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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Interlopers, Rogues, or Cosmopolitans? Wu Jianzhang and Early Modern Commercial Networks on the China Coast**

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#### **Abstract**

After the First Opium War (1839–1842), British and American merchants negotiated with Chinese officials in Shanghai to work out the framework of the new treaty port regime. One key player in these negotiations was Wu Jianzhang, a Cantonese merchant who became circuit intendant of the Shanghai region. Wu, however, also had links to Cantonese sailors and anti-Qing secret societies. When the Small Swords Society took Shanghai in 1853, he found himself entangled in conflicting responsibilities and networks. Foreign traders and Chinese officials regarded Wu, like other middlemen on the Chinese coast, with a mixture of respect and distrust. Wu's situation, however, was not unique to the mid-nineteenth century. This article compares Wu to other intermediaries who played similar roles in the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries, in order to show the ways in which Wu, his predecessors, and those who followed in his footsteps connected China to the wider world by navigating the treacherous waters of diplomacy, war, and commerce. The work of John K. Fairbank, who in the 1950s pioneered the study of such people as Wu Jianzhang, can find new meaning in the twenty-first century, enabling us to understand the transnational implications of China's local social history.

Keywords: Shanghai, Opium War, treaty ports, *hong* merchants, Canton, Fujian, Taiping rebellion, Small Swords Society, Qing dynasty, China coast, Wu Jianzhang

#### **Introduction**

Wu Jianzhang (ca. 1810–1865), a Cantonese merchant who served as the *daotai* 道台 (circuit intendant) of Shanghai, barely survived the 1850s. At first he prospered, both politically and financially, due to his key position managing British and American merchant access to the port under the provisions of the treaties that settled the First Opium War. But when his Cantonese compatriot Liu Lichuan led the secret Small Swords Society (Xiaodaohui) to occupy Shanghai in 1853, Wu had to flee for protection to the International Settlement. While Shanghai was under siege by Qing forces, Wu aided the court by hiring foreign ships to suppress the

Taiping and Small Swords rebellions, but the court in Beijing impeached and exiled him to Xinjiang for failing to resist the Small Swords effectively and for having illicit business relations with the American firm Russell and Company. He was sentenced to deportation to Ili the next year, but because he had contributed his own funds to support the court, friends pleaded for mercy. By 1856, he had turned up again in Shanghai as an adviser to the American doctor Peter Parker, and by 1858, he had become the expectant circuit intendant. He appears to have remained in Shanghai until the end of his life (Leung 1990, 56).

This article describes, first, the entangled relationships between Wu Jianzhang and Liu Lichuan, two Cantonese men who played major roles in Shanghai during the 1850s. They came from the same hometown in Guangdong and encountered each other as business partners, negotiators, and supporters of armed men who fought battles on opposite sides of the walled city of Shanghai. Both had connections not only with Cantonese society and Shanghai merchants, but also with foreign merchants and officials and the Qing court. They occupied the vulnerable and open spaces in between rural society and the foreign traders of the treaty ports, and they took advantage of the opportunities that this intermediate position offered. Placed at a crucial node of global interactions in the mid-nineteenth century, Wu and Liu have much to tell us about China's entry into the modern world. But they were neither the first nor the last Chinese who occupied this position. They had predecessors and, in turn, left legacies. After discussing the mid-nineteenth-century events, I will extend my analysis to look at two other men who found themselves facing similar dilemmas at different times: Lin Xiyuan, a Fujianese gentryman prominent in the sixteenth century, and Wu Tingfang, a cosmopolitan merchant active in Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century. A comparison of the common patterns of such men and their networks helps us trace the long threads that have always tied China to the wider world.

### **The Many Faces of Wu Jianzhang**

Wu Jianzhang played a major role in negotiations with the British and Americans over levying customs duties in Shanghai. He also had business connections with the American firm Russell and Company and contacts with important guild merchants in Shanghai. In 1854, he negotiated with the British, American, and French consuls to create the Foreign Inspectorate of Customs, the precursor to the Imperial Maritime Customs, a major provider of revenue to the Qing government (Fairbank 1969, 440–443; van de Ven 2014). Wu also had close ties to a

fellow Cantonese, Liu Lichuan, with whom he had worked in business. When the Taiping threatened Shanghai, Wu tried to recruit Liu's militiamen to defend the city. In 1853, the Small Swords Society, a branch of the Triad secret society, staged an uprising and occupied Shanghai from 1853 to 1855. After the Qing recovered the city, Wu continued to wield influence in Shanghai through the 1850s.

Wu was clearly a man involved in many networks at different levels of society, and he interacted with a diverse group of individuals, including foreigners, his fellow Cantonese, rebels against the Qing, and local officials. How was he able to connect so many diverse groups, and how did he juggle their competing interests? As his impeachment shows, his position was never secure: a sudden change in the power of one faction could damage his status and wreck his plans. But the fact that he managed to stay in an expectant or regular post of circuit intendant for nearly a decade demonstrates his value to his patrons.

Source material about the elusive Wu Jianzhang is rather scarce. The most revealing information about him comes from British letters in the Foreign Office archives and the documentary collection *Chouban yiwu shimo*, a compilation of sources on Qing foreign relations created by the Qing court from 1843 to 1875 and published in the 1930s (*Chouban yiwu shimo* 1979; Wilkinson 2013, 828). Both foreign and Qing sources express frustration and bias against Wu and his confederates. The British consuls blamed Wu's duplicity on his background in the Canton trade before he came to Shanghai.<sup>1</sup> The Qing sources likewise criticize Wu as an unscrupulous wheeler-dealer who diverted customs funds into his own pockets and undermined Qing authority by failing to act against the Small Swords. He fit the court's image of the insidious "Han traitor" (*hanjian* 汉奸), the kind of man who became too intimate with foreigners and rebels at the expense of imperial authority.

But Wu's ties to the Cantonese secret society communities add even more complexity to his networks. He not only mediated between foreigners and the Shanghai merchant class; he also extended his reach into Cantonese lower-class society. When the Small Swords attacked Shanghai in 1853, he found himself caught between his multiple connections. He was forced to seek refuge in the International Settlement to gain protection from the rebels, and he bought ships to support the imperial forces in their battle against the Small Swords. But he could never

shake off an air of suspicion; both foreigners and the court believed he was profiting by playing different sides against one another.

More recent work on the Small Swords uprising has illuminated Wu from a different angle (Shanghai shehui kexueyuan 1964; Fass 1970). Social historians looking at the roots of conflict in the Qing have tried to uncover the underlying motivation of the Triad and Small Swords uprisings. People's Republic of China (PRC) historians describe those who participated in these uprisings as anti-imperialist peasant rebels: "The Shanghai Small Swords uprising was a revolutionary military uprising by the people of Shanghai against imperialist aggression and Qing feudal rule. It was an important component of the Taiping revolutionary movement" (Shanghai shehui kexueyuan 1964, 5). Political scientist Elizabeth Perry, on the other hand, finds the uprising rooted in anti-tax resistance movements in the countryside around Shanghai, primarily motivated by resistance to Qing tax collectors (Perry 1985). Wu himself appears first as a figure trying to mobilize militia forces to put down the Small Swords and raise funds from his contacts among the merchant guilds of the city. He failed, however, because his militia forces deserted to the Small Swords, forcing him to take refuge in the International Settlement.

Foreigners viewed Wu from the outside, as a duplicitous but influential figure determined to limit their access to the Chinese market. The Beijing court came to see Wu as an untrustworthy agent of foreign powers, too closely allied with commercial interests to be a loyal official. Wu at first attracted the loyalty of Cantonese and Fujianese braves, who were willing to fight under his banner to defend Shanghai, but the Small Swords leaders eventually came to see him as a hostile representative of the Qing administration. Each of these perspectives reveals only one face of this multifaceted man. The man in between is always vulnerable to attack from many sides. Can we discover the "real" Wu Jianzhang in the midst of this welter of conflicting interpretations?

We can view Wu as foreigners did, from the outside in, or as the upper bureaucracy saw him, from the top down, or from the social historians' lower depths looking up, but what if we view him from the middle, in his own terms? In this light, Wu belongs not only to the modern age of treaty ports, but also to a longer lineage of Chinese coastal merchant-officials who wove complex chains of intrigue, smuggling, militia organization, and official responsibility, going back at least to the Ming dynasty. If we place Wu Jianzhang in this Chinese lineage, we can

provide a more local view of his activities that goes beyond accusations of mere corruption, self-seeking opportunism, or treason.

Ever since the late Ming dynasty, prominent Chinese of the southern coast had drawn on networks linking local society and foreign trade to engage in complex maneuvers of diplomacy, commerce, and war. After the mid-nineteenth century, other Chinese men obtained Western educations and continued this tradition of brokerage and mediation, trying to serve Chinese official, national, and foreign interests. They prospered because of their unusual skills at cultural brokerage, for a while. But they also found themselves in vulnerable positions, suspected by all sides of deception, disloyalty, and intrigue. As the consummate shapeshifters in the eyes of others, never considered completely trustworthy by anyone, they epitomize the dilemmas of many Chinese in the globalizing world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Many large-scale overviews of global history give us a grand view of abstract processes shared by many parts of the world. They provide less information about the individuals whose actions made globalization happen (Rosenberg 2012; Iriye 2014; Osterhammel 2014). Ignoring quirky individuals, famous and obscure, makes globalization look like an inevitable linear process driven by irresistible economic and geopolitical forces. This perspective risks repeating the errors of the determinist, teleological Marxism that plagued historical study in the Maoist era. We need to recapture the contingency of historical change by linking local history to global developments. Biographies on a global scale, such as the works of Timothy Brook (2008), Natalie Z. Davis (2006), and John Wills (2001), represent one effective way to do this. The conclusion to this article develops some of the implications of this biographical approach for the global history of China.

### **The Question of Wu**

Wu Jianzhang came from Xiangshan, in Guangdong, and was a member of the Samqua hong merchant firm. He purchased the *jiansheng* examination degree and became acting intendant of the SuSongTai circuit in 1843. He became active in Shanghai by 1848 and took charge of foreign relations as superintendent of customs at Shanghai in 1851 (Hummel 1943–1944, 865–866). Over the next two years, he clashed with the British over several trade issues, mainly because the British felt that he had not fairly enforced the collection of the tariff set by the treaties ending the Opium War. As described above, he fled to the International Settlement

when the Small Swords Society occupied the walled city. He was impeached and sentenced to deportation to Ili but returned to Shanghai as an official in 1858.

That, in brief, is Wu's story. But what entitled him, an outsider to Shanghai with a low-level purchased degree, to such an important position, and what got him into so much trouble? From the court's point of view, Wu had special skills that allowed him to deal firmly with foreign efforts to penetrate the Chinese market. He had learned some English during his time in Canton, so he could communicate directly with foreigners, avoiding dependence on their interpreters (*Chouban yiwu shimo* 1979, 2.6b). He also demonstrated firmness, honesty, and resolve in resisting illegal activity by foreign merchants. When British silk merchants attempted to trade illegally in Huzhou and Taihu, he called in the British consul, insisting that he exert control over merchant infractions, and the consul called the merchants back. When the British hired Chinese laborers, who then stole 700 taels of silver and absconded, they asked the *daotai* for compensation. Wu replied that the British had failed to check on the laborers' hometowns and failed to obtain guarantors; they had hired unreliable men (*wu laili zhi ren* 无来历之人), so the losses were their own fault.

Wu's successor as *daotai*, Huang Zantang, cited Wu's resolute position to support his case that direct, firm action by local officials could successfully ward off foreign penetration. He even compared Wu's actions to those of Lin Zexu, the powerful official whose harsh policies against opium trafficking had incited the British to start the First Opium War. In Huang's view, Lin's policies of shutting down trade and burning opium had gained a victory. Wu also demonstrated resolve in the Qingpu affair of 1848, when British missionaries left Shanghai to preach in Qingpu, 40 kilometers southwest of Shanghai, beyond the restricted zone for foreigners. Local boatmen attacked them, but the local magistrate rescued them. British consul Sir Rutherford Alcock blocked the movement of 4,000 junks bringing grain tribute shipments to the capital in order to enforce his demand for compensation. Local officials resisted paying anything to the British, but when Wu arrived in Shanghai in 1848, he was able to arrange for the release of the grain tribute boats after the governor-general approved compensation (Fairbank 1969, 395; *Chouban yiwu shimo* 1979, 2.30b; Bergère 2009, 19).

Until the 1850s, then, Wu succeeded in serving the court in its efforts to tax the Shanghai trade while also keeping foreign activities under control. The foreign merchants paid him

grudging respect, finding him a useful intermediary, knowledgeable in commercial practices, who restricted their efforts to smuggle goods while also ensuring that trade was carried on with reasonable security.

### **Liu Lichuan, the Cantonese Merchant-Rebel**

Liu Lichuan rose to power in Shanghai by a different method. Born in Xiangshan in 1820, Liu, like Wu, learned pidgin English after moving to Hong Kong. He joined the Triad Society there and then moved to Shanghai to work as an interpreter for a Western firm. Outside the city, in the same country town of Qingpu where the missionaries had trespassed, the local village headman (*dibao*) Zhou Lichun had led a protest to the county seat to plead for tax exemptions due to bad harvests. Zhou fought off the magistrate's guards and established himself as an influential strongman. Zhou, the local strongman, and Liu, the ambitious immigrant, thereby created an alliance against Qing officials trying to enforce tax collection.

After the Taiping armies took Nanjing in March 1853, a group of Triads calling themselves the Small Swords Society occupied Xiamen. Wu Jianzhang assembled a militia corps comprising unemployed Cantonese and Fujianese dockworkers to defend Shanghai (Shanghai shehui kexueyuan 1964, 36). But he soon had to disband them due to a lack of funds and training. They then joined the local Triad groups under Liu Lichuan's leadership. Zhou Lichun took the county seat of Jiading and, two days later (on Confucius's birthday, September 7), Liu launched his attack on Shanghai. When the Small Swords groups took control of the Shanghai region, Wu sought protection from the foreign community. The British, declaring their neutrality in the war and fearing attacks by the Small Swords, refused to give sanctuary to Wu:

With reference to this individual I have advised Mr. Alcock that, in my opinion, it would be imprudent to permit him again to take refuge in the Foreign settlement, for so long as he is suffered to reside under foreign protection, and there to concoct his schemes against the rebels, it cannot be affirmed that the British authorities are observing the strict neutrality which it is so desirable they should maintain, while his residence in the settlement might furnish the rebels with a plausible pretext for making a forcible entry into it for the purpose of capturing him. (Foreign Office, FO 176 17/205, 29)

The Americans, however, gave him shelter in their compound until Wu left the city to organize resistance.



Soon the Small Swords lost control of the countryside. Zhou Lichun was executed, but the rebels held out in the walled city of Shanghai (figure 1). They plundered the yamen treasury and confiscated wealth from rich residents of the city to support their army against siege by imperial troops. Liu Lichuan tried to negotiate a surrender of the city to Wu Jianzhang, but others resisted Liu's peace offers. He was able to escape back to his home in Guangdong after the city fell to imperial forces on February 17, 1855 (Meadows [1856] 1953, 451).



Figure 1. The “Hall of Rising Spring” in the Yuyuan garden within the walled city of Shanghai served as the headquarters of the Small Swords Society when it occupied the city from 1853 to 1855. *Source:* Zang (2005, 65).

However, the Small Swords were not simple peasant rebels. They also obtained foreign military support. The British consul and the American consul, who worked for Russell and Company, both sold weapons to them. Other Small Swords leaders had also worked for foreign firms. In a bid for Christian support, Liu told foreign missionaries that he had sent letters asking

for an alliance with the Taiping in Nanjing. Although Liu's main ideology rested on restoring the Ming dynasty, not on any version of Christian beliefs, he was perfectly willing to draw in Christian Taiping and Western missionaries alike.

The Small Swords mobilization arose from the impact of treaty ports on the countryside of the lower Yangzi and southeast China. Such tax resistance movements originated in cash-cropping districts near Shanghai: opium smugglers, merchant guilds, and foreign ideas supported the Small Swords (Perry 1985). In this tangle of events, all of the parties had complex connections with one another.

Since the Small Swords clearly made bids for foreign support, it makes little sense to interpret the struggle, as PRC historians do, as a polarized conflict between a peasant-led anti-imperialist movement and foreign colonialists. Nor does Wu himself fit the stereotype of either the feudal oppressor or the running dog of imperialism. Wu originally recruited braves to defend the city against the Taiping; then his hired militiamen from Fujian and Guangdong deserted to join the Triads outside the city. Wu aimed to buy ships and weapons to aid the imperial siege of the city while he hid out with his American business partners. Both Liu Lichuan and Wu Jianzhang could communicate adequately in English with the foreigners, and both tried to secure foreign arms. Wu probably would have accepted the surrender of Liu, his compatriot, if the other rebel leaders had gone along. Militia groups recruited by local gentry and officials, since time immemorial, have switched sides for their own benefit. Officials in the Ming and Qing always preferred to buy off troublesome gangs than to track down and defeat them. Ming officials like the great general Qi Jiguang, who bought off pirate groups to defeat the *wokou* attacks of the sixteenth century, would have understood Wu's dilemma perfectly.

### **Cantonese Face the Wrath of Beijing**

Aside from the actions of these two individuals, Cantonese regionalism influenced both the imperial and rebel operations. Wu raised funds from guild merchants in Shanghai who came from his hometown, while Liu recruited braves from Cantonese villages. Foreign observers blamed Wu for the "Cantonization" of the Shanghai trading system in the early 1850s. As they saw it, Wu and his colleagues reintroduced the corrupt practices of the monopoly trade of Canton into Shanghai, frustrating Western efforts to conduct free trade. But just as important as the action of officials was the influx of Cantonese dockworkers and sailors at the time. Shanghai

acquired its foreign networks through two routes: directly, from foreign residents of the city, and indirectly, via the Cantonese connection of *hong* merchants, workers, and seamen. Both Wu and Liu relied on their influence among Cantonese to bolster their influence in the city.

Wu's Cantonese roots, however, also damaged his reputation in the eyes of the court in Beijing. His indictment in July 1854 charged him with "improper communication with foreigners and support of rebels" (*tongyi yangzei* 通易洋贼). It claimed that he had done improper business with the American firm Russell and Company had diverted customs revenues for his own profit and sent them back to his hometown, and had supported the Small Swords rebels because Liu Lichuan came from his hometown.

Now the very traits that had made Wu useful to the court earlier—his knowledge of English, his business acumen, and his ability to mobilize militia—were turned against him. His accusers argued that he used his intimate acquaintance with foreigners not to keep them out of the China trade, but to go into business with them for his own benefit. He had not collected customs revenues for defense purposes, but to line his own pockets. He recruited militiamen and bought ships for a defense fleet, but the militiamen became rebels, and Wu diverted funds from the yamen treasury to support the rebels. He gained the funds not from his private resources, but from illegally diverting customs revenues. The censor who impeached him concluded passionately: "We must have an upright official, either a neighboring provincial official or the governor-general, strictly investigate, to ensure that this evil traitor who colludes with foreigners does not escape justice" (*Chouban yiwu shimo* 1979, 8.17a).

The emperor ordered Jiangsu governor Huang Zonghan to investigate the charges. Huang sent deputies to interrogate Wu and all the relevant parties, and he also consulted with gentry merchants in Zhejiang and Shanghai. In the end, he confirmed some of the charges, but he was unable to get reliable evidence on many others. Wu had done business with Liu and had recruited his militiamen, but the yamen treasury funds were stolen by Liu's men, not diverted into Wu's pockets. Wu had done business with the American firm, but so had many other merchant officials. Wu allowed American ships carrying sheets of lead to sail into Shanghai, but the investigator could not tell whether the lead was used for bullets or tea chests. He could not prove Wu's embezzlement of customs funds, since he could not get access to the yamen books after the recapture of the city (*Chouban yiwu shimo* 1979, 10.27). What did look suspicious, however,

was the fact that nearly all the sailors in the imperial fleet besieging the city were Cantonese. The investigator presumed that they could secretly contact the Cantonese rebels within the walled city to tip them off to upcoming attacks. Wu suffered guilt by association with his fellow Cantonese.

Was Wu a bandit or the innocent victim of a witch-hunt? Probably both. No one could prove that he personally profited from the Small Swords rebellion. In the end, the court was unable to discover exactly how much cash had been in the yamen and where it had gone. Wu might have portrayed himself as a helpless victim of his own militiamen, who turned against him for profit; on the other hand, his suspicious contacts with the Cantonese in Shanghai made him look like an unreliable outsider.

### **The *Daotai*: A Hinge on the Open Door**

Wu's position as *daotai* made him the Qing official on the spot during this crisis. Historian Yuan-sang Leung describes the Shanghai *daotai* as a key "linkage man" facilitating relations between the Qing and foreign powers. These linkage positions connected two separate worlds or value systems, facilitating interaction between them (Leung 1990). Instead of viewing the Qing bureaucracy as a rigid institution resistant to change, Leung cites the *daotai* position as an example of its adaptability to new global trends.

The circuit intendants stayed in their post only a short time, and they were not conspicuous in official biographies.<sup>2</sup> But they had much more influence on day-to-day practice in the treaty ports than their supervising officials. Wu himself stood out among *daotai* for his knowledge of English, and perhaps also some Portuguese; even knowing a little broken English put him ahead of all Chinese officials in Shanghai. Just as the *daotai* post itself expanded its responsibilities during the late nineteenth century, demonstrating the flexibility of the Qing bureaucracy, the men who occupied the position also exhibited adaptability, shifting their alliances and interests in response to changes in the world around them.

But the man in the middle never sits comfortably. One person's "flexibility and adaptability" is another person's opportunism and duplicity. Wu Jianzhang earned all sorts of epithets during the brief rise and fall of his career, both from contemporaries and from later historians. The moralistic tone has somehow never quite vanished, even today. Greed, opportunism, scheming, ruthlessness, hypocrisy, and deception are constant themes in the

evaluations of Wu by foreign consuls, the Qing court, and Western and PRC historians alike. Does he ever get credit for being cosmopolitan, adaptable, open-minded, or vulnerable? By examining more objectively the position of Wu and other figures like him, we can learn more about the structure of commercial relations along the Chinese coast from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

### **Predecessors and Legacies**

Wu Jianzhang and the men in his network linking the worlds of China and the West did not appear *de novo* in the nineteenth century. They had an illustrious ancestry stretching back at least to the late Ming dynasty. In the late sixteenth century, defying the Ming prohibition on coastal trade, maritime confederations reaching from Japan to Southeast Asia employed coastal Chinese and others in large-scale trading enterprises. Ming officials denounced them as “dwarf [i.e., Japanese] pirates” (*wokou* 倭寇), but, in fact, the majority of these armed traders were Chinese (So 1975). Ming officials opposed to maritime trade knew well that the coastal fleets had close connections with resident Chinese on land. These smugglers needed warehouses to store goods, sources of capital, and distribution networks to the interior. Enraged Ming officials singled out the evil gentry known as “harboring hosts” (*wozhu* 窩主) as the chief source of social decay in the southeast.

#### *Lin Xiyuan: Gentry Pirate*

These local gentry enthusiastically promoted maritime trade with all comers. They gained respect by bringing prosperity to their local communities and by establishing vital contacts with foreign traders. One of the most conspicuous of these harboring hosts was Lin Xiyuan (ca. 1480–ca. 1560). Born in Tong’an, Fujian, Lin obtained his *jinshi* degree in 1517 and became an important official serving in Nanjing. He came from a hereditary military family, so he was able to use his privileged status to accumulate not only official position but local power (Szonyi 2017). When he was demoted to the remote post of a subprefectural magistrate on the border of Guangdong and Annam, he developed a great interest in affairs on the southern border (Goodrich and Fang 1976, 919; Perdue 2015). After actively arguing for an attack on Vietnam when the Mac family usurped the throne, he was dismissed from office for his overly aggressive

intervention in Vietnamese affairs. He then retired to Xiamen, where he took up illegal overseas trade. Acting as a *wozhu*, he imported goods from maritime smugglers and sold them on commission in his local area. He was able to build a fleet of ships, invest capital in ocean voyages, lend money at interest, and accumulate a large income. When the Portuguese arrived on the southeast coast in the 1550s, he argued for opening trade with them, stressing the value of their goods. Lin's promotion of the opening of trade with the Portuguese, along with changes in court policy, finally led to the award of a lease on Macau to the Portuguese in 1557. Despite repeated denunciations by Ming officials, Lin maintained great local influence as a local strongman (*tuhao* 土豪) and earned ritual celebration in the local temple.

His greatest enemy was Zhu Wan (1494–1550), governor of Zhejiang, who was also responsible for policing the Fujian coast against pirate attacks (Goodrich and Fang 1976, 372–375; Higgins 1981). Zhu discovered that many local gentry in Zhejiang and Fujian were financing illegal trade, collecting goods for distribution at the island of Shuangyugang near Ningbo. He attacked and destroyed the outpost at Shuangyugang, but he aroused so much local resentment that he generated enemies in the Ming court. They attacked Zhu and had him dismissed from office. He committed suicide while under investigation. Lin Xiyuan and his allies, with their patronage networks in Beijing, had warded off a state effort to reduce their influence.

Unlike Wu Jianzhang, Lin Xiyuan held no official post after his retirement. But he strung together official patrons in Beijing, creditors, merchants, sailors, braves, and international investors in a tightly woven web of relationships that could protect him from outside intervention. He and his ilk pioneered the commercial contacts that linked China to the global economy after the sixteenth century. When the Spanish took Manila, and the Portuguese held Macau, silver from the New World poured into China through the hands of Chinese merchants, mainly Fujian residents in Manila with connections on the mainland (Gebhardt 2015). Lin, like Wu, occupied the awkward middleman position, under pressure from all sides, but he survived because he had stronger local roots. Wu, a Cantonese who drifted to Shanghai, had to stretch his connections further, making them weaker and more vulnerable than Lin, who focused on the Fujian–Macau–Manila trade route.

*Wu Tingfang: Barrister Rebel*

Later in the nineteenth century, a small group of Chinese educated in the West further extended the cross-cultural networks developed by Lin and Wu. For example, Wu Tingfang (1842–1922), a leading figure in Hong Kong and national politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, found himself stretched between the forces of British colonialism, Chinese nationalism, and global commerce in much the same way as his predecessors (Wu 1914; Pomerantz-Zhang 1992). Born in Singapore to a merchant family, he grew up in Hong Kong and was educated in missionary schools. He then enrolled at Lincoln’s Inn to become a barrister, the first Chinese to practice in Hong Kong, and the first to become a member of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council. In the words of his biographer, Linda Pomerantz-Zhang, “As the first Chinese barrister in Hong Kong, Wu was the ideal person to serve as go-between for the Chinese with their colonial administration” (1992, 47).

Wu Tingfang supported efforts by the Hong Kong colonial governor Sir John Pope Hennessy to introduce reforms in colonial administration that would give more influence to the Chinese residents. As Chinese merchants gained more wealth in the colony, they organized their own association, the Tung Wah Hospital Committee, to represent their interests. Wu could span both sides of the vast racial divide between British and Chinese because he had close family connections with the Hong Kong mercantile elite and high status as a barrister among the British elite as well. He insisted that leading Chinese be consulted on all major matters of colonial practice.

This outspoken activity generated hostility from the British Colonial Office, but Hennessy supported him. For example, Hennessy agreed with Wu’s proposal to restrain the use of flogging as punishment for Chinese criminals, but the Colonial Office rebuked Hennessy for endangering British residents. In a famous incident, in 1878, Wu led a group of prominent Chinese to attend a public meeting discussing “lawlessness” in the colony, arousing intense opposition from British who tried to exclude them (Pomerantz-Zhang 1992, 51ff). They accused Wu of leading “cutthroats and desperadoes” to pressure the authorities. But Wu responded that the Chinese had every right to attend the meeting. Hennessy allied with Wu and the Chinese community against the Colonial Office and British residents and appointed Wu to the Legislative Council, in the teeth of opposition by the local British community. Hennessy’s departure in 1882, however, accompanied by a panic and crash in the Chinese commercial community, left

Wu stranded. He also lost money from his investments. In October 1882, he left Hong Kong and took a position under Li Hongzhang in Tianjin, ending his disappointing Hong Kong career.

Pomerantz-Zhang calls Wu part of a “new social group,” the “colonial intelligentsia,” who rose within the British colonial system while maintaining ties to local Chinese communities. But Wu’s rise and fall in Hong Kong strangely parallels the arc of Wu Jianzhang under different circumstances. Both men learned from their Cantonese experience how to appeal to foreigners’ concepts of status, learning English and becoming knowledgeable in commercial affairs. Both entered government service to protect the interests of Chinese communities. They promoted cooperation, while fostering increasing commercial power of the Chinese merchant class. They succeeded for a while, but ultimately ran up against implacable opposition from government circles who regarded them with suspicion. Wu Jianzhang faced a hostile Qing court, while Wu Tingfang faced a hostile Colonial Office, but the underlying ideologies of both governments resembled each other. The Qing court and the British, suspicious of Han Chinese ethnic difference, demanded complete loyalty, which neither man could offer.

The careers of the three men, however, did not end after their dismissal from office. They all found new opportunities after departing their middleman positions. Wu Jianzhang’s career after his return to Shanghai is obscure, but we know that he remained a prominent person in the city until at least 1860. He remained influential in the Shanghai region for some time after his impeachment, but he kept well below the radar of both the foreign and Qing officials. Lin Xiyuan made himself into a local power holder in the face of Ming suppression. By confining himself to local affairs, he avoided challenging the state itself, while consolidating his wealth and status in his community. Wu Tingfang went on to a much more glorious career, as adviser to Li Hongzhang and then minister to the United States, Spain, and Peru. He intervened with both the Qing and Americans during the Boxer expedition and associated himself with Yuan Shikai after the Republican Revolution before his retirement.

Each of these three men negotiated their careers in times of critical confrontation between China and the West. The similarities in their conduct and in perceptions of them indicate a pattern of interactions along the China coast in which these middlemen linked foreign and domestic officials, merchants, and lower classes. Yet they also had distinct experiences because of the changing times. Over time, the intermediaries increased their knowledge about Western societies. Lin Xiyuan knew about the Portuguese only indirectly, while Wu Jianzhang had met



some Portuguese, British, and Americans and learned some foreign languages, and Wu Tingfang had fully assimilated himself to the British ruling elite on its own terms. They also increased their international impact as members of the official class. Lin Xiyuan mainly stood out as a local eminent person, while Wu Jianzhang maintained a variety of contacts in Shanghai; Wu Tingfang gained a truly international reputation. Each suffered attacks and disgrace, and each had financial gains and losses determined by their foreign investments. Each of them, as far as we know, also had links to Chinese lower classes. In Wu Jianzhang's case, we know the name of his main collaborator, Liu Lichuan, but Lin Xiyuan, as a harboring host, also clearly depended on a network of local traders, porters, and smugglers to distribute his goods. Wu Tingfang gained support from the Hong Kong mercantile community, as well as some of the local British. Despite their different statuses, however, all three men served as intermediaries between the Chinese state and foreign rulers, and they were pulled in different directions by regional loyalties, official obligations, cultural tendencies, and personal interest.

In the end, none of these men fully achieved his goals. But their example alerts us to the existence of Chinese who adroitly maneuvered between the Scylla of Westernization and the Charybdis of nativism during China's troubled times. Were they wily opportunists, astute go-betweens, proto-globalizers, or traitors to the Han? People who play multiple roles never fit into neat pigeonholes.

### **Interlopers in Global History**

What can the cases of Wu Jianzhang, Lin Xiyuan, Wu Tingfang, and others tell us about the formation of the globally connected world in the modern era? Quite a few scholars have argued that we need to look beyond the boundaries of contemporary Asian states in order to grasp the dynamics of globalization, past and present (Wigen 1999; Wigen and Lewis 1999; Ludden 2003; Tagliacozzo, Perdue, and Siu 2015a, 2015b). This new wave of scholarship examines processes, places, people, and commodities that cross the boundaries of nation-states and empire, and it aims to reconceive traditional spatial divisions of Asia with new concepts such as the Southeast Asian Mediterranean, Zomia, seas, or archipelagoes (Reid 1988; Wong 2004; Scott 2009; Amrith 2013).

Proponents of transnational history also argue for the study of actors and institutions that cross national boundaries. As mentioned above, biographies of individuals who traveled the

world can illuminate global processes effectively. So far, however, most transnational history concentrates on the twentieth-century United States and Europe. Only a few Asian historians have gone deeply into the study of transnational history for earlier periods, but their number is growing (Benedict 2011; Perdue 2017; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Environmental historians and frontier historians, for example, have looked at borderlands and the populations on both sides. But we still need new studies of the relationships between Chinese and foreigners, even in the classic areas of contact along the Chinese coast.

The lineage of modern historical study of China founded by John K. Fairbank may find new relevance in the era of transnational history and globalization. Fairbank and his students pioneered the study of Chinese foreign relations based on Chinese-language documents alongside British and American archival materials. Unlike earlier scholars such as H. B. Morse, Fairbank used newly published Chinese archival documents to closely examine the actions of both Chinese and British officials together. In *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* (1969), he analyzed how British, Americans, and Chinese officials together reformulated trading relations in the wake of the First Opium War. Key actors on the China side included the governors, circuit intendants, merchants, smugglers, and rebels in the Shanghai area.

Fairbank also described Wu Jianzhang's contribution to the new system of customs duties collection in Shanghai. As he put it, "The Foreign Inspectorate might not have been created if [Wu Jianzhang] had not been capable of the most unscrupulous knavery" (Fairbank 1969, 439). Fairbank describes Wu as "duplicitous," a "wily rogue who had grown up in the Canton trade rather than with the Confucian classics" (Fairbank 1978, 242). In Fairbank's view, Wu made profits for himself and others out of his supervision of the foreign trade, but he also created new methods of levying duties under the treaties. Fairbank also describes Wu as the first of the treaty port merchants to take advantage of their position in between the foreign powers and Chinese consumers to raise both their economic and political positions. Wu laid the groundwork for the rise of the comprador class of merchants who dominated treaty port trade in the second half of the nineteenth century.

So, even though most of Fairbank's analysis focused on the British consuls and military representatives, as well as top-level Qing officials, he also provided intriguing sketches of some lower-level officials. Some of the best recent works on the transnational history of East Asia have specifically highlighted the role of these less prominent but still critical people (Bickers

2003; Uchida 2011; Khan 2015). In this sense, Fairbank pointed the way to developing one of the main themes emphasized by the new transnational history: the study of “mid-level” actors who shaped foreign and commercial relations (Iriye 2013; Saunier 2013).

To be sure, Fairbank’s perspective, with its focus on “China’s response to the West,” came under critique for being too one-sided and too elitist. It mainly emphasized high-level Chinese officials and intellectuals who encountered Western diplomats and traders at the treaty ports. The social history turn of the 1980s focused attention more closely on the rural roots of rebellion, tending to stress domestic sources of rebellion. The case of the Small Swords, however, shows that rebels in regions like Jiangnan had significant ties with foreign agents. Now it is time to link the contributions of social history, with its stress on the local, to our revived recognition of the role of the global and transnational in directing modern Chinese history.

What did it take to succeed in these bewildering times and places? Men who adroitly managed this precarious balancing act needed the support of a three-legged stool: connections to officialdom, links to foreign patrons, and roots in local society. Certain global moments allowed them to rise to positions of importance, but the force field that supported them could shift at any moment. No single leg was stable by itself, and the three supports held each other in tension. Higher officials might at one time endorse, or at least tolerate, foreign contacts, but they could easily turn against slick negotiators tainted by foreign influence. The useful intermediary could turn into a traitor at a moment’s notice. Local people might profit from the brokers who gave them useful links to the bureaucracy and foreign trade, but they could just as easily strike out on their own, pursuing their interests through anti-official collective action or underground smuggling. Foreigners found these people useful, but baffling, and they never really shook off racial prejudices against Chinese who took on foreign ways. Yet, time and again, ambitious, multitalented Chinese men, and later women, have undertaken to connect local Chinese with higher officialdom and the equally promising but dangerous maritime world. They deserve our respect, insight, and careful study.

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**Notes**

- 1 Many scholars have studied the foreign and *hong* merchants in Canton, but we have little information on those who moved to Shanghai. Major works on the Canton trade include Cheong (1997), Downs (1997), and Van Dyke (2005, 2011, 2016.)
- 2 The Harvard China Biographical Database Project of 360,000 biographies contains only one short entry about Wu Jianzhang (<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k16229>).

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