

BOOK REVIEWS

The Qing Opening to the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757. By Gang Zhao. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013. Pp. viii + 267. \$56.00.

Published in the framework of the series “Perspectives on the Global Past” by Hawai‘i University Press, Gang Zhao’s first book is a thoughtful work, which draws on an impressive number of sources that range from Qing official documents and imperial decrees (most notably the Kangxi emperor’s *qijuzhu* 起居注 [diaries of activity and repose]), private writings, and local gazetteers, to modern Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarly essays. It stems from his 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, written under the guidance of William T. Rowe at Johns Hopkins University. On this granitic foundation, Zhao builds up a truly revolutionary perspective that aims to challenge, or better still, to turn upside down the traditional view of late imperial China as a closed country that was somehow overwhelmed by Western economic pressure and was unwillingly drawn into the world market system. Actually this view, put forward by Weber and Fairbank in the fifties, can probably be traced back to Lord Macartney’s mission of 1792–93, which depicted the Qing empire as an endless territory far too large to be governed by an egoistic octogenarian emperor unable to understand what was going on outside his crystalized and stagnant civilization. Weber and Fairbank, both adopting an Eurocentric perspective, argued that, given that traditional Confucian principles considered trade to be a low, despicable activity, and that China was mainly an agricultural society, the government never wanted to embark on commerce and so confined it to Canton, under a strict system of rules. It was only due to foreign dynamism (and to the so-called unequal treaties) that Qing emperors and officials were pushed to open their ports and expand their trade. This theory was so strong as to influence also many Chinese scholars, thus propagating the image of a weak empire that, despite its enormous size and resources, resisted what Zhao acutely defines as “early globalization” (i.e. 1500–1800, p. 3), unable to stand up for its due status. In his sharp analysis, Zhao argues convincingly that a distinction must be made between the Chinese regulation of Western trade and the whole of its maritime policy. The Manchu dynasty actually realized quite soon the centrality of maritime exchanges, and Kangxi’s lifting of the sea trade ban in 1684 is a clear demonstration of this strategy. The author wonders why to date so little attention has been given to this crucial turning point of Qing policy, and intends to fill this gap, focusing on the four great coastal provinces (namely Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong) and illustrating it with great detail up to 1757, when the Qianlong emperor decided to close all ports, except for Guangzhou, to the Europeans.

This work bears a twofold perspective: it not only aims to demonstrate how the Qing role on the international stage was not passive at all, but also to detail how private Chinese maritime trade contributed greatly to early globalization. This is a very important shift of perspective that enables Zhao to reach his premise: the Manchu dynasty did not launch state-controlled commercial activities, such as, for example those that were conducted under the magnificent frame of Zheng He's 鄭和 expeditions; rather, the 1684 "Open Trade Policy" was in fact meant to enrich the state by encouraging private activities (*tongshang yuguo* 通商裕國, p. 86) on Asian seas. Chapter Four is dedicated to exploring this issue and its philosophical foundation: Zhao skilfully unravels how the Kangxi emperor intended to restore Zhu Xi's 朱熹 words to a more practical interpretation, adapting his statements about the natural trend of ordinary people to seek profit to the basic duty of any Confucian sovereign to guarantee his subjects' welfare. Therefore, since the government must by definition take very good care of its people's interests and well-being, and there is nothing that can be done to prevent people from pursuing personal gain ("the inevitability of the principle," *li zhi suo biran* 理之所必然, p. 84), the only thing a good emperor can do is to have a positive attitude towards private trade.

Besides, this was nothing new for Manchus, who, when they were known as Jurchens, used to conduct a lot of trade with Korea and China, and appreciated commerce also as a means of unification among different tribes and neighbouring states (p. 63). The horse trade was particularly profitable and was referred to as the "golden road" (*jinlu* 金路) by contemporary Jurchen documents, for the large amount of silver that poured into the local economy. According to several sources, such as *Manzhou shilu* 滿洲實錄 and *Manwen laodang* 滿文老檔, that are widely quoted (especially at pp. 67–70), the rise of Nurgaci and his foundation myth are strongly linked to horse trade because the huge resources he employed to strengthen his power came precisely from this economic activity.

This practical attitude can be detected also in the way Kangxi managed the thorny question of commercial relations with Japan, particularly crucial as a source of copper. Already in Ming times, private traders used to bypass the ban, that lasted until 1644, on trade with Japan, by having their vessels listed to Southeast Asia, and of course also the Zhengs' fleet sailed freely. From this open secret Kangxi knew very well that such a policy was not only ineffective but also counterproductive for the state itself: since Japan's demand for Chinese products was as high as China's need for copper and silver, it was very clear that a very different attitude had to be adopted. Moreover, in his times the scarcity of copper was aggravated by the fact that Chinese mines were located in Yunnan, which was not under Qing control, and even after the successful repression of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, Chinese was not as good as Japanese copper and very expensive to extract. The solution was then very

simple: following the example of his predecessor, who in 1646 had issued an edict allowing Chinese merchants to trade in copper and other goods with Japan, Kangxi “provided loans to merchants who imported copper from Japan and received deliveries of copper in return” (p. 146). Unluckily, in the following years, Japan’s production of copper slowed down significantly and Chinese merchants were not able to deliver the amounts they had agreed upon. The Japanese government tried repeatedly to control the metal’s export and greatly reduced the number of vessels entering Nagasaki 長崎 port. The situation worsened further in 1715,¹ when the Tokugawa bakufu 德川幕府 decided to start a completely new system of licences to be given to a limited number of Chinese traders for an established supply of copper that was less than fifty per cent of the average imports of previous years. Many voices of protest arose from those Chinese merchants who were not lucky enough to obtain a precious licence. This matter not surprisingly attracted the interest of local authorities only when they underlined how the year of issue was written according to the Japanese calendar on these licences: in Chinese eyes, the very fact of accepting and using them, as Chinese traders had readily done, was equal to treason. The Chinese calendar was in fact one of the main gifts bestowed on the occasion of foreign tributary missions to the Celestial Empire, implying faith in the Son of Heaven and his superior domain. Therefore, that Chinese people would agree to use a foreign calendar was simply unthinkable and contrary to this belief.

Despite the strong opposition of his ministers and advisers who found the merchants’ behaviour unforgivable, Kangxi assumed that the licences were not official documents but “a mercantile contract between two parties . . . used merely for the purpose of regulating” trade (*Kangxi qijuzhu*, quoted at p. 146). The Chinese merchants who had been imprisoned by local officials could therefore be released. The conflict between the two positions lasted for over a year until the emperor issued an edict making his point clear to all officials. This act was unprecedented because it showed how his economic pragmatism had the upper hand over traditional sinocentrism and made way for the clear distinction that can be found, for instance, in the *Da Qing huidian* 大清會典 among foreign countries listed as “tributaries” (*siyi chaogong zhi guo* 四裔朝貢之國) and those known as “commercial partners” (*hushi zhuguo* 互市諸國).

With reference to this specific point, it has to be noted that Qing relations with Japan were extremely complicated because the latter considered Manchu rulers to be culturally inferior just because of their “barbaric” origin, and only the age-old

¹ It is certainly due to a misprint that it is stated that the Tokugawa licence system was inaugurated in 1717 (p. 142).

respect for China could soften this contempt. Zhao goes as far as to suggest that also Toyotomi Hideyoshi's 豐臣秀吉 aborted invasion of Korea was connected with the smuggling trade in the sense that both mirrored the "disregard for the dignity of the imperial Ming" (p. 139). Apart from this particular episode, international trade was undoubtedly intertwined with security issues because it was widely believed that foreigners coming to China could seek intelligence of local military and defence systems, while those who travelled abroad could spread and give away dangerous information. Chinese maps and military books had long been forbidden items. Nevertheless, the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors decided to supersede these (often unfounded) concerns in the name of economic stability.

Private Chinese trade, in sum, not only contributed greatly to the wealth and well-being of the Chinese populace, at least in the coastal regions, but supported and fuelled also the Qing monetary system. Outside the Empire, it was one of the main influences on the global scene, as demonstrated by the huge bulk of documents collected into the *Ka-i hentai* 華夷變態 by Hayashi Harukatsu 林春勝 (styled Gahō 鷲峰) and Hayashi Nobuatsu 林信篤 (styled Hōkō 鳳岡) in 1730, annotated by Ura Ren'ichi 浦廉一 in 1958. These are the logbooks that the Tokugawa government requested every vessel to keep: the great majority were written by Chinese merchants, who sailed from one port to another transporting the requested goods both to domestic destinations and abroad, especially along the triangular route China–Southeast Asia–Japan. This proves that "these ports had functioned as commercial and economic centers for more than 150 years before the arrival of Western gunboats" (p. 136) and therefore that the Qing empire was far from isolated and crystallized.

In order to further demonstrate his main point, Zhao tries also to dismiss what has long believed to be the Chinese intellectual response to the new economy, i.e. to the overseas trade, thus connecting Song and Yuan dynasties to Ming new entrepreneurs. Starting from the famous scholar Zhen Dexiu 真德秀, who at the end of Southern Song wrote favourably about commerce, offering a coherent interpretation of *Daxue* 大學 (pp. 42–43), Zhao mentions several Ming personalities, both officials and gentry, such as Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1420–1495), Lin Xiyuan 林希元 (1488–1565), and Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1511–1565), who did their best to have the sea trade ban lifted, for they believed it would seriously threaten the survival of the coastal people. Although the opening of Yuegang 月港 in southern Fujian to maritime trade is not to be forgotten, it was only a very limited experiment (pp. 25–27, 48–51). As for the early Qing, Rowe's well-known book² highlights how Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀,

² William T. Rowe, *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

governor of Fujian in Qianlong times, was very well aware of the strong presence of Chinese merchants on Asian seas and tried to convince the emperor of the necessity of an adjustment to some strict measures (pp. 184–85).

With its powerful prose and fascinating narrative, *The Qing Opening to the Ocean* not only reverses many common interpretations about Qing foreign policy in general and maritime strategy in particular, but also highlights the fundamental values and ways of thinking of the great Kangxi emperor. The question of Manchu identity is a case in point: it is usually associated with Qianlong that in the second half of the eighteenth century—nearly a century after the foundation of the Qing dynasty, and stressed with a series of edicts—the need to keep firmly or to restore Manchu language and abilities such as horse riding and archery was recognized. Kangxi is often said (Spence, Wakeman, Hymes, to mention just a few) to have done a lot to achieve a sort of integration between Chinese and Manchu and to have been instrumental in the consolidation of the new power; and he was thus supported actively by neo-Confucian officials who in turn saw their values supported. Kangxi is usually depicted as a skilful calligrapher and poet who even went as far as Qufu 曲阜 kowtowing nine times to honour Confucius in his greatest temple. Zhao capably demonstrates how Kangxi actually “consciously adapted Han culture to his own needs” (p. 80), by quoting several of his statements that show a very different position, such as: “Manchus who abandon the tradition of horse riding will become Han. Those who suggest abolishing the tradition have lost the long-term perspective that maintains peace in the land. Many civil officials hope that I will subscribe to Han customs and culture. . . . I swear never to do so, since it would mean betraying the teaching of my ancestors.” It strikingly brings to mind Qubilai Qa’an, who, although he admired Chinese culture and complied with it in many ways, never agreed to give up the traditional habits of Mongolian people or to have officials selected through the examination system.

Useful tables about Chinese and Southeast Asian ships (divided according to the port of origin) entering Nagasaki (pp. 36–39, 130–33), a glossary, an index, and a remarkable bibliography complete this admirable book.

There is so much more too. This work is a must-read not only for those who specialize in maritime history and globalization, but also for Qing specialists and anyone who wishes to gain a new understanding of several characteristics of this crucial period of Chinese and world history.

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