The ~~Terranova~~ Ko Leang-she Affair

Frank Schlupp

On September 23, 1821, at the end of the monsoon season, Ko Leang-she and her daughter Ko A-tow plied the waters between British and American cargo vessels selling wares on the busy Whampoa River. As they made their way upriver, they pulled alongside the American ship Emily. Although the American and Chinese accounts differ on the exact circumstances of her death, both suggest an American sailor struck Ko Leang-she with an olive jar thrown from the ship that sent her into the brackish water of the Whampoa, where she drowned. Her death triggered a flurry of diplomatic activity that included attempts to bribe her family to avoid potential complications in dealing with the Chinese government. The stakes were high for Western merchants as their lucrative trade in Canton, which included significant quantities of illegal opium, depended on not waking the sleeping dragon of the vast Qing empire. This paper reexamines the 1821 Terranova Affair through American and Chinese primary source analysis to illustrate the marginalized status of Chinese women who lived and worked in Canton before the First Opium War amid Western economic imperialism with a particular focus on the victim, Ko Leang-she. This research, intentionally titled "The Ko Leang-she Affair," offers a unique and critical perspective on the intersectionality of gender, race, and economic imperialism in historical contexts.

Introduction

On September 23, 1821, at the end of the monsoon season, Ko Leang-she and her daughter Ko A-tow plied the waters of the busy Whampoa anchorage, selling their wares among British and American cargo vessels moored between the open sea and Canton near modern-day Guangzhou (12). As they made their way upriver, they pulled alongside the American ship *Emily*. Although American and Chinese accounts differ on the exact circumstances of her death, both suggest an American sailor named Francis Terranova struck Ko Leang-she with an olive jar thrown from the ship that sent her into the brackish water of the Whampoa where she drowned (3). Her death triggered a flurry of diplomatic activity that included attempts to bribe her family to avoid potential complications in dealing with the Chinese government. The stakes were high for Western merchants as their lucrative trade in Canton, which included significant quantities of illegal opium, depended on not waking the sleeping dragon of the vast Qing empire.

It is impossible to know how many thousands of women and girls risked their lives every day serving the great Western ships trading with Canton before the First Opium War (1839-1842). There are no known records detailing how many were injured or lost their lives (4). However, a partial reconstruction of one woman's experience is possible through a close examination of an American Consular Dispatch and a Qing Government Memorial, both written at the height of American involvement in the illegal trade of opium in the 1820s. These sources shed light on the dynamics of American economic imperialism and the complex legal relationship that existed between Chinese authorities and Western merchants. As American colonizers pushed West under the auspices of the newly minted Monroe Doctrine, which deterred European ambitions in the Americas, U.S. imperial expansion in the Pacific was well underway. Most significantly, this often-forgotten episode in American history helps center the plight of countless unknown Chinese women in Canton who suffered from crushing poverty, disease, and, for some, violent deaths at the hands of Westerners (5).

Historiography

American and Chinese primary sources were not at great odds in their descriptions of the violence that led to the trial and execution of the sailor. Both agreed on much of the physical evidence, such as the nature of the wounds Ko Leang-she had suffered and the likely weapon, "an Italian olive jar of well, burnt red clay, weighing about 6 lbs large at the mouth, small in the neck, large in the center, small and thick at the bottom" (6). The physical evidence and eyewitness testimony established that the sailor tossed the six-pound container from the deck of his ship down onto Ko Leang-she. During his trial, Terranova admitted to lifting the container with his two hands and intentionally throwing it down at the victim (7). However, the American Consular Dispatch vehemently maintained that Ko Leang-she's death was accidental. The Qing Government Memorial was unequivocal, citing Chinese laws that clearly defined homicide and its capital punishment. Terranova was ultimately found guilty by the Qing magistrate and executed by strangulation.

The conventional history of Ko Leang-she's murder, which came to be known as "The Terranova Affair," has focused attention on the accused sailor and

the purported injustice and cruelty of the Chinese justice system. In 1923, just over a century after the killing, historians George Lanning and Samuel Couling published *The History of Shanghai* for the British-controlled Shanghai Municipal Council, which included what may be the earliest historical account of Ko Leang-she's death. Buried in the endnotes at the back of the book, the authors stated that Terranova "dropped an earthen pot overboard and killed a woman in a boat alongside" (8). However, in describing the murder to readers in their chapter on the evolution of Chinese relations with the West they wrote, "In this case one farcical native trial was held on board the vessel, and another in the city, the final upshot being the strangling of a probably innocent man, the return of his corpse to the ship, and the re-opening of trade" (9). The contradictory descriptions of Terranova as both a pot-thrower and an innocent victim are irreconcilable. Yet they may be understandable given that the book was written for the British municipal authority. It is reasonable to conclude that the authors, as was common during that era, allowed an Orientalist bias to influence their interpretation in the service of the British imperialist status quo. Lanning and Couling were not alone in creating ambiguity around Terranova's guilt or in ignoring Ko Leang-she. By the 1970s, new scholarship sought to reexamine the state of Chinese American relations and revisited her killing in 1821.

Between 1978 and 1983, three works further muddied the waters regarding the circumstances surrounding Ko Leang-she's death. In 1978, in *Philadelphia and the China Trade, 1682-1846: Commercial, Cultural, and Attitudinal Effects*, the historian Jonathan Goldstein wrote, "Francis Terranova, a sailor aboard the Baltimore opium ship *Emily*, was engaged in buying fish from a Chinese couple in a dinghy that had pulled alongside his ship. Suddenly, the woman fell overboard and drowned" (10). Goldstein's otherwise excellent study of the Philadelphia Canton trade remained silent on how Ko Leang-she was killed. In 1983, in *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914*, the historian Michael Hunt at least acknowledged "a six pound pot fell from the top deck of the *Emily*" (11). Yet, Hunt left open the unlikely possibility that the pot accidentally fell from the ship. In his 1981 article "The Francis Terranova Case" which appeared in *The Historian*, William Donahue moved closer to facts contained in primary sources when he wrote, "After several minutes, their [Terranova and Ko Leang-she] negotiations developed into an argument and the boat woman was knocked overboard by an object thrown from the ship" (12). However, Donahue left the killer's identity uncertain and overemphasized American testimonies that exonerated Terranova. It is difficult to square the historical accounts above with the primary sources cited by these authors. Among the sources they cited in the *House Executive Documents* of the 26th Congress was a consular dispatch written by Benjamin Wilcocks and a memorial to the Emperor written by the Chinese Viceroy Ruan Yuan (13). It was not until the 21st century that these documents were carefully reexamined in a way that challenged long-standing assumptions.

In 2004, in his article "Revisiting New Territory: The Terranova Incident Re-examined" which appeared in *Asian Studies Review*, the historian Joseph Benjamin Askew critically reengaged primary sources to challenge the prevailing narrative that Chinese authorities unjustly executed Terranova (14). He argued that the Chinese legal system recognized mitigating factors like intent and accidental death, and that the execution of Terranova may have been more justified than previously acknowledged. According to Askew, the Chinese judicial process uncovered sufficient evidence for a guilty verdict, noting, "the court was convinced by the testimony of Guo Yadou and Chen, the forensic evidence, such as it was, and the immediate post-trial behaviour of Terranova. Nowhere was there any mention of Terranova's failure to disprove the charges as a reason to think he was guilty" (15). Askew concluded that American demands for extra-territoriality were a "deliberate attempt to impose an unfair racial bias on the Qing legal system and deny Chinese people the equal protection of the law" (16). This paper will argue that American responses to the death of Ko Leang-she were shaped by the intersection of anti-Asian racism, gender bias, ethnic prejudice, and class discrimination.

Seeing Ko Leang-she

By the time of Ko Leang-she's death, American economic ties with China were firmly established. Although the trade of opium was illegal under Chinese law, American merchants had adopted the British East India Company's (EIC) practice of smuggling the highly addictive drug (17). The EIC created an elaborate scheme to avoid detection. Local Chinese agents met British and American ships offshore and exchanged silver for opium. The Western ships then sailed on to Canton using a portion of the drug money to purchase Chinese goods like tea and silk (18). Benjamin Wilcocks, an experienced sailor, smuggler, and wealthy Philadelphia merchant, was a true pioneer in the illicit trade. He was the first American to transport opium from Smyrna and regularly acted as a transshipment agent for the EIC (19). Despite the obvious destabilizing effects the trade had on Chinese society, Americans professed "no moral concern" regarding the smuggling of the drug (20). Under these conditions, a small Chinese merchant class, known as the "cohong," thrived, while the majority of Cantonese residents suffered from disease and poverty (21). American attitudes revealed little concern for the suffering of their hosts. Indeed, Wilcocks had a scandalous history involving Chinese women. While in Macau, he fathered at least one

child, Fanny Henry, out of wedlock with a local woman (22). Afterwards, Wilcocks abandoned the mother and child and returned to America. A former business partner, John R. Latimer, sent the child to Philadelphia to embarrass Wilcocks publicly just as he was courting in polite society. Despite his reputation, in 1813, James Madison appointed the then thirty-seven-year-old Wilcocks to serve as US Consul in Canton. His background suggests that Wilcocks may have viewed Ko Leang-she not as a victim deserving justice, but as another expendable woman — a perspective that may have animated his vigorous defense of Terranova.

Qing authorities did little to alleviate the misery of Chinese people (23). The local government in Canton provided no public health services or support for the poor. The historian Jacques M. Downs, in his book *The Golden Ghetto*, described the desperate conditions encountered by American sailors:

> When the ship first entered the river, the traveler was greeted by a host of beggar boats whose occupants cried for 'lice.' From that time until he left China, distributing his last string of cash to the half-naked children demanding *cumsha* at Jackass Point, a foreigner was never far from scenes of appalling desperation. (24)

Women and children bore the brunt of these terrible conditions. Frequent outbreaks of cholera, tuberculosis and smallpox claimed countless lives (25). Crippling poverty drove many to work in dangerous jobs on tiny boats servicing Western ships in the port and along the waterways that led to Canton (26). From these floating shops, they survived by selling everything from fresh fruit to liquor or by providing laundry services or haircuts (27). For thousands of Chinese women and girls, these boats also served as home. Whether as sex workers or casualties of the burgeoning drug trade, many Americans believed the lives of these Chinese women could be purchased for the right price.

Figure 1. ***The Port of Canton in China.*** *A copper engraving depicts the bustling port at Canton just a few months before Ko Leang-she's death. It was from a small boat like those depicted here that Ko Leang-she sold her wares to Western trading vessels. Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1821, The Map House, https://www.themaphouse.com/store/artworks/categories/119/250279-sherwood-neely-jones-china-guangzhou-canton-1821/.*

A close reading of the dispatch sent by Wilcocks to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams reveals key details concerning American motives and mentality. On the morning of September 24, 1821, US Consul Wilcocks learned that an American sailor had killed an unnamed "boat woman" (28). A few weeks later, Wilcocks provided Adams with an exhaustively detailed account that focused on perceived injustices in the Qing government's trial and execution of the accused sailor. The tone was formal and defensive, emphasizing Wilcocks' efforts to handle the situation diplomatically as well as procedural irregularities by the Chinese authorities. Without a hint of irony, Wilcocks pointed to issues in Qing protocol while also describing the delicate nature of negotiations that were the result of his own complicity in the drug trade. For example, when the Qing Viceroy Ruan Yuan offered to personally oversee a trial onboard the *Emily*, Wilcocks rejected the request because the ship's cargo "entirely consisted of opium" (29). Wilcocks reasoned that the Chinese merchant securing the ship "would inevitably be broken and transported for life" if drugs were discovered by Yuan (30). The merchant, Howqua, a close friend of the Consul, would later forgive a sizable debt that Wilcocks had accumulated in China (31). Much of Wilcocks' dispatch to Adams centers on the risks posed by Qing interference in the American economic project. Completely absent from his narrative is any concern for the fate of Ko Leang-she or her family.

Wilcocks' preoccupation with trade was perhaps best demonstrated by his initial response. Upon hearing of Ko Leang-she's death, he immediately instructed Howqua to buy her husband Ko Yoo-Te's silence, authorizing him "to disperse as far as 12 or $15,000 to accommodate the matter" (32). Wilcocks was shocked to hear that the husband refused the offer and intended to seek justice from the Qing magistrate. Bribery had worked in the past and was "the usual mode of proceeding on these occasions" (33). Wilcocks' letter established that precedents had been set. Ko Leang-she was not the first to die and would not likely be the last. It also hints at the desperation of Chinese families

that had little choice but to accept such a considerable sum. Why her husband refused the offer may remain forever unknown (34). However, Wilcocks' conduct was consistent with the behavior of other American merchants. In Golden Ghetto, Downs cites a letter written by an American trader named John Brown, who attempted to sexually exploit a 15-year-old child known as Ayow who lived on a boat: "she is still virtuous and has refused an offer of $500, but I suspect she will relent before long" (35). Brown's letter exemplifies how Americans in Canton consistently acted with little regard for the humanity of Chinese women.

While Wilcocks was primarily concerned with preserving the economic status quo, the Qing Viceroy, Yuan, sought to enforce order and respect for Chinese laws among foreign merchants. The tone of his memorial to the Qing Emperor was authoritative and justificatory, focusing on the legal and procedural correctness of his actions and the necessity of upholding laws of the "Celestial Empire" (36). According to Yuan, conflicts were a "common occurrence" between American sailors and their Chinese hosts (37). However, the historian Downs observed that Qing government policies forbade the instruction of foreign languages to Chinese people and created language barriers that made disputes inevitable. Although Yuan's focus was on the thoroughness of the investigation and the evidence collected, he also shed light on the life of Ko Leang-she and her family.

The memorial related details of Ko Leang-she's identity, social status, and family relationships. Yuan's account indicated she was married and had at least one child. She made her living selling fruits to foreign ships, another business that was officially prohibited by the Qing. As the memorial observed, small boats were not permitted "to sell eatables to the foreign ships" (38). The practice appears to have been tolerated by at least some Qing officials, as the memorial states that Ko Leang-she's interactions with the American ship were done in full view of Ye-sew, a revenue attendant, whose job it was to dissuade such sales. The historian Downs relates, thousands like Ko Leang-she engaged in this trade out of financial necessity despite the risks and legality of trading with foreigners (39). While large and technologically advanced ships brought death to the country in the form of opium, masses of Cantonese people paddled their small and fragile boats bearing fruit to escape starvation.

Ko Leang-she's venture was a family business. Her young daughter Ko A-Tow was onboard to help her mother and witnessed her death (40). Her husband, Ko Yoo-Te, was onshore at the time and had to pull her body from the water as his daughter bobbed helplessly in their tiny boat. We can imagine the anger and despair the family felt in that moment. Although it is possible Qing officials forced the husband to refuse the American bribe, it is equally likely that grief and rage motivated a righteous demand for justice. It is reasonable to interpret Ko Yoo-Te's decision as an act of resistance to oppression and to the purchase of Chinese lives, or as Wilcocks put it, "the usual mode of proceeding" (41). According to Yuan's memorial, Ko Yoo-Te immediately sought relief from the Qing magistrate, who demanded that Wilcocks and the captain of the *Emily* appear in Canton to view the evidence of the crime (42). Other clues in the margins of a translated version of the memorial suggest the family's social status. A note at the bottom states:

> Min-Foo is the expression here used, the previous documents call the unfortunate woman Tan-foo, a woman who lives in a boat, who has not the same consideration in the eyes of the Law as those who live on shore & are called Min. (43)

This statement hints that the official account intended to elevate Ko Leang-she's status so that her murder would be taken more seriously in Peking. It may also be the case that Ko Leang-she was a member of an ethnic minority group, such as the Tanka, which under Chinese law would have placed jurisdiction for the matter beyond the Qing authorities (44). If that is the case, Ko Leang-she lived at the margins of Chinese society under circumstances compounded by her gender, class, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, Yuan took the opportunity to press the issue of her death with Wilcocks, who delivered the accused only after Yuan ordered a complete embargo of American goods (45).

The most notable difference between the accounts was the language used to describe the violent assault. Yuan clearly identified the American sailor and the results of his actions, saying, "He threw a jar at her, which wounded her & caused her to fall overboard & lose her life" (46). By contrast, Wilcocks carefully constructed his description in a way that made it unclear whether the American sailor was responsible. Jackson Katz, a cultural theorist, educator, and co-founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention, an educational program aimed to prevent gender-based violence, observes language is often used to protect the perpetrators of violence against women (47). Katz argues that passive language in gender-based violence discussions diverts attention from male perpetrators, obscuring their accountability and reinforcing societal norms that sustain violence against women (48). Wilcocks' description made it unclear who killed Ko Leang-she, writing, "I received information that a Boat woman had been wounded the day before by some person on the *Emily* at Whampoa. In consequence of which she had fallen overboard and was drowned" (49). For Wilcocks and others, the lives of Chinese women did not matter due to pervasive anti-Asian racism and gender bias.

Conclusion

This research contributes to our understanding of American economic imperialism and its impacts by reconstructing a small portion of the life and death of Ko Leang-she, a forgotten victim of American opium trafficking in the 19th century. By focusing on Ko Leang-she, this paper moves to broaden our analytical perspective and address a persistent historical injustice that ignores the humanity of women. A more comprehensive and just approach to historical production—one that remembers women, humanizes them, and critically reexamines our past and current global entanglements—beckons to us from a not-too-distant shore. It is a grim twist of historical irony that in Wilcocks' hometown of Philadelphia, just over twenty miles from our campus, in a small neighborhood known as Kensington, there rages another opioid epidemic, fed by greed and a disregard for life, claiming the lives of forgotten people (50). As Downs argued, it was "an ignorant contempt for Chinese values and life" that enabled "rational, profit-maximizing entrepreneurs in Canton" (51). This study reminds that similar calculus lies at the heart of every capitalist enterprise and continues to claim victims both here and abroad. Until we question this cold rationality and its underlying assumptions, the marginalized and vulnerable will continue to suffer most.

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1. The author is especially grateful to Gina Talley and James Lingman for patiently reading drafts and providing invaluable feedback. The author also wishes to acknowledge Thomas Noel and Qi Wang for their guidance in locating primary sources and shaping the research direction. This paper is a product of collaboration; however, any errors belong solely to the author.
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3. In Chinese culture, surnames typically come before given names. For example, in the name "Ko Leang-she," "Ko" is the surname and "Leang-she" is the given name. This naming convention emphasizes the importance of family and lineage. This study will use Ko Leang-she's full name to maintain focus on the victim; B.C. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, November 1, 1821, Pg. 1, Digitized Microfilm (Frames 344-357), Register: 1830 - 1906 / Despatches: Volume 1: February 21, 1790 - April 20, 1834, File Unit: Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Canton, China, 1790-1906, Series: Despatches from U.S. Consular Officers, Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State. National Archives. NAID: 210916010. [Online version, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/210916010?objectPage=362, National Archives and Records Administration, October 11, 2024.]; Yuan, Memorial, 1.
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16. Askew, "Revisiting New Territory: The Terranova Incident Re-examined," 367.
17. Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade*, 11.
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19. Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade*, 53.
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21. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 60.
22. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto,* 43.
23. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 61.

24. *Cumsha* is a gift or bribe depending on the context. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 60.
25. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 60.
26. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 52.
27. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 25.
28. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, 1.
29. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, 8.
30. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, 8.
31. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 43.
32. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, 2; Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 153.
33. Wilcocks, Letter to John Quincy Adams, 1.
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36. Yuan, Memorial, 10.
37. Yuan, Memorial, 3.
38. Yuan, Memorial, 9.
39. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 62.
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