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The New Thalassology (A Conversation)

### **The Disappeared Nanyang (“South Seas”)**

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Abstract

How does one write a modern history of an Asian borderland that was intercoastal, intercolonial, and intercultural? Lying between the shores of China and Southeast Asia, the Nanyang, a Chinese word for “south seas,” had long been a contact zone, sometimes likened to the ancient Mediterranean. From the eighteenth century on, the Nanyang was re-energized by an off-shoring of mining and agriculture, a booming junk trade, and mass migrations. This “production turn” helped transform the Nanyang into a center of prized European colonies, a leading producer of rice, tin and rubber, the largest home to a fragmented Chinese diaspora, and the icon of an inter-Asian modern. Before vanishing in the late twentieth century, the Nanyang world had been an informal geography with no clear boundaries, where free movements were not only a norm but also a source of modern identity and power. Today, the Nanyang is often conflated with “Southeast Asia” or marginalized by national historiographies blind to their own landedness. Standard narratives about the overseas Chinese also tend to focus narrowly on Chineseness, native place ties, or relations with China, without fully utilizing a regional lens afforded by the Nanyang. A Nanyang-based modern history is well worth pursuing. Yet, with the picture described above so broad and limitless, where should one begin? My brief remarks will share an experience of living with this problem in a new book project, with hopes of hearing many responses and ideas from other participants.