ABSTRACT

The people of south Fujian, better known as “Hokkiens,” have a long seafaring tradition. Isolated on the remote southeastern periphery of China, they cast their eyes on the territories beyond the sea as early as the 10th century. Sporadic records suggest that Hokkien merchants were actively engaged in trading at emporia ranging from Korea in the north to Sumatra in the south. With the development of maritime trade, they started to sojourn overseas, and some of them even stayed abroad for a very long period. Hokkien merchants were known for their commercial acumen and ability to adapt to different environments abroad. Nevertheless, they still frequently relied on various institutional mechanisms to protect or advance their commercial interests. Invariably they were very creative in establishing business institutions and forming different ethnic networks. Apart from developing a wide spectrum of networks in their daily business practice, they showed various cultural characteristics that differentiated them from other Chinese merchants. As the most daring entrepreneurial group in early modern Asia, Hokkien merchants performed quite well in early maritime Asia. But as a marginal trade group, their status in overseas society was always subordinate despite their commercial success. This article examines the early Hokkien commercial activities in a number of the major port polities of Asia, with a focus on the Hokkien sojourning communities in Korea, Kyushu, Taiwan and Manila, and their unique networks and culture.