

## Chinese Business in Penang and Tenasserim (Burma) in the 1820s: A Glimpse from a Vietnamese Travelogue

Michael W. Charney \*

### Introduction

Our understanding of Southeast Asian history and regionalization, especially along the scholarly divide between the end of the early modern period and what followed, has been the subject of serious rethinking and revision in the last few years (Hamashita 1997; Charney 1999c; Lieberman 1999b; Subrahmanyam 1999; Tagliacozzo 1999; Liu 2000; Sun 2000). An important part of this rethinking has involved looking at how Southeast Asia fits into larger historical rhythms that transcend the old "Southeast Asia is a separate and special region" framework and has focused more attention on a new slate of historical data (information on previously illusive developments in domestic economies), arenas of interaction (contact zones), and on migrant groups whose behavior and spheres of activity cannot be easily understood in regionalization schemes such as, for example, the divide between East or South Asia, on the one hand, and Southeast Asia, on the other.

This article is concerned chiefly with making available additional data on the activities of one transregional migrant group, the Overseas Chinese, in one contact zone, Southeastern Burma. Although there has been a recent increase in scholarly interest in the role of Penang-based Chinese traders in the Southeastern Burma-China trade in the nineteenth century (Charney 1999a; Charney 1999b), little attention has been paid to these traders or this trade prior to the 1830s. This is partly due to the poorly documented activities of Chinese merchants involved in this trade, activities that formed an almost "invisible world" of merchant networks that crisscrossed the Rangoon-Tavoy-

---

\* Lecturer, History Department, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

❖ The author would like to thank U Saw Tun of Northern Illinois University for his help in checking my translation of the early nineteenth-century Burmese language document examined in this article. Gratitude is also owed for helpful comments and suggestions made by Liu Hong of the National University of Singapore and Atsuko Naono of the University of Michigan. Any errors remain my own responsibility.

Penang trade triangle. Reconstructing a picture of the trading activities in this triangle prior to the 1830s requires a closer look at Southeastern Burma's most important pre-rice trade commodity for the Chinese market, esculent birds nests, and identifying specific traders, especially the more mobile and connected Chinese merchants, involved in this trade. Fortunately, a Burmese-language document with new information on this trade for the early 1820s has emerged. One of several Burmese royal orders dated 25 April 1822 includes a contemporaneous Burmese translation of a Vietnamese oral account of the journey of an 1820-1821 mission dispatched by a court in Southern Vietnam. This journey is believed to have been made at the instigation of a certain local Vietnamese official whose name is rendered, in Burmese, "Ka-twei-lan" (my preferred usage here) and, in the western secondary literature, "Cao-danh-lam" (Pearn 1964, p. 149). The present translation and analysis is intended to make this document accessible to those not working in the Burmese language for research on the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the history of the Straits of Melaka, and scholars of Vietnam's interaction with other Southeast Asian countries. I will first identify the sponsor of the mission and the reasons for dispatching it. I will then provide a translation of the Burmese-language Vietnamese account. Finally, I will conclude with some comments on the importance of this account.

### I. The Sponsor and the Goals of the Mission

Ka-twei-lan's higher-ranking sponsor of this mission was difficult to identify due to significant differences in the few available accounts. I have tentatively identified him as the governor-general [*tong-tran*]<sup>1</sup> based in Gia-dinh in Southern Vietnam to Southeastern Burma. This requires some explanation and a brief survey of the relevant sources. From a comparison of these accounts, including a Vietnamese-language account made available in translation by Suzanne Karpeles (1959), I believe that the most accurate of the non-Burmese accounts is a reference to this mission that is included in John Crawfurd's record of a later mission to "Cochinchina." The information for this reference is apparently drawn from George Gibson, who was at that time the *shahbandar* [port officer] of Rangoon and member of the following Burmese return mission to Vietnam. This account (hereafter, the Gibson-Crawfurd account) refers to the sponsor of the mission on the one hand as "King of Kamboja," and, in other places, as the "King of Cochin China." In the mid-

---

1 D.G.E. Hall explains that Gia-dinh was the "administrative centre of the four provinces of Cochin China" and also served as the base for the *tong-tran* (imperial governor-general) (Hall 1966, p. 409). The governor-general at Gia-dinh in this particular case is identified elsewhere as Chao Kun (Pearn 1964, p. 149).

