



FROM INSIDE CHINA

· 中国报告系列 ·

FATE OF THE NATION

HOW GUANGDONG
CHANGED CHINA

国运——南方记事

吕雷 赵洪 著 Tom Watson 译

中国出版集团
社
中译出版社

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

国运: 南方记事: 英文 / 吕雷, 赵洪著; (英) Tom Watson 译.
—北京: 中译出版社, 2015.10 (2016.5 重印)
(中国报告 第一辑)

ISBN 978-7-5001-4321-5

I. ①国… II. ①吕… ②赵… ③华… III. ①英语—语言读物
②报告文学—作品集—中国—当代 IV. ①H319.4:I

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2015) 第 254549 号

出版发行 / 中译出版社

地 址 / 北京市西城区车公庄大街甲 4 号物华大厦六层

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总 策 划 / 张高里

策划编辑 / 范 伟 胡晓凯 王文

责任编辑 / 王仁龙 范 伟

封面设计 / 潘 峰

排 版 / 竹叶图文

印 刷 / 北京易丰印捷科技股份有限公司

经 销 / 新华书店

规 格 / 880mm×1230mm 1/32

印 张 / 22.5

字 数 / 562 千

版 次 / 2016 年 1 月第一版

印 次 / 2016 年 5 月第二次

ISBN 978-7-5001-4321-5 定价: 60.00 元

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Preface

THE PEARL RIVER is formed where the West River, the North River and the East River meet, a colossal dragon whose body and claws wind their way around the landscape of south China, steadily heading southwards.

If China's rivers were measured by annual runoff, the Pearl River would be counted China's second river in fact as well as by reputation. Only a small percentage of its annual flow is produced by the Yellow River. Upon reaching its delta it spreads out like a fan, its waters splitting into many smaller rivers, each one forming a vast gate (or "men") onto the ocean: Humen*, Modaomen, Jitimen, Hengmen, Yamen and so on, showing that it has opened itself to the world. It is not a river prone to violent change; each of the four seasons has a similar outflow to the last. People do not live according to this dragon's whims; in fact, it seems entirely docile. Compared to other great rivers in China, the Pearl River has the lowest sediment content, its channel almost never silting up, and when one takes its multitude of tributary streams into account, it

* A strait at the mouth of the Pearl River, also known as the Bocca Tigris.

is clear that its volume has long been underestimated. During the thousands of years of ancient Chinese cultural history, compared to the rises and falls of royal dynasties on the central plain, or the many times when the empire fell apart and was brought together again, the remote and untamed Pearl River basin seemed hardly worth writing about.

On the 9th of June 1983, near the Guangzhou Chinese Export Commodities Fair, where a small residential compound named Xianggang was being built on a hill, an imperial tomb was surprisingly discovered. Inside it was a treasure trove of priceless cultural artefacts that shocked archaeologists, who were only more surprised when they learned it was the tomb of Zhao Mei, grandson of Zhao Tuo, the first king of the Nanyue Kingdom, founded in the years between the fall of the Qin Dynasty and the rise of Han (around 210 BC). Amongst the burial goods were several astonishing finds: five elephant tusks from Africa, each 120cm long; a curiously decorated round silver box with a garlic-clove pattern from Persia or Babylon; 32 golden half-moon ornaments on the dead king's body, whose soldered pearls showed characteristics of ancient European workmanship; a lacquerware box containing frankincense produced mainly along the banks of the Red Sea, as well as copper and pottery incense burners, exquisitely crafted drinking vessels of rhinoceros horn, jade ornaments in the shape of rhinoceroses, glass goblets clearly from some far-off place, pearl curtains of cornelian stone and so on.

These imported products were irrefutable evidence that the Western Han Dynasty and the Nanyue Kingdom already had developed and flourishing international trade links. The *Records of the Historian* and *Chronicles of the Han* clearly contain refer-

ences to Panyu (modern Guangzhou) as a county seat of the Qin and Han empires, and there is no doubt that early in the Han period (206 BC-AD 220), the Silk Road was opened up by Zhang Qian's expedition to the Western Regions,* far-off Guangdong, the so-called "barbarian land" to the south, was regularly involved in commercial exchanges with kingdoms across the ocean, becoming an important port area and distribution centre for precious foreign products.

This was an earth-shattering discovery.

The archaeological dig on Xianggang Hill discovered the first material evidence that the maritime Silk Road predated the land route considerably. The Pearl River basin was where the first foreign traders arrived in China; Sino-foreign relations began in Guangdong.

The extent to which different civilisations interact is never limited to the purely material; philosophical and religious ideas cannot but follow along, and during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420-589), Buddhist monks who came to China along both the sea and land Silk Roads. Of these monks, by far the most well-known and the one about whom the mythical history is most developed was Bodhidharma. He arrived in Guangzhou, and to this day in the Xiguan District of the city there exists a small alley named "Where the West first came to China". According to local legend, it was here that Buddhist teaching arrived from the West† and got its first foothold in China. The site is honoured as the origins of Chan

* The area of Central Asia beyond Yumen Pass in modern Gansu Province, today and at various points in the past part of China.

† At that time meaning India.

Buddhism.* Over a hundred years later, a young woodcutter came to the temple on Huangmei Mountain to study Buddhism, reciting a hymn so beautifully that he inherited the legacy of Chan from the senior monks: “Fundamentally there is no Bodhi tree, Nor stand of a mirror bright. Since will is void from the beginning, where can the dust alight?” That woodcutter was Hui Neng, a great thinker and religious reformer who played a significant role in Buddhism’s Sinicisation. Nowadays, Cantonese people hold the utmost respect for this reportedly illiterate man who nonetheless exemplified the wisdom of South China, and hail his bold integration of Chinese and foreign cultures and willingness to be a trailblazer.

In 1582, the tenth year of the Ming Dynasty’s Wanli Emperor, an emissary from the West attempted to gain insight into the mysterious Oriental civilisation. He too landed in Guangdong, arriving first at Macau, passing through Zhaoqing, Shaoguan and other cities, before finally reaching Beijing, where he eventually died. He drew the first world map ever produced in China, and translated the *Four Books of the Confucian Canon* into Latin. He was Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest who made an outstanding contribution to Sino-Western relations, and has been called “the world’s first global citizen.”

Whether due to divine providence or simply an accident of history, in the same year as Ricci’s arrival there occurred in Humen at the mouth of the Pearl River, at the time a seemingly unimportant place, an event that would quietly revolutionise China. Chen Yi, a man from Beizha Village in Humen, imported a high-yield crop from Vietnam that could grow wild and in drought

* Better known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen.

conditions — the sweet potato. This was China's first taste of such crops, and it went on to change completely the rice-based monoculture system of South China, as well as practically changing the food chain where arable land was scarce or where crop failures were frequent. The population of South China shot up during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1911), which caused the appearance of a surplus population in China and which experts consider to be related to the large-scale cultivation of the sweet potato.

In fact, more than half a century before Chen Yi's importation of the sweet potato and Ricci's arrival in China, during the reign of Ming Emperor Zhengde (1505-1521), a man named He Ru from Humen in Dongguan City was serving as an official in nearby Baisha, and discovered a new kind of weapon on a Portuguese ship anchored at Tunmen in Hong Kong — a Portuguese cannon, and in a combination of curiosity and sense of duty asked to board the vessel to inspect it. At that time the "redhair" sailors had no interest in confidentiality, nor any concept of intellectual property. Seeing a Chinese official taking an interest in their cannon they turned the ship and fired a shot to show off, hoping to give him a fright. He Ru was overjoyed, secretly drawing up sketches and writing down the principles of operation, on his return instructing the most talented smiths of Humen to make copies.

In 1521, as Portuguese sailors were terrorising the boat-dwelling Dan people who lived along China's south coast, the deputy head of the Guangdong coastguard Wang Kuang ordered his navy to fire on the "redhairs" at Tunmen, on the opposite shore to Humen. The cannon copied at He Ru's orders proved superior to the Portu-

* Old Chinese way of referring to Europeans.

guese cannon, and the Portuguese were forced to flee. In 1522 occurred the Battle of Xicaowan in Xinhui County. The Ming navy won a total victory, capturing two Portuguese ships and 42 sailors, beheading over 30 of them, as well as taking a number of foreign cannon. News of the victory quickly reached the capital, the emperor decreeing: "All captured cannon are to be sent to the artisans of the capital, He Ru is to be promoted to the vice-magistrate in Jiankang subprefecture,* all the artisans of Humen are to be sent to Nanjing to make new 'foreign cannons,' which are to be installed upon ships fighting against the pirates."

By the reign of Emperor Chongzhen (the last Ming emperor, reigned 1628-1644), the cannon of general Yuan Chonghuan wounded the Manchu ruler Nuerhachi, which later led to his death. Yuan Chonghuan gave exemplary military service to the Ming, and it just so happens he too was from Dongguan.

The very first naval battle between China and Britain occurred off the shore of Humen. It took place in the final years of the Ming Dynasty and resulted in a Chinese victory, the cannons of the Ming navy proving an invaluable asset. At that time, Chinese and European armed forces were of comparable quality, and the upper hand was gained by tactics during battle. Had Britain not undergone an industrial revolution which increased its power considerably, and had the Qing Dynasty not stagnated and ossified, the later Opium Wars would have been entirely different.

What's more, the reputation of Humen as a place whose people dare to innovate goes just as much for the rest of Guangdong, the "barbarian land" where Heaven is far above and the emperor is far

* Old name for Nanjing.