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BOOK REVIEW

Distant Shores. Colonial Encounters on China's Maritime Frontier

Melissa Macauley

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Recounting the life stories of a few natives of Chaozhou, a macroregion on China's southeast coast that incorporates parts of southern Zhejiang Province, Fujian Province, and eastern Guangdong Province, "an administrative prefecture and a local culture in which people shared a common dialect and repertoire of ritual, spiritual, and social practices" (p. 3), Melissa Macauley draws a picture of how "the rise of Chaozhou across the watery domain of overseas Chinese was one of the more remarkable social developments in the interconnected history of China and Southeast Asia" (p. 3). More precisely, she gives a well-documented and utterly compelling account of how the migration of Chaozhouese as labourers and merchants to Southeast Asia from the seventeenth century onwards has been conducive to the creation of transnational Chinese capitalism, and how the development both of this capitalism and of the social divide that comes along with it have reverberated throughout the whole of Chinese and Southeast Asian (Bangkok and Cambodia on the Gulf of Siam, West Borneo, Southern Malaysia, Singapore, and the Mekong delta of Vietnam) history. These developments, so she explains, are the natural outcome of the fact that maintained family ties and the establishment of "institutions that reinforced the cultural bond within expatriate communities and with their home villages" (p. 4) made the individual histories of the migrated Chinese part of a translocal whole in which not only people, but also capital, commodities, and ideas circulated.

Melissa Macauley excellently explains how the Chaozhouese expansion into Southeast Asia may, from a nineteenth-century European standpoint, appear to have some characteristics in common with the Western project of colonisation, but how it also differs importantly from the latter. Whereas the Western colonisers held the preponderant military and governmental power in their colonial domains, the Chinese left the state-building to others. "In Siam they loyally integrated themselves into the monarchical order. Elsewhere they let the Euro-Americans bear the burden of constructing colonial states while they continued to dominate the process of resource extraction and commerce in food, lumber, rubber, tin, gold, and other commodities" (p. 10). A further difference from the Euro-American colonial enterprise is that the Chinese state was rarely involved in the overseas Chinese economic activities. The Chinese did thus not rely on the state, but on such institutions as native place associations and partnerships, brotherhood societies, business networks, temples, and philanthropic organizations (p. 11). That the networks of Chinese expatriates throve in the absence of national or international institutions helps to explain why their mercantile activities were not affected by the political mêlée of the nineteenth century. It was only the "great depression" of the 1930s that had a significant impact on the flow of financial support from the overseas domains to Chaozhou (p. 273). By that time, however, the Chaozhouese had already invested larger parts of their capital in such modern enterprises as banking, real estate, manufacturing, and the film industry (p. 158).

A not unimportant part of Chaozhouese wealth was related to the opium trade. First introduced into Western China in the seventh century, opium "circulated as a commodity in the Ming system of tributary relations with Southeast Asia" (p. 69). That is to say that long before the British were present in Southeast Asia and were active in the opium trade, the drug had been given as a tributary gift to the Chinese emperors by the rulers of Java, Siam, and Bengal. Before the Qing war on drugs from 1838 to 1858, the importation of the drug was therefore technically legal under the official tribute system. It was a sharp increase in recreational opium use, however, that made the trade in this drug extremely lucrative. This helps to explain why opium was smuggled as contraband along the Chinese coast, and why in 1729 the Qing court was already inclined to outlaw the domestic sale of the drug. The expanding commerce with Southeast Asia and overseas travel of sailors, merchants, and labourers sabotaged this effort, however, and Chaozhou even emerged as a major site for the domestic cultivation of opium (p. 70), a skill Chaozhouese had learned on their overseas plantations (p. 73). An 1831 edict by the Daoguang emperor "commanding local officials to punish village headmen and lineage elders who participated in or turned a blind eye to its tillage in the prefecture" (p. 71) also proved ineffective, "and the cultivation of opium became a staple of the Chaozhou economy until 1949" (p. 71). Chinese merchants continued to dominate the opium trade along the eastern seaboard of China, "even as the British became more active in the opium trade of southeastern China" (p. 72).

Translocal brotherhoods that had been an important means of protection in the hostile atmosphere in which the opium traders were active also became important tools to channel anti-Qing feelings towards the end of the dynasty (p. 78), especially after Qing Commander Fang Yao's purge of the brotherhood-dominated villages of Chaozhou from 1869 to 1873 (p. 15). Chaozhou was in this sense profoundly affected by the Taiping movement, for it inspired a series of uprisings by sympathetic brotherhoods (pp. 91–92). For other Chaozhouese, anti-Qing feelings were the reason to align with Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance (p. 143).

As noted, Chaozhou history is a translocal history. With Chaozhouese emerging "among the commercial titans and laboring masses of Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century" (p. 85), Chaozhou's economy began to converge with the economies of the southeast Asian lands to which they migrated and which they had known since the Song and Yuan dynasties through commercial expeditions. It was, however, the expansion of the remunerative drug trade in China and around the globe that importantly explains the rise of maritime Chaozhou, a node in an emerging international trade system (p. 23). The huge profits made through trade (including the trade in opium) enabled the Chinese in Siam, e.g., to establish their own state. It is, however, this same Chinese wealth that also explains the later anti-Chinese stance of King Wachirawat in the early twentieth century (p. 148). Similarly, the wealth of Chinese citizens in Cambodia made them a target of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s (p. 154). This also testifies to the fact that, as Melissa Macauley states, "one cannot understand the full significance of an event that occurred in a village on the coast of China without considering its impact on a port city on the Malay Peninsula, over 2800 kilometers distant" (p. 5).

It is precisely herein, i.e., in the reality that "migrants may live a global life, but they do not experience it 'globally'. They encounter it in the quotidian world of the village, port, or colonial plantation," that "multiscopic analysis enables us to discern the human experience of global change and thereby determine how disparate local arenas are shaped by similar global processes" (p. 5). This concurs with what Wolf Schäfer formulated as follows: "Localism disregards global contexts focusing exclusively on local phenomena, while globalism fails to recognize local contexts, such as people's languages, life-worlds, and cultures".[1]

In a 2017 publication, Stephen Broadberry, Hanhui Guan, and David Daokui Li documented that Italy had already started to catch up with China before 1300, and that other European countries followed soon after. They thereby contradicted Kenneth Pomerantz's claim that European dominance over China started only in the late eighteenth century.[2] Melissa Macauley's excellent study of Chaozhou in a translocal world supplements our knowledge by documenting that European economic dominance on a global scale may have its roots in the fourteenth century, but that China's southeastern coastal areas show "not a divergence with European modernity, but a convergence in colonized sites that were critical to the industrial revolution and accelerating levels of capital accumulation" (p. 18). The region of the South China Sea was a Chinese sphere of commercial modernity, in which the Chinese applied legal and illegal tactics in their competition with Western imperialists: the British consulate in Swatow, e.g., "emerged as a transnational institution that reluctantly served the needs of Chinese who made most of their money in the colonies the Europeans built and maintained" (p. 187), and in the competition between British and Chinese groups that continued after the "Swatowmen refused to respect the stipulations of the unequal treaty system" (p. 170) the Chinese even employed British lawyers (pp. 173–174). The commercial and demographic expansion of Chaozhouese and Fujianese into Southeast Asia and Shanghai even "resembled the colonial aggrandizement of Great Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan" (p. 7).

In short: this compelling work not only provides a fresh look at the rationale behind the first Opium War, but also importantly deconstructs the rhetoric of the widely accepted fundamental divergence of Europe and China supposed to have developed starting in the eighteenth century. This well-investigated work rather invites us to see a convergence between Europe and maritime East and Southeast Asia starting in the Ming dynasty.

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[1] Schäfer, Wolf (2010). Reconfiguring Area Studies for the Global Age. *Globality Studies Journal. Global History, Society, Civilization* 22. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.691.9540&rep=rep1&type=pdf (last accessed 23 April 2022).

[2] Broadberry, Stephen, Hanhui Guan, and David Daokui Li (2017). *China, Europe and the Great Divergence: A study in historical national accounting, 980-1850.* Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History 155. University of Oxford.

Pomerantz, Kenneth (2000). *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.