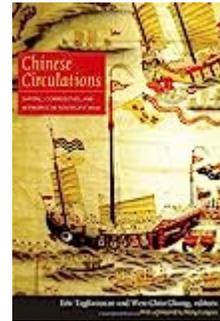




Eric Tagliacozzo, Wen-chin Chang. *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 552 S. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4881-8; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4903-7.



Reviewed by Sun Yue

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E. Tagliacozzo u.a. (Hrsg.): Chinese Circulations

This is a collection of twenty essays dealing with the unifying theme of networking or movement of actors, objects, ideas, and practices in Chinese and Southeast Asian histories during the past few centuries. While the idea of network is not exactly new – though not so old either, its authors capture a repertoire of diversifying details and more nuanced understandings, a most rewarding experience for those who care more for the local and the particular.

“Circulation,” a concept that they borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss, etc, as its authors point out, is “more than mobility or trade; it implies long-term relations of repeated flows that transform society. The goal of investigating circulation, then, is to gain new insights into forces that change a society.” (p. 39). Also in the book, you savor a host of unexpected new findings, like the Ryukyuan contacts with China and others recorded meticulously in *Lidai Baoan*, or precious documents of successive generations of the Ryukyu Kingdom (pp. 107-129), or how the Siamese ruling class’s taste for Chinese luxurious items was related to their claim to royal power (pp. 149-171).

Yet the book’s virtue lies not exactly in its exhaustive details, nor even in its new conceptualizations of “circulation”; rather, it shows convincingly and refreshingly that humanity in this part of the world has always stayed in a dynamic wedlock of network conditions. Thus one learns that a range of astoundingly rich commodities has always been on the flow: precious metals, cotton and copper, opium, pepper and sapanwood, luxury goods, tortoiseshell, gems, junk cargoes, books, textiles, capital, rice, fish, birds’ nests, marine products, jade stones, timber, and even human labor (the “coolie trade” for example), the Bible, and the coins used in regional trade, with each author highlighting one or two of these often over a period of centuries. Each author builds on past scholarship, mines new materials, adds fresh dimensions. The formidable array of authors also makes this book a fine example of collective research in a given field.

In an important sense, this work typifies current global history scholarship as well. Scholars, or even professional historians, often mistake global history as undertaking to see the world in one glance, a ridiculous job beyond human effort or aspiration. Yet the fact is,

thereâs nothing more wrong than this wrongful association. Global history certainly has a global dimension/concern, i.e., it aims to account for all humanity on this globe of ours. But global history is concrete and tangible at the same time, as illustrated by the present book. Though its scope is limited â focusing on China and Southeast Asia in this case, it captures the gist of global history, i.e., the âidea of networks as being crucial to the linking of human societies,â (p. 1) and, in a stunt of fine historical scholarship, it showcases John R. McNeill and William H. McNeill would call the âthickening,â âspinning,â âtightening,â and âstrainingâ of the âhuman webâ (in their 2003 book *The Human Web: A Birdâs-Eye View of World History*) in this part of the world.

One does not have to be so well-informed to discover the fashion shifts in history studies during the past century and more, military political histories giving way to sociocultural histories, and further down from below, histories of everyday life of almost everybody, depending on âarchivalâ availability, and/or oral testimony of sorts.

The trend has been toward ever-finer local case studies. But this can create a lot of confusion with its all high-sounding scholarship. Fortunately in recent decades, there also emerge schools of more integrative scholarship, global history in particular among these.

These latter serve to bring readers out of the âchaosâ of minutest details, to contextualize, or even to re-orient. In this light, the book under review is trying to show the validity and effectiveness of networks and cross-cultural interactions throughout Chinese and Southeast Asia histories, and not much more. One does wish that even regional historians, even though they may not wish to go so far as to embrace big history, which traces all humanity in cosmic perspectives, at least they do better if they put all their materials in a larger framework, as a âframe-workâ thinkerâ David Christian, *Big History*, in: Kenneth R. Curtis and Jerry H. Bentley (eds.), *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past*, Malden, MA 2014), pp. 191-193. does. This has the merit of allowing readers see, besides entertaining them.

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