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Blogging AAS 2010 (5)

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By Miri Kim

SESSION 47: [EMPIRE AND SPACE](#)

In this panel, organized by Siyen Fei (University of Pennsylvania), Mark Edward Lewis (Stanford University), Hilde De Weerd (University of Oxford), and Fei presented papers that creatively engaged the work of G. William Skinner on how to conceptualize empire in time and space. Lewis proposed that the northern capital historically functioned as a peripheral center that connected the agricultural and economic centers found further south with the steppe, and this positioning, a prime concern of the dynasties founded by nomads, helped maintain China as a coherent empire. De Weerd used social network analysis to mine Song dynasty *biji* for data that could model the level of connectivity of the elites that produced them. Fei explained her interest in emphasizing dynastic differences in the study of urbanization in China, arguing that the way rulers seek to order political/economic/social space has a strong impact on the types of urban development that take place. Discussant Kären Wigen's comments pushed the conversation to include maritime frontiers, the merits of visual versus textual representations of data, and the intellectual dynamism within Skinner's body of work.

Like many in the audience, I was struck by the visual complexity and clarity of De Weerd's diagrams of *biji* social networks. One network diagram, resembling the cross-section of a dandelion clock, showed the high number of social connections possible for a *biji* author (located at the center of the circle). Information (people, places, etc.) mentioned only once in the *biji* extended out from the author to occupy the outermost circumference of the diagram, while those mentioned the most filled up the diagram's core. It made me marvel at how efficiently a single well-chosen image can deliver information, and wonder about the kinds of things such an image might not convey (can circular representations be hierarchical? are all datapoints equivalent?). This session brought to the table a lot of food for thought; just the sort of panel you want to find yourself attending at 8:30 in the morning.

SESSION 186: [BORDERS CROSSED: THE LIAODONG FRONTIER IN QING-CHOSŎN RELATIONS](#)

For this session on the borderland Liaodong, part of the region commonly known as Manchuria, Seonmin Kim (Keimyung University) first talked about how ginseng was transported in Liaodong via various types of trade/exchange. Her paper investigated the tensions between Chosŏn rulers and the Qing founders when it came to this highly esteemed mountain root. Drawing on biographical materials, Adam Bohnet (University of British Columbia) considered some of the ways alternate personal histories of Ming loyalist refugees in Liaodong attempted to carve out a favorable political and social space. Seung B. Kye (Korea University), going last, discussed joint Manchu-Korean military expeditions to the Amur area in the mid-seventeenth century, which, in spite of less than stellar results, could be made to contribute to positive assessments of national strength.

Evelyn S. Rawski (University of Pittsburgh) and Pamela Crossley (Dartmouth College) provided insightful comments, highlighting the value of using Korean-language sources for scholars of late imperial China. An audience member added that there are also documents in Russian for events like the expeditions. A commentator raised the question of whether we should conceptualize Manchuria as a frontier zone or not, and what the stakes are in framing it as a frontier, and panelists and attendees debated ways in which to extend cross-border analyses to include Japan, which enters the continental fray at key points during medieval as well as modern times.

SESSION 227: [READING BETWEEN THE FINE LINES: NON-VISUAL MEANING IN SONG AND MING PAINTINGS](#) (A PANEL IN HONOR OF PROFESSOR EMERITA ELLEN JOHNSTON LAING)

Honoring an important scholar in Chinese art history, Session 227 brought together four art historians and one historian for a sumptuous presentation on Song and Ming genre paintings. Chair Susan N. Erickson (University of Michigan) began the panel with preliminary remarks and a brief introduction

about the panel, and then Maggie Bickford (Brown University) explored the fascinating world of bird and flower paintings, where meanings with intricate histories lurk behind every beak and petal. Next, Alfreda Murck (Palace Museum, Beijing) presented her take on the mystery behind "Magpies and Hare" by Cui Bo, a prominent Song court painter (she noted however that this particular piece was made before his tenure at the capital), interpreted as a complex story of misplaced expectations and domestic scandal at the apex of Song society. Ann Wetherell (University of Oregon) argued that the crows in the works of the Ming painter Shen Zhou represent the painter himself, cast as a filial son, and Ina Asim (University of Oregon) explored in detail the cityscape found in a scroll depicting Nanjing during the Ming period.

Among the points raised by discussant Julia K. Murray (University of Wisconsin, Madison) was the problem posed by extrapolating when textual materials are scarce and the extant examples that we have contain features that can support diverse interpretations. Unfortunately there was not enough time for questions, which most certainly would have been interesting, but as Susan Erickson commented at the close, one of the nicest things about AAS is the opportunity to pick up discussions begun in formal sessions in dinners with friends and colleagues.

Miri Kim is a graduate student at the University of California, Irvine.

SESSION 174: [A MARGINALITY DEBATE: REGIONAL FORMATION AND TRANSHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH CHINA AND THE PEARL RIVER DELTA](#)

By Charles Wheeler

This panel brought together scholars from history and geography, using the Pearl River Delta as the means to explore questions of regionality.

John Carroll of Hong Kong University began the proceedings with a discussion of the Canton System in the eighteenth century. The system has long suffered the stereotype as the model of everything dysfunctional about late Qing state and society, in particular of China's refusal to come to grips with the realities of the changing world, and of the incompatibility between China's "world order" and the new order of the so-called West. Placing the system in a regional setting, Carroll pointed out, reminds us that the system evolved in a setting very different from conventional depictions of the Canton system, which focus narrowly on its relationships with Westerners. In fact, the system evolved from a long history of commercial interaction with people of the Nanyang, of which Westerners were only a part, and most of that time a very small one. The main driver of this interest was not conflict, but mutual commitment to financial gain. Cultural mixing was only one of its consequences, and it was manifold. Every instance of conflict can be offset by examples of negotiation and accommodation. In fact, such practices were necessary, for it is evident that the much-maligned regulations of the system were actually rarely ever followed. Such a thing is not surprising, when one views the Canton system in the regional perspective of China's longtime trade relationship with the Nanyang, rather than the narrow view of Sino-Western relations.

Carolyn Cartier, the panel's organizer, brought us out of the eighteenth century to the present, to look at the PRC's plans for transforming the Pearl River Delta into a mega-metropolis it calls "Shengang," spanning Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Cartier showed us an excellent example of governmentality in action. Here, the Chinese state has initiated a long-term campaign to mobilize a set of practices and ideologies in order to produce a "regime of truth," that is, to introduce the idea of the Shengang metropolis and instill within it the aura of inevitability among the people of the Pearl River Delta. This campaign is more than discursive: Ongoing efforts to manipulate the public to acquiesce to unpopular integrative rail links between the two cities have their discursive side, but the rail will lay a structural basis for the state's hoped-for integration. In the end, this will change prevailing ideas of territoriality in the Pearl River Delta, and spatial politics of the region within it. It will certainly transform the place of special administrative zones like Shenzhen and particularly Hong Kong within China.

Angelina Chin carried this discussion further, by addressing the PRC's campaigns to build the Shengang mega-city, to integrate Hong Kong more fully into Guangdong province, and to inculcate a deeper sense of collective identity as patriotic citizens of China. Chin analyzed the difficulties the

government faces in achieving this goal. This can be seen in the ongoing struggles between Hong Kong locals and their government and real estate developers over the demolition of historic buildings, communities and districts. In their discursive battles, activists have sought to instill a collective memory that encourages the imagination of a particular kind of Hong Kong that draws from a pre-1997 past. At the same time, they overlook recent history of both Hong Kong and China as irrelevant, or as lacking the quintessential Hong Kong character of the past. This pits activists and their supporters against officials in the local government working to move Hong Kong toward integration within greater Guangdong, and with China at large.

I next took the discussion to sea, as a vehicle for questioning whether alternatives to the longstanding macroregional model are possible. I argued that any attempt to create new regional perspectives of places like the Pearl River Delta needed to take greater account of the sea as a social space, in order to better detect the geography of social flows moving into the delta through the sea, the function of the sea as a resource, and the way the sea has shaped notions of territoriality. It is also important because center of gravity for places like the PRD sit within the littoral, a distinct human-ecological and socio-historical unit that is neither landlubber nor seabound, but is very much a part of an Amphibious Asia. Here, littoral cultures were central to the processes that transformed the delta into the hub of multiple interactions and integrations. They re-shaped outsiders like the Han who came to conquer, colonize and exploit, and provided not only material wealth, but the wealth of labor and technical expertise, without which maritime *Chinese* history would never have occurred. Even as littoral cultures have declined in modern times, the influence of littoral and ocean geographies continue, as new economic scales, commercial technologies and cultural desires in the twentieth century created a new territorial regional economy that has "pushed" Chinese territorial ambitions both outward, and into the depths.

Jack Wills was the panel's first discussant. He reminded us that, however we might imagine the sea, in reality even the most seafaring culture at some point must come to shore. He challenged me to take my aquatic view of the world upstream, into one of the world's most complex river systems, with its very different set of integrative and productive possibilities. Looking to the other papers, Wills noted that there are some fascinating historical precedents to the PRC's efforts today to resist the PRD's persistent pull into the larger maritime system, and to tether it more securely to the Chinese state. In the Qing, for example, the court masterfully recruited some of its most talented officials to keep things in hand in the maritime South. These included members of the Imperial Household, and such distinguished men as Ruan Yuan, the Governor General of Lingnan.

David Goodman provided the next comments. He began by asking whether it was important to always talk about centers and regions. Regions have existed without centers, after all. Commenting on Carroll's paper, he noted that we can see how many of the ideas about the South, and many of the conflicts that form around the idea, haven't changed all that much in the last three centuries. Conflicts over extraterritoriality in the eighteenth century appear just as complicated by subtext as they do today; if so, the Google case today has deep precedents. Goodman also took to task the whole idea of the South as the driver of China's development. Such a view subscribes to the very notion of a Chinese center surrounded by peripheries. Goodman sees this as a Hong Kong-Guangzhou view of the China. In fact, this is not what historically has motivated the state into promoting commercial development in the South. Quite the contrary; in fact, the initiators of reform during the Deng years chose the South as a strategic place to do something they were forced to do, somewhere where it wouldn't affect the rest of China too much. In commenting on Chin's paper, he noted that Hong Kong faces a very unique dilemma, in that it cannot promote itself among competing regions in China on the basis of a local uniqueness in its history and culture, because these are embedded in a colonial past that was never a part of the PRC.

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