
“The Sea of Learning” in the title refers to Xuehaitang 學海堂, the institution of classical studies in Guangzhou founded by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849). It was one of the most “influential academies of the Qing dynasty” (318n4), renowned for high standards of scholarship, innovations in curriculum and training, networks of graduates, and the compilations printed under its aegis. More significantly, its geographical location brought South China (Lingnan 嶺南) into mainstream Han Learning of the era, focusing on evidential research (kaozheng 考證) and ancient texts (guwen 古文). In the course of Qing intellectual development, it was Chen Li 陳澧 (1810-82), a fellow (1834) and a superintendent (1840) at Xuehaitang who succeeded in synthesizing Han and Song Learning. The academy that had “radically altered literati culture also legitimized . . . Guangzhou’s place as a cultural center in the Qing empire.” For readers principally accustomed to publications on contemporary foreign experiences in Canton, and for me being additionally interested in Ruan Yuan’s scholarly works and official records as Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi (1817-26), it is indeed a joy to behold this serious English-language study embracing scholars and scholarship of the Chinese community in nineteenth century Guangzhou.

The author also goes beyond Xuehaitang and explores the counties and villages of the Pearl River delta—principally to the south and the west of Guangzhou. He courageously tackles regional, local, personal, anthropological, genealogical, historical, economic, political, social, cultural, educational, intellectual relationship, and patronage activities and issues, all, both before and after the establishment and heyday of Xuehaitang during the Daoguang 道光 era (1820-50). The result is not only this “first full-length study of Xuehaitang in any language,” but also a discourse “away from intellectual history to local social and cultural history, and out of Xuehaitang into its broader circle of influence—from urban Guangzhou to the Pearl River delta hinterland (sic) and beyond” (3).

Besides Ruan Yuan and Chen Li, the author introduces a number of Cantonese personalities with whom I have heretofore had only a nodding acquaintance. Wu Lanzhu 吳蘭修 (juren 1808) initiated academic debates on contemporary issues at Xuehaitang, one of which led to the controversial
legalization of the opium trade memorial of 1836. Tan Ying 譚彥 (1800-71) compiled anthologies, local gazetteers, and sang praises of the exotic fruit lychee 荔枝. Wu Chongyao 伍崇曜 (1810-63) of the House of Howqua followed his family tradition in sponsoring publications, some of which he also helped to compile. Wang Quan 王琯 (1829-91) enjoyed summer breezes on Yuexiu Hill and composed poetry in the manner of Ruan Yuan. Zhu Ciqi 朱次琦 (jinshi 1847), also known as Zhu “Jiujiang” 九江, was a colorful personality who, despite his eccentricity, made unique contributions to scholarship in his own way. The individuals named in the final chapter link the main themes of the book with the twentieth century. For all his determined efforts and sensible interpretations, which are here and there written with sentimentality and a sense of humor, Steven B. Miles has earned the appreciation of at least this reader, who has long wished for such information on nineteenth-century Chinese Guangzhou, conveniently collected in one place, and in English.

Miles was trained at Trinity, the University of Texas (Austin), and the University of Washington (Seattle); his Chinese-language research skills were further honed at the Academia Sinica, the National University of Taiwan (Taida), and Zhongshan University. Among his mentors are some of the most respected Qing intellectual historians of our time, among whom Professor R. Kent Guy and the late Professor He Yousen 何佑森. His findings and arguments were further scrutinized at seminars, including those held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with contributions from Professor Jerry Dennerline and an impressive array of young scholars focusing their attention on local history. So we can safely expect solid scholarship as we peruse 297 pages of text and 108 pages of notes and bibliography.

The sources are sound as Miles has unearthed some rare treasures. He read the manuscript diary of the Cantonese scholar Xie Lansheng 謝蘭生 (1760-1831), Director of Yangcheng Academy 羊城書院 in Guangzhou. The entries cover the years 1819-29, just before the founding of Xuehai-tang and during its teething years when Ruan Yuan was on site. Miles also pored over Chen Li’s manuscripts and his copy of Ruan Yuan’s Yanjing Shiji 楊經室集, with margins filled with comments in Chen’s handwriting. Other sources consulted include gazetteers and scholarly and personal (ji

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5) The memorial was submitted in 1836 by Xu Naiji 許乃濟 (1777-1839), whose family is mentioned in this book (30). The claim that Ruan Yuan supported legalization was apocryphal, and is unsubstantiated by records.