

## Miscellany of the South Seas: A Chinese Scholar's Chronicle of Shipwreck and Travel through 1830s Vietnam

By Cai Tinglan. Translated with Introduction by Kathlene Baldanza and Zhao Lu. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023. 177 pp. \$105 (cloth) \$32 (paper)

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Cai Tinglan's journey into the annals of history began quite by accident. On November 21, 1835, while he was sailing home to the Penghu Islands after taking the provincial-level examination in Fuzhou, a typhoon struck and damaged his ship. The vessel drifted along the South China Sea for a week until it landed off the coast of the Quang Ngai province of Nguyen, Vietnam. A Vietnamese naval patrol spotted the hapless castaways and, reassured that they were neither pirates nor opium smugglers, directed them to civil authorities on land. These officials compelled Cai to take a "mock civil service examination" to determine the validity of his claims to *shengyuan* degree status. Once established, his scholarly bona fides gained him entrée to elite political circles throughout his sojourn across Vietnam. His status as a son of southern Fujian ensured that his fellow Hokkienese financially and emotionally supported him in his quest to return home by land. After arriving back home by June of 1836, the ambitious young scholar decided to publish a record of his overseas adventures, and the result was this miscellany, *Hainan zazhu* 海南雜著, which first appeared in print in 1837.

References to the miscellany are scattered across a range of scholarly works on Chinese international history. In Matthew Mosca's study of the transformation of the Qing geopolitical "information order," for example, we find Cai admiring the astronomical expertise of Ding Gongchen in Guangdong in 1836. In Jinming Li's more recent analysis of China's maritime geography, we encounter Vietnamese fisher folk marveling that Cai and his fellow travelers had survived the treacherous waters off Quang Ngai, speculating that "he must have been protected by gods, otherwise he never would have survived!" The work also appears in a host of bibliographies in books on the larger history of the South China Sea region, attesting to its scholarly influence.<sup>1</sup> Does the field need a translation of this source? Is it worthy of enjoying a wider, more popular readership? This reader answers these questions with a resounding "Yes!"

This excellent translation by Kathlene Baldanza and Zhao Lu is simultaneously a pedagogical tool and a work of scholarship that contributes to our understanding of the historical connections between East Asia and Southeast Asia, specifically China and Vietnam. The book is highly recommended for undergraduate classroom use. It

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 214; Jinming Li, *China's Maritime Boundaries in the South China Sea: Historical and International Law Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 63. Among many bibliographical references, see Steven Miles, *Upriver Journeys: Diaspora and Empire in Southern China, 1570–1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017), 310.

includes an extended introduction that offers lucidly written and succinct accounts of Cai's life; the textual history of *Hainan zazhu*; the challenges of sailing along the tempestuous South China Sea; the overseas Chinese experience in Vietnam, in particular the experiences of the Ming loyalists who had settled as refugees in the realm; the political history of the Nguyen dynasty, then in its fourth decade; and Vietnamese social history. The introduction thus offers the reader the contextual background necessary to assess the translated primary source. The translators also offer references for further scholarly reading on all of these topics. At a time when the costs of higher education are increasing and daunting, the Departments of History and Asian Studies as well as the Library at Penn State University should be commended for making this book available as an open access publication (<https://uw.manifoldapp.org/projects/miscellany-of-the-south-seas>).

Beyond the contribution of the introduction, the translated miscellany itself is full of useful information on these subjects. The first section, Cai's terrifying account of the violent storm and its aftermath, is riveting and attests both to his own narrative abilities and to the translators' skill in presenting it to an English-speaking audience. The next section, titled a "Travelogue of the Fiery Wasteland," is a somewhat repetitive record of places passed and people met. Most intriguing in these accounts is the way Cai and Vietnamese officials communicated directly through "brush writing," making use of commonly used Chinese characters to exchange information and write poetry in celebration of their encounters. As the translators note, these "brush conversations" reflect what Alexander Woodside once described as an "international Confucian commonwealth" of intellectual elites across East and Southeast Asia (p. 27).<sup>2</sup> The travelogue is also significant for demonstrating the extent to which Cai relied on people from Fujian (and elsewhere in China) for material support and occasional translation services. Significantly, however, some of these sojourning merchants were fluent only in the "common street language" of Vietnam and unable to contend with the more literary language of Vietnamese officialdom (pp. 30, 71). In spite of his many struggles, it is clear that Cai journeyed comfortably in the two worlds of scholarly fellowship and Chinese commercial transnationalism.

The third section, "Vietnam Chronicle," is perhaps the most historically useful. The translators observe that the accounts of Vietnamese political history were entirely from a Chinese perspective and probably derived from existing Chinese historical sources. After a few initial pages, however, Cai begins to recount information conveyed to him by Vietnamese people, as well as his personal observations concerning aspects of Vietnamese society. Here the reader is treated to colorful and informative summaries of life in early nineteenth-century Vietnam: the strict prohibition against the sale and use of opium; the absence of brothels; the workings of the criminal justice system; the ways in which villagers resolved their disputes; the threat of tigers (and the way elephant herds were used to crush them); marriage practices; the domination of Chinese in the fields of medicine, divining, and mathematics; and so on. Here Cai offers interesting reflections on the similarities and differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cultural practices at the elite and popular levels. From this account, at least, one senses that official, intellectual, and commercial culture appeared to have been far more heavily influenced by the Chinese than popular social practices were.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1988), preface, n.p.

In their introduction, Baldanza and Zhao rightly assert that Chinese trade in Vietnam benefited the realm and that the Nguyen dynasty fully participated in the interrelated commerce of the South China Sea and retained control of the economy in the 1830s. For these reasons, the economic dynamic between the two peoples should not be construed as the sort of quasi-colonial territorialism one sees elsewhere in Southeast Asia (p. 25).<sup>3</sup> In Cai's miscellany, one certainly does not see, for example, the militarized, Chinese *gongsi* settlements of a place like West Borneo or the Malay Peninsula in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in these and other regions where Chinese people eventually achieved economic dominance over some economic sectors, historians have similarly observed that Chinese settlers originally were invited by and thrived at the sufferance of indigenous leaders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Malay rulers welcomed and benefited from the economic dynamism fostered by Chinese trade, for example. This sense of ownership nevertheless dissipated by the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the sheer scale of Chinese migration and investment expanded exponentially and indigenous leaders became increasingly sidelined in the process.<sup>5</sup> Chinese domination of sectors of the economy increased over time, and this affected their relations with indigenous Southeast Asians. A similar historical process probably occurred in Vietnam. Anh Sy Huy Le has been showing how some Vietnamese nationalists in the early twentieth century believed that southern Vietnam was turning into a "semi-colony" of Chinese migrants by the turn of the twentieth century. The question for these nationalists was, how might the Vietnamese become economic sovereigns over their own territory?<sup>6</sup>

This nationalistic reaction seems a far cry from what we see in the early nineteenth century, but Cai's miscellany at least hints that this sort of thinking already was percolating in royal minds in the 1830s. He writes, "For the past several years, officials have forbidden the private export of cinnamon, raw sugar, and other commodities; set official prices; authorized the royal house to trade [these goods]; and increased the taxes on merchant ships. Because of this, Chinese ships are increasingly rare, down by forty or fifty percent, and the people are very resentful about it" (p. 125). Cai does not clarify whether these "people" are Chinese or Vietnamese merchants or both (the Chinese-language version simply states 民甚苦之).<sup>7</sup> We nonetheless see that the royal house sought to benefit from overseas trade more directly. The increased taxation of Chinese merchant ships seems like an implicit effort to diminish the Chinese role in the commodities trade in a way that served the financial interests of the Vietnamese court. When considered in tandem with the massacre of thousands of Chinese people during the Tay Son Rebellion in 1782, one wonders if Vietnamese relations with the Chinese were as friendly as those experienced by Cai Tinglan, who was, of course, a

<sup>3</sup>The translators refer to Melissa Macauley, *Distant Shores: Colonial Encounters on China's Maritime Frontier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup>Mary Somers Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders in the "Chinese Districts" of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Carl Trocki, *Prince of Pirates* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 139-47; Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, 50-55.

<sup>6</sup>Anh Sy Huy Le, "Southern Vietnam as a Chinese Colony: Dao Trinh Nhat, State-Induced Migration, and the Perils of Chinese Migrants," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the AAS, Honolulu, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Cai Tinglan, *Hainan zazhu* (Taipei: Taiwan yinhang, 1959), 40.

scholar who, unlike merchants, shared a classical sensibility with the Vietnamese officials he encountered on his long journey home.<sup>8</sup>

A short review will not resolve this question, of course. One of the many benefits of this exceptional translation and scholarly analysis is that it makes another primary source concerning these issues available to a wider, non-specialist readership, ensuring that many more voices will be added to scholarly debates about the interrelated history of the Nanyang region at this time. This book is highly recommended to specialists and non-specialists alike.

## *Porcelain for the Emperor: Manufacture and Technocracy in Qing China*

By Kai Jun Chen. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023. 248 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

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*Porcelain for the Emperor* aims to elucidate the lineaments of a “technocratic culture” (15) that first appeared in China’s historical record during the 1720s and that was epitomized, in particular, by a “polymath bannerman” (9) named Tang Ying (1682–1756). Tang descended from a bondservant family attached to the Imperial Household Department (*Neiwufu*), an inner-court organization whose *raison d’être* was not simply to provide for the most basic and daily needs of the royal family, but also to maintain the ruling house’s political and economic predominance, especially *vis à vis* the administrative state apparatus. In short, the Imperial Household Department operated as an instrument of patrimonial domination and, as such, developed into an important training ground for politically reliable “bannerman technocrats” who “combined technological expertise and managerial power” in spheres such as “manufacture, finance, and intelligence” (3).

The Imperial Household Department supervised “a cluster of handicraft workshops” in the Forbidden City known as the Imperial Workshops (*Zaobanchu*), which were “responsible for the large-scale production of artifacts” (6) for use at court. And it was here that bannermen such as Tang Ying cultivated and internalized what the author dubs “a technocratic approach to statecraft” (9) which distinguished them from members of the civil examination elite who staffed the bureaucracy. According to Chen, this “technocratic approach” was “essential for accomplishing imperial tasks” of empire

<sup>8</sup>Woodside (*Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 4) asserted that the massacre reflected Tay Son rebel opposition to the “plural society” developing in Vietnam at this time. More recently, Choi Byung Wook has claimed that it was the result of the military involvement of Chinese settlers in the political struggles of the day. See his *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820-1841)* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2004), 36–37.