

Book Reviews

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The Chinese in Maritime Southeast Asia: Trade and Merchant Communities in 17th-century Insulindia. By Marie-Sybille de Vienne. NUS Press, 2025. xvi+342 pp.

A revision and translation of Marie-Sybille de Vienne's *Les Chinois en Insulinde: Échanges et sociétés marchandes au XVIIe siècle d'après les sources de la V.O.C.* (2008), this volume starts grandly, with a claim that it engages in “Asian-centric” (p. 3) research involving a “necessary decentring” (p. 3) of European-centric studies. Immediate issues with this claim arise a few pages later, following an acknowledgement of the vast range of Asian sources available on this topic. We read that “the difficulty of interpretation and above all the accessibility of Chinese sources (regional monographs), most of which have not yet been published (even in Chinese), as well as the small number of translated and published Japanese sources, compared to the relative accessibility, availability and above all great wealth of Western sources, have led to the latter being preferred” (p. 19). In short, the work generally did not draw on East Asian sources. The Japanese sources made available in English by Ishii Yoneo in “The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia: Translations from the Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki, 1674–1723”, and the *Kai Ba lidai shiji* (The Chinese Annals of Batavia) are notable exceptions.

Thus, as the title of the French original notes, this work is essentially a study of Chinese economic activity in maritime Southeast Asia during the seventeenth century, concentrating on the Chinese of Batavia and based essentially on Dutch (and some Spanish) sources. Does this work “decentre” existing European research on the region? To the degree that its focus is Chinese economic activity rather than

European commercial and political aspirations in Southeast Asia, it can be said to be a contribution in this direction.

The value of the volume is manifest in various spheres. An initial broad discussion of commercial ports and networks across Southeast Asia and the commodities that were traded through the ports over the course of the seventeenth century is followed by an examination of the rise of Chinese *shahbandars* in the region, replacing Indo-Muslim port officers, as a result of a burgeoning Chinese trade and migration into the region in the early part of the century. Control of trade in Batavia was an exception to this trend, remaining in the hands of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC). Archival sources are drawn on to illustrate the trade from Batavia across the archipelago and to Siam, Cambodia, Cochinchina, Champa, Tonkin and Manila. The Dutch sources reflect the importance of Chinese vessels and merchants in this trade. The volume then describes the expansion of Dutch interests into the China Sea as the seventeenth century progressed, with commercial extension to China/Macau, Japan and Taiwan. Not unnaturally, Chinese maritime commerce in this region also far outweighed that of the Dutch, both VOC and free burghers.

The dominance of Chinese ships and merchants in the Insulindien trade is then focused on, noting how this was extended and integrated with trade to Taiwan under the Zhengs and Japanese ports in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Part IV of the volume examines currency flows, trade products, prices and profits, and diverse financial mechanisms, including credit, as reflected in regional Chinese commercial activities. This brings discussion more directly to one of the key foci of the volume—the Chinese community in Batavia—for which Dutch sources provide a surfeit of materials. These are presented in a range of tables and include analyses of economic activities, finance, tax farming, Chinese power and influence in Batavia and beyond, key Chinese figures in the community, social institutions, criminality, punishment, and relations with the Dutch administration. Two extremely useful

appendices to the volume are the lexicon of product names mentioned in the *daghregisters* (daily journals) and the inventory of goods traded in Insulinde.

The conclusion brings the reader back to competitive commerce between the VOC and Chinese traders in the region, noting the difficulties of the Dutch in expanding commerce when Chinese traders “controlled inter-Asian trade in an area with a radius of almost 3,000 km from the coast of South China” (p. 275). The political and commercial tensions that led to the 1740 massacre of Chinese residents in Batavia are only briefly explored, as is the arrival of the ships and agents of the British East India Company, presaging a new period in Southeast Asian trade.

While generally engaging, a few deficiencies of the work are worthy of note. We are told that this text is a translation by Kasha Vande of the original French-language study, revised by Wong Wee. There is no explanation as to what sort of revisions were made, which aspects were revised or whether the author condoned the changes. A publisher’s note explaining what was involved in these processes might be included in any future edition.

But the major issue of concern, as noted above, is the failure to engage with the wide range of Chinese and Japanese sources, which are essential to any study of such a topic. Studies of Chinese economic activity in Insulinde over the seventeenth century are certainly not new, and deep research by Chinese and Japanese scholars, as well as other global counterparts, has seen very skilled integration of European and Asian sources in producing histories of diverse aspects of such activity, many of which are available in English. As a particular example, James Chin’s (1998) seminal doctoral dissertation examining Chinese communities and trade in Southeast Asia over this period would have enormously benefited the volume under review by providing English-language access to an excellent range of Chinese sources.

The accomplished skills of the translator are evident throughout, with occasional lapses, such as persons sentenced to being “beaten alive” (p. 259). Of more consequence is the use of the toponym

“Malaka” (rather than Melaka or Malacca) throughout the text, a remarkable lapse in a volume devoted to Southeast Asia.

This is a valuable work, drawing on a wide range of mainly Western sources and scholarship, with much data and reference material presented in useful formats. In addition, the ideas presented with respect to the chronology and degree of Chinese control of Southeast Asian commerce over the seventeenth century will engage scholars for years to come.

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REFERENCES

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Performing Vulnerability: Risking Art and Life in the Burmese Diaspora. By Emily L. Hue. University of Washington Press, 2025. xiii+300 pp.

In the summer of 2025, I visited Bangkok and met up with a performance artist from Hong Kong, who suggested that we stop by the BACC (Bangkok Art and Culture Centre), where a friend of hers was installing her work for an exhibition that was scheduled to open a few days later. There, we met the curators, two displaced Burmese artists—whom I will not name to protect their identities—who explained the nature of the show, which included works by artists from Myanmar, Iran, Russia, Syria, Hong Kong, Tibet and the Uyghur diaspora. Titled “Constellation of Complicity”, according to the curators, it highlighted the shared spirit of resistance against authoritarianism across the world. A few days later, I received an