

Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914*, Penguin Group, 2011, 496 pp.

Cesar Guillen-Nuñez

It has taken some 400 pages of text for Robert Bickers to grapple with one of the strangest chapters in history: the virtual occupation of 19th century China by the West. In Chinese historical terms being overrun by foreign hordes or hosts is not unusual. The Mongols in the 13th century, or the Manchus in the 17th, had done so in a spectacular manner. But in the 19th century the occupiers did not come from regions bordering China's land frontier. They came instead across vast oceans in merchantmen and frigates unknown to the East, from lands from as far away as Holland, Sweden, Germany, France, the U.S.A., and of course, imperial Britain. Moreover, originally they did not come to invade, but to trade. And what was more inexplicable to East Asians, instead of the invaders being Sinicized, it was the Chinese who would often adopt many of the invaders' ways.

Robert Bickers, who is Professor of History at the University of Bristol in the U.K., has attempted to understand this unusual moment of contact and transformation by delving into numerous archival sources and unpublished material. These are as diverse as London's Foreign Office; the Archives of the Chinese Maritime Customs (Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing); East India Company Factory documents (India Office Records), at the British Library; Christian missionary papers at SOAS, archives at Harvard, Hong Kong, as well as other public and private documents in Britain, China and the U.S. In his Introduction Robert Bickers explains that, amongst other exposés recently published in the People's Republic of China that purport to recount the country's century of humiliation, there is even a *Dictionary of National Humiliation*. But he also found numerous contemporary eyewitness accounts by the foreigners on the state of Qing Dynasty China at the time of their arrival and occupation, and on the benefits of the civilization of the West the foreigners introduced. The terrible effects of the Opium Wars and colonial attitudes aside, sophisticated cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, Christian church and civil architecture, symphony orchestras and Tsingtao beer are part of the lasting evidence of the more positive aspects of that encounter.

Given these contradictory points of view, readers will realize that this is a period about which it is extremely difficult to be objective. Perhaps for this reason there has been a tendency today to not look too closely at the history of the 19th century China trade. But as the author rightly observes, "we cannot understand the resurgence of China now ... unless we understand the traumatic century which followed the first opium war, however much it might seem mere history" (p.10). For the author that century begins in 1832, because that was the year, "when British ships sailed north into forbidden Chinese waters ... carrying pamphlets, textiles and opium" (p.11). The historical events that followed were to form, "the untidy, unplanned scramble for China" (p.11).

These arguments are entertainingly expounded at great length in a historical account in which the author uses the main events and the historical figures that make up the narrative almost as characters in a play. In fact, one of the chapters in the book is entitled "On A Chinese Stage". Nonetheless the result has been an 11 chapters page-turner. The

first, entitled “Unwelcome Guests”, begins with the rather explosive entrance into the scene in Shanghai of Hugh Hamilton Lindsay (1802-1881). Lindsay’s tale of scouting the northern ports of China for the British East India Company in his ship, the *Lord Amherst*, sets the stage for the historical events that the author then develops in the following several hundred pages. What follows is a fascinating accounts of life in the foreign factories in Canton in the 1830s, of the First Opium War, of the foreign settlements in Shanghai after the Second Opium War, of the treaty ports, which were, “In many ways ... [an] offshoot of Britain’s Indian empire” (p. 105), the forceful establishment of proper foreign embassies along modern lines in Peking, the introduction of lighthouses along China’s coasts, the Boxers and the foreign missionaries, etc. It all ends in chapters 11 and 12, entitled “Extinction” and “History”, the latter being Robert Bickers own take on these great events and the legacy it leaves to China.

They are events that have by now been well studied by specialists of the China trade and the material in the book is not entirely new, so the challenge to the author was evidently great. But his book does disclose numerous unknown facts, new insights and curious details, all written in a historical, literate style, that reconsiders this controversial period of China’s and the West’s history from a twenty-first century perspective. This is, in fact, a handsome hardback publication by Allen Lane (Penguin Books), with excellent colour and black-and-white photographs and illustrations, and very helpful maps. It can therefore only be considered an admirable addition to a difficult, controversial but highly topical subject.