



Social Transformations in Chinese Societies

Guest editorial

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Interdisciplinary studies on Chaozhou society and history

By focusing on the maritime social history of Chaozhou (潮州)—Shantou (汕頭) region (today's Chaoshan 潮汕) in Guangdong Province, this special issue features five articles that explore the role of merchants, laborers and migrants who shaped the contours of this coastal area. Our contributors consult original, often newly released archival materials and fieldwork observations investigating the transnational flows of goods, capital, people and cuisine culture in Chaoshan, transitioning from a stage of disintegration at the turn of the twentieth century into a state-centered society in the Maoist era (1949-1976). The analytical emphasis on the intrinsic linkage between overseas migration and socioeconomic development place the historical experience of Chaoshan natives and their efforts to support transnational networks at the heart of the discussion.

Why do we focus on Chaoshan? Chaoshan is not a homogeneous region; it is composed of many linguistic, cultural, social and ethnic groupings. Conventional characterizations of Chaoshan overlook two important features of this maritime landscape. First, the coastline of Chaoshan, known for its tidal waves, reoriented inhabitants from an inward-looking Great Wall mentality that opposed contacts with outsiders, to an outward-looking maritime culture that seized overseas career opportunities and embraced new ideas and practices from abroad. Let us imagine that you grew up in Chaoshan. Even if you had never seen the ocean before, you saw rivers daily and imagined them widening out into the South China Sea. You had a picture of this great body of water in your mind from descriptions heard from travelers to Southeast Asia, Shantou merchants, as well as foreign missionaries and native evangelists coming upriver. You might also imagine leaving home one day for a world of countless opportunities, of crowded commercial cities like Shantou, Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok and Singapore, and of tropical fruits and exotic commodities. By contrast, if you were born in the mountainous interior of neighboring Jiangxi Province, you might spend your entire life in an isolated rural settlement. Second, the invention of Chaozhou Scholarship (*Chaozhou xue* 潮州學) by the late Sinologist Rao Zongyi or Jao Tsung-I (饒宗頤; 1917–2018), initially funded by wealthy merchants of Chaozhou origin in Hong Kong such as Li Ka-Shing (李嘉誠), and now endorsed by the Chinese municipal and national authorities, addresses the Confucian literati's representations of Chaoshan in classical Chinese literature. These scholars are only concerned with the Confucianization of this maritime society and ignore the varieties of local languages, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Neither do they discuss what constituted Chaoshan in different temporal and spatial settings. People from the traditional political and cultural center of Chaozhou prefectural city and Shantou often dismiss those in the interior as less Confucianized and look down upon people from the districts of Haifeng (海豐) and Lufeng (陸豐).

Against this backdrop, this special issue proposes an alternative way to rewrite the longstanding top-down, nationalistic and state-centered narrative of Chaoshan. As the ancestral homelands of tens of millions of overseas Chinese in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, Europe and North America, Chaoshan has a long history of inflow and outflow migrations. For centuries, Chaoshan was deeply integrated into the ever-growing maritime economy of the South China Sea. Since the eighteenth century, countless natives left their families to find work in Siam (now Thailand), planning to return to China upon retirement. While living abroad, they maintained contacts with their home villages through kinship and native place ties, which provided an effective network of support. Because these migratory routes were outside Chinese official control, they created an invisible maritime highway that not only



transcended the boundaries of traditional empires and modern nation-states but also channeled resources into this region. Recent studies by Choi (2018), Lee and Chow (2017), Lee (2018), Macauley (2016) and Thai (2018) reveal the interconnectivity between Chaoshan and Southeast Asia through transnational trading networks, smuggling activities and Christian church ties. When different Chinese regimes co-opted, policed, and regulated these maritime activities, the coercive measures prompted local merchants, laborers and coastal inhabitants to pursue independent strategies for survival and empowerment.

One common thread woven into the five articles is the determination of Chaoshan communities to sustain their longstanding transnational business networks. Leahy consults the US diplomatic documents to examine the commercial activities of Alfred J. Kohlberg, a prominent entrepreneur who hired tens of thousands of local embroiderers to produce handkerchiefs for upscale American department stores in the 1930s. Shortly after Japan occupied Shantou in June 1939, Kohlberg and his Chinese business associates bribed Japanese officials to keep the port open for American merchant vessels. Surveying the spatial distribution of overseas remittance businesses in downtown Shantou, Xie, Ouyang, Huang and Zhang regard the inflow of overseas Chinese capital as essential for local real estate development in the mid-twentieth century. Taking a closer look at the survival of overseas remittance businesses in Shantou under the Japanese occupation from 1939 to 1945, Kim argues that local merchants used innovative strategies to maintain their commercial activities and networks across the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. Evidently, these resilient horizontal trading networks provided Kohlberg and Chaoshan merchants with valuable material and organizational resources to adjust and adapt to a wartime situation.

The 1950s saw a new era of state-society relations. After the Communist revolution of 1949, Chaoshan witnessed a transition from a fluid, mobile maritime environment into an increasingly state-centric agrarian society. Wang shows that faced with new barriers of border control under the Maoist rule (1949-1976), Chaoshan natives strove to circumvent institutional obstacles in order to go to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. When Chaoshan migrants in Taiwan realized that they could no longer return to their ancestral homelands, they had to rebuild their life abroad. Tseng presents a fascinating case study of the popularization of Chaoshan *sha-cha* (沙茶) sauce, an indispensable ingredient for beef hot pot and stir-fried dishes, in post-1949 Tainan. These migrants played a pivotal role in introducing the *sha-cha* sauce to Taiwan, thereby securing a stable source of income for themselves and globalizing Chaoshan food culture.

Taken together, the vast array of topics illustrates the scale, process and consequences of transnational flows of people, commodities and material culture between Chaoshan and Southeast Asia in times of war and regime change. These articles provide a methodological lens through which to evaluate the diversities in coastal China. The fascinating process of transnational encounters never operated in a vacuum. Such interactions were largely shaped by a wide range of exogenous and endogenous forces of change and a complicated web of human and occupational relations. Only by studying this historical dimension can we better appreciate the multiplicity of Chinese maritime world.

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