

Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier. By C. Patterson Giersch. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. xvi + 308. \$49.95/£32.95.

In the past half century, Western scholarship on China has seen the Qing first as a failed dynasty, then as a dynamic early modern state, and most recently as an expanding empire. Each of these images has had something to offer, but each approach has had its limits. The first image—that of a failed dynasty—was of a political order whose institutions were too rigid, and whose personnel were too corrupt to survive in the modern world. Owing much to Chinese revolutionary historians of the early twentieth century, this image mixed a fundamental despair about Chinese traditions with a remarkable hope for China's future. Historians working within this paradigm produced studies of China's institutions, the "systems" of the Chinese cultural and political order image that the Qing bureaucrat had of the work he was doing, but often reified China's bureaucratic functioning, and the disaster of dynastic collapse was never far away.¹ A second image of the Qing as a dynamic state emerged with the opening of the Qing archives to scholarly study in the late 1970s.² With access to archives, historians discovered individuals like the Yongzheng emperor and his counselors,³ or Chen Hongmou⁴ who stretched the boundaries of existing "systems," often actively responding to the political problems of their days. From these studies, Qing historians acquired a new sense of archival methodology, and the capacity to realize case studies of remarkable depth and insight that brought life to what seemed to have been thoroughly ossified institutions. Often behind such studies was an explicit or implicit comparison of China with contemporary European states undergoing similar processes of urbanization, commercialization and population growth. Unfortunately many of these studies were narrow, based as they necessarily were on a reading of all the relevant documentary material, and did not have the depth to fully accomplish the comparisons they proposed to make. Recently, the Qing has appeared in a third guise, as an early modern empire, facing issues of border control, fiscal and political viability, seeking to map and comprehend the numerous non-Han peoples it encountered. Inspired by post-colonial studies, the development of the study of the trans-Mississippi west in American history, and a desire to let the conquered speak for themselves, historians have moved to the frontiers,

¹ See *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), and Kung-chüan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1960, 1967).

² Jonathan D. Spence, *Ts'ao Yin and the K'angxi Emperor: Bondservant and Master* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966) was the first work in English to use palace archives.

³ See Madeleine Zelin, *The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth Century Ch'ing China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴ William T. Rowe, *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

leaving behind the concern with institutions and documentary trails which marked their predecessors. C. Patterson Giersch's *Asian Borderland* is just such a study; it highlights vividly a remarkable space on the border of the Qing empire, and the strengths of an analysis of borderland.

The book takes as its focus a region which Giersch labels as "the crescent," an area along the Yunnan border between the Mekong and the Salween rivers. This region is not defined in the book by geopolitical markers; and neither in the book nor elsewhere does it appear as a spatial unit marked by borders. It is a region defined less by any sort of juridical markers than by a type of activity that goes on there. The region was a commercial crossroads populated by: "Chinese and Muslim-Chinese who led pack animals along the numerous borderland routes or deep into Southeast Asia, Tibetans who drove mules from the Sipsongpanna Tea Hills to markets on the Sino-Tibetan frontier, and more affluent Chinese merchants whose fathers or grandfathers had established the family in frontier towns." (p. 161) Politically, it was a region of constant negotiation. Government was not a product of a *tusi* system, for there was never any fixed *tusi* system, Giersch argues, but rather a constant and shifting interaction between native leaders and Qing authorities. Indeed, the interest of the region is not political doctrines or state documents it produced. "Far beneath the grand machinations or great men, there were indigenous leaders, soldiers, farmers, merchants, miners, and petty officials—intrusive *and* indigenous, male *and* female—who lived on the frontier. And it was they who actually traded, fought, negotiated, and inter-married with each other." (p. 3) In the case of "the crescent" the compelling story is, in part, the tension between the relentless Qing effort to bureaucratize the frontiers and the persistent peculiarity of the local. Indeed the evocation of this tension, which underlay much of Qing activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, constitutes one of the central contributions of Giersch's volume.

Who were the indigenes? Despite Giersch's careful attempt to explore the categories in ethnic surveys conducted in the Peoples' Republic, and untangle a daunting linguistic diversity, no enduring image of the indigenous people of the area lingers in the reader's mind. Instead, the image of the human resources of the crescent is one of diversity. There are Tai speakers, speakers of Burmese languages, and people who claimed with varying degrees of justification to be Chinese. Valid as this picture may be, it raises an interesting question. Giersch writes that "this book takes seriously the trajectories of indigenous histories and the potential for indigenous agency. In the spirit of the best work, I place frontier indigenes 'at the center of the scene' along with Qing officials and Chinese migrants." (p.7) As a reader, it is distressing to be confronted with such a claim, and not rewarded with a clear indigenous voice. Giersch does use productively Tai chronicles, as they have been translated into Chinese and published in Yunnan. But ultimately the indigenous agency encountered in this book not a matter of voice, but of actions, of people in the crescent who adapt their lives and political structures to changing economic and political circumstances and the evolving forms of the polities that surround them. Can one have agency without voice? Perhaps one has to, particularly when the alternative is to hear indigenous voices as they were redacted by Qing officials, who brought their own institutional biases to the task.

Chapters Two through Four consider Qing political action in the region. This is surely a necessary, but not sufficient task in understanding the dynamics of the frontier. The focus

of the Chapter is fairly narrow, encompassing the events of 1728 when E'ertai sent troops into Sipsongpanna to avenge the killing of a possibly corrupt local official, and a subsequent rebellion the area in 1732. The accounts are solid, and draw on available sources judiciously. But in a book which deals with the broader subject of borderlands, is it perhaps necessary to expand the focus beyond the lens of Sipsongpanna. Giersch sees action in the southwest as a product of “frontier militarism” of the new men, mainly E'ertai, of the Yongzheng reign. But neither E'ertai nor his emperor was really a militarist. E'ertai was a bodyguard who had never been to war before his appointment in the southwest, and the emperor a somewhat reluctant insomniac ever cautious about his steps. What distinguished the “new men” was not a commitment to militarism, but their commitment to political reform. Military action occurred in the southwest when E'ertai, chose to side with long experienced local officials in the region who felt that military action was the only way to achieve success. The uncertainties of Qing policies in the southwest were illustrated well when E'ertai's two protégés in the region, Zhang Guangsi in Guizhou and Zhang Yunsui in Yunnan pursued different dimensions of his legacy. Zhang Guangsi embarked on a violent military extermination of native peoples in Guizhou, and Zhang Yunsui developed the silver mines in Yunnan. Granted that from the point of view of local residents, the Qing invasion seemed an exercise in incomprehensible violence. But an account of the Qing political role in the borderlands should include some reference to the tensions and debates which surrounded such actions: if the circumstances of the borderland were uncertain and divided, so too were the motives of the central government. The differences in policy between E'ertai and Zhang Yunsui may have been less a case of the fading of frontier militarism than the assertion of a new priority—making government in the southwest pay for itself.⁵

If Sipsongpanna is not quite the right lens through which to view frontier policy in the southwest, it may be the perfect lens to view the Burma campaigns of 1768–1769. Viewed from Beijing, this action seems nearly incomprehensible, except as a vainglorious attempt by the conquerors of Xinjiang to extend their military victories of the southwest, a mistake for which four Manchu frontier specialists and one Chinese governor-general paid with their lives.⁶ The view from the Burmese capital is not fully enlightening either. Alexander Woodside in *The Cambridge History of China* has portrayed the war as conflict between a war-loving Qianlong emperor and a Burmese state “enclosed in a stiff panoply of self-exalting Indo-Buddhist political style” seeking new servicemen along the border.⁷ Giersch's description of how the new Burmese Konbaung dynasty put pressure on the Thai polity at Chiangmai, and ultimately on territory that Qing governors perceived as their own is eminently plausible. In this instance, the borderland had its own dynamics, not readily

⁵ See Wang Yanfei 王燕飛, *Qingdai dufu Zhang Yunsui yu Yunnan shehui* 清代督撫張允隨與雲南社會 (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2005), pp. 11–42.

⁶ For this impression, see *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644–1912)*, ed. Arthur W. Hummel (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1943–44), p. 252.

⁷ Alexander Woodside, “The Qianlong Reign,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 9, Part 1, *The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 267.

perceptible from distant imperial capitals, and an analysis of borderlands sheds light on the centre.

The regional focus is also useful in capturing the realities of social and economic change in the southwest, which was driven in the crescent by the movement of people—soldiers, miner, merchants and immigrants—into the area. An institutional historian might well linger of the details of each migration, studying the evolution of military bases or the changing policy toward mining. In particular on mining, Yan Zhongping 嚴中平, not cited here,⁸ and even Kent C. Smith's 1976 doctoral dissertation provide a good bit more detail on mining in the southwest.⁹ But Giersch's purpose calls for a rather different approach, an attempt to weave together different strands of social history into one panoramic tapestry. The picture created is much like what would have been seen by William McLeod who traveled from Burma through the region in the winter of 1836–1837, or John Anderson who made the journey several decades later. There is merit to this approach. Often what has passed for social history in the southwest, or in much of China, has been too bogged down in studies of changing political forms to capture the realities beneath them. Surely we should not ignore the political, but attempt to keep its effect on local life in some perspective.

In fact, as Giersch argues underlying the transformation of the southwest is something over which the Chinese political order had little or no control, international trade. In particular, Giersch emphasizes the role of overland trade with southeast Asia. It was this caravan trade which transformed the trade in Pu'er tea and precious stones into a trade in staples, such as cotton, tobacco, felt thread, steel needles, and cotton shoes. As this trade developed the fragile ties which had traditionally bound the crescent to the outside world became sturdier links of commercial interdependence. Chinese had a sizable role in all of this, but the Chinese involved were merchants, organized into family trading groups or native place associations, rather than officials. This finding raises the question of the changing relationship between trade and politics in Chinese imperial expansion. In the northwest, as James Millward has argued, imperial expansion cost rather than benefited the Qing state; those who made profit from Qing adventures into the Xinjiang were merchants, or perhaps officials acting as merchants, rather than the state itself.¹⁰ In the southwest, it was likely that the state gained more from the extraction of raw materials, although the Yongzheng emperor was extremely uncomfortable with any formulation of the motive for southwestern action that emphasized profit. The fact that Qing expansion in Yunnan occurred at an early stage of Qing history when the vast treasury surpluses of the later eighteenth century were not yet in evidence meant that political action in the southwest had to pay for itself to some degree. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, merchants were certainly the major beneficiaries of Qing political action in the region, and

⁸ Yan Zhongping, *Qingdai Yunnan tong zheng kao* 清代雲南銅政考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1957).

⁹ Kent C. Smith, "Ch'ing Policy and the Development of Southwest China: Aspects of Ortai's Governor-generalship, 1726–1731" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1971), pp. 180–219.

¹⁰ James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 109.

probably the principle engineers of social change. Giersch does not engage in comparison between the nature of Qing explanation in the southwest and other regions, indeed there is no reason why he should, but the picture he presents certainly contributes to an overall sense of the social and economic nature of China's eighteenth century culture of war.

The mixture of cultural, political and economic penetrations into the southwest in the eighteenth century may explain why after two centuries, the peoples of the region remained "barbarians still." The "cultural complexity and ambiguity of that were a common heritage of the borderlands" fascinated all those who travelled through it, and one suspects, Giersch himself. The terms "assimilation" or "acculturation" are perhaps too coarse to describe the range of conviction, concession and convenience that attended life in the borderlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To survive, all had to accommodate themselves to the powerful economic engine that Chinese mercantile activity represented. Changes in dress and hairstyle, language and surnames proved that Chinese ways were attractive. In addition, those who dealt with the representatives of the Qing state had to make concessions. "Imperial etiquette, the Chinese language, and Confucian ritual became avenues for establishing and preserving strong ties with the Qing." (p. 190) At the same time, Theravada Buddhism remained a powerful organizing force in the community, and the symbols and rituals of Tai and Burmese legitimacy remained powerful in the area. Giersch's last chapter presents an effective, multi-archival, treatment of cultural change in the borderlands.

Giersch's book is an important one, and should be read both as a study of a fascinating region, and as an example of a new methodology in Qing history. It is a history not dependant on a Qing dynasty documentary paper trail. This is not to say that the book uses no Qing documents, it most certainly does; but Giersch does not allow the details of documentary debate to drive his narrative. His questions derive from the comparative study of borderlands, not the queries posed by Qing administrators. This can be problematic when the issues at stake are explicitly political, as in his treatment of the motives for Yongzheng era militarism. The approach does, however, readily correspond to the realities of life along the borders. There is little remnant of the old failed dynasty approach to be found here. Indeed one suspects that along the border the vicissitudes of the central state may be less impactful on local affairs than changes in the global economy. If anything, study of the borderland in this case suggests the centre was more flexible than its rigid codes would lead us to believe. A distant, vaguely conceived but powerful presence, the centre appears in this study more as a cultural than political force, whose best representative could be quite pragmatic. As a regional historian Giersch rejects Skinner's regional definitions as too rigid, though clearly his work is founded on Skinner's fundamental insight that it is trade, rather than cultural or political action. But much of this says only what the book is not. It remains to say what the book is: a vigorous and fascinating study of a fluid borderland on the boundaries of one of the great early modern empires, and a serious attempt to deal with the political and social complexity of a region little examined, and a must read for anyone interested in southwest China or the nature of the Qing empire.

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