Reviews


Tsukahara Togo

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In this work, Fan Fa-ti explores how British naturalists and their Chinese associates represented the Chinese natural world during the late Qing empire. With ample examples and original analysis, this is undoubtedly a valuable work that combines the history of science and intercultural encounters, successfully describing how this field of knowledge production was embedded within the context of cultural exchange between the British and Chinese.

The merits of this book can be considered under the following two points. First, Fan clarifies the history of this branch of Western scientific research in China. This history has been largely neglected, and Fan has unearthed abundant evidence so far little known to historians of science. On both the British and Chinese sides, Fan explores interesting archival and personal documents, and sheds new light on historical details. His laborious scrutiny of historical documents has provided us with substantial empirical rewards. In sum, this work is established on the firm foundation of historical research.

Second, Fan successfully sites the cultural meaning of the history of natural history in the context of cultural exchanges and power relations between the rising/expanding and falling/contracting cycles of empire. This line of enquiry is generated from the negotiation of cultural exchanges between the British and the Chinese. Among Western scholars, non-Western natural history has often been characterized simply as a result of exploration or Western discovery of Eastern resources, but this is not at all true. Fan makes clear that the emergence of this branch of knowledge depended on multidimensional actors and socio-economic forces, as well as on the political interactions between the empires.

In order to demonstrate the second point, Fan’s methodology draws upon recent trends in cultural studies. Following current analyses of cultural encounters and history of science, he examines “the research of British naturalists in China in relation to the history of natural history, of scientific imperialism, and of Sino-Western relations by tracing the scientific naturalists’ activities from a long historical perspective and in a broad cultural context” (p. 2). He does not build his framework from the point of view of the “modern”, nor does he assume that the popularity of natural history and the expansion of the British Empire are suffi-
cient on their own to understand the various contacts between British naturalists and the Chinese. Instead, in order to analyse such encounters, he employs the concepts of “contact zone” and “borderlands”, and emphasizes the “hybrid” and “performativ” aspects of these cultural encounters. Hence, he neither presupposes a rigid demarcation of cultural boundaries nor conventional binary categories such as Chinese/Western, but defines his task as a historian as being to “explain why and how the boundaries were formed”, and how they are thought to “mark out a space for human actors as agents of historical change.” He thus is able to “trace the translation, transmission, and generation of knowledge and other cultural productions that did not square with national, cultural, or other conventional categories” (p. 4).

The book consists of two sections, “The Port”, and “The Land”. The division is both geographical and chronological, with the first part mainly covering from between the middle of the eighteenth century and the Opium Wars, and the second part tracing until the first decade of the twentieth century. The first section contains two chapters, “Natural History in a Chinese Entrepôt” and “Art, Commerce, and Natural History”. The first discusses early exchanges between the Europeans and Chinese in Canton, the period commonly referred to by later Western residents in China as “the times of Old Canton”. These consisted mostly of commercial, and some cultural, exchanges on objects of natural history, and a number of episodes and stories set in the “contact zone” of Old Canton are vividly described. Chapter two presents natural history illustrations that, according to Fan, were generated as export paintings through the collaboration of British naturalists and Chinese artisans. Chinese export painting brings together the Western gaze on nature partly captured by the Chinese artisan’s technique, thus becoming “the hybridization of visual cultures”. Picturing nature is a matter of aesthetic negotiation, and, for example, such naturalists as John Reeves had to “harness the Chinese Artists’ creative imagination in ways that were not compatible with the established rules of natural history illustration” (p. 51). Reeves therefore had to keep the pictures from transgressing the boundaries of “scientific realism”. The author frames natural history illustration as a medium of “scientific communication”. He describes how its “realistic” style invoked the authority of objective observation, and the ways in which the illustrations relied on certain shared systems of encoding and decoding. Natural history illustrations themselves are analyzed as a site of cultural encounter, and Fan examines the relationship between visual authority and production of knowledge.

The second part of the book contains three chapters, covering the period of the opening of the treaty ports in the wake of the Opium Wars until the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Fan identifies three dimensions of this period: (1) the formation of an empire of scientific information, (2) the cooperation and inter-development of Sinology and natural history and (3) increasing activities of exploration and fieldwork. In general, he argues, there are increasing activities due to greater access, alerting readers to the consequences of this wider access. Thus, chapter three outlines the prosopography of British naturalists and institu-
tions that supported their activities. Chapter four then examines the translation of natural objects and the identification of traditional materia medica and natural history, as well as its parallel to the increase of knowledge in Sinology. Fan investigates natural history and its relation to so-called orientalist scholarship in the discourse of Sinology. Wider access and collaboration with orientalist discourse opened up new space, both geographically and ideologically. As the interior of China became accessible to them, the British travelled deep into it. Such travel included British hunting culture, hence imperial ideology. Fan demonstrates that, “At any rate, British Imperialism in China was hardly limited to commercial aggression backed up by gunboat diplomacy. It also permeated cultural practices in everyday life. Technological superiority, particular codes of honour, cultural confidence and arrogance, a desire to export universal values, and a belief in ‘handling the natives firmly’ all entered into the thinking of British travellers and naturalists in the field and shaped their conduct toward the affairs concerning the Chinese” (p. 143). The British had been exploring China since the 1840s, and by the end of the nineteenth century, they had reached the frontiers of the Qing empire. Such exploration and travel is, according to Fan, considered to be a struggle “to reconfigure the territories, perhaps more symbolic than geopolitical; it asserted, however indirectly, certain power relations. It strove to create an imperial space” (p. 152).

This is a very well structured and informative work with interesting historical evidence, and his arguments are substantial and firmly grounded. From a different viewpoint, however, I would like to pose a few questions on the further validity of Fan’s work. This is a splendid case study on the encounter of the British naturalists and China, but to what extent are his arguments valid more widely? Fan parallels the development of the growth of the body of natural history knowledge and the discourse of Sinology, but is this comparable to other sites of orientalist discourse, for instance that of French naturalists in Africa, or the natural historians working within the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki, Japan? European naturalists in Japan should be the optimal comparative case for Fan’s Old Canton; for instance, the Swedish naturalist C. Thunberg exchanged his “modern” Linnean discourse with Japanese traditional practitioners of materia medica, and the German scientist Ph. F. von Siebold gave detailed instruction to traditional Japanese painter Keiga Kawahara, and had him produce a series of marvellous natural history paintings, many of which were used for the influential works Flora Japonica and Fauna Japonica. In addition, with regard to his analysis of imperialism and space, and the production of knowledge embedded in the context of struggling powers and multidimensional actors, is it also valid for the British (or other European Imperial) encounters and interactions with other old empires, such as the Ottoman Empire and/or the Mugal Empire? One need not expect to Fan to provide answers in this book, though his work inevitably stimulates us to ask such wider historical questions.

Even in such a well-written and exhaustive work, I must note that there are just a few points of regret. Although there are extensive notes containing biblio-
graphical references, it lacks a bibliography. For such an excellent work analyzing cultural encounters and exchange, there also seems to be some cultural bias. For example, even though there is an appendix of biographical notes on British naturalists, as well as a list of abbreviations of British institutions and major journals, no list of Chinese associates or glossary is attached. Indeed the book is entirely without Chinese characters. Probably this is because this book is assumed to be read principally by English readers, but assuming such a dominance of the English language decreases the value of this work. For instance, when considering such a key concept as “the Hong merchant” in Canton, and “Puankequa”, the premier Hong merchant in the late eighteenth century who traded with Westerners, we would like to know what “Hong” and which “Puan”, “ke” and “qua”. Since the Chinese are the counterparts Fan eagerly describes and analyzes, it seems inappropriate to disregard their original names and details. The problem is that there is a wide variety of pronunciation in Chinese, and the use of romanised forms alone is quite often not specific enough. The use of common Chinese characters and the specification of place and peoples’ names facilitates identification, not only for Chinese readers, but other East Asian readers of Japanese and Korean. This is, of course, not the fault of the author, but a matter of the publisher’s policy, and is one that really should be reconsidered. After all, works of this sort aim at enhancing mutual cultural understanding, and it is hoped that any book discussing British (and European) cultural imperialism would not become in itself imperialistic. This work is, however, essential reading for historians of the sciences and cultural exchange.