

Rewriting East Asia: No Victors, No Vanquished

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During the Nuremberg trials, Hermann Göring wrote in the margins of his indictment “*Der Sieger wird immer der Richter und der Besiegte stets der Angeklagte sein,*” which roughly translates to “The victor will always be the judge, and the vanquished the accused.” Göring was found guilty of war crimes and would die in April 1946 from an apparent suicide by cyanide poisoning the very night he was scheduled for execution. In line with his observation that history is written by winners, Göring would go down as the overweight, evil Nazi leader who died a mysterious death. In an interview conducted sixty-seven years after Göring’s death, his great-niece would give a different picture: that on the other side of the murderer, his great-uncle resembled “a big child” and was “a family person” who was “nice, and charming, and incredibly caretaking.”¹ Certainly, this does not erase the brutal crimes Göring committed but it sheds light on a small square that nonetheless completes the tapestry of his life. It further evidences, in a way, that history does not necessarily have to be a narrative of victors – if we look beyond general accounts and consider alternative accounts supported by non-official sources. This is exhibited by the pursuits of the Confucian scholars, Japanese Buddhist monks, Eastern Han local governors, Chinese coolies, Shanghainese tailors, Macau joss-stick makers, Hong Kong locals, and Cantonese working-class musician featured in this edited volume. With the idea that history can be retold in multiple ways from varying perspectives depending on the sources selected, approaches adopted, arguments shaped, and unique circumstances authors and historians face, this collection demonstrates from an East Asian context that regardless of time period, alternative narratives can be boundlessly constructed and marginal voices recovered when we journey beyond official archives. Some have left subtle and ambiguous marks in misplaced texts or stele while others, specks in archival documents and census data, are absent in general narratives. This edited volume carves space for voices and experiences recovered from the margins that make us think twice about historical events and developments we thought we knew all too well about early China’s networks, medieval Japanese interactions with Chinese

¹ Morin, “An Interview with Nazi Leader.”

culture, Western encounters in British Hong Kong, postwar Chinese diaspora, and heritage preservation in contemporary Macau. The big array is to prove that no matter which time period, there's always something that remains underexplored which can give us a peek into past East Asia's dynamism, diversity, and global connections. This is the vision that we have.

In Search of People's Stories

In a broad sense, historical studies deal with uncovering specific ways of life, be they of individuals, epochs, or human communities. However, elitist and ethnocentric presumptions, which have lost little of their influence today, have for long limited historians' vision and understanding of human activities to accounts documented in official records and experiences of communities, men, and to a lesser extent, women that have left noticeable marks in mainstream historical narratives. The cradle to a paradigm shift came with the birth of the mass society during the French Revolution, which eventually prompted a turn towards a social and cultural history capable of depicting the everyday life and encounters of ordinary people as documented in newspapers, novels, songs, diaries, photographs, and paintings. This extended in the twentieth century to comics, blogs, and digital platforms that further revolutionised historians' use of sources beyond official archives. Owing to these new developments and the growing cross-fertilisation between the Humanities and Social Sciences, historians have uncovered neglected dimensions of the human past that help us enrich and re-evaluate our understanding of broader events in history. This was seen in how Brendan Simms, in 2015, added to over two centuries of thorough research on the Battle of Waterloo. In *The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo*, the spotlight was on four-hundred Prussian riflemen who changed the course of this historic battle. Intense feelings of patriotism, fear, and confusion, captured in eyewitness reports, were acknowledged to reveal lesser-known faces of the battle that Napoleon came close to winning.² In another example, Gareth Glover's *The Story of the 52nd Foot at Waterloo* drew on original maps, underused archives, and the unpublished journal of Lieutenant Charles Holman of the 52nd Foot Guards to draw attention to the heroic deeds of a group of British soldiers who stood firm in the thick of the action. The monograph also provided an account of the well-researched battle from the British army's perspective in hourly segments.³ These reappraisals evidence how unpublished and less-readily available materials could fuel intensive empirical

² Simms, *The Longest Afternoon*.

³ Glover, *The Story of the 52nd Foot*.

and theoretical research into a greater variety of subjects in the future. In history, analysing and interpreting unorthodox sources has no doubt led to the mushrooming of new perspectives and findings that have challenged, in one way or another, conventional narratives.

Scholars of East Asia have shown a similar interest in reconstructing broader narratives through the lenses of neglected actors and/or sources. A volume of literature, for instance, probes into the lives and dealings of commoners to decipher socio-cultural and political patterns. Valerie Hansen's study of contractual documents, unearthed from several archaeological sites in Xinjiang and Gansu, revealed not only the untold stories of commoners, but also changes in China's land system, price inflation, literacy levels, and the penetration of state power into everyday life during the medieval transformation of China.⁴ Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, using archaeological data, visual sources, stela inscriptions, and excavated manuscripts, demonstrated the state's strategy of managing social castes as human resources. This literature further constructed the artisanal caste as far more complex than what was described in the "four classes" of Confucian classics.⁵ Of Tokugawa Japan, Gary Leupp extracted depictions of urban workers from poems, household records, edicts, legal codes, and samurai writings. The focus on urban workers, which made up one-fifth to one-third of the urban population, provided a rich portrait of a city in Asia in the early modern period.⁶ Sunglim Kim's book on the *chungin* class ("middle people" between the aristocracy and commoners) highlighted Korea's material culture and artistic exchange with China and Japan in the late Chosŏn period.⁷ Wars, causing massive disturbances to human communities without mercy, have provided openings for researchers to explore marginal narratives. *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* provided a reassessment of the Taiping Rebellion, an extensively-studied disturbance that left tens of millions dead in China, more than 150 years after the devastation. Using sources that had been overlooked, the book shed light on how Chinese and Western survivors, families, and communities coped with grief and loss in the aftermath of the catastrophe.⁸ In his work on the American occupation of Japan and Okinawa, Michael Molasky explored the voices of Okinawan and mainland Japanese writers, both men and women, to decipher the remembrance, construction, dissemination, and preservation of the historical memories of postwar Japan.⁹ Nicola Di Cosmo's introduction

⁴ Hansen, *Negotiating Daily Life*.

⁵ Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in Early Imperial China*.

⁶ Leupp, *Servants, Shophands, and Laborers*.

⁷ Kim, *Flowering Plums*.

⁸ Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*.

⁹ Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa*.

to *The Diary of a Manchu Soldier in Seventeenth-Century China* exemplified how the personal writings of one man can enrich our understanding of the relationship between war and society in Chinese military campaigns.¹⁰ Encompassing varying historical areas and time periods, these works have demonstrated the importance of making space for plural histories that regard all historical actors as subjects in their own right.

Historians nowadays can no longer neglect their responsibility to work together to paint a broader picture of history that speaks for more than a prominent few. Once regarded as a revisionist approach centred on the underclasses and marginal groups rather than tycoons and presidents, people's history has gradually come to shape in the last two centuries to provide a point-of-access for delving into the narratives and daily lives of common people. Originally published in 1846, Jules Michelet broke new ground by shedding light on the habits, beliefs, and political participation of the French lower classes that had, until Michelet's writing, remained largely invisible in traditional historiography.¹¹ In 1966, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, a leading figure behind the journal *Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, narrowed down the scope to focus on the previously-untold stories of peasants in the southern province of Languedoc and their silent reaction to changes in production, consumption, and taxation from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.¹² Bearing a taste of Marxist analysis, Eric Hobsbawm's new social history vitalised ordinary people as the driving force of historical change. As every social system creates a population of oppressed, poor, and nonconformists, Hobsbawm pointed out that peasants, working men and women, bandits, and social protestors could be studied in contexts where social and political power was exercised and reproduced.¹³ In *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Pierre Bourdieu focused on migrants, high school students, laid-off company directors, and temporary workers. The experiences of these vulnerable actors were central to Bourdieu's analysis of dissatisfactions and painful experiences coming from groups dislocated in a runaway world.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the fact remains that historians can never produce "complete" accounts; there are events and people beyond their interests and worldviews that ought to be forsaken. Thusly, the historian's search for different voices and perspectives from the past is a journey that sees no geographical or temporal boundaries.

¹⁰ Dzungseo, *The Diary of a Manchu Soldier*.

¹¹ Michelet, *The People*.

¹² Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*.

¹³ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*.

This endless search is seen in two recent edited volumes that have rethought history from bottom-up or concurrent perspectives. The collection of essays in *Power from Below in Premodern Societies: The Dynamics of Political Complexity in the Archaeological Record*, for instance, questioned the conventional top-down paradigm in pre-modern societies by drawing from a variety of archaeological, anthropological, and historical data.¹⁵ Incorporating specialists from the areas of pre-historic and medieval Europe, early China, Mesoamerica, and New Guinea, the volume demonstrated that the power structure in pre-modern societies was never entirely hierarchical. Instead, it took on many forms that ultimately co-existed with hierarchical inequalities, marking a spectrum of diversity and dynamism in power relations within and between communities. This compilation has shown that exploring history from the bottom up paves new paths for historians and researchers to uncover neglected narratives regarding commoners' participation in governance, resistance to state power, and acquisition of literacy. Piecing together the experiences of marginal individuals has further opened up new perspectives to cross-cultural interaction, particularly in returning agency to individual actors that helped shape globalisation.¹⁶ While the aim of writing alternative narratives is to unveil voices and perspectives previously unknown, it is not flawless. Gunlög Fur has highlighted a tendency amongst postcolonialists to focus on writing their "own" history, in the process muffling other significant colonial experiences. To address this, she proposed the writing of concurrent histories to make sense of narratives that stand in conflict with each other.¹⁷ Similarly, Biedermann argued that linking local narratives in colonies with concurring wider developments in the metropole reveals the impacts of local events in shaping global networks.¹⁸ Clearly, there are lacunae waiting to be filled and issues to reconsider when we look beyond official narratives and records. In addition to uncovering neglected vignettes, the essays in this volume were roped together to comprehend what lessons we can learn about East Asia's past when we listen to relatively subtle voices and focus on marginal stories. By centring on "other" stories, our contributors will demonstrate how we get a better sense of East Asia's cultural diversity and global connectedness from the points of view and experiences of its nameless inhabitants.

¹⁵ Thurston and Fernández-Götz, *Power from Below*.

¹⁶ Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys," 573-591; Menegon, "Telescope and Microscope," 1315-1344.

¹⁷ Fur, "Concurrences as a Methodology for Discerning Concurrent Histories," 34.

¹⁸ Biedermann, "Three Ways of Locating the Global," 110-141.

The Significance of Re-Viewing Big Patterns through Small Lenses

This edited volume embodies the timeless search for marginal voices in and alternative perspectives to existing historical narratives. It not only contributes to the pool of literature that has sought to restore the presence of actors disempowered by statesmen or underrepresented in official records, but also opens up different possibilities in exploring East Asia's past beyond official accounts and archival documents. From ancient China to medieval Japan to British Hong Kong to contemporary Macau, the big array of temporal and spatial coverage demonstrates that, regardless of historical era, there are events, people, and perspectives that historians have, deliberately or not, neglected, overlooked, or misunderstood. Surely, the private writings, oral interviews, excavated relics, visual materials, and recovered documents our contributors used are not new to historians, yet collectively, the papers speak volumes about the versatile interconnectedness of East Asia and the complex, non-uniform worldviews of its inhabitants. Prioritising micro levels of human and cultural interaction, the ten essays featured in this collection suggest how the rich texture of sources from non-official pathways can offer a microscopic lens to look into the subtle nuances of East Asian society. To different degrees and according to the eras in which they lived, East Asian people experienced the ripples of political centralisation, cross-border movement, foreign imperialism, nationalism, and globalism that mushroomed locally and universally. With this in mind, the chapters have been organised in chronological order for the sake of elucidating the broader patterns of past and contemporary East Asia they accentuate.

The first section prompts a reconsideration of political centralisation in ancient China. In the featured essays, our contributors reveal some of the ways, big and small, that Chinese officials sought to establish their footing in a colossal empire. Examining the *Tang Yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道 (The Way of Tang [Yao] and Yu [Shun]) bamboo manuscript, excavated from tomb no. 1 at Guodian in modern Hubei, Frankie Chik explores the elements of push-and-pull that led to the evaporation of “throne abdication” (*shanrang* 禪讓), a practice of favouring individual merit over hereditary transmission in the process of selecting political successors. He builds on earlier perceptions that rulers borne out of *shanrang* were easily pulled down by their political enemies and ultimately casts light on the pliable construction of Chinese monarchical practices. In his chapter on Eastern Han China, Chun Fung Tong uses three stelae inscribed with administrative documents to exhibit nuanced purposes in the construction of “local memories,” which encapsulated the ancestral memories of kinship organisations and individuals and community events documented by local institutions. As Tong argues, the lettered class etched their collective cultural memory in the Yi Ying stele to bolster lineage identity, a magistrate and a clan left behind contesting “local memories” on the Shi Chen stele that was

reflective of their struggles, and a local regime infixed an unprecedented function in stelae by placing the Zhaojue stone within a ritualised setting. Lingering in the same historical period, Hajni Elias's contribution uncovers the memories of local people in the southwest region through a close study of two stelae discovered in 2010 Chengdu. Elias argues that the stelae, erected for two prominent Governors of the Shu 蜀 commandery, suggest local perceptions that the deeds and achievements of the two local leaders were deemed more important than those of the emperor who sat in a faraway capital. To achieve this, local officials highlighted their service to the population yet downplayed their relationship to the dynastic ruler or superior. Coming together, these works provide an opportunity to rethink not only the complex messages behind stelae, but also what order meant in ancient China, particularly in light of competing political discourses and local power scrambles.

The two contributions in the second section present some of the endless possibilities that unfolded through informal Sino-Japanese exchanges. They show that narratives shaped by individual or communal responses to and pursuits in an increasingly interconnected East Asia help shed light on the breadth and depth of cultural and economic dialogue between China and Japan. In his chapter, Keith Knapp carefully examined two copies of *Xiaozi zhuan* 孝子傳 (Accounts of Filial Children), writings belonging to a popular historical genre in early medieval China, that have been preserved in the *Funahashi* 船橋 and *Yōmei* 陽明 libraries in Japan. His discovery is that the two copies exhibited subtle divergences with Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 *Wuxiao zhuan* 五孝傳 (Accounts of Five Types of Filiality), which has been acknowledged as the only surviving copy of the genre in China. Knapp believes different versions were written to reach a broader readership that ranged from a general audience to Confucian-immersed literati. From the activities of unofficial actors, Yiwen Li paints a portrait of close Sino-Japanese exchange under the six-century-long diplomatic hiatus between China and Japan. With few records available to restore Sino-Japanese intercourse during this time, Li used diaries, letters, and poems preserved in Buddhist archives to paint a world wherein sea merchants and itinerant monks collaborated for mutual benefit. Japanese monks who continued to journey to China for Buddhist training returned to Japan with the help of Chinese sea merchants. In turn, the merchants advanced their economic interests through networks provided by the monks. Such a trade-off reveals that in spite of the diplomatic hiatus, the uninterrupted ambitions and pliability of Japanese and Chinese individuals permitted Sino-Japanese interactions to thrive. Through uncovering such accounts that would otherwise have been engulfed by broader narratives, Knapp and Li illustrate the diversity of East Asian mobilities in the medieval period, as seen through cultural transmission and physical movement, and the robust connectivity between Chinese and Japanese people who were enclaved within a shared linguistic and cultural sphere.

The chapters in the third section take us through Hong Kong in two very different contexts and time periods to look at how an increasingly-connected world, prompted by imperialist and nationalist initiatives, carved not only new paths of mobility and advancement for foreign and local men and women, but also resulted in unprecedented social integrations and segregations. In his essay on early British Hong Kong, Thomas Larkin discusses how racial divides were imagined, realised, and eventually transmitted to the American metropole through the deliberate omission of Chinese workers from the documents of the Heards, an American merchant family in southern China. As opposed to European and Macanese employees who appeared in the company's records with full names, Chinese employees were usually documented under short nicknames or general labels such as "boys" or "coolies." Larkin demonstrates how the approach of strategic reading can help to locate and restore some of the Chinese networks the Heards established in Hong Kong and from there, recover a more comprehensive portrait of racial inclusion and exclusion between the colony's American and Chinese residents. Wing Chung Ng's chapter follows a working-class musician traversing through post-war devastation, the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Cold War Hong Kong, and life as an immigrant in Canada. Examining Wong's personal writings, which were largely provided by the musician's daughter, Ng demonstrates the impacts that national, colonial, and global turns had on a Chinese individual. He observes that in spite of the countless ups and downs encountered during his long diaspora, Cantonese opera remained a constant in Wong Toa's life. Just as his cities-of-residence received his music in varying ways, his life unfolded with decisions based on what Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Vancouver had to offer to a Chinese musician. Riding on the coat-tails of broader developments, the experiences and pursuits of the non-political actors featured in this section should help us reflect on the minute reverberations interracial and intercultural engagements resulting from imperialism, nationalism, and sojourn had on the private and public lives of people that passed through East Asian settings.

The final section blurs "East Asia" by unveiling the ceaseless reconstruction of its cities in the minds of administrators, settlers, and visitors. The essays featured explore postwar Hong Kong and postcolonial Macau as sites where alternative narratives of the Cold War, orientalism, and postcolonial heritage preservation were formed. From the perspectives of Chinese suit-makers and of American soldiers in their R&R, Katon Lee's essay reveals a tale far from the political foci of most Cold War narratives. Through evidence produced from oral interviews and wartime memoirs, Lee discusses the ways the Cold War, on a par with the take-off of Hong Kong's tourism industry, crossed the paths of local suit-makers and American buyers. This resulted in personalised views of the global fifties, sixties, and seventies: the Chinese tailors remembered the Vietnam War as a significant development that

brought the suit-making business to unprecedented heights whereas the frequent visits of American soldiers to tailoring shops helped ground Hong Kong's reputation as a suit centre in the Far East. Lok-yin Law's and Catherine Chan's chapters challenge official constructions of contemporary Hong Kong and Macau, respectively, through informal voices. Cross-referencing promotional posters designed by the Hong Kong Tourism Association with newspaper reports on tourist experiences and Chinese residents' visions of the city, Law's chapter reveals the futile efforts of the British colonial government to market post-war Hong Kong as an "oriental" place surrounded by rickshaws and half-naked Chinese workers. Foreign visitors were left with the impression that Hong Kong was a modern city with high-rise buildings whereas local Chinese elites hoped for the construction of modern entertainment facilities to bolster tourism after the social turbulences of 1967. In her essay on the heritagisation of joss-stick craftsmanship in postcolonial Macau, Chan critiques the Macau government's selection, inventory, and interpretation of a skill that has for decades been disappearing from the city's urban landscape. Demonstrating disparity between the official account and actual developments, she examined the government's brief description of the joss-stick industry vis-à-vis newspaper articles and interviews conducted with the founders of Veng Lei Laboratory, a budding local business working to preserve, through innovative approaches, the "tradition" of making and using joss-sticks. Chan argues that although UNESCO's creation of Intangible Cultural Heritage was done in good faith, unregulated local execution can silence the voices of cultural practitioners and eventually result in the compilation of heritage inventories that hardly echo the values of the individuals, communities, and cities they represent. Interwoven with the aim of reinstating local experiences, the final section shows that without the perceptions, struggles, and memories of those who lived through historical junctions, we are left with over-generalised official narratives that fail to underscore the diverse yet nuanced ways East Asian citizens encountered and processed global patterns.

Conclusion

For a long time, silk, tea, Sinocentrism, and Eurocentrism made up a big patch of East Asian history. Simultaneously deviating from and complicating these tags, this volume reconstructs narratives from the periphery and considers marginal voices located beyond official archives as the centre of East Asian history. Instead of revealing a lacuna, the essays have collectively evidenced that communal experiences and official accounts are mutually constituted and equally important in the process of actualising past engagements amongst East Asian communities and cultivating cross-cultural dynamics that have sprouted in the region. As if looking into

a kaleidoscope, each of these ten chapters provide us with new angles not only to reassess East Asia's vibrant networks, but also to rethink broader colonial, regional, and global events as experienced by non-political actors. What we ultimately saw is that East Asia's inhabitants were highly versatile in the ways they built their own paths within pre-existing traditions, orders, and conformity. Traditional thoughts such as Confucianism, as in Knapp's essay, circulated to Japan where it was modified according to local needs. Chik demonstrated changing perceptions towards the conventional idea of "abdication" after the unification of the Qin. Even those who were of influence, as according to Elias, Tong, and Law, documented their own visions and ruffled a few feathers by subtly drifting from the narratives of central governments. East Asia's inhabitants dynamically sought opportunities to advance: Li showed how sea merchants and Buddhist monks sustained Japan and China's relations when official channels were unavailable while the musician and tailors in the respective essays of Ng and Lee exhibited shrewdness in how they made use of available resources to advance their careers. In Chan's account, the thousands of joss-stick makers, silenced by the Macau government's official narrative, carried their own interpretation of their skills, just as much as the Chinese missing in the Heard archives facilitated Sino-Western collaboration and conflict as told by Larkin. From this collection, we discern that East Asia is complex, nuanced, and non-uniform.

In his landmark 1963 book, E.P. Thompson claimed to

rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.¹⁹

While we are guilty of including the narratives of politicians and merchants and have failed to "rescue" the commoners, labourers, and "boys" featured from going down in history as nameless actors, this edited volume nonetheless seeks to document the rich tapestry of lived experiences in past East Asia. We hope this book effectively highlights the importance of digging into the stories of people unheard of in official accounts, or those who have been reduced to "subjects," "inhabitants," and/or "workers" in available yet scanty sources. From strategic reading to oral interviews to cross-referencing official with communal discourses, we trust that the approaches our contributors deployed in this volume will encourage historians and researchers to look beyond the archives and recover the voices of marginalised actors and communities that have played their parts in constructing East Asia.

¹⁹ Thompson, *The Making of the Working English Class*, 12.

Their stories, more than enriching the fabrics of East Asian societies, carve the space for us to see and appreciate the region's diversity away from the so-called "great deeds" of "great men."

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