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Chinese history for English readers is a quietly contested field: quiet because discussion and developments take place in the margins of the English-speaking world; and contested both because the market for trade books is growing and, more importantly, because new publications are offering ever more diverse and complex ways of seeing China. Two seminal events, the Opium War (1839-42) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), play an outsized role in attempts to introduce China to the world. Books on these events, especially on Mao and the Mao era, are more readily available than books on any others. The issue is not whether these two super events should receive less attention but rather whether new publications are challenging old prejudices in productive ways. Publications on these important periods have been coloured by, among other things, Anglocentric viewpoints, including a whiggish modernist worldview that pits the progressive West against a backward China, as well as semi-disguised and overt nostalgia by apologists for imperialism. One could add to this list the viewing of China through a capitalist market economic framework that focuses on China's contributions to the making of the globalised world.

Fully aware of the pitfalls of these perspectives and armed with revisionist literature that was mostly developed by academics in the field of Chinese history in America, Stephen Platt's *Imperial Twilight* charts the history of the Canton trade era that started in 1759 and ended at the conclusion of the Opium War in 1842. During these crucial eight decades, the Qing Empire confined China's European trade to a single port, the port of Canton. This history requires some broader context. The first Europeans to establish regular contact with China were Portuguese traders and Jesuit missionaries who arrived in the early 16th century. The Portuguese settled in Macao and traded in Canton. The Jesuit missionaries produced for Western readers largely positive images of Chinese civilization, yet the Qing disliked the missionaries because they saw Christianity as a threat to their Confucian-Legalist-based state ideology. In the early 18th century, therefore, the Qing government expelled the missionaries from China. Exploiting the Qing dynasty's sense of insecurity, merchants of Canton lobbied for the port's monopoly of European trade and presented it as the best way of controlling Western traders. These Western traders were also regarded as a threat by the Qing, who feared that they would join forces with domestic rebels to overthrow the dynasty. Canton succeeded in their control of China's European trade in 1757. The Qing court believed that, by limiting the foreign presence to Canton, it could quarantine the threat while still collecting lucrative tax revenue from trade in the port.

The British, by this point, had outstripped the other European trading communities and played an increasingly important role in the port. The commercial life of the port thrived on the export of luxury products like silk and porcelain, while the growing tea trade

considerably boosted the prosperity of the port, and thus Sino-Western trade. By the early 19th century opium smuggling started to play a larger role in the port's life, and quickly threatened the old Canton world. The result was the infamous Opium War, an event that violently altered the course of Sino-Western relations. After the war, relations between Britain and China were established on the basis of treaties arrived at through intimidation of war; those treaties acted as the scaffolding for a whole new relationship between China and the West, known as the treaty port system, which lasted until the Second World War. *Imperial Twilight* offers perhaps the best account anywhere of the history on the Canton period for general readers, a group that technically includes most historians outside the field of Chinese history.

In charting the Canton era of Sino-Western interactions, *Imperial Twilight* achieves something more than just bringing new perspectives to general readers. Through archival research, the author unearths intriguing new details of this historical period. Those historical details dug up from unexamined and newly discovered materials provide a weapon against a prejudicial view of the historical events. One could argue that historical perspective grows from details, which in the hands of some historians are wilfully or inadvertently edited out because they do not fit a certain narrative. The inclusion of these many details provide much to contemplate and make *Imperial Twilight* particularly readable.

Platt's ability to use the archives in this way is a product of the revolutions in the English-language historiography on Chinese history, especially among American academics in the 1980s when leading figures like Paul Cohen advocated a 'China centred approach' that was neither Eurocentric nor anti-communist. One outgrowth of this new approach was 'The New Qing history', which also developed among academics in America. By using archives in Manchu in the study of the Qing empire, the new Qing history moved away from the Sinocentric perspective. While scholars like Cohen managed to go some distance in correcting the Eurocentric historiography that sees the rest of the world as a footnote to Western progress, the new Qing history confronted the Sinocentric historiography that argued the Manchus were aliens who ruled China between 1644 and 1911, and in the process of which were Sinicized to the extent of becoming 'Chinese'. These new ways of understanding made Chinese history much more exciting, and *Imperial Twilight* brings this to the general reader.

By giving life to major historical figures, the book explores major events in chronological order between 1759 and 1842 in a most readable fashion. One example is the story of James Flint (1720-?), an English orphan who was left behind at Macao by a ship captain to learn Chinese. The captain hoped that Flint's linguistic skills would one day make Flint useful to the British traders. Flint subsequently earned a place in history by representing the East India Company (EIC) when it submitted

a petition in 1759 to the Qing emperor outlining the grievances of the British traders in Canton (and by teaching Benjamin Franklin how to make tofu). The EIC's petition had the adverse effect, for it increased the Qing court's determination to confine Europeans to the single trading port of Canton that was first set out in 1757. Lord Macartney, who appears next in the narrative, was also a character forged by the British Empire, though on a statelier scale than Flint. Rather than focusing on the failure of the 1793 mission in bringing new trading privileges to the British as most historians do, Platt's account of the 1793 Macartney Embassy highlights the lasting impressions of the delegation of a China both orderly and properly governed. This positive portrait mirrored the favourable report that the Jesuits had relayed to the West. It is also in keeping with research on the economic history of China that has shown that the great divergence between China and the West started only around 1800. This balanced and contextualised understanding of the Macartney Embassy thus departs from earlier sensationalised accounts. Qianlong's famously rejected the British trade offer with the words: 'The products of our empire are abundant and there is nothing we do not have' (p. 40), traditionally read as a sign of China's isolation. Platt puts this sentence back in its political context by arguing that the emperor was conveying to King George that the Qing, not the British Empire, was in control of the terms for trade and other interactions.

Among Macartney's lavishly dressed entourage was the 12-year-old George Thomas Staunton (1781-1859), who studied Chinese during the voyage that took the embassy to China. By the age of 18, Staunton had returned to China to work for the EIC in Canton, where he moved slowly but steadily up the ranks of the EIC office (the 'factory' as it was called). Staunton visited the Qing imperial court for a second time in 1816 as the deputy to William Pitt Amherst (1773-1857), the second British ambassador to China. Rich in archival detail of the interactions between members of the second embassy and the Qing officials, Platt shows that the Amherst embassy did not fail because of the 'kowtow' question as most historiography tells us. He argues that the question of the British kowtowing to the Qing emperor was a major issue neither for Amherst nor Macartney. The turning away of the embassy before being granted an audience with the Qing emperor was actually a farce created by an ill-mannered Qing court official. Amherst played his part by refusing to meet the emperor because on arrival at the Forbidden City as he was separated from his baggage. In it were his outfit for the audience and the letter to the emperor from the prince regent. The Qing official and Amherst argued over it before the exchange turned into a full-on melee at the waiting chamber. Historical events can be chaotic, random, and meaningless. Platt's account shows that the two embassies have been more often than not over-interpreted in Sino-British history.

Thomas

Manning (1772-1840) and Robert Morrison (1782-1834) represent two different strains in Western interest in China. Manning was the adventurer, fascinated by the mysteriousness of China; Morrison was a Protestant evangelist engaged in the impossible task - as it was seen at the time - of bringing China into the arms of the God. They arrived in Canton in the same year in 1807. Manning was given access to EIC ships and welcomed at Canton due to his connections with the British establishment. Morrison was not allowed to sail on EIC ships and refused accommodations at the Canton factory because the company did not want to risk offending the Chinese by bringing banned missionaries into China. Platt brings alive the adventures of these two Englishmen in China who cut such contrasting figures. Morrison produced the first ever English-Chinese dictionary and voluminous Christian treatises in Chinese and was hailed as a pioneer Protestant missionary. Manning published not a single word about China and died in obscurity despite being the first Englishman to venture into Tibet. Manning was unusual among the British travellers of this era for leaving so few traces of his life in China. A great number of Western residents in China published memoirs, diaries, journals and letters, which give insight into their China experience.

Signs of trouble in Sino-British relations became apparent when Lord Napier arrived in China in 1834. As the ill-fated friend of King William IV, Napier was the first British trade superintendent in China after the EIC's China trade monopoly ended in 1834. He immediately tried to make the Qing court change its ways by staying on in Canton without permission. Napier's office represented the free trade ethos that had ended the EIC monopoly and was on the rise in Britain. His royal connections combined with faith in free trade gave him an oversized ego and introduced wholly new elements to Sino-British interactions. Before he could achieve anything, he died of illness in Macao. Although Napier did not succeed in making China bend to the British will, his death was the first wave of change to crash on the China shore.

Platt's emphasis on Napier's personal ambition results in a downplaying of the role played by British private (non-EIC) merchants like William Jardine and James Matheson in the changing power dynamics in Canton. This narrative would sit comfortably with history that focuses on personalities rather than on structural issues. The result is that the British private merchants as a community who became dominant in the Canton trade in the late 1820s, as argued by Michael Greenburg, do not feature strongly in Platt's account of the Napier affair. Yet the Canton trade was moving into another phase thanks partly to the growth of the opium trade, which gave British private merchants economic strength, and partly because of the growing confidence of the British Empire after victory in the Napoleonic wars in particular and imperial expansion in Asia in general. As the focus of *Imperial Twilight* is on events and personalities, the structural changes are insufficiently addressed. This is evident also in Platt's reading of

a disastrous episode featuring the EIC chief William Baynes, who took his wife to Canton in 1830 despite of the Qing prohibition. Platt attributes Baynes's actions to the notion that he 'could not stand to be away from his wife' (p. 231). This is an overly simplistic reading that does not take into account the dissatisfaction in the Canton British community about the trading conditions in the one port that electrified the atmosphere in the early 1830s.

Nonetheless, Platt's work stands out because of his ability to interweave well-documented events and figures at the heart of Sino-British interactions with the Qing domestic political situation. The domestic politics of the Qing court is a more difficult sell for English readers and has therefore received little attention in English-language publications. But internal decline played an important role in weakening the Qing state, hence the book title. Platt brings this to life for the general reader by mining the well-established literature on the White Lotus rebellions and by telling an engaging story of how the millennial popular religious movement in northern China shook the Qing empire to its foundation. Not only was the campaign to quash the rebellion costly, but corruption flourished during the rebellion, rendering the Qing bureaucratic machine unable to run the empire. Pirates on the Southern China coast also exposed the troubling fact that the Qing had no navy to speak of while the British boasted the biggest navy at the day. The Qing turned to negotiation to solve the pirate threat, buying off the pirates and incorporating them into the imperial political fold by bestowing title and rank. This domestic crisis weakened the Qing, and the sapped Manchu Empire had little strength left to deal with the British.

Ultimately it was the opium trade that ignited the first war between China and the West. Opium created a host of problems for the Qing government, from drug-related crime to delirious soldiers. Yet, the most serious problem was economic: Chinese silver was flowing out of the country to buy opium, creating a scarcity of silver that resulted in inflation. More than any other treatment of this issue, Platt admirably outlines the complicated process of how Qing bureaucrats developed the idea of legalising opium in order to end the financial crisis. The emperor Daoguang (1820-50) seriously considered the policy but to British dismay he opted instead for complete prohibition. What followed was the widely documented history of Commissioner Lin Zexu (1785-1850) confiscated opium stores in 1839 sparking war and a British victory. Consistent with his emphasis on the agency of historical figures, Platt highlights the role played by Charles Elliot (1801-1875), who placed himself between the British merchants who smuggled opium into China and Commissioner Lin. *Imperial Twilight* argues that the compensation that Elliot promised to the British opium traders forced the hand of the foreign secretary, Palmerston, who put Britain on the path to

war. This largely follows the historiography outlined in the mid-20th century by Peter Ward Fay and Hsin-pao Chang. On the opium issue, Platt deals brilliantly with the Chinese side of the political context, but leaves largely unexamined British domestic political issues that resulted in political crisis. This aspect of the story has been well documented by Glenn Melancon, who brings attention to the partisan parliamentary jockeying between Whigs and Tories during a time of rising budget shortage and increasing debt. War with China presented an opportunity for the Whig government to get out of this crisis. Melancon's argument dovetails with Michael Greenberg's thesis that the radicals who represented the interest northern cities in lobbying the government to start a war were the decisive faction needed by the Whig government. Likewise, the British traders of Canton played a much more important role in the making of the Opium war than given credit by Platt and other scholars. The British private traders were in fact the main force behind the war. The idea of hostilities against China was developed in Canton by the British private merchants like Jardine and Matheson who were named as the Warlike party. They allied themselves with the northern cities who want to expand their trade to China to lobby for the war first in 1835 and again in 1839. In the end, the Canton British merchants' determination and political connections and their alliance with northern merchants made all the difference. By putting Elliot at the centre of the war's origin Platt is in effect arguing that Britain went to war to request compensation for the opium confiscated by Lin and that opium was the *casus belli*. I would argue instead that trade issues and lobbying by merchants in both Canton and in Britain were the prime causal factors for the outbreak of war.

To be sure, China was less a victim of Western imperialism than most other colonised or partially colonised nations. Besides, Qing China was an empire in its own right that even in decline was still capable of all sorts of state violence and ideological prejudices against Westerners coming to their territory. The spread of corruption among the imperial bureaucracy only made interactions between China and the West more difficult. Qing China was every bit as much to blame as the British in changing the nature of the Canton trade in ways that contributed to the Opium War.

Despite its imperfections, *Imperial Twilight* offers readers a page turner, with well-documented lively stories from China's history. The authorial voice is wonderfully restrained in letting the protagonists tell their own stories in their own voices, much like a documentary film would. In this way Platt uses a plain and unassuming style to tell a most lavish and beautiful story. If you want to read only one book about China, this would be the one.