly was there by 1790. There were also kongsis in Bangka, and it seems likely that they existed among the miners on both sides of the Malay Peninsula by the beginning of the nineteenth century, if not earlier. The situation for Siam is less certain. Walter Vella notes that the first reports of secret society activity date from 1824 when the Siamese government made its first move to suppress one. There is no evidence that they existed before that time, but there is also no evidence that they did not. It is doubtful that they had only just appeared when the Siamese decided to suppress them. More likely, they had been around for some time, but had not previously been perceived as a threat, or else the government did not feel adequately in control to confront them.

In some cases, the societies were involved in opium smuggling and in other cases rioting and outright rebellion. In 1848, 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 “...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)

The year 1825 seems to be the first indication that such societies existed in Singapore. That was probably the year in which Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir witnessed an initiation ceremony of the Heaven and Earth Society, or the Ghee Hin on a gambier estate. He was one of Raffles’ scribes and the Malay teacher for many of the first Europeans in the Straits Settlements. (Abdullah 1970) Obviously, the society had been active in Singapore some time before then, and was clearly involved with the pepper and gambier agriculture.

The problem of opium smuggling, that is, violations of the farmer’s monopoly, were one of the most common crimes in Singapore during this period. The first important outbreak of secret society violence, the Chinese Funeral Riots in 1846, occurred at a time when the leadership of both the society and the Singapore opium and spirit farms were changing hands. Wu Xiao An’s study of Chinese business in Kedah and Penang shows that control of the revenue farms was always a matter that was hotly contested, and that powerful revenue farmers either controlled the local secret society, or else they found themselves forced to combat it. In those circumstances, we should expect to see conflict in the societies when changes occurred in the farms, and vice versa.

The communal and egalitarian ethos of the kongsi, however meaningful it was to the ordinary members of these societies was not really able to stand the temptation of unprecedented wealth for the leaders. The men who controlled the revenue farms were always the wealthiest and most powerful individuals in the local community. If a secret society leader was successful in forcing his way into a position of power in the farming syndicate on the basis of his armed strength, he might immediately turn around and make common cause with the state which gave him the monopoly. This appears to have been the case in Singapore when in 1846, one Lau Joon Teck, seems to have bullied his way into the syndicate. By his death in 1859, he was known to Europeans as “the moneyed man of the farms”, and the thugs of the Ghee Hin Kongsi, or secret society, had become a part of his force of “revenue peons.” (Trocki 1990) His successor, Tan Seng Poh, who controlled the holdings of the powerful Teochew taukeh, Seah Eu Chin, in the 1860s and 1870s, was able to dispense with the secret societies altogether and recruit his own personal force of revenue police.

It is important to understand the changing views of secret societies in the eyes of Europeans in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the century, if they were aware of them at all, European administrators and merchants saw them as powerful organizations that had to be pacified and somehow or other, brought under the management of the colonial enterprise. Failing that, and they usually did, they were seen as a “state within a state”, not really as criminals. The societies were necessary evils which had the one benefit of keeping the masses of the Chinese under control. It was not until 1869 that the British in the Straits Settlements passed legislation to restrict them, and even that was only aimed at registering them. They did not actually try to ban them until 20 years later.

It was only in their final incarnation in the 1870s, subsequent to being ousted from the revenue farming business that secret society members came to be viewed as extortionists and petty criminals. In Singapore, it is noteworthy that during the 1850s and 1860s, the societies were viewed as allies of the government. J.D. Vaughan’s comments on them suggest that during the middle of the nineteenth century, the government left control of the Chinese community to the societies. (Vaughan 1971)

Opium was thus an important factor in breaking down the autonomy of the kongsis-cum-secret societies, and therefore of Chinese labor as it came into confrontation with the expanding European colonial empires. Labor was made subservient to the state and to capital. At the same time, another shift occurred, and that was in the ownership and purchase of the goods produced by Chinese labor. At the start of the labor migration, the aim of production was to supply goods to the China market. By the middle of the nineteenth century, that had changed. As Indian opium, whose flow was controlled by Britain, flooded into Southeast Asia and China, it also had an impact on

China's purchasing power, and China seems to have been less able to purchase the products of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Europeans found that they had a need for the products of Chinese labor in Southeast Asia. From the 1830s onward, goods such as pepper, tin, gambier, tapioca, tobacco and others began to flow to Europe rather than China. They were still produced by Chinese labor in Southeast Asia, but ultimately all of them began to move toward Europe. This does not mean that the Chinese market ceased to absorb these goods, but that Europe now became the dominant consumer. In time, new commodities, such as rubber, were developed to serve the European market.

There were two reasons for this shift in the flow of trade. Both of them had to do with opium. On the one hand, opium was flowing into China at such an alarming rate that China was now exporting silver, where once they had imported it. Simply put, China was becoming much poorer in relation to the West. In about 1850, Rutherford Alcock estimated that China was spending about 10 million taels on opium annually while it was selling only 2 million taels worth of tea. China's new export was people. The second reason was that throughout Southeast Asia, European capital was able to outbid China for the products of Chinese labor.

The Role of Singapore

In laying out the story of opium and the Chinese migration, it is important to understand the role of Singapore. The British trading center which was founded in 1819 by Thomas Stamford Raffles brought together all of the elements of the new order in Southeast Asia. In particular, it was a British free port. It was protected by the Royal Navy and was a place where the British country traders could unload their precious cargoes of the Indian drug, and where Chinese and other Asian merchants could gather and amass their fortunes without fear of the depredations of "native" chiefs.

Singapore, in addition to lying beside the only clear, deep channel between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, was also at the center of a line running north and south linking Dutch Batavia and Bangkok. Between those two capitals lay most of the major kongsi settlements in Southeast Asia. To the north were the two coasts of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and the Gulf of Siam. Beyond that lay the populous mainland states of Burma, Siam and Vietnam. The west coast of the Peninsula was then being settled by groups of adventurous tin miners from bases in Penang and Melaka. On a tangent to the west were the pepper gardens of Aceh. The east coast of the Peninsula was dotted with settlements of Chinese, Malays and Siamese producing rice, pepper, tin, gold, birds' nests and the vast range of forest produce always in demand in China. Off to the northeast were the pepper ports of Chantaburi with sugar, tobacco and endless supplies of dried and salted fish. Beyond that were Cambodia and Cochinchina and important supplies of rice and sugar.

To the south was Riau, the port which had set the pattern for Singapore in the previous century. It still housed a settlement of several thousand Chinese pepper and gambier planters which centered on the Sino-Bugis settlement of Tanjong Pinang. It had only recently been occupied by the Dutch in 1818. By the 1840s, however, it was being re-occupied by Chinese settlers from Singapore who were expanding the pepper and gambier settlements to the remainder of the archipelago. The islands to the south – Lingga, Bangka and Belitung (Billiton) – were major tin mining areas. Bangka had been the site of major mining kongsis since the early eighteenth century and these continued to be productive throughout the nineteenth century. To the south was Java and to the east the Java Sea, Banjarmasin, Sulawesi and the islands of the eastern archipelago.

Singapore became the center of a widespread Chinese economy of Southeast Asia. As the center of the opium trade, Singapore was where the traders servicing these settlements came for their supplies. As the center of Chinese trade, Singapore was where the junks from China landed. In particular, it became the headquarters of Southeast Asia's Chinese labor exchange. Laborers and coolies came to Singapore first and were then shipped out to the various mines or plantations in the surrounding areas. Singapore was thus not only the headquarters of the opium trade, but also was the center of the labor trade, or the coolie traffic, as it was then known. By the 1850s, Chinese had

come to constitute more than fifty percent of Singapore's population, and ever since then it has been essentially a Chinese town.

For Southeast Asia, Singapore was the source of both capital and labor. Naturally, the products of all the surrounding areas flowed back there. The port also became the center of the region's commodity trade. As a trading port it did not really draw much trade away from other centers. In fact, Crawford argued in about 1824, that Singapore had in fact, increased the overall trade of the region. In a matter of months after its founding, the Chinese junk traders, Bugis traders and British merchants began to flock to Singapore. Within five years, Singapore's trade grew to a value of over \$13 Million annually. (Crawford 1987:537) John Crawford argued that Singapore had greatly contributed to an absolute increase in British trade in Asia. Answering critics that Singapore simply drew trade from Penang, he pointed out that in 1818, the whole of direct British trade with the Straits of Malacca, and generally with the eastern islands, excluding Java, centred at Penang, totalled \$2,030,757 worth of exports. In 1824, however, the joint exports of Penang and Singapore were \$9,414,464, of which \$6,604,601 was exported through Singapore. (Crawford 1987:549)

What was the basis of this sudden increase in British trade? Certainly an important share of it was opium. In 1823-4, \$8, 515,100 worth of opium was shipped to China. Even though not all of this was landed in the Straits, much of it was. Its location moreover, gave Singapore a more advantageous position than Penang. In addition to serving as a base for British trade, it was better able to tap into the very active trade carried on by Chinese junks in the South China Sea, the Gulf of Siam and the Java Sea.

If Singapore did not draw trade away from other British ports, it certainly affected other trading centers. Even though trade generally increased, many of the older centers near Singapore now sunk into relative obscurity. The trade of Tanjong Pinang, the port of Riau and the trade of Siak began to suffer. Hatien, possibly the key port of the Gulf of Siam in the eighteenth century, had been sacked by one army after another (the Siamese, the Taysons, the army of the Nguyen) in the years between 1768 and 1800. It had lost population and seen its leadership weaken. Moreover, the town had been brought more firmly under the control of Hue, at least in theory. In 1833, it was caught up in the Cochinchinese rebellion following the death of Le Van Duyet and was once again sacked and its population massacred. Most of these would have been Chinese.

The consolidation of new states on the mainland, particularly Siam and Vietnam, had done much to reduce the autonomy of the earlier Chinese settlements in the region and by the middle of the nineteenth century, these towns had become backwaters. Wealthy Chinese merchants, where they remained in those countries had gravitated to places like Bangkok and Saigon. These became the new growth centers for these countries and also for the overseas Chinese.

The Place of the *Peranakan* Chinese

The role of the *peranakan* Chinese was crucial in the advance of imperialism throughout the nineteenth century. Particularly in the British possessions, the "Straits Chinese" as they came to be called, were the key allies of the colonial powers in governing the masses of the immigrant Chinese. This group of individuals, many of whom traced their ancestry back to Chinese settled in the region prior to the British arrival, were among the original inhabitants of the Straits Settlements. Their families had been established at Riau, Melaka and Penang before the mid-eighteenth century. They had already worked with Malay chiefs and Dutch burgers as well as Portuguese traders and the other commercial groups of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. They also, despite their long residence in the region, maintained family and business links with China.

They emerged not only as the partners of the Europeans and cooperative Asian rulers, in managing the Chinese populations of their settlements, but also as some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals in the region. One element of their power and wealth was their durability. They were able to maintain family lines in an immigrant environment through a variety of social and economic institutions which included temples, family kongsis, business partnerships, judicious marriage alliances and extensive networking. Jennifer Cushman has described one such family: the Khaws of Penang and Ranong in southern Siam (Cushman 1991). Others include the five clans

associated with major kongsi foundations in Penang: the Khoo, the Cheah, the Lim, the Yeoh and the Tan, not to mention a number of other clans who are outside this group of five. Throughout the nineteenth century, a number of family groups were dominant in Singapore, including the Seah, the Tan Tock Seng family, the Tan Cheng Lock family and the Cheang family. Some of these had their origins in Melaka which remained the family base into the twentieth century.

One of the primary sources of wealth and power among these families was the opium revenue farms. From the beginning of the British presence in the region to the end of the revenue farming system in 1910, members of these families tended to dominate the revenue farms of both Penang and Singapore. In so doing, they also tended to control those of the Malay, Dutch, and Siamese territories which adjoined the Straits Settlements. My work on Singapore has shown that a small number of Singapore families controlled the opium farms, not only for decades at a time, but also over an extensive area which included Johor, Melaka and Dutch-controlled Riau. Penang taukehs, such as the Lims and the Choongs controlled the farms of Kedah and other west coast states, eastern Sumatra and the states of southern Siam. (Wu 1999) Cushman's work on the Khaw family shows similarly extensive networking and consolidation of revenue farms. (Cushman 1991)

These families not only maintained networks among the other powerful Straits Chinese families, but also with key first-generation Chinese migrants who had become wealthy taukehs. They thus held positions in the secret societies, or were able to influence their actions without actually holding formal membership. To hold revenue farms, it was also necessary to maintain close relations, sometimes hidden ones, with important European merchants and government officials. Recent evidence shows that certain colonial officials had Chinese favourites. It was, after all, necessary for a revenue farmer to be someone who was known as a trustworthy individual. The fact that Straits Chinese could speak English, had their roots in the colony, and were often British subjects were all points in their favour (Wu 2003)

We see an interesting transformation over the course of the nineteenth century. Colonialism and state consolidation destroyed the power of the Chinese kongsis and helped to undermine the wealth and influence of the prominent towns of the Chinese water frontier of the eighteenth century. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, indigenized Chinese groups such as the Straits Chinese were able to carve out a place for themselves within the British and other European empires. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, opium was the vehicle by which they attained this place. Singapore and Penang in particular became the bases from which cliques of *peranakan* Chinese could expand into the rest of Southeast Asia both through their own networks as well as through those of the British.

Throughout the nineteenth century, we find that two or three cliques composed mainly of Hokkien, Straits-born Chinese merchants, controlling the opium farms of most of British Malaya, southern Siam and Sumatra. Interestingly, it seems that these same groups also dominated the shipment of laborers from the ports of Fujian and the Chaozhou areas of Guangdong province. They thus controlled the supplies of both labor and capital for much of the commodity-producing enterprises of island Southeast Asia. They also extended their commercial reach through links to Bangkok, Saigon, and Hong Kong, and in some cases even Australia and the United States. Wherever, Chinese labor went, so too went opium and the influence of these merchants.

A Case in Point: Seizing the Hong Kong Farms

I would like to offer a sort of case study that shows how these cliques of *peranakan* Chinese saw themselves within the empire at a specific point in time. This was the Singapore/Saigon Hokkien scheme to take over the Hong Kong farms. One could offer a number of such examples, and each time the circumstances would probably differ, but we would see both adaptability as well as a sense of vision and, overall, a vast ambition to push their luck to the absolute limit and to make use of every possible opportunity. Very often, these schemes ended unsuccessfully, but a study of them gives us the chance to see what these people thought they were doing. Also, the lawsuits that often followed these spectacular failures open the door on these normally secretive doings.

In 1879, the members of a clique of Hokkien taukehs from Singapore joined forces with a group of Saigon Hokkiens to take control of the opium farms of Hong Kong. The Singapore group included Cheang Hong Lim one of the most powerful and wealthiest Chinese in the settlement. He had been one of three partners controlling the opium farms of Singapore, Johor, Riau and Melaka since the 1860s, and his father before him had held them since the 1840s. (Trocki 1990) Their partners were the Saigon opium farmers who controlled all of the opium farms of French Cochinchina as well as those of Cambodia, and it is possible their reach extended to the portions of Annam still controlled by the Vietnamese emperor.

The Saigon farmers were actually natives of Singapore although their antecedents are unclear. They included Ngan Wee, usually known by his trademark or “chop” as Banhap; he was partners with three brothers, Tan Keng Seng, Tan Keng Hoon and Tan Keng Ho, also Singapore-born. (Trocki 2004) They had held the Saigon farms since 1864 when they pushed out a clique of Cantonese taukehs. In 1879, these five individuals joined with a disaffected group of Hong Kong opium merchants and organized the Man Wo Fung Company which staged a takeover of the Hong Kong farms. It seems likely that they did this with the blessing and encouragement of the Hong Kong Governor, John Pope-Hennessy who expected a major increase in the annual rental for the farms if they succeeded.

The Hong Kong farm itself, was actually quite small when compared with those in the Straits Settlements or in Cochinchina. In that same year, the Cochinchina farms were valued at about \$2 million while those of the Singapore were \$440,000 annually to the respective governments while the rent that Banhap and company offered for the Hong Kong farms was only \$220,000. This sum, however, was a considerable increase of what the former Cantonese clique had offered. This was quite cheap, given the additional advantages of the Hong Kong farm. These advantages came from Hong Kong’s role in the Pacific Ocean coolie trade. The Cantonese opium merchants of Hong Kong had, like their Hokkien competitors, merged their control of opium with their control of labor.

Since the 1820s, the Singapore taukehs had managed to gain a controlling position within the coolie trade of the Fujian and northeastern Guangdong coasts. Much of this traffic now came through Singapore, from which the coolies were distributed throughout the rest of the western part of Southeast Asia. Since the 1840s, the taukehs of Hong Kong had developed the commerce in Cantonese labor to California, Hawaii and Australia. In addition, they had also kept control of the rights to supply those coolies with prepared opium, manufactured in their facilities in Hong Kong. The other advantage was in Hong Kong’s proximity to China and the vast smuggling trade that was carried on to the north. These additional benefits were the object of Banhap and his friends.

The available information suggests that the Chinese opium farmers of the Straits Settlements and Cochinchina were seeking to consolidate a region-wide amalgamation of opium farms and coolie broking covering not only Southeast Asia and the China coast, but also stretching across the Pacific and following the Chinese migration wherever it went. This scheme is all the more extraordinary when we consider that most of the business of creating this combination seems to have taken place within the rather short space of two or three years, much of it actually in 1879 alone! It is probable that this joint venture was more plural than singular in nature and more segmented than unified. Even today, Chinese have a tendency to operate through collections of relatively autonomous, locally-based establishments rather than through tightly-organized and hierarchical structures. In each place there was a separate company, often managed by local partners. International connections between them were limited to infusions of capital (often as loans from syndicate members) and the involvement external managers, at least enough so that they could protect their investments and repatriate their profits. As a result of this sort of organization, it is rather difficult to establish who was working with whom, since the involvement of some individuals was not public knowledge. Sometimes alliances in one place coexisted with competition in others.

This was apparently not the only attempt to gain monopoly control over the opium trade of

the region. The following year, 1881, Li Hung-chang the Chinese statesman, memorialized the throne proposing that a Chinese company be chartered with a capital of \$20 million to buy up all the opium to be exported into China. (Morse, 1918: 385) The instigator of this scheme was a Cantonese Ho Hsien-ch'ih, his name does not appear among those involved in the Man Wo Fung, but he may easily have been connected to one of the Hong Kong companies. (Spence, 1975: 165) As Spence points out, these were very wealthy men and in each of the colonies they had come to appreciate the power that their wealth had created. Clearly, the time had come when some Chinese in the "fraternity" of international opium farmers that had come into existence by 1880, saw that an area-wide monopoly of either the opium trade or the opium farms, or perhaps both, together with the trade in Chinese labor, was a possibility. After all, the Jewish firm of Sassoon took control of the upstream end of the opium trade, first in Bombay and in Calcutta by the 1870s. Was it not possible for a group of Chinese to take control of their end of the trade?

The End of the Affair

Despite the success of the Man Wo Fung in Hong Kong, Banhap ultimately fell victim to the rationalizing ambitions of the French colonial authorities. In 1881, the French conducted a series of hearings, which have been reported by Groeneveldt. His report has formed the basis for studies by Dumarest and others on the opium farms of Cochinchina. Ultimately, the French decided to abolish the farming system and to create the first operable Southeast Asian government-run opium monopoly. (Descours-Gatin 1992; Dumarest 1938; Groeneveldt 1881; Nankoe 1993) Testimony in the hearings commented on the "virtual stranglehold" which the Chinese merchants, in particular the opium farmers, held over the retail and wholesale trade of Vietnam. This included rice, opium and even French commodities. Banhap, himself, was the object of considerable comment and vilification since he was credited with creating the system. His distribution system was based on a central warehouse in each of the three provinces which his company controlled. Extending out from this was a network of opium dealerships in each village and small market. The opium shops also offered credit to the local people, but on fairly exorbitant terms. Local Vietnamese officials on the Colonial Council were ready to join the French officials and merchants and vote to undercut the power of the Chinese opium farmers.

While the French were concerned about Chinese power, they do not seem to have been overly concerned about the extent of the Chinese networks around them. In many respects, cities like Saigon and Bangkok were important complements to colonial port cities like Singapore and Hong Kong. The two former cities were major centres of large Southeast Asian states and each housed major rice-milling and rice-exporting businesses. Many Singapore merchants owned rice mills in both cities. It is probable that some had been in Saigon since before the French takeover of Cochinchina. Individuals such as Khoo Cheng Tiong of Singapore and his son, Khoo Teck Saeng, were known to own large rice mills in Saigon and to play a major role in the trade between Singapore and Saigon. Tan Kim Cheng, another important Singapore merchant owned rice mills in both Saigon and Siam.

As a Fujian trader and a native of Singapore, Banhap had long standing relations with other merchants from his part of China, who dominated the trade of Singapore and Penang. It is instructive that the partners that can be identified in the Man Wo Fung syndicate (excluding the Hong Kong partners) were all members of established Straits-born/Fujian families. (Wright, 1907: 705) Cheang Hong Lim and his son-in-law, Lim Kwee Eng were from old Baba families in Singapore (Song, 1920). Banhap's Saigon partners, the three Tan brothers were likewise well-connected. Tan Keng Hoon owned the Bukit Pasoh estate in Singapore at his death in 1877. He had married his only daughter, Tan Yean Neo, to Ang Teow Guan, the son of Ang Kim Cheak the son of a Melaka-born *peranakan* who was an important Singapore merchant in the mid-nineteenth century. He too, had business interests in Saigon and Bangkok. (Song 1923:271)

The grand scheme to put all the opium farms and all of the coolie trade of both Southeast Asia and the entire Pacific Ocean under one vast company did not succeed. In a few years, the

Cantonese cliques of Hong Kong had patched up their differences and the Singapore/Saigon clique was out, at least for a few years. In the late 1880s, Lee Keng Yam, another Melaka-born Singaporean, was back in charge of the Hong Kong and the Shanghai farms. In 1880, Cheang Hong Lim and his friends lost the Singapore farms to Koh Saeng Tat, another Baba from Penang. Nonetheless, for the next three decades, the Straits farms were dominated by one or another of the *peranakan* cliques of Singapore or Penang. (Trocki 1990)

The coolie and opium trade to the United States and Australia declined rapidly in the early 1880s as both countries passed legislation to restrict Chinese immigration. This move greatly reduced the traffic in Chinese laborers and opium to the Pacific basin and reduced the attractiveness of the Hong Kong opium farms.

In 1883 the Cochinchinese Colonial Council abolished the opium farm and established the *Régie Directe*, a government-run monopoly. However, even before this occurred, Banhap lost the Saigon farms and was himself reduced to smuggling (Nankoe, Gerlus et al. 1993). The French move to establish a government monopoly, however, was not as successful as they had hoped. It proved impossible for Frenchmen to actually manage the enterprise and, as Nankoe makes clear, they ended up hiring, or contracting with many of the same individuals who had formerly run the opium farm. Chinese continued to manage the day-to-day affairs of the new monopoly, and despite these changes, or perhaps because of them, profits were generally quite modest and never lived up to expectations. As time passed, colonial authorities became more familiar with the operations of the opium production and distribution system and it became possible to create more reliable colonial police and customs forces to guard the monopoly.

Within another decade, the Dutch adapted the French system to Java and established a monopoly of their own, which was, in fact, far more successful than that of the French. Early in the twentieth century, the British and Siamese too, eliminated their farms and created government monopolies. In 1914, Hong Kong followed suit. From then on opium farming ceased to be a Chinese controlled business and the entire opium business (except for the international trade in raw opium) was under government monopolies.

In the years between 1883 and 1914, however, Chinese capitalists continued to move their money at will around Southeast Asia and China. Despite attempts by the colonial powers to control this largely autonomous Chinese economy, it expanded, to both the concern and profit of the various colonial establishments. Chinese capital had been successful internationalized, and it would stay that way into the twentieth century. Although opium and the farming system had been pulled out of their hands, *peranakan*, taukehs would continue to find ways to develop their own financial empire within the new global economy being created by imperialism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the *peranakan* financial cliques were turning to other ways of managing the imperial economies. Apparently, the most lucrative one, aside from the property market in the various colonies, was the field of banking. It is of interest that the first Chinese banks in Southeast Asia were founded by ex-opium farmers. While these did not oust the large European banks which still dominated much of the global trade of the empire, they made a place for themselves within the local economies and were ready to cash in on the adventures of new migrants like Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian when they came to dominate the local rubber industry. (Trocki 1990)

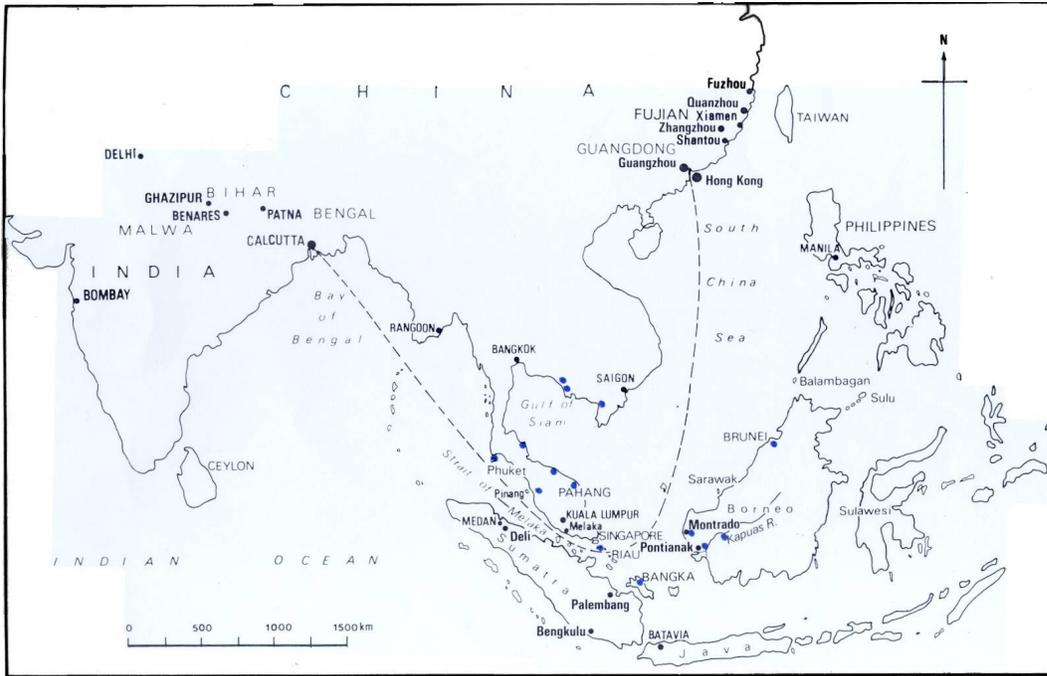
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