
In the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for indigenous leaders in the borderlands between Southwest China and Southeast Asia to cooperate with two (or more) empires simultaneously. In the 1770s, during a Qing-imposed embargo on Yunnan-Burma trade, a Tai domain leader who was both a Qing native official (tusi) and Burmese tributary (saw-bwa) hatched a plan to reverse the decline in transfrontier trade that was threatening his livelihood. He dispatched his son to the Burmese capital bearing gifts and a letter from the Qing emperor. In the letter, the emperor acknowledged the Burmese king as his younger brother. The Burmese interpreted this to mean that the Qing sought peace (the two powers had been at war with each other between 1765 and 1769) and thus dispatched envoys to Beijing. Relations between the Qing and Burmese soon warmed and the trade embargo was eventually lifted. Fortunately for the Tai ruler, neither his Qing “father” nor Burmese “mother” ever discovered his ruse: the letter had been a forgery! Instead, the Qing showered him with gifts and thanked him for facilitating Burma’s “submission” (p. 108).

In this fascinating and important study of Qing China’s Yunnan frontier, C. Patterson Giersch attempts to place indigenous historical trajectories at the centre of the story. It is fascinating because it approaches a familiar topic (Qing imperialism) from an unusual perspective (the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands). When viewed from its edges, the shape of the Qing empire changes dramatically: the centre becomes peripheral and the periphery becomes central to the story of the political, economic, and social transformations taking place in frontier Yunnan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Giersch’s book is important because it challenges a number of “widely held assumptions” about Qing imperial and Chinese demographic expansion (p. 10), and is the first English-language study to make use of indigenous, particularly Tai, sources to throw light on Qing empire building in Yunnan. As such, the book should be of real interest to historians of Qing China in particular and of borderlands in general.

Perceiving a Sinocentric bias in previous studies of Qing China, Giersch proposes a “new theoretical framework” (p. 3) for understanding its history. In fact, the framework and vocabulary he uses to understand and explain the transformations taking place in the “Crescent” — a region stretching from Tengyue in the north to Chiang Hung in the south — will be familiar to students of comparative frontier history. Like much recent work on North American borderlands and Qing frontiers, Giersch focuses on interactions and exchanges among empires, migrants, merchants, and indigenes, and he documents the many ways in which individuals and groups influenced and adapted to each other. He argues cogent-
ly that the history of the Crescent in this period was shaped by the decisions and actions of imperial and local actors, elites and commoners, merchants and monks, men and women. In other words, Giersch sees Qing empire building in Yunnan (and elsewhere) as a negotiated process.

The book is divided into two parts. In part one, Giersch introduces the reader to the landscape, climate, and peoples of the Crescent, and surveys the region’s history prior to the eighteenth century, before proceeding to examine the military and political transformations it underwent in the period between the 1720s and the 1850s. Chapter one discusses outsiders’ attempts to project power into Yunnan through “native officials” (tusi), “indigenous leaders who maintained their autonomy but recognized Ming” (and later Qing) “suzerainty” (p. 34). This arrangement did not preclude Qing native officials from sending tribute to Burma’s kings, however. The Sipsongpanna Tai aristocracy summed up the relationship in the phrase: “haw pin paw, man pin mae, the Haw (Chinese) as father, the Man (Burmese) as mother” (p. 36). Clearly, there were limits to Qing influence among the Tai. Chapter two explains that the rivalry with Western Mongols for control of Inner Asia led the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-1735) to undertake administrative reforms aimed at establishing direct rule throughout Yunnan and transforming Southwest China into a strategic base for operations in Tibet. Chapter three examines the rhetorical reach of empire by examining travelers’ accounts, gazetteers, illustrated albums, maps, and other texts. Giersch demonstrates that while Qing and Tai ideologies differed, the two sides nevertheless found ways to accommodate each other. In chapter four, Giersch argues that the century of regional conflicts that commenced in the 1750s “reduced — but did not eradicate — local political authority across the frontier zone” and resulted in hybrid institutions that were neither exclusively Qing nor exclusively Tai and overlapped with institutions of other expanding empires (p. 124).

Part two examines demographic, economic, and cultural changes in the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands. In chapter five, Giersch discusses the breathtaking demographic transformation of frontier Yunnan in the period between 1700 and 1850, during which Chinese migrants and their descendants came to predominate over indigenous populations. As a result of Qing imperial expansion, Chinese migration, and frontier urbanization, state, migrant, and indigene were brought into “close proximity” and compelled to “coexist” (pp. 157, 158). In chapter six, Giersch argues that the commercialization of an unprecedented number of local producers and consumers and their integration into a “more elaborate long-distance trade network” (p. 184) amounted to a “commercial revolution” (p. 166) in the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands. Since history is cumulative and Tai communities had long contributed to and benefited from regional trade, some may see evolution where Giersch sees “revolution.” As for patterns of cultural change, the subject of chapter seven, Giersch helpfully distinguishes between processes of assimilation and acculturation, and argues convincingly that the latter was the “dominant form of social transformation” (p. 188) in Southwest China. Not surprisingly, indigenous communities tended to acculturate in ways that benefitted them, adopting certain practices (Chinese language) and rejecting others (foot binding and arranged marriage).
In the conclusion, Giersch places his story in the wider context of empire-wide transformations and imperial rivalries. He observes that the Qing approach to the Crescent had its parallels on other imperial frontiers, and that Qing and Mughal methods for dealing with indigenous leaders were “remarkably similar” (p. 208). And yet, there was no standard Qing approach in administering the empire. Officials developed different policies for different places and peoples, and sometimes borrowed approaches from one region and applied them in another. In other words, the Qing were for the most part “relatively flexible”) empire builders, many of whom seem to have understood that “without the cooperation of indigenous elites, the use of indigenous soldiers, or the productivity of frontier farmers, the imperial endeavor would have been impossible” (pp. 209-10).

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International tourists arriving in Beijing today may flock to its art galleries, flea markets, and the ersatz Great Wall, yet feel most cosmopolitan about China by attending a performance of the Peking opera. Those with some familiarity with Mandarin may watch traditional Chinese opera from thirty-four provinces and autonomous regions on CCTV 11, though Peking opera dominates the station’s daily programs. Peking opera, as Joshua Goldstein relates in his superbly researched, sophisticated analysis, emerged from over 360 traditional genres in the nineteenth century to become recognized as the national drama (*guoju*). While scholars of Modern Chinese culture have traced this development before, Goldstein connects it to the forces shaping the Chinese nation-state and subtly probes its relationship with internal and external forces of modernity.

Goldstein first sketches the basic institutions of Peking opera in the nineteenth century, providing fascinating details about intranational influences on the capital’s dramaturgy, and makes the point that Peking opera constantly changed. Chapter one elucidates the social and political structures transforming the Peking opera in the late Qing Dynasty. Gender dynamics elevated the *laosheng* (older male actors) as models of imperial perceptions of masculinity, a factor that Goldstein considers crucial to Peking opera’s ascension to cultural power. Ever sensitive to the physical architecture of the opera, Goldstein uses two chapters to reconstruct the teahouse as a social space that became transformed in the early twentieth century, to playhouses “centered on the proscenium stage.” This transition occurs within the gender reforms of the early nation-state that brought women into the theater as audience and actors. These reforms dissipated during the May Fourth era of 1919-1923, during which Peking opera was viewed as feudal and backward. Peking opera survived such criticism and, in the 1920s and