

***Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong.*** By Elizabeth Sinn. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 454. \$45.00.

Elizabeth Sinn has written a path-breaking, richly researched book on the role played by Hong Kong in the rise of a transpacific world after the start of the Californian Gold Rush. Professor Sinn's sources include private research collections, institutional holdings, newspapers, digital collections, public records, and holdings in specialist libraries across the world. This massive scholarship sits lightly on the plain, elegant prose. The volume rewrites the colony's history against new findings and proposes modifications to theories currently popular in migration studies. It deepens and extends themes previously broached by the author's *Power and Charity*,<sup>1</sup> which used the history of the Tung Wah Hospital 東華醫院 to explain Chinese merchants' role in mediating between Chinese and the colonial administration, an early example of the indigenization of colonial power that is also a theme of *Pacific Crossing*.

The book opens with a chapter on Hong Kong on the eve of the Gold Rush, and asks why the colony was so well placed to take advantage of the California traffic. Factors that helped equip it to become one of Asia's leading emigration ports and a major entrepôt included its location, topography, and free-port status, shored by the development of its infrastructure and government system, the Navy's imposition of security at sea, the accrument of a professional class (native and imported), and the birth of a lively Chinese press. The economy also matured and diversified, and although for a while opium was its bedrock, other branches soon flourished, notably shipping and banking. The colony's Chinese population was a mainstay of its growth. Trade guilds proliferated, stabilizing the community and economy.

One reason Hong Kong's response to the California opening could be prompt and effective was that Americans had already established a strong presence in the Pearl River Delta economy and the Canton (Guangzhou) system that originally ran it. The prospect of trade with China was a main consideration in Washington's decision to occupy California, even before the Gold Rush. In South China and Hong Kong, Chinese with close contacts to Americans were among the first to take advantage of the link.

Chapter 2 looks at the impact of the Gold Rush on Hong Kong's development as one of the nineteenth century's leading emigration ports—an entrepôt for people as well as goods, bound eventually not just for California but for other Gold Mountain

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<sup>1</sup> *Power and Charity: The Early History of the Tung Wah Hospital* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989); *Power and Charity: A Chinese Merchant Elite in Colonial Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

locales (in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), and for the world. The study also looks at the California trade's invigorating impact on the old Nam Pak 南北 trade linking North and South China and the routes to South and Southeast Asia that intersected at Hong Kong. Sinn identifies three outstanding features of emigration out of Hong Kong: it was Cantonese, transoceanic, and voluntary. Its Cantonese and transoceanic character marked a turning-point in modern Chinese emigration, which had previously been mostly from Fujian and Chaozhou-speaking eastern Guangdong and bound for Southeast Asia.

Its largely voluntary nature was also new. Sinn draws a clear line between the migrants leaving Hong Kong for North America and those sailing from elsewhere (especially Macao) to Cuba, Peru, and other places. Whereas the former comprised several classes (including the well-off) and were rarely coerced, rarely indentured, and relatively well treated both on shipboard and at destination, the latter were mainly forced or entrapped, mainly manual labourers ("coolies"), mainly contracted or indentured, and typically ill-treated *en route*, as well as in the receiving country. In 1853 and 1855, new British laws led to the further regularization of Hong Kong's passenger trade. However, Sinn argues that American observers failed to concede this difference between emigration from Hong Kong and from other ports, so anti-Chinese polemicists could argue that the Chinese were unfree and therefore ineligible for US citizenship, a conclusion used to legitimate the Exclusion Laws.

One of the author's major findings is that the emergence of Hong Kong created a "vantage point" from which to monitor the Mainland (p. 83) and raise informed critical voices on its margin. One way in which Hong Kong influenced China was through its press. Chinese-language newspapers in the colony identified with Chinese emigrants and their interests, which the Qing court had ignored. Calls in Hong Kong for the appointment of Chinese consuls seem to have slightly preceded Beijing's adoption of a new style of foreign representation, and reformers in the capital were apparently aware of them. Other instances of Hong Kong's constructive marginality included the elevation into new social roles of people and classes usually on the periphery of power under the Qing, for example traders, who were able to claim a new status and pursue new cultural ideals. Many traders rose to prominence in the colony, where mobility replaced the old rigidities and restrictions. Merchants were able to come into their own in a society from which the traditionally dominant gentry was largely absent and create the sinews of a new merchant power, realized in their previously suppressed spirit of enterprise and endeavour. Their achievements included the Tung Wah Hospital, proposed by Governor Macdonnell but founded by Chinese businesspeople, some of them traders with the Gold Mountain countries. The hospital performed functions that a Chinese consul might have done had there been one, and facilitated the repatriation of thousands of disabled emigrants. In later decades, it was adopted as a model by Chinese communities outside California. Other marginal

groups flocked to the colony, which became an “alternative space” (p. 30) and a magnet for people prevented by China’s gentry elite from giving free rein to their energy.

Among the groups that thrived under the British, Sinn highlights the water-borne Tankas 蠶家, who were ostracized under Chinese rule and forbidden to settle ashore. I know of few studies on the Tankas’ contribution to the rise of Hong Kong: here too Sinn’s discussion is seminal. As a boat-dwelling people, the Tankas were ideally placed with dense networks of support to provide the infrastructure needed to carry goods and people between visiting vessels and to shore and back, to pilot ships, and to work as stevedores. They had little regard for the Chinese state and became foreigners’ trusted allies, first in Canton and then, by “invasion,” in Hong Kong. Tanka women cemented the bond, working for seafarers as cooks, launderers, and prostitutes or mistresses. Some Tanka “collaborators” (a Qing designation) achieved wealth and respectability.

Sinn defines Hong Kong as an “in-between place,” a concept she proposes as a new paradigm, for migration studies in the past focused chiefly on sending and receiving countries and said little about people in transit, including through Hong Kong. To show the importance of the “transit experience,” she describes Hong Kong’s transformation by the Gold Rush “from a small-scale entrepôt of goods into a large-scale entrepôt of people” (p. 90), not just Cantonese from the immediate hinterland but speakers of many dialects, bound not just for America but for all continents. Few of the migrants were natives of the colony, a fact that magnified the inbetweenness. However, Hong Kong was not just the migrants’ first stop abroad but also, in most cases, became their first stop in China on return, and its levels of comfort, security, openness, and business freedom created among them a special attachment to the city, where many took up long-term residence. It was a comfort zone, because of its cultural as well as logistic inbetweenness. In it, migrants could cope more easily with the culture shock of a return to China, like divers in a hyperbaric chamber. It was a strategic place from which to observe trends, make connections, and control businesses at home and abroad.

Hong Kong was one of many windows imperialism opened between China and the world. Sinn’s analysis of its inbetween role revisits interesting questions about the wider part played by marginal places in Chinese development. The many obvious differences between Hong Kong and the treaty ports suggest the possibility of a typology of such places, to identify the special impact of each on China. Sinn’s analysis suggests several paths such work might follow, including differences in the composition of trade (particularly the ratio of emigrants to cargo), the differing impact of rival colonial regimes, and the differing urban cultures of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other ports.

In the spirit of Sinn’s book, I would like to suggest other aspects of the “transit experience” that might also reward further study. “Inbetweenness” was classically con-

ceptualized, in a very different way, by anthropologists like Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, who described the “middle passage” as the protracted moment of birth of a new black culture in the Caribbean. In the original view, this cultural and linguistic birthing took place at sea, in the months-long shipboard mingling of people and cultures, but the study of Chinese international migration suggests it can be extended landwards, for example to the barracoons in the ports where migrants boarded and disembarked. Sinn’s notion of inbetweenness could prompt new studies on the effect of the middle passage, more broadly understood, on the emigrants’ culture, psychology, and human relations. The changes in these spheres flowered most fully at the place of disembarkation, but the months or weeks of waiting in Hong Kong, where rural newcomers mixed with urban types and Chinese dialects encountered one another and languages of the wider world (notably English and Portuguese), played an essential part in their preparation. Studies often analyse the identities migrants display abroad as a simple outcome of migration, conceived as a movement from one place to another in the course of which non-migrants with fixed cultures and no horizons become migrants with horizons and then settlers and even cosmopolitans. Yet many of the “novel” views and practices of migrants preceded migration, or were the occasion for it. Migrants formed new attitudes and relationships while awaiting migration and at sea (often for months), as well as at the “end”-point. A deeper study, in continuation of Sinn’s work, of the Hong Kong middle passage would help overthrow simplistic views of migration. One issue Sinn does not explore is how locals communicated with outsiders, both Europeans and other non-Chinese, and with Chinese speaking dialects unintelligible to them. The answer is, by pidginizing and creolizing, leading to the further elaboration of inbetween linguistic forms, particularly of English, but including elements of Portuguese, Swedish, and other languages. Migrants and seafarers exported these new tongues across the world, where they served as a cultural tool and means of survival.

The third chapter looks at the role played by shipping in the development of Hong Kong. Studies on the commercial development of British colonies in Asia sometimes neglect the role played by “natives” (including “overseas” Chinese) in trade and industry or treat indigenous capital as separate and apart from companies under predominantly “Western” control, but in reality Chinese business groups in colonial settings developed strong inter-ethnic relations and partnerships across “national” and ethnic lines, despite others’ belief in Chinese ethnic exclusivity. Sinn shows that collaboration between Chinese and non-Chinese was commonplace in mid-nineteenth-century Hong Kong, where Chinese were active in a wide range of fields. Hong Kong was one of the earliest modern sites of Chinese long-distance transoceanic shipping: the “tracks,” “corridors,” and “superhighways” (Sinn’s words) that Chinese wore into the Pacific survived the Exclusion Act. One of Sinn’s main theses is that the California traffic created self-perpetuating hubs not just in Hong Kong but in

San Francisco, where Chinese stayed mobile (despite their depiction by short-sighted observers as sedentary “ageing bachelors”). So the concept of inbetweenness can be extended to include places where Chinese migrating through Hong Kong planted settlements, especially San Francisco, which served as a secondary hub for the onward scattering of Chinese across North America and, after the start of the China-hating binge there, onward into the wider world. This multifocal character of the diaspora is often portrayed as a contemporary innovation, but it was there practically from the start, as Sinn shows.

Chapter 4 looks at Hong Kong’s trade in goods, no less stimulated by the Gold Rush than the migration of people. This too is a seminal point, for studies on early Chinese migration look far more at remittances than at trade or at the importance of migrant trade for China’s national trade. Hong Kong was among the closest global ports to San Francisco, which had to import nearly everything. From the point of view of Hong Kong’s merchants and British administrators, the Gold Rush rescued the colony from the despair in which it had begun to languish after its initial failure to meet Governor Pottinger’s expectations of a great emporium. A lively network of market intelligence quickly grew up between the two Pacific ports, stiffened by social networks. At first, the transpacific trade was dominated by European and American companies on which Chinese merchants at both ends of the corridor had to rely, but once Chinese beachheads had been founded in California, the synergy between them and Hong Kong grew. Activities came to include the remittance of savings and capital, a field widely studied by economists and historians, but mainly in relation to Southeast Asia rather than to Gold Mountain countries. The corridor was braced by interlocking ownership and shareholding and cemented by personal and family ties. The trade soon diversified from opium to other crops and products, especially rice, sugar, flour, ginseng, and foreign exchange. One way in which the Pacific corridor transformed Chinese migration was by creating a Cantonese source for it, which in later years vied with the old easterly *qiaoxiang* 僑鄉 (migrant regions) and turned the Pacific Ocean into “the Cantonese Pacific” (p. 189). Other routes out of Hong Kong and remigration of Cantonese southwards from California to Australia after the first Gold Rush meant Cantonese migration dominated the New World and the British Dominions.

Chapter 6 switches the focus from male migration to a less studied theme, the emigration of Chinese women. Women flowed across the Pacific in a similar way to opium (the subject of Chapter 5) to meet the needs of Chinese males. Chinese women emigrated within the framework of the Chinese patriarchal system, which allowed their buying and selling as *mui tsai* 妹仔 (young female domestic bond servants). British laws against slavery could have been used to suppress female trafficking, but sadly the administration turned a blind eye to it. Female submissiveness and intimidation by Chinese men, together with official insouciance, meant the trade in women

was extended from Hong Kong to North America's Chinese bachelor communities. Sinn points out that the involuntary export of women boomeranged on the males, by playing into the hands of American demagogues out to equate Chinese immigration with slavery. Chinese community leaders in Hong Kong helped the authorities to combat kidnapping, but they continued to endorse the selling of *mui tsai* and the buying of women as concubines, and they rarely asked whether female emigration was voluntary or involuntary. This played into the hands of the American Sinophobes, who argued that slavery and concubinage were emblematic of Chinese iniquity and justified Chinese exclusion.

Chapter 7 describes the "returning of [migrants'] bones," a reflection in ritual of the cyclical design of Chinese migration at the time. "Freightizing the dead" (p. 268), as Sinn calls it, became a defining feature of Chinese emigration to California, thought quaint in the 1850s but repugnant in the 1870s, when anti-Chinese feelings hardened. Emigrants' remains had long been sent home for burial, but at first this happened only with the bones of the rich and powerful. Not until after the Gold Rush were they repatriated *en masse*. Sinn provides fascinating detail about the complex logistics, administration, finances, profits, rituals, and moral and emotional connotations of the practice, a rich synthesis of entrepreneurial and charitable spirit. The practice later spread to Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Peru, Cuba, and other places.

Though there is no shortage of histories of Hong Kong and of Chinese emigration, the merit of Sinn's book is that it connects them. This is a pioneering work in many ways. Among the book's themes largely neglected by previous scholarship are: Hong Kong's role as a place of migrant transit; migrants' transport to the New World; the development of Hong Kong's shipping industry (including its sailing ships, which scholars have particularly overlooked); the mobility of Chinatown, often wrongly depicted as immobile; the impact of the Gold Rush on trade in Hong Kong and China; the special features of remittances from the Gold Mountain countries; the colonial administration's role in controlling the Hong Kong market (less *laissez-faire* than usually thought); the reasons for the small number of Chinese women in America in the nineteenth century; and the impact of Hong Kong's Chinese press on debate in Beijing, and thus its hand in the birth of a modern Chinese foreign policy. Some of these themes are explored in detail, others sketched with fewer strokes. So the book not only fills big gaps in our grasp of Hong Kong's role in international migration but helps set the agenda for future research on it.

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