

Zitierhinweis

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Jessica Hanser, in her book *Mr. Smith Goes to China*, tells a tale of 18th-century globalisation involving three international actors—Britain, China and India—through the lives of three British (more precisely, Scottish) merchants. All of them bore the name of George Smith, an extremely common name at the time. And all of them were ‘private traders’” (i.e. individual traders or brokers who were not formally employed by the East India Company) operating in Asia. They were George Smith of Madras, of Canton and of Bombay, in each case distinguished by a port city in which they had once resided. This book is a history of British seafaring and imperialism, written largely from a micro-level perspective, placing the focus on individual traders rather than the East India Company as a whole. But it is not only an imperial history. It also unravels the interwoven financial, political and social relations between Britain, China and India in the 18th century. As Hanser claims, ‘this book turns the seemingly dry materials of ledger sheets into a compelling historical narrative that fundamentally alters our understanding of Britain’s empire and global trade on the eve of the industrial revolution’ (p. x).

Hanser begins by setting out the historical background of British involvement in Asian trade. Since tea became a common beverage in British society from the second half of the 18th century, and especially after 1784, when the Commutation Act put an end to tea smuggling, the tea trade had been ‘thoroughly in the hands of the British state’ (p. 18). It was one of the most lucrative businesses for the British brokers who went between the East India Company and China, such as the Smiths and others. Trading with China before the Opium Wars, however, was complicated. There were no formal diplomatic relations between the two and foreign trade was a semi-legal grey zone in China. It was limited to the coastal Canton region and took place through a special class of Chinese brokers, the so-called Hong merchants. To finance the expensive tea trade, a financial system based on extremely high-interest loans was established. A similar system was running in the British settlements in India. This fragile financial system finally collapsed at the end of the 18th century when the British creditors could no longer re-collect their money loaned to the local merchants—a fatal blow to many private traders.

Hanser goes on to examine the life of each Smith closely. The fate of all three Scots was interwoven with these ‘new intra-Asian financial networks that kept silver and tea flowing during the second half of the eighteenth century’ (p. 28). Two of the Smiths (of Madras and of Canton) sank into bankruptcy with the breakdown of the Canton financial system, only managing to recover a fraction of their debts from the Chinese Hong merchants. Smith of Bombay was more successful in business than the other two. He was, however, involved in a political and diplomatic conflict with China, the Lady Hughes Affair. In 1784, gunners on the ship *Lady Hughes*, of which Smith of Bombay was the ‘supercargo’, accidentally killed two Chinese fishermen while firing. This event was not only a turning point in the British perception of China, but also a catalyst for the first British envoy to China in a decade. Private traders such as the three Smiths were keen to bring in the British state to protect their financial profits and lobbied for the establishment of an embassy in China.

In the last section, Hanser continues the story of each Smith’s family life and the life of their offspring with abundant biographical details, but in a different social context – England. For example, we see how a married woman like Smith of Canton’s wife, Charlotte Smith, could make use of a trust ‘to protect their new family’s assets from the hazards and uncertainties of George Smith’s business’ in late 18th-century England (p. 155).

Hanser has consulted an impressively wide range of archival sources in different languages and located in various countries, from private letters to periodicals, and from official Chinese documents to East India Company reports. Her work contributes to our understanding of 18th-century British imperial history in two respects.

The first contribution is to the field of micro-history. Following Jonathan Spence’s two fascinating monographs, *The Death of Woman Wang* and *The Question of Hu*, *Mr. Smith* is another work which looks to unveil history through the private lives of ordinary people. It

narrates the history of British imperial expansion in the East and the Sino-British-Indian financial and political triangle in a story-telling manner through the lens of three otherwise obscure Scottish private traders.

But this book is different from Spence's work. Woman Wang and John Hu were both historically insignificant characters – a poor and illiterate 17th-century peasant woman from a provincial Chinese village and a devout, lower-class 18th-century Chinese Catholic convert. The former, an unhappy wife from a flood and drought-prone region, ran away with a lover, returned home destitute and was subsequently murdered by her husband. The latter, a clerk from Canton, went to France with the Jesuit missionary Father Fouquet to assist him in translating religious texts into Chinese, but ended up in a lunatic asylum. These were ordinary people at the bottom of the social ladder struggling to survive, yet their lives reveal much about the contemporary socio-economic conditions, the experiences of women, religious beliefs and Sino-European interaction, among other things.

Spence's works, undoubtedly profound scholarship, are also poetically written and almost fiction-like. In recent years, this kind of 'narrative of the anonymous' has become an increasingly popular way of writing history. Many such works, like Spence's, are not lacking in scholarly brilliance, and they constitute an important contribution to our understanding of the past. However, the trend now is to value 'narrative' over 'analysis', and social history over political history. Historians have become more comfortable with telling stories and less assertive in making judgments. History is not just about reconstructing past societies and ordinary people's lives, but also analysing the 'big events' and formulating theories about the past. Analysis and judgment still deserve their place at the table.

A strength of *Mr. Smith* is that it breaks away from the narrative/analysis, social/political, and micro/macro dichotomies. The George Smiths, although obscure, were not among those who left no imprint on history. Though not 'gentlemanly capitalists' – the bankers, financiers and investors based in London – they were nonetheless closely connected to power and able to make their voice heard (p. 5). Smith of Canton and Smith of Madras were unofficial advisors to Henry Dundas, the trusted lieutenant of Prime Minister William Pitt, and contributed to the shaping of a new perception of China among British politicians. Smith of Bombay was directly involved in the above-mentioned Lady Hughes affair, even making his way into the official Chinese documents. And all three men had an influence on the decision to establish an embassy in China. They were not politically anonymous and they could have potentially changed the course of the Sino-British relationship.

The second contribution of *Mr. Smith* is to the study of the changing British perception of China during the 18th century. There is a consensus in scholarship that the British (and European in general) perception of China and Chinese civilisation changed from romanticisation and admiration in the early part of the century to contempt and aversion in the second half. Scholars, including Colin Mackerras, Jeng-Guo S. Chen, Peter Marshall and Glyn Williams, have argued that this changing attitude towards Asia was largely due to the political-economic development of Britain and Europe. This is certainly true, but we still lack a vivid picture of how exactly this transformation took place and what triggered it.

Jonathan Spence stresses that the McCartney envoy in 1792 was a watershed. While the setback of Lord McCartney was undoubtedly significant in shaping the British public's views of China, the change did not happen overnight. This incident punctuated a long period of worsening relations, mistrust and contempt that culminated in the Opium War in 1839. The Smiths lived through this period, and Hanser shows us vividly how such a change of mentality happened gradually. *Mr. Smith* demonstrates how clashes with Chinese law and bureaucracy, as well as dealings with local officials and merchants, altered British individuals' opinions of China. .

Mr. Smith is a sophisticated and erudite work, covering several interesting topics: the machinery of the East India Company; Sino-British political relations; the economic/financial circumstances of the Chinese coastal regions and British settlements in India; and the social

status of the empire's private traders at home. Readers, however, are left somewhat unsatisfied in two respects.

Hanser herself claims that a 'close examination of the three George Smiths and others like them confirms Scotland's "conspicuous and arguably disproportionate" impact on the development of Britain's eighteenth-century empire in Asia" (p. 8). What exactly, then, drove these and other young Scottish men to the colonies across the globe? Lack of opportunities at home might be one reason, but there must be other explanations. Although trading in the East could be extremely lucrative, it would not have been a light choice after all. Many perished at sea and still more did not survive the harsh weather and tropical diseases. Even those lucky enough to return safe risked losing any fortune gained, like two of the Smiths in this book. Would it not have been easier for the young Scots to make a living in London? A thorough investigation into the dynamics of Scottish societies is needed. What was the class background of these imperialistic Scots? Were there any differences between the Highlands and Lowlands?

The other aspect that could be explored further is the Chinese perception of these private traders, although this might be constrained by the availability of sources. We know that at least George Smith of Bombay made his way into official Chinese documents because of the Lady Hughes affair. But what about private accounts? Private traders in Canton certainly had many opportunities to mix with the local notables (gentry, officials and the politically influential Hong merchants). Hanser depicts the banquet scene that another private trader, William Hickey, attended at a Hong merchant's house. It was very likely that the Smiths also had had the opportunity to be invited to this kind of elaborate dinner party. Are there any diaries from locals recording such an event? If so, what do they say about these Scottish traders? This would give readers a more balanced account of the world of 18th-century East Asian trade.

To sum up, *Mr. Smith* is an original and rigorous study of 18th-century British imperialistic expansion as well as an impressive work of social history. It is fluently written, well-illustrated, and free of the moralistic stances which are all too common in the study of imperial history today.