

In the Interstices of Empires: Chinese Transoceanic Labor & Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Long Eighteenth Century

I have titled the paper 'interstices of empire' to focus on a population of seafarers who by most accounts remained all but invisible, but who by the same token moved relatively easily within the gaps, intervals and disparities of two very different empires. The Chinese minority Manchu-ruled Qing empire right up through the 1830s and beyond only loosely enforced their ban on overseas travel and migration, allowing men with coastal connections to take the various available maritime labor opportunities in East Asia. The British empire by contrast, as seen in their carefully managed wage accounts books and ships' journals, were most assiduous in maintaining surveillance over their maritime population, but still sought advantageously to use this 'hidden' non-European labor force, unobtrusively creating an important shift in maritime labor recruitment practice but not in stated policy. By the British East India Company's own lights, the decade between 1803 and 1813 saw a combination of almost 10,000 Chinese and Lascar sailors temporarily residing in London, waiting for return ships to either South Asia or China, or as often the case, any intervening port *en route*. Those responsible for the care of the men claimed some £114,328 pounds sterling in expenses for the same period for maintenance of these 9,750 men; this total did not include the significant sums claimed for medicines, clothing and the men's return passage. I have examined the East India Company ships' wage ledgers for the period 1793 – 1815 and am in the midst of calculating more specific data of Chinese sailors visiting Britain. Yet until recently, the history of this population of what the East India Company referred to as 'Asiatic' sailors was all but invisible. Through provocations and subversions this non-Anglo European maritime workforce became visible on occasion and thus entered documented history. Here I will discuss three 'moments' in the Chinese and Lascar seafarers' experiences. The first occurs in the cosmopolitan entrepôt of Macau, China during the heyday of the Qing empire's export trade with Britain. The second moment encounters the Chinese and their experiences with Britons during their stay in London. The third meets a group of

Chinese seafarers in the midst of their voyage. I conclude with a proposition that the increasing Chinese presence in London was due to important but unstated changes in the employment of non-European labor.

In 1798 in the area just beyond the confines of the wildly cosmopolitan port city of Macau, a lowly Chinese government tax collector met a beggar on the road between two villages wearing Chinese clothing and carrying a begging bowl. Upon addressing him he was startled to discover that the Chinese beggar spoke no more than a few words of Chinese. He was a young man and had expertly taken on all the proper accoutrements of a Chinese beggar, as the careful list the authorities later made of his possessions testifies. These included: a bamboo basket containing one and a third pint of rice, a pair of china bowls—one to drink and one to eat from--and the most crucial implements to have while travelling, his own pair of chopsticks. Filipe, as his name turns out to be, was not a Chinese but a young man from the former Portuguese port city of Goa, and thus likely to be of mixed race and darker-skinned so less immediately noticeable as a stranger. He was a ship's boy. Apparently his ship's captain had treated him with such cruelty that when once more he was being cursed out and punished, he jumped overboard intending to run away. The ship was not docked, but in shallow waters. Unable to get any closer to land, the captain quickly decided to give up pursuit, abandoning the boy. Filipe, having no Chinese, found he could not get the local fishermen to give him directions to Macau and, unfamiliar with the area, found himself wandering about, begging as his means of survival. The magistrate, more concerned about illegal Christian proselytizing, simply had the boy escorted to the jurisdictional line with Macau and handed over to the Portuguese authorities. A small, relatively insignificant example of an encounter in one of China's contact zones, it serves to illustrate how those who have but little manage to share their resources. In this case a Chinese gave Filipe the necessities to beg for a living and, at least for a time, this was how the boy was able to secrete himself amongst the local population thus, avoiding the attentions of the local authorities, and to all intents and purposes becoming a Chinese. It is the slipping between the gaze of the authorities, squeezing out a space of agency, however small, and creating the means of his survival within that space that also

connects to the next two 'moments.' Equally significant is Filipe's rapid acculturation to Chinese practices both social and cultural. This adaptivity also seems characteristic.

In 1804, some seven years after Chinese seafarers began to appear regularly in the streets of the British imperial metropole, London, and after the British East India Company had assumed responsibility for their care, a Chinese appeared as interpreter before the magistrate at the Old Bailey. John Antony, a former Chinese seafarer, had come in support of the plaintiff, a Chinese seafarer named Erpune who had he claimed been robbed of his money while he slept in the arms of an Anglo-British prostitute. John Antony, unlike many interpreters before him, spoke fluent English rather than the simplistic pidgin that Erpune spoke. Whereas Erpune claimed that "this man catchee my dollar," his interpreter, who on his own account had been shipping to Britain since the War with America, was able to translate that charge into one of robbery. More significantly, John Antony was able to translate and adapt the spirit of Chinese culture to suit the framework of British legal forms—and invent a practice that continued in Britain well into the twentieth century. To become a subject of British law and not merely subject to it, John Antony felt Chinese culture needed to show that, despite language differences, practices such as oath-taking were recognized as common attributes of the legal system. This was necessary to ensure truth claims made in court were accepted as valid. The procedure recorded in the Old Bailey Sessions Records is worth quoting in full:

Question (from the magistrate): What do you know, of your own knowledge, of an oath in China—did you ever see an oath administered in a Court of Justice there?

Answer (John Antony, the interpreter): Yes

Question: You have been at China since you were a man?

Answer: Yes.

Question: You are well acquainted then with the mode of taking an oath in the Courts of Justice there?

Answer: Yes.

Question: To whom do they make an Appeal?

Answer: To the God they worship in that country; they break a saucer, and then they are told, your body will be cracked as that saucer is cracked, if you do not tell the truth.

Question: You are quite sure that this is the way of taking an oath in China?

Answer: Yes

...Now administer the oath to him in the usual way in his own country.

(The court records: The oath was then administered to the prosecutor [Erpune], and a saucer delivered to him, which he dashed to pieces.)¹

Despite an earlier 1800 case involving both John Antony and another Chinese, no special “Chinese oath” was used on that occasion, having perhaps not yet been invented. Almost two centuries later, writing of his father’s 1930s London Chinatown reminiscences, Daniel Farson repeated a Police Court Missionary’s story.² In that version, instead of swearing on the bible in court, Chinese would swear the Saucer or Candle Oath. The oath-taker would say, “If I tell a lie, may my soul be shattered into a thousand pieces—like that! Then he would slam the saucer on the floor.... Or, with the candle: ‘If I tell a lie, may my soul be blown out—like that!’ Puff – and he would blow out the candle.” Lacking any evidence to the contrary, this oath is likely a wonderful invention devised by a Chinese to mimic the British oath and to fulfill the expectations of an Anglo-British Christian audience. Once invented the oath was perpetuated by subsequent Chinese, allowing them to become juridical subjects, able to make claims before British law and for the law to make claims on them. How John Antony came up with this invented tradition and how he got Erpune to go along with it will probably remain a mystery. Certainly no eighteenth or nineteenth courtroom in China would recognize such a practice—if

¹See “Ann Alsey, Thomas Gunn, Theft: Specified place, Theft: receiving stolen goods,” 5 December 1804 Proceedings of the Old Bailey Ref:t18041205-56. (<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/html>), (p.62-64, in published records, First Session, 1804). I thank Carol Watts in her Keynote Address for the *Eighteenth Century Cosmopolis: Global Cities and Citizens in the Age of Sail*, October 2008, “China Maxims, Entrepôt Imaginaries in 18th century London” for this inspirational mode of verbatim presentation of the case.

² Daniel Farson, *Limehouse Days: A Personal Experience of the East End* (Michael Joseph Ltd, 1991).p.101

indeed John Antony as he alleged had returned to China as an adult and left again for Britain. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century China the court system was not adversarial and guilt was presumed but needed confession (sometimes extracted under torture) to receive sentence. Without knowing precisely the dynamics of how this creative intervention occurred, we do know that John Antony produced a custom, that he claimed was Chinese but of which we have no record in Chinese legal practice nor in Chinese popular culture. As a spur-of-the-moment invention the oath quite skillfully balances both mimicry and sufficient difference to achieve an exotic acceptability—one that marvelously demonstrates again how ordinary, working Chinese seafarers claimed some agency in a world not of their making. Exhibiting sharp intelligence without necessarily the advantages of education, this quirky example equally demonstrates adaptivity and another kind of sharing of cross-cultural knowledge and resources.

In the last of my three exemplary cases, the wage ledger of the East India Company ship, *Cuffnells*, documents the way Chinese sailors were able, by accident or design, to play their employers.³ The system governing Lascar crews from South Asia-- of having a *Ghat Serang* overseeing and taking the wages of the Lascar crew-- did not apply to Chinese crews. Chinese crew were hired as individuals, were paid a variable wage depending on whether they were considered able-bodied or ordinary, and did not necessarily even have a Chinese boatswain giving them orders.⁴

Chinese rarely if ever gave their family names—and it is unclear whether ship's captains knew or cared. Instead they gave their given name preceded by the common South China diminutive "Ah." Wage ledgers listed the diminutive as the surname with the result that often all Chinese came under A in the wage ledger's alphabetical index. In the example of the ship *Boddam*, the list begins: Assing, Ahong, Achong, Achou, Ahu, and so on. Towards the end of the war, indexing the name was abandoned, as if giving up on the Chinese as unnamable foreign hordes.

³ See BL: L/MAR/B/178-N, Ship *Cuffnells* (1811 – 12 season), putting in at Madras and China

⁴ Labeling of Chinese did change over time, both how they were identified generically and how and where they appeared in the ship's wage ledgers. See my forthcoming book, *Chinese Transoceanic Labor and Cross-cultural Encounters*.

Chinese became listed instead as so many “Chinamen.” But these seafarers it seems could on occasion exert what agency they could over their circumstances. To the various authorities they might appear as indistinguishable both in name and appearance, but the Chinese crew could take measures to secure a record of their very existence. We are fortunate to have one documented instance of such.

The ship, *Cuffnells*, left Britain on 24 February 1809, for what became a two-year voyage to St. Helena, Benkulen, and China. The ship docked in Bombay and then went onto Canton before turning back for home. Arriving at Bombay in July of 1810, the ship took on a Lascar crew of 18. Six months later, arriving in Canton in January of 1811, she hired an additional crew of thirty Chinese. The index to the wage ledger listed neither the Lascar nor the Chinese. But as their wages had to be accounted—thereby providing us with the documentation—their names were entered into the body of the ledger. They appeared as a single entry giving details of date of entry and discharge, wage rate, time served, deductions for wage advance (usually three to four months), Greenwich Hospital and outstanding wage paid. Their names followed, written as a single block. This was the new alternative to each man getting an individual entry with wage rate, deductions, and so on, as the British crew did. Unlike the Lascar crew already on board, they had no boatswain overseeing them. However, the Chinese cook, Assam, also taken on in Canton, did merit a separate wage ledger entry. He was paid more than twice the rate as the Chinese sailors (seventy shillings a month compared to the Chinese sailors’ thirty shillings)⁵

At first glance, the names seemed strange—two-thirds with multiple syllables—a rarity in Chinese naming practices. I wondered at first if they were perhaps Thai or Malay names or, some other Southeast Asian language or perhaps the unusual family name of ‘Shap’ really existed. The ledger provided no explanation. Only in sounding out the names did I realize that each sailor had given himself a Cantonese numeric designation. It is doubtful that any scholar has ever systematically examined the individual Chinese names in the ledger entries and

⁵ The role of Chinese ship’s cooks in the global diffusion of Chinese cooking is a story yet to be told. Certainly these ledger entries confirm their diasporic reach.

even those who may have looked at a few might not be familiar with the Cantonese dialect. The series begins with the Cantonese numbers 1-10 with the addition of the diminutive Ah (Aut, Ayee, Asam, Asee, Aoum, Aloke, Asat, Apaas, Acou, Ashap). The next ten switched to the more distinctive “Shapyat, Shap Yee, Shap Sam, Shap See (11, 12, 13, 14) on up to Yee Shap (20), Yee Yat, Yee Yee (21, 22) continuing to Sam Shap (30); Shap being the Cantonese for ten and Yee two, making clear these were indeed romanized Cantonese numerals. My discovery of this method of group enumeration was initially to be amused, but upon reflection, I also realized that the method was also a convenient way to ensure the group could easily account for themselves. A numeric series neatly brings into relationship a group of individuals mostly unrelated by kinship ties.⁶ At any juncture of the voyage’s oftentimes-dangerous weather events, the men would only need to gather and enumerate themselves to check for possible loss. It is equally possible too that the men were preserving the privacy of their names, as is common in Chinese culture. Chinese naming practices are complex, but at their simplest no one but a senior relative such as a parent has the right to use a person’s given name. Whether out of superstition of the evil eye or ritual naming practices, it was common either to adopt alternative names or to make a diminutive of the given name. It would thus not be surprising that to preserve this privacy a crew might as easily adopt a numeric classification. One final point that does not obviate the more practical explanation is that the Cantonese crew, working men who were mostly illiterate, were playing with the authorities and in doing so, again carving out a small space of agency “under the radar” in the world of English speakers. In this instance, the men seemed to have found a way to play with the authorities’ condescension and ignorance of Chinese language and customs.

To conclude, these three moments illustrate the different ways in which seafarers, working men, from a different culture than their host or employer could adapt, creatively mimic and use the cultural resources at hand to carve out a small space of agency in the interstices of the much larger authority with control over

⁶ See East India Company ship *Cuffnells*, 1808-09 season Wage Ledger, (L/MAR/B/178-M)

them—to become either Chinese as in the first example or British as in the second, or just to find ways of remaining themselves.

My final proposition is that both the declining fortunes of the Qing empire and the expansiveness of the British created these interstices through a system of labor recruitment that was neither policy nor written. The evidence provided to the 1815 British Parliamentary inquiry into the care and treatment of *Asiatic* sailors in the United Kingdom states specifically that “the Company, however, never would have brought Lascars in any considerable number to England had they not been obliged to do so by the impressment of British sailors from their ships in India for the service of the navy.”⁷ This explanation (expressed at several points in the report), in the circularity of citation familiar in academia, has been so oft repeated that it has become fact.⁸ However, the wage ledgers of China-bound merchant ships make perfectly clear that while ‘Asiatic’ crews were taken on from ports during the outbound voyage away from Britain, and before the captain could have any idea of which and how many of his English crew would be impressed. The English crew was removed in their largest numbers upon re-entering British waters in the final weeks at the end of the return voyage. In other words, when a ship picked up a Chinese crew, the captain had no idea how many of their British crew were going to be taken by the Royal Navy.⁹ Let me just give you a couple of examples. At times, merchant ships could lose crew with no recruitment of Chinese or Lascars. In 1794 the ship *Taunton Castle* had no Chinese or Lascar on board, yet the navy impressed 68 of their crew upon their return in the waters just off the British coast. But, in 1797, as the Napoleonic War advanced, the ship *Fort William* took on 11 Chinese at Canton on the outward-bound voyage. Upon re-entering British waters on the homebound

⁷ Letter from James Cobb, Secretary to the East India Company, dated 22nd February 1816. In L/MAR/C/901, Correspondence between India Board and Public Bodies, relating to the Lascars. Note, although the Report concerned Chinese sailors as much as Indian, both being part of the *Asiatic* category, little mention is made of the Chinese in that their conditions were considered better than those of the Indians.

⁸ See for example, Jean Sutton, *The East India Company and its Ships, 1600 – 1874* (2000).

⁹ The parliamentary report makes clear that the East India Company were on the defensive. Accused of negligence of Lascar welfare, their justification was that the measure was a wartime exigency and unlikely to reoccur. They kept no figures for how many men were impressed from a ship—making a count of each wage entry and paying attention to the note added to a specific individual’s fate is the only way to document this.

voyage 22 men were seized and taken off the ship. While nowhere near a one-to-one replacement, the Chinese were taken on in *expectation* of loss. In 1798, 20 Chinese came on board the ship *Boddam* in Canton; this was eight months before any impressment occurred.¹⁰ I wish to suggest that such an arbitrary and loose explanation was no doubt made to obscure an important shift in East India Company maritime labor policy—yet has been accepted at face value. Only a systemic change in employment practice adequately accounts for this shift in the recruitment of merchant marine.ⁱ Instead of parity between British impressments and non-Anglo replacements in Indian or Chinese waters, the East India Company systematically constituted an Asian reserve labor force beginning in the late eighteenth century—a reserve pool that depended on an easily dispensable workforce with little or no employee rights or security, and maximally exploited imperial expansion into Asia. During wartime especially, the expectation was not that an individual ship needed supplementary labor, but that *any* merchant marine ship would have an unmet demand because English crew were *always* subject to arbitrary impressment. Ships took on Chinese and Lascar crew to solve the *overall* problem of losing crew, knowing that combined numbers reaching Britain would form a reserve labor force easily accessible and of no interest to the navy. By such a maneuver, the Company together with conditions in China fostered the transoceanic diasporic movement of Chinese and others within its territories and provided the opportunity for men to create adaptively what they could of their environment. If unspoken and unacknowledged policy rendered the Chinese invisible as a labor force, my examples show ways in which sailors were adept at using this invisibility to get a little of their own back.

¹⁰ See BL: OIOC, L/MAR/B/351-K, Ship *Boddam*, 1797-98 season's voyage. This same pattern is repeated in many of the East India Company ships' ledgers (author's master list of China-going East India Company ships).