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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

BRITISH NATURALISTS IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Fa-Ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. xi + 238. US$49.95 HB.

By Peder Anker

The life and work of British naturalists in China has largely been overlooked by historians of science, until now. Fa-Ti Fan's illuminating book unveils a rich history of scientific investigations and cultural encounters between the British and the Chinese, especially in the period from the prelude to the Opium War (1839–1842) to the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

Natural history in China should be understood in the context of trade, Fan argues, because most of the naturalists were employees of the East India Company. In the first part of the book, he takes the reader to the port of Canton where he situates natural history collectors among traders, sailors, art dealers, shopkeepers, policymakers, and local dignitaries. Canton was a particular "contact zone" (p. 16) between Chinese people and Western naturalists, where species and knowledge about them were traded for money or services. In this section Fan offers a lively account of some of the difficulties British naturalists had in overcoming the challenging process of moving often live specimens from inland China to the British Isles.

Leaving Canton and the port, the second section of the book takes the reader to the work of British naturalists in interior China. Starting in the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens and moving inland, Fan uses the research of Henry Fletcher Hance (1827–1886), among many others, to unveil the scientific networks and institutions from which British naturalists operated. This is an interesting account of informal power structures within British communities, and of the issues and organisms they took interest in. "No heated debates broke

out'' when Charles Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species* (1859) arrived in China, according to Fan (p. 71). Hunting, fishing and botanical collecting, on the other hand, were topics of intense discussion among the British naturalists. In the 'natural' world studied by these naturalists, they also included folk knowledge, art, and Sinology. Thus they presented China to their audiences at home largely within their own culture's scientific framework.

The book is decidedly asymmetrical in its description of the cultural encounters between the British naturalists and the Chinese. Fan relies almost exclusively on British archives and English primary sources. This creates a rich and well researched portrait of British naturalists' experiences, but one is still left to wonder how the British were viewed from the Chinese side of the cultural divide. The activities in the 'contact zone' Fan describes mostly involved cases where British naturalists had to negotiate with Chinese non-naturalists over the collection and transportation of specimens. The story of how these Chinese were profiting socially or earned a living in helping the British naturalists is based on British accounts of the events. That ''British naturalists never met Chinese scholars known for their learning in natural history'' (p. 158) may point to a lack of scientific discourse between the cultures, raising questions about the degree and kind of contact that did occur.

Fan's notion of a 'contact zone' should not be confused with Peter Galison's 'trading zone' (*Image and Logic*, Chicago, 1997). Within Galison's trading zone, people exchange knowledge by the means of a makeshift pidgin language. In Fan's contact zone, by contrast, the transfer of meaning through natural language is a real possibility. His chief methodological aim with the 'contact zone' concept is a critique of some current trends in post-colonial studies. A problem in the work of Chinese scholars such as Jacques Gernet, the author of *China and the Christian Impact* (1985), and Alain Peyrefitte, the author of *The Immobile Empire* (1992), according to Fan, is a sort of essentialism which turns people ''into puppets imprisoned in the glass house of culture'' (p. 93). Rather than asserting cultural incommensurability rooted in mental categories, languages or worldviews, Fan explores how Chinese and British were able to communicate despite their differences. He also rejects the post-colonial model of interpreting Chinese actions as resistance to imperial domination because the Chinese retained much of their political autonomy despite pressures form the West. Instead of understanding scientific order as an exercise in imperial domination, Fan asks whether knowledge of

Western natural history was perceived as useful and beneficial by the Chinese. Though he leaves this question open, this line of argumentation is both refreshing and thought provoking.

Not much has been known to historians of science about the activity of British naturalists in Qing China, and Fan has done an excellent job in bringing their activities to light. He has also shown that the cultural encounters between the British scholars and the Chinese people can neither be rendered as a simple story about the oppression of the weak by the powerful, nor, alternatively, as free dialogue between equals. Instead Fan has unveiled how British naturalists negotiated their identities as explorers in enriching alliances with the Chinese people.

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Fa-ti Fan's new book is an intellectual delight. Rich, resourceful, full of insights, and meticulously researched, it sets itself the formidable goal of explaining ''the formation of scientific practice and knowledge in cultural borderlands during a critical period of Sino-Western relations'' by exposing ''the interplay between the discourse of natural history and that of horticulture, of Chinese visual art, of Chinese folk knowledge, and of sinology'' (p. 2). More remarkably still, it achieves this goal. Addressed to a broad range of scholars, this study of British naturalists in nineteenth-century China merges data on the practical challenges of everyday life in the port-communities of 'Old Canton' (everything from the problems that self-styled naturalists faced in securing funding for research, to the dilemmas around collecting, preserving, and transporting specimens, to the reproduction of British class hierarchies among expatriates) with illuminating discussions of the Chinese horticulturalists, illustrators, interpreters, peasants, guides, and even children with whom the British naturalists collaborated. Situating his work within the ''growing recognition of natural history as an inclusive, complex, extensive, and heterogeneous enterprise'' (p. 156), Fan casts his net wide, investigating naturalist enterprise among British merchants, collectors, missionaries, civil servants, and others. At the same time he makes the most of