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FORUM ARTICLE

*Introduction to the Global China Forum**

SHIRLEY YE

University of Birmingham
Email: S.Ye@bham.ac.uk

HANS VAN DE VEN

University of Cambridge
Email: jjv10@cam.ac.uk

Introduction to Global China: New Approaches

'Global China: New Approaches' consists of four articles that explore the methodological contours between transnational history and China studies. China historians have not been invulnerable to the excitements of transnational history. Few would be happy to be suspected of still believing in a unique and enduring Chinese essence, and fewer still would be willing to argue that the foreign has been irrelevant in China, not just for the last two centuries but for its entire history. The urge to break free from histories shackled to the nation-state (whether told as revolution or not), the desire to be alert to connections with other areas of the world, and the wish to escape from teleological narratives characterize much of

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the most arresting work done on China in recent years.[1] China-centredness has not disappeared, but it certainly has attenuated.

Global China seeks to combine the advances made over recent decades in China studies with insights derived from transnational history. That means several things. First, is abandoning a definition of China as territorially bound by the borders the country reached for the first time during the High Qing and which the People's Republic of China has inherited. Sinophone studies, which takes as its subject the literary production of all people who speak Chinese, recognizes this, although not entirely unproblematically as many people were, in reality, multilingual.[2] But the advantage is that we need not accept definitions of China territorially, politically, socially, or culturally as made by a political centre.

The use of sources other than Chinese, particularly Manchu, has been one of the defining features of the 'new Qing history'. According to this school, the Manchus readily inherited a large bureaucratic empire unified by a single written language even as they maintained its status as 'a conquest elite with their own banner nobles and imperial kinsmen'.[3] One of the authors in this Forum, Pamela Crossley, has in her earlier work played a significant part in shaping those debates, arguing for a pluralistic view of culture and identity in Qing China rather than one based on a fixed identity. Interpretations of the Qing conquest over the northwest were part of broader historiographical discussions that compared the Qing with the state building and expansion of the Ottoman and Romanov empires, and European colonization in the early modern world.

Global China is characterized by both diversity and extended timescales. It includes *longue durée* studies of economic change based on

[1] P. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); H. van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); P. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[2] S. Shih, 'The Concept of the Sinophone', *PMLA*, Vol. 126, No. 3, May 2011, pp. 709–718.

[3] E. S. Rawski, 'Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Nov. 1996, pp. 829–850, p. 832.

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carefully accumulated statistical data as well as micro-histories of European religious communities operating in China. It is alert to the importance of contact zones and of the circulation of texts, goods, and people, and of networks. In part, Global China explores the ways in which we can use techniques from other disciplines, such as cultural studies (Ien Ang) and the history of medicine (Angela Leung), to understand the history of globalization in China and China's role in globalization. Global China positions itself against a historiography that has self-consciously 'liberated itself' from the 'Western impact-Chinese response' model, not by way of examining the internal, endogenous dynamics, as called for by Paul Cohen's *Discovering History in China*, but by expanding both the timescale and the mode of inquiry in order to highlight the connections and processes that help us understand the entangled and entwined history of globalization and China.[4] In doing all this, it challenges the continued obsession with industrial revolution, the expansion of European militarized empires across the world, and the emergence of the modern in the nineteenth century.

Global history, in being concerned with connections and comparisons, seems to be a promising way of bringing China into the centre of deep disciplinary enquiry, not simply as an adornment to show geographical spread. Yet, there are some problems. In attempting to make a vast past and space legible, the terms of global history can flatten structural differences and significance. Terms such as 'network', 'transfer', and 'mobility' assume equivalence across space and time, without shedding light on the container or context of those connections. Such equivalence can seem refreshingly free of politics in light of the disproportionate agency allotted to both Western actors and forces in imperial histories. Yet, this can come at the expense of understanding the power that institutions and states exert over or allocate to individuals and social groups.

Together, the articles in this Forum decentre our frameworks for China and the global. By highlighting new approaches that exploit a variety of historical tools, they show how using China as the measure for our analysis can deepen our global historical inquiry. Expanding the timescale to include the early modern period, and indeed the deep past, they challenge the conventional temporal boundaries of globalization during the age of high imperialism. Global China decentres both the Eurocentric

[4] P. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

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categories of historical knowledge as well as China as hegemonic state and cultural centre.

Each of the articles in this collection highlights a particular aspect of how we can study the 'global' and 'China'. Pamela Crossley's article responds to Eurocentric accounts of the world that use European normality as the baseline for global and comparative history. In her article, Crossley makes a methodological intervention in such global history accounts and argues that China should be seen not as the prime mover of history, but as the prime indicator. As Crossley shows, there are significant challenges to displacing European normality. Both the modern historical discipline's origins in nineteenth-century Europe's nation building and its rich documentary record reinforce Europe-centred comparison in global history. There are several compelling arguments for a China-centred comparativism: China being exemplary for agricultural, densely populated societies and the historical patterns of its urbanization. Yet, it is Crossley's trenchant reading of Adam Smith that provides the most food for thought: according to Smith, China overvalued agriculture and undervalued skilled labour. Smith saw the new source of wealth not in exporting in itself but in the 'cost and profit differentials, and of the transformations—in credit, insurance, and eventually in privatization—that would make more wealth possible'. For Smith, it was the profitability of long-distance trade and markets, not mechanization, that was the more dominant factor in explaining twenty-first century development.

Eugenio Menegon's article examines the lives of European and Chinese Christians in the late imperial Chinese capital. Micro-history, as pioneered by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, examines in fine detail the culture and *mentalité* of individual lives. Differences in religious identity or ethnicity are less important than the human condition in Menegon's analysis of everyday life in the empire. Using a micro-historical scope, Menegon zooms in to show the human condition animating the 'power of personal networking across cultures and political and economic systems', thus implicitly subverting assumptions of essential difference in the cross-cultural encounters by Europeans, Manchus, and Chinese. Menegon zooms out on the global infrastructure of commerce for the macro-historical setting. The provision of luxury objects was a greater preoccupation than identity or belief for his motley cast of characters, which include clockmakers, eunuchs, missionaries, painters, and merchants. Through four vignettes of significant actors on the margins of capital life from the 1740s to the 1770s, Menegon reflects upon the limitations and advantages of his varied source bases (ego-documents, institutional sources) and what they reveal about the social-political milieu

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of his actors. Although Christianity had been prohibited since 1724, European and Chinese Christians continued with their daily lives in the centre of imperial culture. The luxury objects they crafted were highly valued by members of the court, including the emperor himself, and they were complicit in the corruption of the court. Yet sometimes the business schemes of Chinese Christians could go deeply wrong: for example, the transport of European and Chinese merchandise was subject to the vagaries of the water levels of the Grand Canal and the extortionate taxation practices of custom officers.

The Chinese are one of the world's largest diasporas and Global China includes Chinese migrants and their descendants.[5] It is in the history of migration that one of the most enduring characteristics of Chinese identity comes forward: native-place. In the modern period, the southern edge of China saw large numbers from Fujian and Guangdong migrate to Southeast Asia. Hong Kong was the first stop for many who embarked for North America and Australia.[6] The production of global and local medical knowledge in the Canton–Hong Kong–Macao nexus around 1900—the subject of Angela Leung's article—sat on top of the region's thriving maritime trade, with much of it in human migration.

This formation of medical knowledge happened away from the political and intellectual centres of both the Qing and British empires, but at the heart of the regional and global trade. Accompanying the acceleration of maritime trade that now brought this region—already well-connected to Asia—to the global market, Leung shows how the Canton–Hong Kong–Macao nexus became more susceptible to disease. The local medical culture had roots in negotiations with North Chinese epistemology, trade with Southeast Asia, and the support of the local Chinese merchant community. Hong Kong's rise as a shipping port in the British empire meant both that unprecedented numbers of bodies flowed in and out of the city, and new hybrid Western-style hospitals and merchant-run charity hall institutions arose as sites of teaching and healing for Western and Chinese doctors.

In the final article of this Forum, Ien Ang examines how ethnic enclaves for Chinese in the Anglophone world have adapted along with China's changing status in the global economy. The severe rejection experienced

[5] A. Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Politics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[6] E. Sinn, *Pacific Crossings: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).

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by Chinese migrants led to strong links being maintained between themselves and their ancestral homeland.[7] In the resource frontiers of the Pacific in Australia and California, Chinese labourers built railroads and mined coal and gold. Almost as soon as they arrived, however, Chinese faced hostility from the Anglo settler communities, who ironically had settled there only recently themselves. Overseas Chinese sought security in spatially circumscribed areas—Chinatowns—that served to reinforce wider views of Chinese as clannish and insular. In the early twentieth century, Chinatowns were sites for Chinese migrants who wanted to connect to their linguistic and cultural homes, and were considered ghettoes of ethnicity and crime by the wider public. Chinatowns were both territorial enclaves within a larger metropolitan context and simultaneously deterritorialized. Such older ideas about Chinatown have since been displaced. Since the 1970s, Australia, following the United States and Canada, loosened restrictions against Chinese migration. New urban planning transformed Chinatown in Sydney into a restaurant and entertainment quarter; the erection of the Chinatown arch symbolized the 'Chinese essence' that planners wished to impose. Today, Ang argues, Chinatown is 'a metaphor for the world's ambivalence about the rise of China'; the 'proliferation of Chinatowns is also an index of the increasingly palpable and undeniable presence of "global China" in local contexts everywhere'.

Where is Global China located? As our historiographies are increasingly transnational and global, and less centred on the nation-state, we can easily see and follow the circulation of people, capital, and goods that are made in China and dispersed through trade networks all over the world. To know and understand China challenges the limits of knowledge contained in any one discipline or sub-discipline. The articles in this Forum are by no means a totality of new approaches to Global China, but nonetheless pose a valuable array of questions from a select few fields by scholars who are at the cutting edge of their own fields.

[7] G. Benton and H. Liu, *Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), p. 20; M. Y. Hsu, 'Migration and Native Place: *Qiaokan* and the Imagined Community of Taishan County, Guangdong, 1893–1993', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2, May 2000, pp. 307–331, esp. pp. 310, 322.

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