

## Reviews

Cheong Weng Eang, *Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade, 1684-1798*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997. 376 pp. ISBN 0-7007-0361-6.

Cheong sets out to examine the hong merchants of Canton from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century and to correct the mistakes of traditional China scholars such as H. B. Morse. Using principally the records of the East India Company in the India Office, London, Cheong has reconstructed the case histories of 57 out of 87 well-known hong merchants over the course of seven generations. He finds three major periods of economic activity when trade with Europe evolved and increased, as did government efforts to control and tax foreign trade. A number of different mercantile strategies developed and declined over the 100-plus years surveyed here. Certain hong came to specialise in European trade; merchants travelled less and became more like sedentary brokers. Cheong traces the development of the infamous co-hong and details the financial dealings and ultimately the failure of many hong. He also examines the activities of various officials who were involved with the trade and he details the intricacies of Ch'ing government policy at Canton.

According to the introduction, the book represents a long-term labour of love. Its strengths lie in an exhaustive examination of the India Office files. Cheong provides lists of merchants, the names of their hong, lists of hoppo(s), governors and governors-general (viceroys) of Kwangtung. It is somewhat ironic that the author employs English language records (plus a few in French) for an internal examination of Chinese trade, deliberately rejecting such Chinese sources as local gazetteers

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and official histories. The resulting story is presented not as constructed or perceived by the British, but rather as straightforward factual narrative.

Many of the problems in the book stem from its sources. As John King Fairbank observed in 1953, the eighteenth-century Canton trade 'is not easy to document'.<sup>1</sup> The names of most hong merchants and hoppo(s) are rendered in pidgin English; the author can only guess at the actual Chinese names. Errors in orthography and inconsistent romanisations abound. Cheong misread the name of Kwangtung governor Nien Hsi-yao as Shih-yao (p. 46). Nien was a Chinese bannerman with close connections to the imperial family, but his sister was a concubine of the future Yung-chung Emperor, she was not the Empress (p. 69, n. 53).<sup>2</sup> The Liang-kwang viceroy in 1757-59 was Ch'en Hung-mou, not Hung-mao (p. 207).<sup>3</sup> Bondservants are identified as *boyi* (Manchu: *booi*), rather than Wade-Giles *pao-i*, but Cheong does not make the connection that the hoppo was almost always a bondservant *because* he was a trusted representative of the imperial household. *Ke, sha* (*hsiu*) and *kuan* were courtesy suffixes signifying low-level official rank, not purchased titles (pp. 101-106). What does it mean to say that a merchant retired and became a 'mandarin'? Certainly not that he became a Manchu official. Hong merchants at Canton are not situated in the context of the overall growth of the professional merchant class in eighteenth-century China but are treated as anomalies. A more nuanced investigation of class status and upward mobility would have been welcome. The list could go on at length, but these examples suffice to give an idea of some of the problems. Surely recourse to appropriate sections of local Kwangtung and Nan-hai *hsien* gazetteers, the *Ch'ing Shih-lu*, or even modern reference works such as Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing* or Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* could have corrected many of these errors?<sup>4</sup>

Like the eighteenth-century British before him (who apparently invented the term 'hoppo', under the impression that this official was connected with the *Hu-pu* [Board of Finance]), Cheong has confused the 'hoppo', who collected tribute for the Emperor, with the standard *hai-kuan* tariff system on trade under the Board of Finance. Indeed, the situation in the eighteenth century was often confusing, with governors on occasion acting as hoppo and sometimes two representatives serving at once. Had Cheong distinguished clearly between the two revenue systems, he might have presented the Canton situation as a struggle between the imperial household, represented by the hoppo, and the bureaucratic government, represented by the maritime customs to establish a standardised system. Where Cheong refers to governor-hoppo, it would surely be more correct to say, governor with concurrent duties as hoppo.

Hong is capitalised throughout the book, but never adequately defined. Cheong refers to a hong as a family-run business, but the internal evidence regarding the names and connections of partners seems to refute this description. China specialists would like to know more about the structure of merchant trade at Canton. Cheong mentions that many hong merchants (quaintly termed 'hongists') came from Fukien and Ningpo, but does not examine *hui-kuan* native-place groups or guilds; nor does he investigate possible *kung-so* or trade-guild organisations, although from time to time there is a vague reference to a guild, referring to the co-hong.

Scholars looking for a book that will engage the recent discourse on port cities, mercantile economic development, elite status, merchant trade organisations, sojourners, internal Chinese immigration and such topics will be disappointed. Cheong cites very few secondary sources from the last thirty years. He would have been well advised to consult such studies as Fairbank and Wakeman in *Cambridge History of China, Late Ch'ing*, Rowe on Hankow, Johnson on Shanghai, and Goodman on guilds.<sup>5</sup> The addition of Chinese characters for names (where

known) would have been helpful. Better proofreading could have eliminated some of the more annoying minor problems such as misspellings, grammatical errors, and strikeovers.

Cheong has made a valiant effort to give organisation to the eighteenth-century Canton trade, listing merchant firms, their leaders, trade officials, governors and viceroys, but is ultimately limited by dependence on the India Office records and neglect of other primary and secondary sources. In sum, *Hong Merchants of Canton* is more of a curiosity than a contribution to current studies in the social history of Chinese merchants and the history of Sino-western trade. It corrects some errors in earlier scholarship but perpetuates many more.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953: 50.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1944; reprint 1975: 588.

<sup>3</sup> Hummel: 86-87.

<sup>4</sup> Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Frederic Wakeman, Jr., 'The Canton Trade and the Opium War' and John King Fairbank, 'The Creation of the Treaty System', in Fairbank and Denis Twitchett (eds), *The Cambridge History of China, Late Ch'ing*, vol. 10 part 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978: 163-263; William T. Rowe, *Hankow, Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* and *Hankow, Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1889*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985 and 1989; Linda Cooke Johnson, *Shanghai from Market Town to Treaty Port, 1074-1858*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

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