

Book Review

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Robert J. Antony

Unruly People: Crime, Community, and State in Late Imperial South China

Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2016. xi, 308 pages.
ISBN 9789888208951

In *Unruly People: Crime, Community, and State in Late Imperial South China*, Robert J. Antony has made an important contribution to our understanding of the relation between state, society, crime, law, and banditry in South China during the turmoil-filled decades before the Opium War. Antony moves beyond a traditional view of Chinese banditry as a primitive stage of development of revolt by incorporating new theories on criminal behavior and stage regulation developed in Western social history. His starting point is the lack of studies by scholars of both Chinese law and Chinese banditry who research everyday crime and crime suppression. Bandits, Antony finds, were of the working poor, and in this, he joins with many other scholars of crime who acknowledge that laws against crimes were often associated with expanding inequality and shifting economic realities. Antony shows that the rise of banditry had much to

Manuscript received: May 4, 2018; approved: October 17, 2018.

2018年5月4日收稿，2018年10月17日通過刊登。

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do with population pressure, a weakening state, and an expanding commercial environment that created targets for criminals. As he has showed in his earlier study on Chinese piracy, Antony reveals bandits as connected to local society in complex ways, difficult to repress, and a threat to both local society and the state. As a result, the efforts to suppress banditry in South China created new and evolving relations between the state and society.

An important theme that makes *Unruly People* so compelling and original is Antony's awareness of the importance of vigilante justice at the local level. A state as thin as the Qing had to come to terms with both an unruly population of the working poor and a local society that often had to take matters into their own hands for self-defense and criminal justice. One result of this was a sharing of duties between the state and the people. As most modern theories on the state privilege the singular nature of power in society, Antony's book is yet another reminder that often in world history state power was weak and needed to negotiate with society in complex ways. Ethnic diversity contributed to the necessity of this negotiation as many groups in South China had their own means of managing social relations independent of the state. As Antony writes concerning the Yao Uprising of 1831-1833: "[The Hakka] brought with them traditions of organizing village alliances as well as sworn brotherhoods for mutual-aid, protection, and predation." (35-36)

After providing the broad social and historical setting for the study, Antony gives us a three part study starting from society and building up to the state, but then returns to local society, showing it to be a vigilante ally in bandit suppression. He is particularly interested in the application of law, but is aware of its weakness at times and the necessity of more extreme efforts and bandit suppression. If law comes off as reactionary in this study, we should not be surprised. Law rarely held all the cards in empires the size of the Qing, especially in remote areas undergoing massive ecological, social, and economic transformations. The law had to catch up to new realities on the ground, just one of which was growing restlessness among the poor.

By starting with local systems of managing crime and vernacular protective stratagems, Antony begins by describing a type of dual power running throughout South China in the Qing. State power was displayed even if utterly absent on the ground. One of the main methods for advertizing state power at the local level were public placards or stone inscriptions, but as most of the population was illiterate, these declarations were little more than visible representations of authority. While present, however, none could deny the existence of the law. Other methods of educating subjects on the law included the community lecture system (*xiangyue*) and use of the local lineage system. Local law enforcement was a more difficult matter, especially in the crises-ridden South. Antony argues that the state agents were quite present at the community level, including military leaders and yamen runners. They often worked cooperatively with mutual surveillance systems and the local constables. Much of the policing and investigation of crimes came from subcounty officials, in particular the notoriously corrupt yamen runners, whose relationship with criminals was often too close. Aiding them were soldiers stationed at military posts. Where the real effective policing took place was in the space between these state agents and community, particularly the *baojia*, or mutual surveillance system.

Antony describes local society in 19th-century South China as essentially fortified thanks to the efforts of both communities and criminals. The government walled towns, but villages had to put up walls for themselves. In the mountains, or near bandits, villages were more likely to construct fortifications. Lineages were responsible for organizing local security, often from the population of single young men. The people recruited into these units were frequently the same sort of people who were attracted to banditry. As with the yamen runners and local constables, the line between criminals and police was fairly thin, contributing to much of the social disorder in South China.

Antony also looks into the structure of crime, showing it as organized and cooperative, as well as the social origins of criminals. The conclusion he

comes to is that the criminals were of the local societies they preyed upon and were often intimately connected to them through individuals, institutions, and at times, networks of cooperation. In terms of their degrees of organization, criminal activity could be organized in ad hoc bandit groups or in permanent sworn brotherhoods. Bandit gangs tended to organize voluntarily and casually through local relationships, often familial. The vast majority of bandit groups in South China were voluntary, short-term associations of people from mixed backgrounds and organized in loose structures. Even in more permanent bandit gangs, as often as not, membership was amateur.

With punishment for membership being so severe in criminal associations, why did anyone join at all? One important fact Antony notices is that life within a bandit gang or a sworn brotherhood tended to be the life of older men, suggesting that members were those frustrated in their careers. They were frequently people who never married and had any property. That is, they were the working poor with few other options due to a disrupted family life, and many were once migrant workers. And as we might expect, only a small number of the poor who entered criminal networks joined sworn brotherhoods with the intention of becoming career criminals.

In practice, banditry and organized criminal behavior followed fairly regular cycles. Some of this was based on the seasons with winter drawing the poor into crime in the face of unemployment. It also seemed to congregate in the Canton region, which had the most targets for criminals, but also the largest supply of members due to intense competition among workers. Crimes also followed fairly particular patterns, the most common crimes were related to property, especially robbery and theft.

As stated Antony describes a complex relationship between state and society in South China since the line between the criminal and local society, or even the state, was often thin. As with any criminal network based on robbery and theft, bandits and secret societies in South China depended on fences and safe houses. Thus, we are forced to ask just how much did local society

take for granted the presence of a criminal culture. Certainly, it seems many cultural forms derived from the marginalized and criminalized men drifted into mainstream peasant culture in everything from fight clubs to folk religions. Antony's description of these cultural forms makes for some of the most interesting and fascinating aspects in the book.

The final question Antony explores in *Unruly People* is the actual efforts of the state to suppress criminality, its effectiveness, and the applications of law against offenders. To begin with, the Qing state realized the problem they faced with lawlessness in Guangdong and answered this threat with draconian laws, which sprung forth from the Qing Board of Punishments. This agency provided the means for the Emperor to craft laws from the advice of provincial officials, and in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Board was creative in its answer to crime in the South. In large part, these laws removed any lenient options from the magistrates sentencing criminals involved in banditry or piracy. As Antony shows, the Board of Punishment responded to South Chinese crime in specific ways by crafting laws to address the types of banditry most common in the South. Finally, the death penalty became the standard punishment.

Did these laws work? This is the question that Antony takes on in the final two chapters of the book. There was a fairly common system by which the state became aware of banditry and then tried to investigate and suppress it. This process sometimes ended with large scale military interventions, but the investigations began with the victims who were expected to inform the local officials of crimes. Once captured, bandits faced a bleak future of either execution or punishment, which may be followed by a return to the life of a criminal. In one of the most fascinating chapters in the book, Antony reveals how the breakdown of state authority in the 19th century, and especially, the judicial systems being overwhelmed led to much more draconian and sometimes ad hoc methods of prosecution and punishment. When the government failed to respond to banditry effectively because of

backlogged cases or a lack of resources, villages had to resort to vigilantism, again showing how the line between the law and the criminal was growing thin. After apprehending criminals, villages resorted to their own traditions and procedures in undertaking prosecution. Despite challenging the monopoly on violence held by the state, vigilantism—which sometimes included extrajudicial killings—was necessary in a context of weakening state authority over local society. Punishments were based on strict rules and were constructed to maximize deterrence while rehabilitating criminals. However, it seems that the focus was on deterrence as many punishments involved public flogging and the public use of the death penalty. Hard labor, tattooing, banishment, and mutilation were also used. Repeat offenders were given more severe punishments. Antony uses the expanded use of “execution by royal mandate” to show both the increase of executions and their taxing effect on the judicial system. The overall picture Antony paints is one of a state becoming increasingly helpless as local society was criminalized or resorting to extralegal vigilantism.

In *Unruly People*, Antony shows what society can do when the state abandons its traditional role in a dynamic environment that made the state more precarious. He talks of a state “increasingly unable to cope” with disorder and “dynastic decline.” However, at other times Antony suggests that the state was never that strong to begin with. For instance, he writes: “Despite the increasing reach of the state into local communities over the first century of Qing rule, there was little effective state control at the local level. [. . .] Cognizant of the government’s own inadequacies, officials encouraged, and at other times even demanded [local self-defense].” (80) In fact, Antony shows a state that both originally relied on ad hoc ways of governance and was dynamic in facing growing challenges related to control due to crime, piracy, and social disorder. In this way, it is hard not to come away from Antony’s book with an added respect for how flexible local society could be in dramatically changing environments, even in cultures with strong statist traditions such as China.

There is little to criticize about this well-researched, interesting, and relevant book. Antony has a lot to say and has thoroughly researched this topic, looking at legal cases, palace memorials on banditry, local histories, and Western reportage. Readers expecting a social history of criminals may be disappointed. This is a social, legal, and institutional history of crime and its effects on local society as well as fragile state power in one region. *Unruly People* is about the relationship between state and society centered around the challenges posed by crime. But when Antony is able to give us vignettes of crime sprees, criminal cases, and uprisings, we get a glimpse into the rich stories that may never be told about criminals and crimes, even if they are not at the forefront of this analysis.

Unruly People will attract readers who have an interest in the dynamic nature of state power in Chinese society and those who wish to know more about the complexities of local society in China. But ultimately, this is a study about the interaction between the two. Antony's work will also be of interest to those interested in China's current social and economic transformations and their relationship with crime. Similar to late imperial South China, contemporary China has many young men without stable careers or families who enter criminal networks. He writes: "A large number of people, including men and women, who have lost their jobs, are underemployed, or resent the unfairness of economic inequality, are more inclined to turn to crime as a way of life and as a means of getting ahead. Economic reforms have brought more prosperity to China, but the resulting inequality has resulted in an increase in crime." (264) However, for those seeking an easy answer, it will not come from this study. Local society was flexible in response to banditry, but it was unclear how effective it was. Antony shows that more, and harsher, punishment had little effect on crime. And as crime—including corruption—increases, popular feelings toward the state will shift to indifference with consequences for state legitimacy.

