

Contact Zones in China

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Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by
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Merle Schatz, Laura De Giorgi, and Peter Ludes

Introduction

More than 68 million people were forced out of their home countries in 2017 – and more than 70 million in 2018: the highest number ever counted by the United Nations Refugees Agency. In order to survive or evade torture, hunger, mass mutilations or natural catastrophes, they left their historically and naturally pre-given homes and delved into mostly unknown territories, with little safety or living goods. The directions of their escapes were constrained by dangerous routes and by hopes inspired via mobile messages. Such forced contacts between help-seeking refugees and often unwilling host communities characterize the first decades of the 21st century. In a lecture in 2014,¹ Mary Louise Pratt, who introduced the concept of the contact zone in 1991 (see below), provided us with more encompassing examples of migrants who move into foreign territories, and remarked that mobility is defined as freedom and progress by those wealthy tourists, business people or scholars who can enjoy their temporary travels and stays. Yet, mobility can be experienced by others as an invasion. Even more important is the fact that unsolicited migration is sanctioned as illegal by host counties and countries, which, nevertheless, exploit the cheap labor of these immigrants.

Pratt introduced the concept of contact zones² in 1991 and elaborated on its potential for “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991, 34). Just one year later, Pratt (Pratt 1992, 6) specified that contact zones were “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with one another and

1 Pratt, Mary Louise, “The Rough Guide to Geopolitics,” Presented at the 25th Anniversary Chicago Humanities Festival, Journeys, November 2, 2014. <https://www.chicagohumanities.org/media/rough-guide-geopolitics-mary-louise-pratt/>. (last visit 3. 6. 2019)

2 Our international symposium at the German-Italian Center for European Excellence in the Villa Vigoni in Menaggio, Italy, in May 2017, focused on “Investigating Chinese-European Contact-Zones: Comparative perspectives on the experiences of Italian and German communities in China from the 19th to the 21st Century.” The contributions to this book originated in presentations and discussions at this symposium and were subsequently elaborated upon.

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establish ongoing relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict.” In *Criticism in the Contact Zone* (Pratt 1993, 88–89), she draws attention to “differences and hierarchies [. . .] produced in and through contact across [. . .] lines [of differences]. These lines are borderlands, sites of ongoing critical and inventive interaction with the dominant culture, as permeable contact zones across which signification moves in many directions.” Pratt privileges an approach that examines how texts engage with and transgress “official categories.”

In their critical review of Pratt’s concept, Rosner and Hall (2004, 98–99) clarify some changes to her concept, referring to far-reaching and enduring institutions like colonialism and slavery as particularly decisive examples of enduring “relations of power,” “relations of domination and sub-domination” and “difference, hierarchy, and unshared or conflicting assumptions.” Changes in the specific nature of relationships imply how to “meet, clash, and grapple with each other [in] conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” to “ongoing critical and inventive interaction [by means of] permeable contact [. . .] across which significances move in many directions.” Here “contact zone” is used very broadly. Everyone who in one way or another is interacting with someone else contacts the other in a particular area. Since contact always happens in a real or virtual space, the persons interacting find themselves in such a specific area or zone, for some time. Nevertheless, the critics address the supposed boundedness, stability and homogeneity of groups or cultures that interact, whereas social interaction is often characterized by change and inconsistency. Still, changes do not just develop smoothly and evenly, but differ with regard to speed, place and social organization. Host societies and new groups involved usually do not simply and unconsciously change their attitudes, instead they can sometimes negotiate their positions towards each other.

In fact any study of intercultural contacts viewed through the lens of the notion of the “contact zone” needs adapt the concept to specific historical and contingent conditions, where the interaction between the hosts and newcomers is shaped by material and symbolic factors and is subjected to changes over time.

In China, intercultural contacts over the last 200 years have developed from local experiences to globalizing local contact zones. Often, only a few individuals, sometimes with their families, were delegated from one state to another, working as missionaries, scholars, soldiers, merchants or diplomats. Therefore, members of both groups met in different social interactions, often learning only the rudiments of the foreign language, acquiring basic cultural and scientific knowledge, or exchanging trade products. These contacts remained more or less peaceful as long as the intruders were not hostile and no danger to the hosts, and could be mostly identified within the locality to which they relate. On the

other side, they also required a non-violent and partially submissive attitude from these strangers in a foreign land, that was strange for them. The locality here also meant that communication regarding these contacts in China either happened on regional levels among the actors involved or within the diplomatic realm. These contacts were shaped strongly by the local Chinese conditions. Global development in contrast is characterized by an increasing level of communication about these contacts over mass and network media to people not directly involved with them. Our choice of the term “glocality” (Robertson 1997) refers to cultural perspectives where glocalization describes a form of shifting between forced or natural openness to people of other countries, cultures and habits, in which regional or local habits are preserved and defended. It is important to define and to describe in this context the degrees and forms of personal, social, political, economic changes along selected criteria (see below).

During the 19th century, merchants and soldiers from several European countries colonized major parts of China, partly also through the criminal drug trade, veiled as a part of “free trade.” From the First Opium War (1839–1842) onwards, colonialism and imperialism shaped the interactions between Chinese society and most foreigners, at the individual and the community levels. Nevertheless, the experiences of contact between people from different cultural backgrounds cannot be simply contained within the framework of colonialism and its legacy. Nor, after 1949 and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, were the memory of that period and the Cold War ideological counterpositions the only factors in influencing these encounters. Rather, the concept of “contact zone” can give new insights in understanding the complicated and shifting cultural dynamics in the relationships between Chinese society and migrants and travellers.

Pratt’s concept of contact zones emphasized the imperial eyes of colonizers, gazing at those whom they considered inferior, worthy only to be exploited, baptized, “civilized” or excluded from interactions. Concerning more recent globalization processes, Pratt (Pratt 2007) highlights that it has been accompanied by de-globalization, namely processes of isolating and excluding hundreds of millions of people from international markets or international security mechanisms and solidarity. Hubs of globalizing markets and innovative infrastructures weaken peripheral zones and the former rights of their inhabitants. In these zones of exclusion, however, cultural practices emerge distinct from the globally predominant ones. Alternative forms of local production and consumption, new forms of social integration and the formation of identities, values and mentalities, hopes, anxieties and imaginations of transcendence appear.

Our case studies intend to enrich our understanding of the contact zones in China – in a crucial period of Chinese and global history:

As a general trend, in large parts of Asia there was an increasing demand for foreign advisers; this was driven partly by the realization that more functional bureaucracies would help advance a state's position in the complicated game of international commerce and competition. Especially after the 1550s, rulers in many regions began recruiting experts for commercial, scientific, technological, and military activities.

(Sachsenmaier 2018, 164)

Actually, the cases of Italy and Germany's experiences of knowledge and interaction with China are of specific relevance in investigating the contact zones. As latecomers in 19th-century China, without the same strong geopolitical and military interests in that area of other Western powers and of Japan, until 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China both Germany's and Italy's presence in China was characterized by a weak and unstable imperialism. As a matter of fact, the position of Germans and Italians in China and consequently their interactions with local society can only be partially analyzed from the perspective of a colonial relationship, as could be the case of other foreign communities as the British, the French and the Japanese.

Our synopsis of German and Italian experiences in contact zones in China during the past two centuries highlights distinct personal, institutional, political, and economic contexts and configurations. Individual and small group local, virtual, and programmed encounters contributed to sketchy imaginings of Chinese-ness for specific groups of missionaries, mercenaries, soldiers, and diplomats in the contact zones and in their respective home countries. Yet, personal relations, sufficient language skills and regional expertise had already been the results of previous interest in the imagined China and other particular regions, and of increasing communication with potential hosts and official authorities. Specific German-Chinese or Italian-Chinese, Chinese-Italian and Chinese-German personal accounts, dictionaries and ethnographies teach us that despite all the personal challenges, a strong interest also emerged in informing fellow Europeans beyond the original home countries about highly demanding and challenging Chinese culture, habits, languages, political and economic systems and intentions. Italian and German experiences were shaped by specific mixtures of personal adaptations and official rules, which had to be canonized and respected in the context of increasing Chinese dominion, of hard and soft power.

Moreover, most contacts and interactions between Chinese hosts and foreign migrants or settlers establish a divide between the colonial and post-colonial era, discarding a longer chronological perspective, or usually adopting a specific disciplinary approach. One notable exception is the book edited by Andornino and Marinelli (Andornino and Marinelli 2013) dedicated to the Italian experience of contacts with China all along the 20th century, from different perspectives, it is also true that the post-WWII experiences of contact are still too often framed by

the discourse of the ideological counterposition of the Cold War. Therefore, in the history of the relations between China and the outer world after 1949, the possibility of the emergence of new “contact zones” has remained virtually unconsidered as a useful perspective in understanding these interactions.

The few Europeans in China before 1949 were sometimes rather free in their migration and interpretation of Chinese culture. This hardly legitimate prerogative changed after WWII when, more strategic, better planned and politically more organized, China also started exerting greater control over all international contacts within its country. Going beyond physical contacts, we therefore asked our contributors to look at “contact immanent and contact shaping forces” such as social role, political control, or the mass media. In this way new evidence is offered showing how “contact zones” are shaped by social and cultural norms, embodied in actual historical experiences of people with different cultural backgrounds who are interacting and living in a specific space and time.

What makes a “Contact Zone”?

Originally, territorially defined social contacts required multisensory experiences. But the increasing spread and prevalence of technical networks of so-called ‘social media’ shape and frame, condition and enforce new types of behavior and identity models. Which dimensions, however, can actually be put into mediated words and visuals, and which dimensions remain beyond explicit words, e.g. selfies? Multisensory experiences are mostly very intense, yet hardly considered by cultural scientists when they focus on written documents. Adapting, suffering, learning, seeing, doing, and sharing constitute personal, immediate forms of social interaction. Previously internalized and embodied behavior patterns in turn reflect social interdependencies and asymmetrical power relations and are questioned in new contact situations. Long-distance, tele-technical communication alone does not mean contact in its full sense, using all the senses. Stephen Greenblatt refers in *Marvelous Possessions* (1991, 20) to the sensory perceptions of the Other in their first encounter: “When we wonder, we do not yet know if we love or hate the object at which we are marveling; we do not know if we should embrace it or flee from it.” Different emotions are part of the contact experience. Immediate contacts imply but do not continuously involve multisensory experiences.

As a consequence, we ask how we can index a “contact zone,” and what distinguishes it from other forms of interactions between different communities and groups. More specifically: what does the special perspective of “contact zone”

add? More encompassing economic conditions, political and other types of power relations, and legal rules and sanctions shape any particular contact zone in its particular mode, time and space. Yet, do new contact zones also re-shape and endanger the prevailing broader conditions, established power relations, and norms? Our juxtaposition of Italian and German experiences highlights how home country habits endure in the new configurations. German missionaries and scholars contrast with Italian diplomats and soldiers, and later on with merchants, journalists, other experts, and students. We clearly see a rather slow but steady increase in the numbers of these “guest workers,” their establishment of particular services, their conscious reflection of Chinese habits and rules. As Fig. 1 shows, the contact zones in China were historically and spatially located in the coastal cities and in the political and economic centers (especially the well-known “treaty ports” such as Shanghai and the capital cities Nanjing and Beijing) where the interactions between different communities and individuals were more sensitive to political, institutional and technological changes. Moreover, as our timeline (Fig. 2) illustrates, these contacts occurred when important political global



Fig. 1: Map of Italian and German contact zones in China.

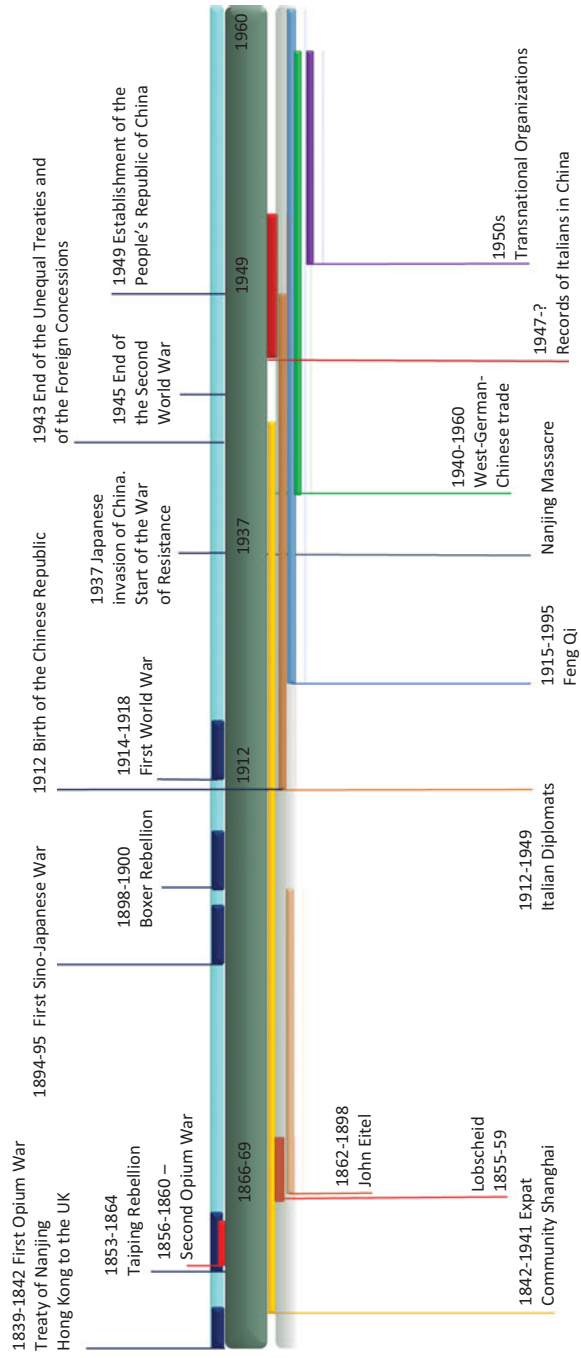


Fig. 2: Contact zones in China. Italian and German examples. Timeline.

and domestic events (such as wars and revolutions) affected the shift from the colonial to the post-colonial period in China.

Analytical Pivot Points

In this vein, we focus on three major pivot points, namely (1) the space, where different forms of contact take place, (2) the duration of these contacts, and (3) the experiences made by those involved. Taken together, they describe the most relevant characteristics of the different forms of contact. Social and cultural practices in the contact zones can only be partially explained by models of cultural synthesis such as hybridity, because a demarcation of the Self from the Other can result via the intermixtures within the “contact zones.” Taking concrete examples from the variety of contact zones into consideration, we point out how distinct notions and limitations of the broad concept of “contact zone” necessarily emerge as an outcome of its multidisciplinary usage, which implies different sets of data sources, concepts, methods, and theories. The three main aspects, i.e. space, time and experience, are closely interwoven. Depending on the particular situation and phase of the development of a contact, they highlight distinct dimensions of interdependencies, constraints and options, behavior standards and power relations.

First, space is basic for delineating a contact zone, condensing communicative, cultural, political, and economic relations, which point beyond immediate territories. As communication necessitates media as well as communicators, we must specify these basic ingredients of any contact zone. Second, time is equally important. The beginning, duration, and end of social contacts require special attention. Historical data such as legal registrations, housing, police, or schooling and work records indicate important contact dimensions. They distinguish typical conditions and modes of contact and how they are formally experienced. Yet informal, increasingly virtual forms of mediated contacts require further attention.

For example, one chapter of our book illustrates how ‘Old Shanghai’ (1842–1941), originated on the basis of the Treaty of Nanjing, hosted also a minority group of Italians, from a few dozen in the late 19th century to some hundreds in the 1920s and the 1930s. Some Italians chose their residences and shops so as to cluster in specific urban blocks, aiming at creating a small and divided ethnic space, renamed ‘Shanghai’s Little Italy.’ At the same time, an important portion of Italian migrants in the Pearl of the East was made up of businessmen, plant directors and skilled workers, mainly involved in the silk

sector: in these cases, the work environment needed to be a place of real encounter and exchange. In another chapter, Wong Tsz argues that Hong Kong under British control was itself an important geographical contact zone during the late 19th to early 20th centuries, where multiple actors of different nationalities played a role in producing a new cultural encounter, and where revolutionaries also became active.

Third, experiences are constituted by living conditions, options and constraints as well as by embodied habits of perception, communication and interaction. Experiences imply differences, e.g. different threats, to one's own identity; strangers are experienced as different by the host, whereas a stranger also suffers or enjoys usually quite distinct experiences at the same time with the host. For example, Ernst Eitel's "disturbance of knowledge" plays an important role in understanding the contradictory dynamics and positionings of "living in the contact zone." These dynamics show that maintaining boundaries and differences are crucial when negotiating within another cultural context. Laura De Giorgi explains that the "contact zone" in which foreign friends of communist China lived and operated was ideally shaped by the ideology of internationalism with its norms, expectations and values. Yet, it was strongly influenced by shifts in international politics, institutional and spatial arrangements and by ideological fissures, not taking cultural differences and modes of interactions into account.

The Book's Structure

We have arranged our book in two main sections: In the first five chapters we describe a few historical examples which may highlight the long path from first personal encounters via slow learning processes to some shared assumptions in local contact zones. Merle Schatz and Wong Tsz explain how different types of knowledge as part and as a result of encounters are essential when negotiating through new contexts, whereas Stefano Piastra, Renata Vinci and Guido Samarani show in highly detailed ways and with deep cultural understanding historically unique as well as partially enduring contact patterns.

Chapters 6 to 11 pinpoint the conflictual interdependency of a common socialist ideology in the Cold War, yet also with the enduring dominance of strict bureaucratic rules in the service of national goals. Such bureaucratic rules governed not only the interactions and segregations of native citizens and potentially disturbing foreigners, but also increasingly the export of goods, services, and people to other parts of the world. Laura De Giorgi, Sofia Graziani and Giovanni Bernardini share a similar time frame in their

contributions but inquire into very different practical experiences, especially concerning the actors and organizations involved. Anja Rommel and Tim Tausch describe the challenges of Chinese perceptions and expressions that reflect new social, political and intellectual dynamics due to the contact situations.

In his chapter, Peter Ludes offers a new typology of local, virtual, and programmed contact zones: Each “migration” of missionaries, military personnel, common citizens or workers implies giving up previous bonds, former constraints and repressions, but also security levels and embodied knowledge of norms and sanctions in the lost or – temporarily – given up home. The degree and intensity of such losses depend on, for example, the size of the contact groups, whether they are mainly constituted by individuals or families, and whether the contact is expected to last for a few months, years, a lifetime or several generations. More particularly, making sense of individual, family, small group, community or more encompassing collective experiences, usually requires narratives of actors in specific places and times, focusing on special challenges. The distinction between local, virtual, and programmed contact zones refers to the mixtures of personal and mediated experiences.

In a view back to much slower and delimited times, we account for the trajectories from individual and small group local, territorial, physical, fully sensual interfaces and interbody contacts, via their combination with virtual, mediated, imaginative contact zones to fully programmed and highly steered contact zones in the 21st century. The impact of the duration of contacts in a long-term perspective, the development from local to glocal ones and the constitutive experiences and perceptions of these processes vary significantly with regard to the concrete experiences made in a contact zone, and lead to different prioritizations of habits, memory-formations, power relations, borders, defense institutions, mobility and communication. In our examples of *social contact zones*, *virtual contact zones*, *cosmopolitan contact zones*, *transnational contact zones* and *combat zones*, (inter)national ideology and media always play an important role. They form and express patterns of embodied habits and types of knowledge that are closely interwoven with intercultural and transnational interactions.

Our inquiries into these contact zones in China illustrate and re-coin Pratt’s concept. The respective foci and modes of analysis highlight either only one of the aspects emphasized above, or describe their complex interconnections, taking into account the local or glocal aspects that shaped the contact over the course of time.

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Merle Schatz

1 A German Missionary in China (1862–1898)

This chapter focuses on the particular historical example of the German missionary Ernst Johannes Eitel (“Ernest John Eitel”) who lived in China from 1862 to 1898. His book *Feng Shui, Or, the Rudiments of Natural Science in China* (from here on *Feng Shui*) distinguishes enduring social and cultural differences in local contact zones. Eitel’s previous knowledge and experiences were significantly challenged during his stay in China. This chapter looks at his “local experiences”. Eitel’s curriculum vitae and academic work regarding China demonstrate his insights into Chinese culture and Chinese ways of thinking. He was involved with various aspects of China on different institutional and personal levels. His academic education in Germany induced him to systematically write down his observations regarding Chinese politics and history, people and languages. He compiled a dictionary, wrote a historiography on Hong Kong and an ethnography as well as a historiography on the minority group “Hakka”. It was his desire to not only deeply understand this country he lived in, but also to convey as a mediator a picture of China that explained cultural peculiarities to the European readers. And as one exception among his “China-publications,” the book *Feng Shui* gives us insights into his own challenges of living within another culture.

Eitel approached the “Chinese other” by sticking to his very own “systems of belief and knowledge.” He conceived of “the other” by demarcating the boundaries between Chinese and Europeans, and therefore by keeping and legitimating the distance. This mode of “description and analysis and juxtaposition” delimits chances for understanding, agreements and mergings that need to be considered for my description of the particular processes that constitute this local “contact zone” of a German in China in the second half of the 20th century.

John Eitel’s Life and Work

Eitel began his studies at Tübingen University in 1856.¹ He was enrolled in the philosophical faculty in the first year, and transferred to the Protestant theological

¹ With permission of Hung-yi Chien 簡宏逸, I used information on Eitel’s vita from her paper “Sinologist Ernst Johannes Eitel’s Hakka Studies: A Perspective of Missionary Ethnography”

faculty to complete his bachelor's degree in 1860. During his studies he also took classes in physical anthropology and psychology.

After his university education, Eitel joined the Basel Mission in 1861 to become a missionary. He arrived in Hong Kong in 1862 and was deployed to the missionary station at Lilong 李朗, a rural village in today's Shenzhen City, where he worked from 1862 to 1865. Due to his engagement to Mary-Ann Winifred Eaton, with whom he had seven children, and his prioritization of his family, he was forced to leave the Basel Mission in 1865. As soon as Eitel terminated his connection with the Basel Mission, he sought out James Legge and John Chalmers to request serving in the British mission. Legge and Chalmers endorsed Eitel's application and recommended that he minister the Hakka-speaking churches of the Poklo District. In 1875, Eitel was appointed director of Chinese studies by Governor Arthur Edward Kennedy to examine the Chinese competence of British employees, and he also worked as an interpreter and as the governor's secretary to the Chinese. In 1879, Eitel resigned from the London Missionary Society to focus on serving in the Hong Kong government. Thereafter, he served as inspector of schools until his retirement in 1898, when he then moved to Adelaide, Australia.

Eitel became actively involved in education practice and policy and was respected for his academic activities: He was the editor of *Notes and Queries on China and Japan* and of the *China Review*. Both journals were platforms for publishing Westerners' Oriental studies in the late 19th century. Eitel's first major work in the missionary field "Ethnographical Sketches of the Hakka Chinese" was published in *Notes and Queries on China and Japan* as a series from Vol. 1, No. 5 (May 1867) to Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1869). His treatise on the Hakka migration history was published in *China Review*. Eitel's book *Europe in China: The History of Hongkong from the Beginning to the year 1882* was a significant contribution to the early histories of Hong Kong, and was sometimes even considered to be the first history of Hong Kong:

It was by no means his only publication, but its importance was enhanced by the fact that it was heralded by journal articles – one focusing on the history of education in Hong Kong and another couple providing a brief appetizer with a focus on the inconsistent policies and fluctuating circumstances that led to the actual establishment of the British colony. (Sweeting 2008, 89–90)

Beside his interest in history, Eitel also studied Chinese Buddhism and published a handbook on the topic, as well as a Sanskrit-Chinese Encyclopedia of

that was presented at the Joint East Asian Studies (JEAS) Conference 2016, SOAS, London, September 7–9, 2016.