

# Reviews

## Merchants of Canton and Macao: politics and strategies in eighteenth-century Chinese trade

By Paul A. Van Dyke. *Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Pp. xxxii+545. Hardback US\$ 80.00/£55.00, ISBN 978-988-8028-91-7.*

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doi:10.1017/S1740022813000260

Paul A. Van Dyke's *Merchants of Canton and Macao* is an invaluable reconstruction of maritime trading and commercial practices in eighteenth-century China. We are informed that its genesis stems from research done for *The Canton trade* (2005) and that a third, as yet untitled, manuscript is being written that will 'present more of the Canton merchants' stories in an effort to learn more about the trade' (p. 225). Van Dyke's dense and detailed trilogy has done much and, hopefully, will do still more to advance our understanding of China's maritime trade and commerce in the eighteenth century.

I should mention two caveats at the beginning of this review. First, during the write-up of the book's manuscript, author and reviewer discussed the work and I read and commented on some of his early chapters. Second, some of my recent research partially overlaps and contrasts slightly with Van Dyke's by emphasizing and integrating private Portuguese merchants with all other company and private European, American, and Asian merchants' activities in the rise and advancement of China's international trade and commerce in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We share, for example, an interest in the human agency of merchants and the importance of maritime trade in both the internal and the external development of China's economy and its integration into an emerging global economy.

Van Dyke's study focuses on Chinese merchants of Canton and Macao and rectifies historical misunderstandings concerning their organization and participation as individuals, partners, and groups in the political economy of maritime trade and their role in developing and expanding China's economy in the mid to late Qing period. His impressive (re-)examination of Chinese merchant activity is successful in large part on account of his handling and incorporation of diverse research materials found in multiple archives on three continents. Van Dyke provides a comprehensive examination of 'these men' who were at the centre of great changes in world commerce', which, as he correctly opines, is 'pivotal in understanding how and why these changes took place' (p. xiii). Furthermore, he has made an important contribution and inroads towards expanding and rectifying a previously 'incomplete picture' (p. xx) concerning China's foreign trade. This is no small or mean achievement, although the author generously and only partially categorizes his contribution as a clarification or improvement of our scholarly focus on this issue.

Based on the materials and framework that he employs and the issue that he examines, Van Dyke logically situates his study chronologically in the eighteenth century. He is clear as to why his study extends to 1806, when a majority of the European-chartered East India Companies (Flemish, Danish, French, and Swedish) had ceased their trading activities with China (see pp. xiii–xiv). Regrettably, he is not as clear as to why he initiates it at the beginning of the eighteenth century, since it erroneously gives the impression that China's foreign – regional, intra-regional, and global – maritime trade in the early modern period began at that time. The reader is left to surmise that the author chose to begin his study in the eighteenth century based upon the evidence that there was an increase in the frequency and regularity of commercial contacts and exchanges between Europeans (companies in

particular, but also private merchants) and China that was established at the beginning of the eighteenth century and both remained unbroken and intensified over the course of the century.

There are also a number of surprises in the length and organization of *Merchants of Canton and Macao*. It is 672 pages in total, including preface and acknowledgments (33), unnumbered pages of plates (96), appendices (206), and critical apparatus (notes, bibliography, and index; 112). I was pleasantly surprised, in particular, by the number and quality of the plates, the extensive detail in the appendices, and a very nearly complete bibliography. Both the author and the publisher are to be commended for preparing and permitting the reproduction of such a quantity of pages. It is unlikely that most readers could have imagined that the document trail for this type of study was so rich and detailed!

There are, however, only 225 pages of text and analysis, which seems barely adequate for the quantity and detail of material that the author introduces. It is presented in a straightforward manner and organized into introduction, thirteen chapters, and conclusion. The introduction and first four chapters introduce and frame the study. The subsequent nine chapters provide detailed individual case studies for a number of merchants and their families that span the period from 1716 to 1804; these chapters succeed in elucidating 'the life behind the business of the merchants' (p. 185).

While a major accomplishment, Van Dyke's study has some minor weaknesses. The most glaring is the author's rare occasional failure to provide sufficient data to document adequately or develop a statement or position. China's foreign maritime trade over the eighteenth century, for example, is repeatedly stated and depicted as growing and expanding, seemingly perpetually, unhindered and without demonstrating recessionary behaviour. I am inclined to agree with his characterization of the expansion of the Middle Kingdom's internal and external economies during the first sixty-odd years of a period that has been characterized as the Chinese century (1740–1840). However, the reader probably needed more evidence of the growth of China's maritime trade and its crucial participation in the emerging global economy to be convinced. An analysis and comparison of some of Van Dyke's China trade with De Vries's recent essays (2003 and 2010) concerning European Cape-route trade (1497–1795), which are not in his bibliography, would have been useful.

Another weakness is that, while they are mentioned in notes, there is no glossary summarizing the multitude of weights, measures, monies, and exchange rates that were employed. Its absence complicates the interested reader's comprehension of these terms and details.

Despite my minor quibbles, Paul A. Van Dyke has uniquely brought to life the strategies, dynamics, and mechanics of merchant practices and behaviour in late imperial China in a truly inspiring, intelligible, and profitable way. *Merchants of Canton and Macao* makes a major contribution to the historiography and our comprehension of early modern China's entrepreneurs and the role that maritime activities played in China's economic development.

### Religion and the making of modern East Asia

*By Thomas David DuBois. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xii+259. 27 b/w illustrations, 7 maps, 5 tables. Hardback £55.00, ISBN 978-1-107-00809-0; paperback £17.99, ISBN 978-1-107-40040-5.*

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doi:10.1017/S1740022813000272

This is a very enjoyable book telling the parallel stories of religion in the political histories of China and Japan from the fourteenth century to the present. DuBois is a very gifted writer, with a talent for telling the twists and turns of history with wry humour. Hopefully the book will be successful in reaching audiences among those who have no professional stake in better understanding China and Japan, but who would nonetheless much benefit from such understanding. The format is light, with 230 pages of text, few footnotes, and a good number of very useful illustrations; yet the author takes care patiently and pedagogically to remind the reader what such terms as Buddhism or Marxism mean. This is a book to recommend warmly to anyone interested in history in general.

DuBois, who is primarily a historian of twentieth-century China but also knows Japan first-hand, has chosen not to write a regional history (which would have included Korea, and other places) but a comparative history showing the parallels and differences between the two countries. This is a