

**The Moral Economy of Trade:  
Ethnicity and Developing Markets**  
**Hans-Dieter Evers + Heiko Schrader (editors)**  
Routledge 1994

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1994 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

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The ostensible subject of *The Moral Economy of Trade* is the "trader's dilemma" — the difficulty of accumulating the capital and resources necessary for trading ventures when this contravenes the "moral economy of the poor" — and its significance for the existence of trading minorities throughout Southeast Asia. This is an exciting topic, and definitely one deserving of book length treatment. But while *The Moral Economy of Trade* is set out as a unified book, with a division into three sections, an integrated bibliography and numbered chapters, it clearly shows its origins as a collection of conference papers. Though all the papers (and they are papers rather than chapters) make at least nominal reference to the trader's dilemma, only the introductions to each of the section, the chapters authored or co-authored by the editors, and a few of the other papers are coordinated with the overall project. In other papers the references to the trader's dilemma are fairly obvious grafts, often quite unconnected to the principal subject material.

The papers are divided into three sections. The first deals with theoretical issues, the second contains an assortment of local (Southeast and South Asian) case studies, and the third looks at the at the broader perspective of the modern world-system. This is a pretty wide subject range, and the papers also vary dramatically in depth: Southwold-Llewellyn's study of traders in a Sri Lankan village goes into sufficient ethnographic detail to interest Sri Lankan area specialists, while Auansakul's brief paper on Chinese rice traders in Thailand contains nothing that is likely to be new to any Southeast Asianist. This combined with the absence of abstracts, makes life hard on potential readers; while students from a wide range of disciplines — economic sociology, Southeast Asian studies, development studies — will find worthwhile material in individual papers, it isn't going to be easy for them to find them. Another problem is that English is very

obviously not the native language of a couple of the authors, and more aggressive editing would not have gone amiss.

In summary, I feel that the material in *The Moral Economy of Trade* should either have been published as a straightforward set of conference proceedings (with abstracts) or ruthlessly pruned and worked over to produce a book with a real focus on the trader's dilemma. This is a book most people will be happy for their library to have a copy of.

November 1994

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