

The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845. By Paul A. Van Dyke. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006. xviii + 280 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, tables. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN: 9-622-09749-9.

Reviewed by Madeleine Zelin

Paul Van Dyke concludes his book on the Canton trade with a passionate lament for the nearly extinct Chinese-language record of China's early maritime encounter with the West. While this is an unusual way to end what will long stand as the definitive description of the daily workings of the administration of this famous trade regime, it leaves the reader pondering the "root of the problem" that has been lurking behind every institution, regulation, and practice that Van Dyke describes. According to Van Dyke, that root is not corruption and disdain for trade, as we have long been led to believe by scholars of the "impact of the West" persuasion, but the Chinese government's failure to recognize the import of the foreigners who came in increasing numbers to its southern port. It is for this reason that the billions of pieces of paper generated in Chinese—by officials, merchants, boatmen, translators, compradors and others—were never sent to Beijing, never informed government policy, never forewarned the state of the potentially lethal technologies the foreigners had developed, and therefore were lost to history, except in the rare instances when they were preserved by foreigners.

Van Dyke is determined not to make the same mistake as the Qing court. His research has taken him to every known China-trade collection in the United States, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Belgium, and Sweden. In addition to ships' logs, letters, account books, journals, and other merchant papers, these archives have yielded up a small, but valuable, collection of Chinese materials that few scholars have studied. As Van Dyke himself points out, this prodigious effort has also allowed him to avoid the British East India Company-centered perspective that has dominated our understanding of the changing commercial environment in Canton and Macao between the early eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries.

It is impossible to recount all the issues raised in this book. I will focus on two. The first concerns the nature of the Canton customs administration and what it tells us

about the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty's attitude toward trade. Van Dyke argues that the maritime customs at Canton was a sophisticated administrative system designed to encourage a well-managed and growing trade and flow of revenue from that trade to the emperor's coffers in Beijing. The structure of the trade was laid down from the last decades of the seventeenth century, when defeat of Taiwan-based resistance to the Manchu conquerors of China disposed the new Qing rulers to reopen China's maritime ports and welcome foreign ships. Among the most interesting material Van Dyke presents are his descriptions of the way in which the ad hoc arrangements of the late seventeenth century evolved into a regularized system of security controls and fees through a process of give and take among Chinese officials and both Chinese and foreign merchants. Although he is not the first scholar to make this point, Van Dyke is correct to stress that the concentration of foreign trade at Canton was not the result of Chinese state policy. It was the outcome of foreign preference, fostered by predictable fees, competitive prices, and a body of Chinese counterparts able to supply a rapidly growing demand for tea and other export goods. Indeed, Van Dyke argues that we should not talk about a Canton system beginning in 1757, when the state officially restricted foreign trade to Canton. He sees little change in the day-to-day practices of merchants, save the requirement that they retreat to Macao when the trading season was over.

The responsibilities of the superintendent of customs at Canton (*Hoppo*) are well known to students of China. But far less has been written about the way in which foreigners were monitored and taxed. Van Dyke devotes whole chapters to each of the main components of the system. Licensed pilots guided the foreign ships up the Pearl River to Whampoa. Licensed compradors provisioned the foreign factories and ships. And licensed linguists mediated between foreign merchants and the Chinese state. Detailed regulations governed the measuring and inspection of ships, payment of fees, unloading and loading of cargo, and responsibilities of Chinese merchants for their foreign opposite numbers. Although changes were made and policies adapted over time, the growing volume of trade and customs revenue are sure signs that the system worked well for Chinese and foreigners alike.

While some scholars may challenge the positive picture painted by Van Dyke of the eighteenth-century Canton trade, everyone agrees that in the nineteenth century things

began to fall apart. Two main approaches have been taken to the demise of the Canton system in the wake of the first Opium War. The first, often identified with the work of John Fairbank (see his *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, 1953), places the onus for war on the corruption of China's bureaucracy, its ignorance of the international system, and a cultural aversion to trade. A less ideologically charged version of this argument has been made by James Polachek (see his *Inner Opium War*, 1992). More recent studies, such as Lydia Liu's *Clash of Empires* (2004), focus on British imperial desires in Asia. Van Dyke's take on the First Opium War grows out of his respect for the earlier workings of the Canton system and his more pragmatic approach to the development of institutions. Spurning ideological or cultural explanations (it is significant that his book never mentions the tribute system of trade, to which China was thought by Fairbank to be inextricably committed), Van Dyke instead examines changes in the trading environment of the early nineteenth century.

Among the most important factors influencing the decline of the Canton trade regime were policies of the Qing state that placed increasing pressure on Chinese merchants and forced them into debt to foreigners. However, Van Dyke points as well to changes in the information economy among foreigners dealing with China, opium importation (to which Van Dyke assigns an earlier starting date, pushing it back to the time of the silver shortages created by the Seven Years' War) and its creation of a shadow customs administration that regularized contraband trade, and improvements in seagoing technology, which freed the foreigner from dependence on the facilities at Macao and Canton. Specialists in both Western and Chinese economic and business history will find much of value in this book. While better editing could have improved the flow of the narrative, Van Dyke offers up a feast of fine detail and analytical insights regarding this critical moment in China's encounter with the international economic system.

Madeleine Zelin is Dean Lung Professor of Chinese Studies at Columbia University. She is author of numerous books and articles on Chinese economic and legal history, including The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth Century Ch'ing China (1984), The Merchants of Zigong: Industrial Entrepreneurship in Early

Modern China (2005), and she is coeditor of Contract and Property Rights in Early Modern China (2004). Her current projects deal with the history of Chinese business institutions and the evolution of modern Chinese legal culture.