“Migratory Bipeds” and “Floating Town”
The Emergence of Chinese Littoral Communities in the Pearl River Estuary in 1839-1841

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Abstract  Until the 1960s, in Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbour, one could usually see numerous inhabited Chinese craft, where those on board, like their counterparts in late imperial (1368-1912) and modern China, were commonly thought to live afloat for generations without a clear origin. Were they really a residential caste or even a race as claimed by their contemporaries, Westerners and Chinese alike? If not, who were their antecedents?
This talk addresses these questions by looking at the Chinese society in the Pearl River Estuary, Guangdong province more than 170 years ago, during the time from the commencement of Commissioner Lin’s anti-opium campaign in 1839 to the first days of British Hong Kong in 1841. It traces the emergence, in 1839-1841, of Chinese coastal settlements and “floating towns” beside foreign merchant and British armed shipping in Jiulong, Tonggu, Jishuimen, and their neighboring waters, where Qing control was tenuous but not totally absent while British power was rising but not dominant. Examining the socioeconomic backgrounds and activities of those “migratory bipeds” in the communities, this talk argues that many Chinese people took advantage of the opportunities provided by the 1839-1842 Qing-British hostilities to expand their own trading activities and social networks. In 1841, when many Chinese serving the foreigners migrated to Hong Kong Island with the British Expedition, a huge number of them stayed afloat as the first immigrant “boat population” in the British colony.

Rather than adopting the conventional diplomatic-institutional approach to explain the profound impact of the Opium War (1839-1842) on Chinese society, this talk illuminates this impact by scrutinizing how the unprecedented Chinese-Westerner contacts in wartime transformed local littoral communities. Nonetheless, the Opium War did not bring about a complete change in Chinese littoral society. Contextualizing 1839-1842 Pearl River Estuary society in the late imperial period, this talk highlights some aspects of continuity in Chinese littoral society before, during, and after the Opium War.

**Speaker** Having received his D.Phil. in Oriental Studies (Chinese Studies) in August 2016 from the University of Oxford, Gary Chi-hung Luk is currently the Economic History Society Tawney Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research in the School of Advanced Study, University of London. Meanwhile, he is an affiliated researcher in Chinese Studies in the Department of East Asian Studies and a research associate at Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge. Broadly speaking he works on early modern and modern Chinese history, focusing on the maritime and river world, the Qing Empire, British imperialism and colonialism, borderlands, and ethnicity. His specializations also include Hong Kong history and Manchu studies. At Cambridge he is completing his first book manuscript entitled “Water Borders: Empires, Trades, and Communities in Mid-Nineteenth-Century China’s Littorals.”