

Book Reviews

Asia

China on the sea: How the maritime world shaped modern China

By ZHENG YANGWEN

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The author's premise in this book is that the historiography of China, especially during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), has been dominated by two related assumptions: that China has been isolated from the rest of the world, partly by geography, partly by cultural preference; and that China's history can best be described by focusing on the interaction between the Chinese and the peoples living on China's northern and western frontiers. These assumptions have strong points in their favour: two of China's last three dynasties, the Yuan (1260–1367) and the Qing, were formed by invaders from the north, and China placed rigid restrictions on the freedom of Westerners to enter and travel within China.

Zheng Yangwen's counter-argument is that China's frontiers which face the sea deserve at least equal attention as factors shaping China's historical development. Historians of Southeast Asia have paid considerable attention to periods when Chinese rulers implemented more liberal policies. During the mid-ninth through the mid-fourteenth centuries, China exported large quantities of metal objects, ceramics, and silk by ship in return for two hundred types of products from the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Tang Chinese rulers allowed maritime commerce despite philosophical objections from bureaucrats due to the desire of nobles and Buddhists for foreign goods. These were brought by foreign merchants who lived in circumscribed areas in a few specially designated Chinese ports. The Tang justified this trade by a formula under which foreigners were admitted under guise of presenting tribute to the Son of Heaven, for which the Chinese reciprocated by giving tokens of political recognition, but by the late Song dynasty this was replaced by commercial alliances between Chinese noble families and traders.

During the thirteenth century the Chinese began to build their own ships rather than relying on foreigners. Historians have generated an extensive body of data and theories regarding the effects of this relationship on Southeast Asia. Little archaeological or historical research has been conducted regarding the effects of this commercial activity on China's society.

In the late fourteenth century the newly installed Ming dynasty reinstated ancient prohibitions against foreign trade. This attitude may well have been exacerbated by the fact that the first Ming emperor was attacked from the sea no fewer than 23 times by his rivals (Zheng, p. 50). China became almost completely isolated from the rest of the world. In the late sixteenth century Chinese rulers grudgingly began

to allow European traders to live in some ports, but restrictions on foreigners continued until the infamous Opium Wars of the early 1800s.

One of the book's principal strengths, and source of its original contributions to the historiography of China, is its prolific use of Chinese-language primary sources. In addition to archival sources, the author adduces quotes from works by Chinese poets and novelists which provide a new perspective on the cultural changes of which the Chinese themselves were quite aware, connected with the advent of foreign commodities and consumer items rather than foreigners. These include such genres as *zhuzhici* or folk verses dedicated to local cultures, and poems on imported items such as bicycles, which are not often used as historical sources, but are 'extremely valuable' for the light they shed on local perceptions (p. 240). The book contains many references to contemporary Chinese scholarship which will be very useful both for historians literate in Chinese and for those who want to know how Chinese historians are framing Chinese history.

The book utilises sources only recently made available by the Number One History Archive and Palace Museum. Other important repositories, e.g. the Tribute Archive and Exhibition Archive, remain closed. This volume utilised images from the John Rylands Library, but further information is needed to place them in context. For example, on p. 66, a depiction of a 'Canton Customs Inspection' is presented without explanation of its significance. When was the image made? By whom? What is the significance of the design and decoration of the boat?

Several books have recently been written about the growth of consumer culture in China during the Qing period. The core chapters of this book continue this study. Chapter 4 describes how and why clocks became popular, nicely augmented by a discussion of how palace life as depicted in the classic *Dream of the red chamber* was regulated by the clock, and by advertisements for clocks and watches in Qing newspapers. Chapter 6 deals with the shift in imports from exotic luxuries to mass consumer commodities and the social life of foreign goods among ordinary consumers. Another chapter deals with the 'indigenisation' of four categories of foreign goods in the Qing (textiles, food and drink, architecture, and transport).

This book is relevant to a number of questions which may be raised regarding modern China. Will the Chinese elite eventually make it easier for the masses to own things which the elite now considers status symbols and therefore wishes to restrict access to? This book attributes much of the motivation for increased foreign imports to population growth in China, as well as social transformation. Why did Chinese industry not keep up with the number of domestic consumers? Why has it taken so long for socioeconomic change to take place? Will China eventually raise wages sufficiently to create a vibrant domestic market, making the economy less reliant on exports? These are questions which historical works such as this one can help to clarify. Social and economic historians, as well as those with a general interest in any aspect of society in Qing China, will profit from reading this book.

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