
The modern history of Shanghai is one of the most studied of all Chinese cities, for obvious reasons of size, economic importance, foreign presence and source materials. However, in view of the limited publications in English about its earlier history, Linda Johnson’s book is very welcome. It consists of two parts which have little connection with each other and could be read separately. The first half is an overview of the economic and geographical development of Shanghai until the coming of the British in 1842, and is primarily based on local gazetteers and some secondary Chinese literature. The second half is an almost day-by-day account of the first decade of the British settlement, based on Western sources.

Johnson puts the growth, and sometimes decline, of Shanghai in the context of regional economic development. Because of the paucity of data, particularly on trade, the picture has to remain rather sketchy. Cotton became the mainstay of the Songjiang Region and also Shanghai; its trade declined after the early Ming had restored the tribute grain route by the Grand Canal. In 1403, the opening of an alternative waterway leading the waters of the Huangpu River and the Songjiang River together to the north into the Yangzi River, instead of East into the sea, had a profound and lasting effect on local navigation. According to Johnson, it saved the market town of Shanghai. While this is certainly true, at the time the motives for dredging the Fanjiabeng (misspelled as Fen Family Creek), which was the major part of this project, may have been agricultural rather than commercial, viz. to provide a solution for the increasingly severe waterlogging problems of the region. Contrary to what the author says, the new waterway did not provide a final solution: in 1458 and 1522, extensive dredging had to be undertaken and a new channel was added, the present Suzhou River (see Mingshi, “Biography of Cui Gong” 明史·崔恭列傳 and “Record of Rivers and Ditches” 河渠志). During the latter half of the Ming period, “Shanghai’s port functions nearly disappeared, and the city turned inward” (p. 113). The accepted explanation, with which Johnson concurs, lies in the invasions and destruction inflicted by the wokou. However, their ef-
fects on shipping and trade still await quantification, and some contrary signs, such as the reconstruction in 1540 and 1552 of the port town of Wusong (indeed, outside Shanghai county, but at the mouth of the Wusong River) after its destruction by floods should have been considered, and also the reasons for separating three western (inland-oriented!) districts from Shanghai county in 1542. The author seems to contradict her own earlier assessment when she states subsequently (p. 157) that “the city continued to thrive”.

This book is marred by a number of factual errors and misspellings. While some inconsistencies are understandable, e.g. writing bang (Shanghai dialect) instead of beng 滬 “creek” (p. 115), some are just wrong. Lihetang 裏河塘 “lining river dike” (p. 27 and glossary) should be lihutang 裏護塘, “inner protective dike” (this name has been in use only since Republican times; Ming and Qing sources refer to the ganhaitang 捍海塘 “seawall”, lihutangyan 裏護塘堰, and laohutang 老護塘 “old protective dike”). Guanwang 關王 is not the “Guardian of the Passes” but the famous Guan Yu. Huoguang 霍光 (first character mistaken as fire) is not the “Southern Guardian”, but the Han general. The garden’s name (p. 90) is not Luchun 露春 but Luxiang 露香 “the scent of dew”. The magistrate’s name on page 92 should be Wang Ting. The city god revered in early Shanghai before it became a county cannot have been a Shanghai god, but probably was the city god of Huating county, revered by sojourners (pp. 67, 70, 84). The height of the Shanghai city wall was not 12 feet (p. 81), but 24 feet (to which five feet were added in 1598).

Johnson has made good use of Morse’s, Negishi’s and other studies of the “guilds”. She recognizes that the gongsuo and huiguan, “common-trade organisations” and “native-place organisations”, overlapped to a considerable extent, but points to a geographical distinction which also had consequences for the scope of their activities. While the former were primarily concentrated around the Yu garden within the city, the latter were located mainly outside the walls near the waterfront. Johnson’s descriptions of temples, halls, cemeteries, and other facilities created by government and native-place organizations are quite adequate, but might have benefited from a wider reading of Chinese sources and literature, e.g. the thorough survey by Zhu Peng 祝鵬, Shanghaiishi Yangz Dili 上海市沿革地理, Xuelin Pub., Shanghai 1989.

When in 1843 the British arrived, in many ways their settlement