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Book Reviews

Unruly People: Crime, Community, and State in Late Imperial South China. By Robert J Antony. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016. 308 pp. $65.00, £50.00 (cloth).

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Robert Antony's new history of the mobile underclass in the highly commercialized society of Guangdong during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resonates with recent interest, especially among scholars of contemporary labor migration, in the notion of precarity.[1] Engaged in a seemingly daily struggle for survival, the unruly people at the heart of this study are the "laboring poor" who turned to banditry and formed brotherhoods, and thereby comprised the "underside of Guangdong society" (258–59). Based upon a daunting amount of archival research, largely using palace memorials and routine memorials, Antony traces the spread of banditry and brotherhoods, as well as countermeasures taken by local communities and the Qing state, between 1760 and 1845. With its focus on predacious crimes carried out on land and on the inland waterways in Guangdong, this book will be read most profitably as a companion volume to the author's previous study of precarity and piracy on southern China's maritime frontier, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2003).

Unruly People is made up of thirteen chapters (including an introduction and a conclusion) organized into three thematic sections. Following an introduction and a background chapter, the first section, "Preventive Measures and Protective Strategies," surveys the dissemination of Qing law, the administrative reach of the state, and the self-defense efforts of local communities in Guangdong. Drawing on his previous work on subcounty officials,[2] the author shows that this level of government steadily expanded during the first century of Qing rule in Guangdong, but then leveled off in the early 1760s, the point from which Antony sees an increase in social disorder (58). Two important themes are that the state apparatus of subcounty officials was concentrated in the most

[1]For example, Carl-Ulrik Schierup, Ronaldo Munck, Branka Likić-Brborić, and Anders Neergaard, eds., *Migration, Precarity, and Global Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for Labour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Precarity was a major theme explored at the conference "The Migration Industry: Facilitators and Brokerage in Asia" at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, June 1–2, 2017.

[2]Antony, "Subcounty Officials, the State, and Local Communities in Guangdong Province, 1644–1860," in *Dragons, Tigers, and Dogs: Qing Crisis Management and the Boundaries of State Power in Late Imperial China,* edited by Robert J. Antony and Jane Kate Leonard (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2002), 27–59.

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heavily populated and most highly commercialized parts of the province, particularly the Pearl River delta, and that the men tasked with preventing and reporting crime—night watchmen, constables, runners, and soldiers—came from essentially the same socioeconomic backgrounds as bandits (96, 101).

The second section, "Crimes, Criminals, and Community," focuses on bandits, brotherhoods, and secret societies, the social background of the people who joined them, the crimes that they committed, and the networks of accomplices who harbored them and fenced their stolen goods. Many of the findings in this section echo the author's earlier work on pirates. For example, we learn that, like pirates, most bandits were occasional bandits who turned to crime as a supplemental form of income, often on a seasonal basis (118; *Froth*, 82, 94–96). Similarly, as with pirates, the bandits studied in this volume relied on accomplices of similar social background who fed a shadow economy parallel to and interwoven with the mainstream market economy (181; *Froth*, 129ff). Finally, as with the men who became pirates, poverty and mobility were two important characteristics shared by a majority of the men who became bandits and joined brotherhoods (137; *Froth*, 82–85). Antony emphasizes the connection between brotherhoods and banditry (162), although the close correlation, in archival sources, between the two might be attributed to brotherhoods most likely coming to the attention of the state when their members committed banditry. In the third section, "State and Local Law Enforcement," one finds a great deal of useful information on the reporting, investigation, prosecution, and punishment of predacious crimes. Antony takes the proliferation of substatutes targeting banditry in Guangdong during the period under study as evidence that the Qing state was losing its "coercive capacity" to maintain social control (260).

For this reader, some of the most interesting and challenging questions in this study are raised by the author's discussion, based on an impressive dataset of 2,300 criminal cases from the archives, of the social backgrounds of the laboring poor who became bandits and joined brotherhoods. For instance, the author asserts that most convicted bandits came from "broken homes," which he defines as "families in which one or both parents were deceased or if alive the families were dysfunctional" (128). He adds that the mean age of offenders was 32.6 *sui*. As a representative example, the author describes a man convicted in 1802 for robbery: thirty-six, father deceased, mother and three younger brothers alive (135). But one wonders whether or not such circumstances make the backgrounds of convicted bandits unique. In Beijing between 1740 and 1839, a place and period roughly comparable to the main city (Guangzhou) and period that Antony studies, male life expectancy at age twenty was 29.5.[3] Assuming that a father's age at the birth of his first child was twenty-five, we might then conclude that it would not be at all unusual for the father of a 32.6-*sui* son to be deceased. In other words, as the author defines it, we should expect that a 32.6-*sui* man would have belonged to a "broken home." Thus, even if the author has given us a "broadly accurate picture of family composition of convicted bandits" (129), we cannot be certain that this is not also a broadly accurate picture of men who were not convicted of banditry.

[3]James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 54, table 4.1.

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Antony also musters data on the occupational backgrounds of bandits and brotherhood members. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he finds that gentry rarely appear in the case records. Yet gentry, at least defined as holders of at least lower-level civil or military service degrees, formed a tiny minority of the overall population. In his classic study of the Chinese gentry, Chang Chung-li estimates that gentry accounted for 1.8% of Guangdong's population before the Taiping Rebellion, which corresponds to the period that Antony studies.[4] Antony's data on the occupational backgrounds of 825 men convicted of banditry contain only four degree holders. At 0.48%, gentry do appear to be underrepresented in this category. In data on 91 convicted brotherhood members, however, we find six degree holders, or 6.6% (144, table 7.2). In this category, then, the degree-holding (including "defrocked scholars") gentry appear to be overrepresented. Similarly, the author asserts that "the poor were easily the most mobile sector of the population" (140). We could be more certain of this assertion if we could measure it. As the author notes, few peasants appear in his case records. Could there not be a large number of poor peasants who were relatively immobile, and hence less likely to commit banditry or less likely to be targeted by the state? Likewise, how do we know that middling or upper classes, or at least middling and upper class men, were not as mobile as the laboring poor who appear in these case records? My sense is that high rates of male mobility were common across the socioeconomic spectrum, if not the occupational spectrum, in the highly commercialized Pearl River delta. Moreover, in her study of opium suppression in nineteenth-century China, Melissa Macauley suggests that the people convicted of opium-related crimes also tended to be relatively poor and highly mobile. Rather than concluding that poverty and mobility characterized the perpetrators of such crimes, however, Macauley asserts only that these were the types of people that the state targeted for prosecution.[5] Although less-mobile locals may have been involved in opium-related crimes, and whereas wealthy Guangdong merchants certainly organized and profited from smuggling operations, they were less commonly and/or less effectively prosecuted. It is conceivable, then, that powerful people in "respectable society" were involved in banditry but had more resources for evading the law, a possibility that Antony recognizes (176).

Throughout this compelling study, Antony addresses the question of the relationship between the social, economic, and cultural world that bandits and brotherhood members inhabited, on one hand, and what he calls "respectable society," on the other. The author is certainly not alone in grappling with this immensely complicated issue. Antony frames his book as a study of one of two Guangdongs; not the familiar Guangdong of wealthy maritime merchants and powerful corporate lineages, but rather the "seedy and menacing" Guangdong of the laboring poor (257). What was the relationship between these two Guangdongs? Reflecting the difficulty in answering this question, Antony asserts that the laboring poor who became bandits and formed brotherhoods were both closely linked to and vastly separated from mainstream society: "Bandits and brotherhoods, indeed, were intrinsic components of the local social fabric; they relied on a vast covert network of spies, fences, yamen underlings, soldiers, commoners, and

[4]Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 114.

[5]Macauley, "Opium, Migrants, and the War on Drugs in China, 1819–1860," *Late Imperial China* 30.1 (June 2009), 2, 14–15, 31.

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local gentry for support. Bandits also were part of a vast underground culture of violence and vice that rejected the dominant Confucian values upheld by officials and so-called respectable society" (12). When discussing networks of accomplices and analyzing the shared social backgrounds of bandits and those assigned to suppress banditry, Antony emphasizes connections between bandits and local communities, if not socioeconomic elites. Elsewhere, Antony depicts "the poor and dispossessed members of society" as having been "denied access to legitimate, respected organizations, such as lineages and guilds" (125, also 259). But were occasional bandits, the majority in the author's sample, denied access to lineages, for example? Extant sources might not suffice to answer this question. Yet, in his recent study of the nineteenth-century opium trade on the Fujian coast, Peter Thilly emphasizes the role of powerful lineages in orchestrating the illicit trade.[6] In Thilly's case, we can easily imagine that wealthy, middling, and poor lineage members alike contributed, though in different ways, to this criminal enterprise. Similarly, although Antony provides some lively examples of bandits on the run—including a man from Dapu in northeastern Guangdong who was later apprehended in Hainan (170)—if most bandits were occasional bandits, as Antony convincingly demonstrates, then one wonders to what extent it was true that most bandits "had to sever their connections with their home communities and natal families" (181).

Antony paints a portrait of increasingly pervasive social disorder in Guangdong province between 1760 and 1845. For example, he uses three memorials from 1764, 1770, and 1788 to document a growing backlog of pending cases of larceny (252); he also points to twelve substatutes created between 1780 and 1845 dealing specifically with banditry and brotherhood activities in Guangdong and neighboring provinces (193). Intriguingly, it appears that the Qing state in Guangdong turned from expanding its subcounty administrative apparatus before 1763 to expanding the legal code after 1780. Was this shift from enforcement to legislation a cause or symptom of declining state capacity? And if social disorder was on the rise in Guangdong, was the province unique in this regard? Antony asserts that, based on his ongoing archival research, between 1760 and 1845 Guangdong indeed "had more recorded incidents of banditry than any other province" (324). It would be interesting to know to what extent other provinces exhibited a stagnation in subcounty administrative expansion followed by increasing social disorder.

This richly documented study draws attention to precarity not only in the daily lives of Guangdong's laboring poor in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but also in the conclusions that all social historians must make from their sources. The information that we retrieve from archival sources might shed light on the criminals and victims who appear in such documents. In the absence of other kinds of sources by which to calibrate this information, however, we are left to ponder the extent to which generalizations can be made. Does the social background of the average convicted bandit reconstructed from such sources reveal something about only convicted bandits, about the laboring poor more broadly, or about the vast majority of Qing subjects beneath the thin layer of elites? The answers that historians propose may be precarious, but they enrich our understanding nonetheless.

[6]Thilly, "Opium and the Origins of Treason in Modern China: The View from Fujian," *Late Imperial China* 38.1 (June 2017), 159–62, 168–70.

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