
【Summary】**Medan–Penang–Phuket Connection in an Era of Nation-States:
Chinese Immigrants and Contemporary Politics in Southeast Asia**

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This paper reconsiders the development of post-colonial Southeast Asia from the viewpoint of Chinese immigrants who have moved back and forth across national boundaries around the former Straits Settlements and beyond. In a strict sense, the Straits Settlements consists of three territories under British rule, namely Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. However, its informal circle of influence was much wider, encompassing the adjacent Dutch and Siamese territories. This informal circle of influence of the Straits Settlements (hereafter, the “unofficial Straits world”) has been connected and activated by Chinese migration flows. Penang’s connection with Medan (north Sumatra) and Phuket (south Thailand) is a typical example. In Medan and Phuket, the late 19th century and the early 20th century saw the spread of mining and plantation businesses and secret societies along with the influx of migration of the Straits Chinese from Penang. Throughout the 20th century before and after decolonization, such migration flows were sustained so that individuals could circumvent persecution in one territory by seeking refuge in another. Even after the colonial period, this “unofficial Straits tradition” as a colonial legacy has been utilized in periodic political crises in postcolonial Malaysia and Indonesia as well as in Thailand. For example, repeated anti-Chinese movements at the times of turning points of political development in Indonesia (in the late 1950s, 1965, and 1998) have re-activated past experiences of cross-border networks of Chinese immigrants, connecting Penang and Phuket with Medan. The fact that they have crossed the Malacca Strait in search of a better business environment and education opportunity as well as safety means the cross-border migration in the era of nation-building takes various forms such as the relocation of a business base, studying abroad, internships, and marriage in addition to taking refuge. A question that arises from these findings is what these refugees’ “home” is; one’s birthplace, present parental residence, and ancestral homeland may not be the same. If the cross-border Chinese migration flow has been the connecting force of the territories within the “unofficial Straits world,” its unique nature lies in the diffused reflections of the very concept of “home” itself.