Møter med Kina: norsk diplomati, næringsliv og misjon 1890–1937

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This nice edited collection is the outcome of a Norwegian research project, ‘Merchants and Missionaries’, which for several years studied various encounters between Norway and China in the decades around 1900. Camilla Brautaset at the University of Bergen, who led the project, here cooperates with five other project members and co-authors – all women – who contribute to the book with one or more chapters: Malin Gregersen, Karina Hestad Skeie, Frida Brende Jenssen, Olga Medvedeva and Inger Marie Okkenhaug. The chapters are organised around four different Norwegian-Chinese themes: diplomacy, business, Christian mission and Norwegian imaginations of China. Apart from a substantial introduction to the volume as a whole, each theme has its own introductory chapter, which seeks to discern main patterns and trends.

The book covers one of the most dramatic and fateful periods in Chinese history, starting in the late nineteenth century and ending with the onset of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which put an end to an era of increasingly dynamic Norwegian-Chinese interaction. The period covers not only the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911 and the rise of Republican China, but also the culmination of Western imperialist ambitions in East Asia. The editors make clear from the outset that Norwegian action in China must be seen not only against the background of imperialism, but indeed as a contribution to it. In some cases it even appears that Norwegians were at the forefront of imperialist undertakings in China, be it through their substantial role in the shipping industry or the pivotal role of one or the other Norwegian representative in Beijing’s or Shanghai’s international political community.

Brautaset and her colleagues set out to write a truly transnational history, taking inspiration from recent research on migration, in particular, while expanding the notion of the ‘migrant’ to include diplomats and other members of the societal elite. To map Norwegian-Chinese historical encounters, they place the concrete experiences of – mainly Norwegian, but occasionally also Chinese – individuals centre-stage. The result is in essence a kind of micro-history, which is nicely complemented, however, by a wider contextualisation of these individual human destinies.

Møter med Kina is a must-read for anyone interested in Nordic-Chinese relations – not only historians, but China analysts focused on our own era as well. It is an exciting piece of academic work from the beginning to the end, and this reviewer found it difficult to stop reading once started. The book is authoritatively written, but at the same time down to earth in its analyses, firmly guiding the reader through the chaotic realities and lives of Norwegians in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although it is academic in style, it clearly also deserves the attention of a wider audience.

The book is lavishly illustrated, whereby the images contribute greatly to the overall reading experience. Take the image of a Chinese banknote issued by the Sino-Scandinavian Bank in 1922, with a Viking ship on it, or the photo of Norwegian General Consul Nicolai Aall holding the arms of two Chinese ladies somewhere in Shanghai in the 1930s. Such images do much more than just complement the text – they form the very basis for historical inquiry.

Some of the chapters centre on a specific event, which is introduced in the beginning and leads the author to ask questions about it. The rest of the chapter then seeks to explain the event and putting it into context by elaborating both on what had happened before and how the event related to ongoing societal trends and debates. In the diplomacy part, for example, one of the chapters (written by Brautaset) starts from Norwegian newspaper reports about a high-level Chinese visit to Norway in 1906;
the chapter then elaborates on the internal Chinese political struggles and the Chinese problems in
the international arena that formed the basis for the visit, while also critically scrutinising the extent
to which the delegation actually can be said to have represented the Chinese imperial government.

In general the chapters in this book do not claim to have discovered previously unknown cases of
Norwegian-Chinese interaction. What they do is rather to dig deeper into already known cases by
drawing on new source materials (Olga Medvedeva, for example, brings in Russian archival sources)
or innovatively changing the perspective (Frida Brende Jensen, for example, revisits the Manchuria
crisis of 1931 by looking at competing narratives and diplomatic hierarchies in shaping Norwegian
‘knowledge’ about what happened in the Far East).

The chapters must be regarded as unusual in the sense that they are very short. The reasons
behind this editorial choice are not delved upon. While it may be argued that shorter chapters
make it possible to expand the number of case studies and that they arguably enhance analytical
focus and readability, personally I often found myself longing for more text and wanting to know
even more.

What one would also like to see more of are Chinese perspectives on Norwegian-Chinese inter-
action. The editors and authors have obviously done their utmost to access source material in this
regard, but with limited success only. One problem is that Chinese archives are not as accessible
as Norwegian ones; another is that the material may have been destroyed, or that it, quite simply,
has never existed. But maybe a way forward could be to initiate closer cooperation with Chinese histori-
ans, who might be in a better position to locate good sources?

In any case, this book clearly deserves to be followed up by further studies – and it should be a
great source of inspiration in this regard.

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The Sound Toll at Elsinore. Politics, shipping and the collection of duties 1429–1857,
edited by Ole Degn, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2017, 623 pp., $85.00
(hardback), ISBN: 9788763544702

Under the auspices of the Danish historian Ole Degn, who passed away recently, the contributors to
this lengthy edited volume shed light on the administrative and diplomatic history of the famous
Sound Tolls, which were levied by the Danish King on ships passing through the narrow strait
between present-day Denmark and Sweden connecting the North Sea and the Baltic. The Sound
Toll was collected in the Danish coastal town of Elsinore at the entrance to the Danish Sound
(Dk. Øresund). The registrations of the taxes paid at the customs office in Elsinore are preserved
in an almost uninterrupted series covering four centuries; more than 700 surviving toll books occupy
over 60 metres of shelf space at the Danish National Archives in Copenhagen. The present volume is
motivated by a desire to ‘(…) point out the problems and possibilities connected with the unique
Sound Toll books and to inspire new investigations made possible by recent advanced [sic] in
data technology’ (p. 14). However, contrary to what might be expected, none of the contributions
to the edited volume (expect for the preface) refers to or utilises the Sound Toll Registers Online
(www.soundtoll.nl), where since 2014 a major part of the Sound toll books can be consulted by
means of a fully searchable electronic database of ships and cargoes passing through the Danish