The junk trade from the southern Chinese ports

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The seasons of the junk trade

The oldest commercial link of Singapore was the link with China. Chinese junks had sailed to the ports of the Nanyang for centuries, as the first chapter of this part has shown. They began to call at the new British settlement soon after its founding. Their voyages followed the monsoons. Junks left the ports of Fujian and Guangdong with the north-east monsoon at the end of the year, arrived in Singapore early in the following year and returned with the south-west monsoon in the summer.[1] The arrival of the first junks of the season was one of the great events of the commercial year, awaited by merchants, shopkeepers and the families of emigrants.

The junk trade connected Singapore with the maritime provinces of southern China, from which most of its Chinese population came. Junks from Amoy in Fujian, from Canton and from the Teochew ports of eastern Guangdong each served their own communities in Singapore, which shared their dialect and their home districts. Hainanese junks formed a further group. The structure of the junk trade therefore reproduced the dialect divisions of the Chinese community, which the following chapter examines in more detail.[2]

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Cargoes and passengers

The junks brought the goods that the Chinese of the Nanyang wanted from home: tea, silk, porcelain and earthenware, medicines, paper, tobacco and a wide range of foodstuffs and household goods. On the return voyage they carried the produce of the Straits and the archipelago, British manufactured goods and even armaments to China.[3] Straits produce meant above all tin, pepper, rattan, sea cucumbers, birds' nests and other products of the forest and the sea, for which Chinese markets paid well.

The most valuable cargo was human. The junks brought merchants, craftsmen and labourers from China to Singapore, who relied on them to learn news of their homeland, send money to their families or return home.[4] Each season brought thousands of new arrivals, many of whom had borrowed the cost of their passage against their future wages. The junk trade thus fed the labour market of the port and of the plantations and tin mines of the hinterland. It also created the first flows of remittances from Singapore to China, a business that later grew into an important part of the city's financial sector.

The junk as a commercial enterprise

A junk was a commercial enterprise with its own organisation. Ownership was often shared among several investors, while the cargo space was divided among merchants who shipped goods on their own account. The captain and a supercargo managed the voyage, while members of the crew were frequently entitled to carry a small amount of cargo for their own trade.[5] This division of risk among many participants resembles the partnership structures of medieval European shipping. It allowed small capitals to take part in long-distance trade and spread the losses of shipwreck or piracy.

The junk also served as a channel for money and information. Letters, remittances and commercial news travelled with it. A merchant in Singapore who wanted to pay a supplier in Amoy, or a labourer who wanted to send savings to his village,

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entrusted money or goods to a person travelling on the junk. These informal remittance channels later became institutionalised in the remittance houses and the qiaopi networks, which the next chapter discusses.

The decline of the junk trade

The junk trade reached its peak in the early 1840s. The tonnage of junks arriving in Singapore reached 18,400 tons in 1841–1842 and fell sharply to 3,280 tons by 1865–1866.[6] The turning point was the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, which ended the First Opium War. The treaty opened several Chinese ports to foreign ships and allowed European vessels to trade directly with China, so that much of the business the junks had carried passed to square-rigged ships. Coastal piracy and the lower cost of European shipping accelerated the change.[7]

Wong Lin Ken's study of Singapore's entrepôt trade confirms the trend. His tables document the gradual displacement of Chinese junks and Bugis prahus by Western square-rigged vessels between 1830 and 1866, especially on the routes to China and Thailand.[8] The Chinese merchants of Singapore outlived their junks. They chartered European ships, bought vessels of their own and later invested in steamships. The change in the carrier left the commercial networks intact, which is one reason why Chinese firms retained their central role in the trade of the port.

Notes

1. On the timing of the junk voyages between the southern Chinese ports and Singapore, with arrivals from about January and departures in the summer, see Wong Lin Ken, "The Trade of Singapore, 1819–69", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1960. ↩
2. On the division of the junk trade by port of origin and dialect group, see Kua Bak Lim, "Chinese Junk Trade in Early Singapore", in Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim (eds), *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2019, chapter 2. ↩

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3. Kua Bak Lim, "Winds of trade: Chinese junks in early Singapore", *Culturepaedia* (Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre), 21 February 2024: exports to China included "Straits local produce, British manufactured goods, and armaments". ↩
4. Kua Bak Lim, "Winds of trade: Chinese junks in early Singapore", *Culturepaedia*, 21 February 2024: the junks brought "merchants, craftsmen, and labourers from China to Singapore", through whom migrants could "inquire about news from their homeland, send money to their families, or return home". ↩
5. On the organisation of the junk trade, including shared ownership, the division of cargo space among merchants and the private trade of crew members, see Jennifer Wayne Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993. ↩
6. Kua Bak Lim, "Winds of trade: Chinese junks in early Singapore", *Culturepaedia*, 21 February 2024: peak tonnage of 18,400 tons in 1841–1842, declining to 3,280 tons by 1865–1866. ↩
7. Kua Bak Lim, "Winds of trade: Chinese junks in early Singapore", *Culturepaedia*, 21 February 2024: European ships replaced junks after 1842 because of treaty provisions allowing foreign vessels direct access to Chinese ports, coastal piracy and cheaper European alternatives. ↩
8. Wong Lin Ken, "Singapore: Its Growth as an Entrepot Port, 1819–1941", text accessed through Cambridge Core, September 2026 (Table 5 on the displacement of junks and prahus by square-rigged vessels between 1830 and 1866). ↩

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