Book Reviews

on polarity in chapter 10) would further bolster the author’s theoretical contribution, by specifying the exact differences between asymmetry and hierarchy.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the study of Asian IR has reflected, rather than determined, broader developments in the field of international relations theory. Brantly Womack’s *China Among Unequals* represents a sophisticated effort to reverse that dynamic, and place Asia in the centre rather then the periphery of theorizing on international relations.

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This impressive study is an opportune contribution to the literature on a contentious concept, “Chinese capitalism.” This book is exceptional because of the method adopted to draw insights into how Chinese communities and their enterprises in Southeast Asia have evolved over centuries. In the process, this volume reviews major theoretical propositions in analyses of a Chinese form of capitalism.

The concept of “Chinese capitalism” has been the subject of intense debate, with a large body of literature arguing that there are traits unique to this ethnic community that define their form of business enterprise. Another school contends that such features, specifically family firms, co-ethnic networks, trust, thrift, diligence, and an adherence to Confucian ethics, essentialize Chinese identity, homogenize the way members of this community conduct their business ventures, and present an erroneous interpretation of how Chinese enterprises have emerged as major actors in Southeast Asian economies.

In this lengthy edited volume of 20 chapters, in addition to an introduction and a foreword by Wang Gungwu, an impressive ensemble of historians who have spent much of their careers studying Chinese enterprise provides us with judicious and thought-provoking historical assessments of the trade and development of a diverse range of commodities. Through this innovative method of reviewing commodities traded in Southeast Asia by merchant diasporas who settled in the region, as well as the evolution of their enterprises from the pre-colonial period until more contemporary times, this study provides insights into the formation of new communities and identities. Other important matters noted include how a change in fashion, such as from rubies to jade, or the pursuit of scarce resources like timber had had a bearing on political and economic change in Southeast Asia. Through this method, most contributors note one fundamental issue
strongly present in the literature on Chinese business, i.e., the role of the
state, in China and in Southeast Asia, in either nurturing or hindering the
development of enterprises by this ethnic community.

What is unfortunately absent in this book is a concluding chapter, on what
has been learnt from this historical assessment of the trade and development
of these commodities. The study also does not use this substantial compilation
of historical facts to determine the usefulness of the concept of “Chinese
capitalism.”

In any appraisal of “Chinese capitalism,” as well as to understand how
Chinese communities in Southeast Asia have evolved, three issues require
thoughtful assessment: the role of the state; the structure and evolution of
networks, family firms, and ethnic-based institutions, including the kongsi
and clan associations; and, the effect of the emergence of new generations
and what this means for traditional modes of commodity production and
the sustainability of Chinese firms.

Anthony Reid, whose chapter opens this history, draws attention to
power hierarchies before the advent of colonial rule. Reid’s description
of authority structures by river chiefs reveals how power was dispersed
across the region, with Chinese traders linking up with those of influence
in these small territories to develop mutually beneficial ties in the mining
sector. The chapters by Adam McKeown, Carl Trocki, and Wen-Chin Chang
discuss the nature of the state under colonial rule, which had an enormous
bearing on patterns of trade, while the appearance of nation states and
mass Chinese—and Indian—migration to the region radically reshaped
how ethnic communities, including those in business, dealt with each other.
Chang describes how the colonial state influenced and shaped trading
patterns, while the implications of the emergence of the “strong state” is
noted by Trocki, who shows how a powerful government could take control
of key enterprises, including highly profitable opium farms that had long
been under Chinese control. Chang alludes to the need to draw a greater
distinction between state and society, arguing that more attention needs
to be drawn now to the latter. This is crucial as this book traces how new
communities and identities emerged in a relatively more peaceful manner in
a borderless pre-colonial period, while the colonial state and the subsequent
newly-independent governments persistently reinforced ethnic identities that
divided communities, with Chinese businesspeople, now citizens of these
countries, typified as exploiters of indigenous groups and natural resources.

Chinese contribution to the development of increasingly multi-ethnic
Southeast Asian economies is seen in chapters dealing with the structure and
role of institutions, networks and family firms. By historically evaluating the
variety of institutions created to facilitate trade of commodities, attention is
drawn to the growing heterogeneity of Chinese society. The flow of Chinese
into Southeast Asia in the colonial period involved people who were not traders
but had emerged as key players in the economy, marketing commodities on
a smaller scale, as family firms or as middlemen. The question of how the role of middlemen, a key issue in the literature, has evolved over time and if their importance has diminished is not discussed. This is unfortunate as the concept of middlemen runs through numerous chapters.

C.P. Giersch and Li Tana deal well with the role of institutions, though a thorough assessment of their significance in different historical epochs would have provided insights into the evolution of Chinese identity. Their conclusions would have helped discern how the nature of co-ethnic business networks changed over time and what this reveals of how this concept is employed theoretically. Assessments of how early traders specialized in trading a particular commodity as opposed to the diversified pattern of growth of family firms in colonial Southeast Asia would have disclosed much about problems in society, specifically the usually hostile relationship between non-elite Chinese and the state. In the present generation of family firms, a return to specialization has helped them cope better with competition, while new technologies have transformed what the contributors refer to as “circulation regimes.”

Eric Tagliacozzo’s discussion of generational change that distinguishes new generations from a sociological perspective is insightful as this had a bearing on the sustainability of Chinese firms and institutions, raising questions about the concepts of “Chineseness” and “Chinese capitalism.” This longue duree of commodity trade reveals a shared humanity and emergent identities and identifications. This is something that the governments in China and many Southeast Asian nations have overlooked or even suppressed, the reasons for which future research on Chinese communities in Asia should explore.

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This book is a collection of 13 chapters and an introduction by one of the editors. They are based on the papers presented to a Network of East Asian Think Tanks Working Group meeting in Singapore in May 2005. According to the editors, the goals of the Working Group were to “promote energy conservation and energy consumption efficiency, to share and learn from the experiences of the energy-efficient APT [ASEAN Plus Three] countries and to support an East Asian Community in the long run through regional energy cooperation” (v).

With these goals, the essays are divided into two sections. The first three