



Encroaching the Frontier: Boundaries and Diaspora in Ming and Qing China

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Ng Chin-keong. *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Time*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. 497 pp. \$56 (cloth).

Steven B. Miles. *Upriver Journeys: Diaspora and Empire in Southern China, 1570–1850*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. 346 pp. \$50 (cloth).

The two books being reviewed here do not really speak to a shared theme. Historian Ng Chin-keong's *Boundaries and Beyond* consists of selections from Ng's writings over the years about the development of maritime trade in Fujian Province in the Ming and Qing dynasties, while fellow historian Steven B. Miles's *Upriver Journeys* is his second attempt to probe the Cantonese mind-set, this time going out of Guangzhou and following Cantonese travelers and settlers on their journeys into Guangxi (see Miles 2006). Yet, in a loose way, both books fit into the broad field now described as "Chinese diaspora" studies. "Diaspora" research deals not only with people traveling out from China but also with the impact of those migrants on their home territories. While most diaspora research follows the history of overseas Chinese, much of the diaspora logic applies also to migration within China. Miles indicates as much in his book's title.

I would advise readers of *Boundaries and Beyond* to begin with chapters 1 and 12, which sum up the major trade routes taken by the junk trade from the Ming into the Qing and the Chinese ports associated with them. It would have helped if Ng had provided a few good maps, but it is still useful to launch into the story with an awareness of the key place names—Yuegang, Xiamen, Zhanglin, Guangzhou (rendered respectively as Haicheng, Amoy, Chamlin, and Canton)—and of the trade associated with Liuchiu, Manila, Nagasaki, Batavia, Taiwan, and eventually Singapore. Ng is at his best summarizing a great deal of scattered data on the trade generated and directed at different ports, and he gives a clear impression

that the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century was the height of the region's prosperity in terms of trade (Ng reminds readers that Dutch historian Leonard Blussé conveniently called that period the "Chinese century").

By the mid-nineteenth century, the junk trade was declining, but slowly. First, it continued for a long while in the carrying trade on the China coast. Second, it "migrated to greener pastures" (402), by which Ng means that Chinese junk owners, having built up their bases in Southeast Asia, simply uprooted from Fujian and settled there. Starting in the 1820s, it cost half as much to build a junk in Siam as to build it in Fujian, an economic factor that certainly contributed to the increasing shift of operations to Southeast Asian ports.

The subject of the migration of junk owners, and of merchants in general, which Ng mentions here and there, brings to mind a host of problems that the author refers to but does not quite develop. The Fujian merchants not only migrated outside of China; many moved their operations to other ports within China as well, notably to Guangzhou (307–313). This subject also opens up the question of multiple identities, which Ng alludes to in places, as when he writes, "It cannot be said for certain whether these settlers [Fujianese and Chaozhou merchants operating their businesses in ports away from their hometowns] should be regarded as locals or expatriates" (346). But identity is not really Ng's focus. A chapter is devoted to essentially government-backed trade organizations such as the *hang* of Xiamen, the *jiao* of Taiwan, and, of course, the *Cohong* in Guangzhou. Those institutions may be loosely translated as merchant guilds, as long as it is understood that they were also closely engaged in virtual government monopolies and, therefore, very different from European merchant guilds. It is the manner by which business was conducted, rather than the creation of identities, that Ng is interested in.

In the rest of the book, nine chapters examine facets of the government's encounter with maritime trade, and two provide context by describing local society in Fujian. The story begins in 1517, with the Portuguese seeking imperial sanction for trade, and continues until 1557, when the Guangdong provincial government tacitly agreed to the establishment of a Portuguese base in Macao. During that time, Ng shows, the privilege to conduct trade was tied up with conflicting local and court interests (chap. 3).

The Portuguese appeared during a time when the imperial government had banned trading overseas, but, as Ng shows, the ban had not inhibited the Fujianese junk trade (262). It was also around the same time that piracy was rife, especially the variety known as the *wokou* ("Japanese pirates," even though many of these "pirates" were not Japanese). Zhu

Wan (1492–1549), the inspector-general of Zhejiang-Fujian's Maritime Defense in 1547, figured prominently in pointing out that smuggling and piracy were conducted with the active participation of local Fujianese and in collusion with the scholar gentry. Zhu came under political criticism for his harsh policy and committed suicide. Nevertheless, by 1567, the overseas trading ban was lifted, and Yuegang was opened to maritime trade, paving the way for Xiamen to develop into an important seaport (chap. 9).

The story then jumps to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Readers who want to fill in the gap may consult Ng's 1983 monograph on Xiamen and his paper in a 1990 volume edited by historian E. B. Vermeer. By the eighteenth century, the customhouses in Fujian and Guangdong were making so much money from maritime trade that no ban on trade would have been conceivable. But the imperial government, ever suspicious of maritime trade and its operators overseas, narrowed its focus to the distinction between traders who made annual trading journeys and sojourners who actually spent time living abroad. The question of whether the imperial government had any moral or political responsibility over its settlers abroad had been raised after the massacres in Manila in 1603 and Batavia in 1740. In both instances, senior officialdom took the view that sojourning abroad was illegal and, on that ground, absolved the imperial government of any responsibility (chaps. 9 and 13). Ng puts some flesh on that skeleton with the case of Chen Yilao, who was arrested in 1750 upon his return from Batavia to Fujian after a successful career. Chen had not only become wealthy but had also been appointed Chinese lieutenant by the Dutch in Batavia, and had brought much wealth home. After returning, his property was confiscated and, with his family, he was punished by banishment to the frontier. Chen had returned to visit his village earlier, in 1739, and attracted no notice from the authorities. Did he arrive at his misfortune ten years on because success had made him more ostentatious? Ng leaves the moral of the story dangling. Did this one instance of the enforcement of a ban on repatriation make much impact on the Batavian Chinese? Did overseas settlers indeed not return? Or, might Chen Yilao's experience indicate that many others must also have returned, whether temporarily or for good? The story is a reminder of how the government mostly lurked in the background in late imperial China. It was ever present, but it rarely struck. The junks would have put out to sea and people would have migrated back and forth on their own initiative, for the most part never being recorded in official written records (chap. 13).

At this point, it becomes possible to bring Miles's book into this discussion. But let me preface that discussion with a brief statement of my own prejudice. Like many others who

study diaspora, Miles works hard following his migrants, often to the neglect of the incumbents into whose presence they were migrating. In other words, I wish Miles had paid some attention to Guangxi outside of the migrant's purview. Unlike Southeast Asia, on which the Ming and Qing governments relinquished all but tributary claims, Guangxi was part of the imperial realm. Yet, unlike the Qing dynasty, the Ming dynasty did not operate on the notion of a unified government structure. The civil bureaucracy had no authority over the military bureaucracy, and neither had authority over princely households or native chieftains. It is necessary to distinguish the native chieftain in his chieftaincy from his official bureaucratic appointment, often in the military. It is also necessary not to assume that, being "native," the chieftains were necessarily uncultured. The Guangxi native chieftains included people who were well versed in Ming-dynasty politics and were often the driving force for Ming expansionist policies in Guangxi. The fall of the Ming brought about many changes. For example, with the abolishment of the military bureaucracy and the princely household in Guangxi, provincial administration was streamlined. I wish Miles had taken into account the marked administrative changes between the Ming and the Qing.

Against this background, when Miles tells us that a substantial number of Cantonese men were appointed to the civil bureaucracy in Guangxi during the Ming, and proceeds to credit them with "expertise in frontier affairs" (45), I am left pondering rather uncomfortably whether they were the only people who merited that distinction and even what that expertise might have consisted of. My doubts are not removed by the description, now by the Qing dynasty, of three eighteenth-century Cantonese magistrates appointed to Guangxi. Miles presents a history of their appointments, rather than discussing what they did in office and what sorts of problems they encountered in order to accomplish what they did. Did the Cantonese officials bring an expertise to frontier administration, and, if so, what was it? Or was the frontier being opened up anyway—by internal pressure, trade, politics, and powerful non-Cantonese men such as Manchu governor-general E'ertai (in office 1728–1732)—and they merely stepped into vacancies created?

In fairness, what officials did is not really part of Miles's story. While the first chapter makes the point that Cantonese officials served in Guangxi, the next few chapters go on to explore what Guangxi's opening up might have meant to Cantonese people from the Pearl River Delta through the Ming and the Qing. It is not always clear that migration was in the formula; some went to game the examination system. To do so, the examination candidate would have had to have been a member of a registered household in the county in which the

examination was held, which some candidates achieved by “entering into the registration records” (*ruji*). In one documented case, the candidate sat for the examination not only under another given name but also under another surname. Were cross-county candidates necessarily migrants? Miles offers some hazy notions of people with lineage connections who might have moved but maintained connection with Guangdong, perhaps settling in Guangxi—but we are never quite certain of that—and sitting for the examination there. For the most part, Miles falls back on a discussion of government institutions. Local people objected to their examination places being taken up by Guangdong Cantonese and, after decades of official discussions, some intervention was instituted. It is an interesting story, but not really a story of diaspora.

If numbers are any concern, examination candidates must lag far behind travelers engaged in trade. The reader should notice that the timeline for chapter 4, which deals with this subject, shifts from 1570 to 1700. Regarding the latter era, I miss in Miles the strengths I see in Ng. Where Ng gives the reader a strong sense of what trade consisted of and how much went where, Miles’s text is skimpy, except for the two examples he focuses on, namely rice and salt. Were the Guangdong Cantonese involved in the copper trade that had become so important to the Qing economy by the eighteenth century (and if not, where did the copper merchants come from)? And were they involved with the charcoal burners that one reads about in the history leading to the Taiping Rebellion? The burners were said to be Hakkas (also from Guangdong), but the charcoal was going downriver to feed into the pottery industry in Foshan. And what about opium? Did it come upriver from Guangdong into Guangxi? Fair questions, it seems, as chapter 4 signals that it deals with events up to 1850.

Although without addressing the exciting changes coming about in trade, Miles treats readers to an account of how trade might have been conducted, highlighting the role of temples and guilds. Of course, there is already an important literature on the mercantile role of those institutions (Mann 1987; Wang 1996; Xu 2013). Reference to Taiwan would suggest that setting up temples was instrumental in land development (see, for example, Chen 2015). Might the Guangdong Cantonese, who were settling into villages in Guangxi, not also be interested in land? There is not a word about that in Miles’s book. All is not lost, however, for Miles has worked hard on the legal records to see what might be learned from them about trade institutions. I am not terribly excited by the periodic resistance against the export of rice on the ground that export upset prices. More interesting is that, in the instance cited by Miles, the objection seems to have come not from the farmers or even the city folk but from local

officials. The documentation of a family dispute over money loaned and remitted between Guangdong and Guangxi (112) is also interesting. Miles reads the case as an example of a kinship relationship breaking down. My reading is different: I see it as a fascinating case that illustrates how difficult it was to manage investment at a distance.

The case involves two family groups related by marriage. One group, residents of Nanhai County in Guangdong, involved Liang Taicheng, whose daughter was married to Lin Xiuqin. The other group involved Xiuqin's father, Lin Yihong, whose brother (or cousin), Lin Yitai, ran a shop in Luoding County up the West River. In 1817, Liang Taicheng loaned Lin Yitai 211 taels, with the understanding that, over time, repayments (presumably with interest) would be made to Xiuqin. How very strange, one should think, that an investment made in Nanhai to a man journeying to Guangxi should have been regarded as a loan to the merchant's nephew resident in Nanhai. Xiuqin did receive some money back (130 taels, according to the source cited), but Yitai paid the remainder (or said he did) to Xiuqin's father (that is, to his brother or cousin), Yihong. Yihong died, which gave Xiuqin reason to claim that the money should not have been thus paid. When Xiuqin continued to demand payment, making threats in the process, Yitai did pay a second time. However, this time, in 1820, he paid Liang Taicheng directly, in Xiuqin's presence, and Xiuqin signed a receipt for the payment. What a strange arrangement, again. From Lin Yitai's point of view, the payment in 1820 wrapped up the transaction, but that was not how Lin Xiuqin saw it. In 1821, when Lin Yitai was back in Nanhai, Xiuqin demanded a loan. When Yitai refused, Xiuqin reported Yitai to the Nanhai magistrate's yamen on a false charge of conspiracy against the state (112).

It is common enough for families to fall out over money. However, we learn much more than that from a case like this. Of course, it would seem vital for Miles to tell his readers where all these events were happening, but he does not. The shop was located in upriver Luoding, but the money was paid in Nanhai, and the suit was brought in Nanhai. As indicated by reference to payments made when he "was home," meaning Nanhai, Lin Yitai had journeyed from Nanhai to Luoding to run his shop. In a circuitous manner, a marriage relationship of the nephew of the debtor and a daughter of the creditor's family provided not only the guarantee that was to make the investment workable, but grounded the loan settlement in familiar Nanhai, rather than distant Luoding, if a dispute should arise. The case is interesting not because family relationships might have collapsed, but because the creditor had anticipated how the loan might be dealt with if default resulted.

Let me skip Miles's chapter of anecdotes about the broken families of men who traveled from Guangdong to Guangxi, and the native women there who had poison to avenge betrayed relationships. I shall also skip the genealogical research showing that lineages might be "translocal." These stories are well known even in the English-language literature. What is not obvious is whether Miles's documentation reflects the complex linguistic cultures of Guangxi into which his Cantonese men migrated. Large tracts of Guangxi did, and still do, speak Cantonese. Should one expect different marriage patterns when Cantonese men journeyed in those areas? Much of Guangxi is, of course, said to be Zhuang. Do we know much about cultural variations among the many communities said to be Zhuang? Without knowing something about local practices, one tells the stories and arrives at generalizations that collapse readily once pressed. Miles reports that "accounts in delta gazetteers portray the fathers of upriver women seeking to gain economic or social benefit from forging marriage alliances with migrant Cantonese men." He says "these accounts suggest a certain kind of negotiation between upriver families and migrant Cantonese men" and "hint at a set of social practices in which uxorilocal marriage was common" (186). If one removes the words "upriver" and "migrant," are such generalizations not also true of downriver Guangdong, or, indeed, most parts of China, if not many other areas of the world?

No reviewer should hold authors to account for what they did not set out to achieve and so, whatever shortcomings I cite, I lay at the feet of the literature on the subject at large rather than blaming Ng or Miles. Juxtaposing these two books shows what I believe to be a major shortcoming of the "Chinese diaspora" approach to history. We China historians are so concerned with tracing the travails and travels of Chinese men (rarely women) that we write as if native populations do not matter. These two books, which deal with the same timeframe in two different political settings—one within the confines of the Chinese state and the other outside of it—should be able to suggest if or how the political state might matter to travel, trade, and migration. Something is inherently missing in the story if Chinese merchants are said to have conducted their business in Southeast Asia in the same way as they did in Guangxi, or if a social strategy that involved seeking appointment to the post of Chinese lieutenant in Dutch Batavia did not produce a noticeably different social structure from one that sought to game the Chinese imperial examination. Frontiers mean little taken out of their social contexts. Chinese travelers and merchants encroached on those frontiers. It is about time that we historians do the same.

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