

sources at the heart of *Frontiers of Possession* can present some ways for future legal historians to further recover the multilogues that animated the frontier struggles of the Iberian imperial systems.

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Mark McNicholas, *Forgery and Impersonation in Imperial China: Popular Deceptions and the High Qing State*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. Pp. 280. \$50.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0295995090). doi:10.1017/S0738248017000128

Mark McNicholas's study of confidence men and fraudsters constitutes a valuable addition to the burgeoning scholarship on law and society in China during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). It is based primarily on memorials reporting major criminal cases to the imperial center, which are held at the First Historical Archive in Beijing and at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.

Chapters 1–2 focus on cases of political impersonation during the Kangxi and Yongzheng reigns that had grave implications for the throne because they reflected actual power struggles within the imperial court. One implication is that rumors, and even accurate knowledge about such struggles, were surprisingly widespread among the people. These masquerades appear politically ambitious and they were certainly dangerous—many being punished with death by dismemberment—but the motives of the individuals involved seem opaque, unlike the more run-of-the-mill con men (they are all men) treated in other chapters. At any rate, the frequency of such cases (never very great) appears to have declined later in the eighteenth century, once politics at the imperial center had stabilized.

Chapters 3–4 concern less dramatic cases of individuals who attempted to impersonate lower-ranking officials or yamen runners. Widely circulated bulletins announced new official appointments, and a canny fraudster with access to this information could impersonate an appointee en route to his post; the boldest might even assume office in his place. Less ambitious schemes involved posing as runners, to extort money from individuals supposedly subject to arrest. These cases call to mind the typical con artists found in other societies, who are motivated by a desire for money, and for a measure of power and prestige otherwise unavailable to them, as well as the sheer thrill of getting away with it. The notorious Frank Abagnale (of *Catch Me If You Can*) comes to mind.

McNicholas's portrayal of yamen runners—based on the cases in which con artists impersonated them—reflects and reinforces the stereotype of these indispensable government staff as incorrigibly rapacious and corrupt. Bradley Reed has argued, in his landmark *Talons and Teeth: County Clerks and Runners in the Qing Dynasty* (Stanford University Press, 2000), that this stereotype was a discursive construct that served the interests of degree-holding officials and other elites, who used it to distance themselves from the practical dirty work of governing. In that light, it might have been interesting for McNicholas to interrogate more closely the manner in which runners were impersonated and the assumptions behind such impersonation. Did it depend on ordinary people believing the stereotype? Was this an example of a “feedback loop” between a stereotype and actual criminal practice?

Chapter 5 concerns the mechanics of fraud: specifically the knowledge and materials necessary for forging documents and official seals. A striking feature of these illicit activities is that they all, in one way or another, involved the appropriation of official credentials and authority by unauthorized persons. (This may be a distinctively Qing variation of the more widespread phenomenon of confidence schemes.) The literacy and technical knowledge required for such schemes created a field of illicit opportunity for lumpen literati who were frustrated by failure at valid occupations. Still, one is struck by how quickly many of these fraudsters were caught, because their forgeries were so incompetently executed, although McNicholas does recount at least one case of a forger who carried on for years with impunity.

Chapter 6 is a case study of how the imperial state's sale of official ranks and titles lent itself to fraud. The system permitted proxies to do the actual delivery of funds and credentials on behalf of applicants, which created the opportunity for swindles: McNicholas recounts various scenarios in which proxies provided forged documents while pocketing the money that had been entrusted to them. One implication is that by creating a huge market for official credentials, and undermining their value in the process, the imperial state itself fostered this kind of fraud. Did not the sale of credentials itself resemble a form of state-sponsored impersonation?

The book's final chapter provides a useful (if somewhat dry) overview of forgery and impersonation in imperial law, with main emphasis on the Qing code. It argues that this particular chapter of the code became increasingly political over time, focusing on direct usurpations of imperial prerogative, whereas more mundane frauds of a purely economic nature were relegated to other sections of the code.

Given that the con artist is a universal type—and that a certain pathology underlies the more obviously rational motives for such behavior—I find myself wondering how much McNicholas's fascinating cases can really say that is specific to Chinese society in the High Qing, as opposed to what is

conventionally called “human nature.” Nevertheless, his book should prove of interest to scholars working on a wide range of topics.

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Gautham Rao, *National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 272, xii. \$45.00 hardcover (ISBN 9780226367071); \$45.00 e-book (ISBN: 9780226367101).

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British Commissioner of Customs Henry Hulton recalled that prior to the Revolutionary War, “[T]here was scarce a port in America where an Officer had endeavoured to make a Seizure, or refused a compliance with the will of the People that he had not been tarred, & feathered” (19–21). Fast forward to 1797, when, in spite of Alexander Hamilton’s admonishments to enforce customs bonds against merchants with “exact punctuality,” the Charleston custom house had accumulated \$580,000 in unpaid bonds, a mess that would take decades to sort out (88–89). Fast forward again to 1804 and 1805, when United States merchants expanded their trade with freed people in the newly independent Haiti, flagrantly avoiding custom house authority and violating United States policy in antagonizing France; or again to 1808, when James McCulloh, Collector of the Customs in Baltimore, was on the docks frenetically pushing merchant ships out to sea before Thomas Jefferson’s embargo could be announced.

Gautham Rao’s colorful history of custom houses in the early republic is a welcome addition to a venerable body of historical scholarship examining the making of the United States as a nation state through the lens of specific state agencies. Custom houses were crucial to state-making because they were responsible for collecting the vast majority of federal government revenue. Customs revenue was the linchpin of Hamilton’s plan for the public credit and remained the basis for federal finance through the Civil War. However, Rao’s emphasis is not so much on national policy but on the delicate balance custom house officials achieved in implementing policy while appeasing skeptical and powerful merchants. Rao concludes that, prior to 1816, custom houses held, at best, a “negotiated authority;” that is, authority negotiated heavily with local merchants where the merchants often appear to have an upper hand. At times in the account, the “state” seems to be simply hanging by the coat-tails of the merchants, happy with whatever breadcrumbs they