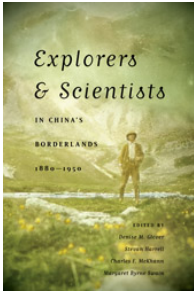


REVIEW: *EXPLORERS AND SCIENTISTS
IN CHINA'S BORDERLANDS*

Reviewed by Gregory Rohlf (University of the Pacific)



Denise M Glover, Stevan Harrel, Charles F McKhann, and Margaret Byrne Swain (eds). 2011. *Explorers and Scientists in China's Borderlands, 1880-1950*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. xii+300pp, notes, gazetteer, references, contributors, index. ISBN 9780295991184 (paperback 35USD).

This collection of eight biographical essays from a 2007 symposium makes for engaging reading and holds together well as a book. The authors, mainly anthropologists, examine the lives of ten explorers who were active primarily in the first half of the twentieth century. Some worked for decades in the Chinese borderlands. Several became quite well-known and influential figures during their lifetime and after, such as Joseph Rock, but it is likely that most of the explorers featured here will be new to readers. They were active primarily in Sichuan and Yunnan and were North Americans or Europeans with one exception, Ding Wenjiang, who is examined alongside the Swede, Johan Gunnar Andersson. All were men with the exception of Hedwig Weiss, a German who travelled with her diplomat husband, Fritz, in Sichuan and photographed the Yi people of Liangshan.

As a collection of biographies, the authors have included the sort of details, first-person accounts, and photographs that make biography such a wonderful form of historical writing. Their life stories also narrate the broader story of Euro-Americans in China. The era included much violence, some of it produced by Western intrusion. We learn, for example, that these well-meaning North Americans and Europeans tended to treat the native people of

Chinese lands as their colonial subjects, though of course China was not a colony. For example, one botanist vowed never to kick his servants, reminding us of the extent of Euro-American power and violence at the interpersonal level in East Asia. Similarly, we learn that these men went out into the field with armed guards most of the time, or were themselves armed. As the authors describe, the rising Nationalism of post-Qing China meant that Euro-Americans were at times in personal danger of attack by resentful and politicized locals.

The book is also about what the explorers did and why they did it. Botanical and ethnological collecting are well-represented in the chapters, but most of these men were generalists, committed to collecting evidence in many areas of inquiry, including folktales, songs, insects, mammals, spoken languages, and written scripts. What drew Euro-Americans to the numerically small minority peoples amid the hundreds of millions of Han Chinese? Motive is perhaps the more interesting question, though harder to determine. One answer is articulated in several chapters, including Chapter One by Erik Mueggler, on British botanist, George Forrest. Forrest resented how Chinese crowds gathered and stared at him, which made him feel uncomfortable and angry. When he made eye contact with Tibeto-Burman peoples, on the other hand, he found they had an "ocular comportment" that Euro-Americans were more accustomed to, in which staring was considered impolite (33). In Mueggler's analysis, the way these people looked at each other partially determined how Forrest situated himself in the Chinese borderlands, identifying with minority peoples and against the Han Chinese. The analysis is difficult to evaluate in a social scientific sense, but it is fascinating to consider alongside recent scholarly work on the imperial 'gaze' of Europeans upon their subjects, as Mueggler does.

Similarly, other adventurers reported seeing their native landscapes in the alpine highlands of western China, or in the peoples themselves. As Tamara Wyss makes clear in her chapter on her grandparents, Fritz and Hedwig Weiss, Romanticism drove explorers to seek out an ideal they felt had been lost in the modernizing world. In this sense, what they saw in western China and the minority

peoples there were mainly projections of their own yearnings. For Hedwig Weiss, for example, the Yi reminded her of the German people's "warlike forefathers, as light-footed as the Lolos, chased through clefts and ravines" by centurions of the Roman empire, which, in her re-telling, had become the Chinese empire (104). Like any Romantic, she reported a profound sense of freedom in the hills, away from the stifling civilization of Chengdu. Orientalist projections are no longer presented with Weiss' facile enthusiasm but it seems likely that some portion of the Romantic imagination still inspires scholars and travelers to seek out the hard-to-reach destinations of China's West and Southwest.

For this and other reasons, North Americans and Europeans of the era sought out non-Han even as they were fully immersed in the language and practices of the racialist culture of white supremacy that condescended to both Han and non-Han. They were enmeshed in both the "big imperialism" of European and US expansion and the "little imperialism" of the Chinese state on its own peripheries. The Catholic priest Paul Vial, described by Margaret Swain in her contribution, illustrates this. Vial had a "well-honed antipathy toward the Han and the Chinese state" and sought to protect "his" Sani (155). Ultimately, he tried to do this by creating a new social system in which he himself was landowner and "lord" of a Catholic utopian community, which he called St. Paul la Tremblaye, after his aristocratic patroness in France. Vial was thoroughly vilified for this after the Communists came to power, but, like many of the other figures described in the book, was later rehabilitated and officially honored for his work recording the language and culture of the Sani.

Some chapters are also narrativized around the history of science and academic inquiry, particularly in the context of the mission work that some of the explorers were simultaneously engaged in. Englishman Ernest Wilson is credited with introducing more than one thousand Chinese plant species to European horticulture, for example. At the time, science was understood to be something that any Western-educated person could do, more or less. David Crockett Graham, who is credited with building the highest quality university museum in China, had all of a year's graduate

training in anthropology and archaeology, and started as museum curator immediately after his training. The relatively new use of photography as a scientific tool is analyzed in several chapters as well. It was clearly an era of both tremendous opportunity and productivity in field sciences, ethnology, and the like.

There are many other interesting accounts, such as the dispute between one missionary who viewed the Qiang as a lost tribe of Israel, and another, more progressive missionary, who refuted the analysis point by point, recounted in the contribution by Charles McKhann and Alex Waxman. We learn, too, in Jeff Kyong-McClain and Geng Jing's chapter that this progressive missionary, David Crockett Graham, supported the Republican Chinese nation-building efforts in the archaeological work that he did, even as Academia Sinica elbowed its way onto his turf to assert its primacy in the telling of China's origins.

Joseph Rock is the star of this group of adventurers, both during his own lifetime and after. His chapter is uniquely composed of contributions by four authors, including three who composed their sections as a tribute to Rock's career. These note that Rock was certainly a cultural chauvinist and imperious in his manner, yet the overall effect of the chapter comes close to making the biographer's error of loving the subject of the story too much.

In his superb introduction, symposium organizer Stevan Harrell notes that the spirit of courageous inquiry and the effort to expand knowledge that inspired these explorers is one that the current generation of borderlands scholars has proudly inherited, even as it has rejected the earlier generation's prejudices. Specialist and general readers with an interest in China's borderlands will find this book of value, above all, as a history of Western inquiry and adventure in the region. Sections of the book might also be used effectively in undergraduate or graduate courses on Modern China and its borderlands, European imperialism or the history of science.