

structure defining the roles of emperor and his officials. We might also ask about the nature of the economy that Dong Fen and others were so quick to profit from. He invested in pawnshops and the profits from this business appear to have been used primarily to support a conspicuously luxurious lifestyle. How sustainable was such a business model? What impact did the commercial activities of the great families have on Jiangnan (and, for that matter, the empire)?

In sum, *Brush, Seal and Abacus* does not offer a fresh analysis of either the tensions of Jiangnan society or bureaucratic factionalism in the late Ming. It does provide, however, a vivid series of examples and cases, drawn from close reading of generally well-known primary sources, of elite strategies for enrichment and political influence mongering in late sixteenth-century Jiangnan and the social and moral responses to such strategies in the face of dynastic decline in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

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Civilizing the Chinese, Competing with the West: Study Societies in Late Qing China. By Chen Hon Fai. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2017. Pp. xxxix + 276. \$45.00.

Over the last few decades, much has been written about the chequered history of China's transformation from an empire into a nation-state. From Joseph Levenson's *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* to Peter Zarrow's *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* and Wang Hui's *China from Empire to Nation-State*,¹ readers are repeatedly reminded of the difficulty that China faced in joining the modern global system during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The list of China's problems is long, including its ethnocentrism, its Confucian culture, its imperial structure, its restrictive social hierarchy, and, above all, its remarkable diversity of peoples living in a vast land that

¹ Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

stretched from East Asia to Central Asia. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: China had had tremendous difficulty adjusting to the “family of nations.” In more than half a century, China stumbled in international affairs, suffered from political chaos and social turmoil, and finally adopted the party-state system that has ruled the country to this day.

A sociologist by training, Chen Hon Fai revisits this old story in *Civilizing the Chinese, Competing with the West: Studies Societies in Late Qing China*. Although not explicitly stated, Chen follows in the footsteps of the Annales school in post-WWII France by taking a long and broad-sweeping view of the past. Instead of giving a conventional account of China’s failure to join the “family of nations” based on diplomatic records and signed treaties, he offers a thoughtful interpretation through the lens of “historical sociology.” A main characteristic of this hybrid approach is to employ sociological theories to dissect historical events, uncovering the deep structure, the enduring issue, and the recurrent theme of the Chinese discourse of the nation. To highlight the pressing problems that China faced in the mid-nineteenth century, Chen opens his book with an analysis of the “collective crisis” of the Chinese when the country encountered, at once, a decay from within and a threat from without (p. 74). The crisis triggered a creative response from members of the educated elite who wanted to create a common identity among the Chinese, turning them into self-motivated and self-sacrificing citizens of a new nation.

Much of Chen’s book is to offer a nuanced account of this double move of building a strong and united Chinese nation on the one hand and transforming the “four hundred million people” (the entire population of China at the time) into self-motivated citizens on the other. On the surface, this double move looks paradoxical. Simultaneously it aimed to create a collective unity known as “China” (*Zhongguo*) and to make each individual Chinese citizen an active agent with an independent mind. But Chen suggests us to put this paradox in the context of the time when China confronted a new world order dominated by European powers. According to Chen, the new world order was predicated on the double meanings of civilization. On the one hand, civilization was a universal normative principle that defined the membership of the international family. On the other hand, it was a measurement by which to separate the “civilized” nations from the “barbaric” and “semi-civilized” nations (pp. 30–31). Hence, to be recognized as civilized and exempted from European colonization, China must form a nation-state. And to form a nation-state, China must be governed by a centralized government and filled with self-motivated and self-sacrificing citizens.

With the double meanings of civilization, Chen raises questions about Prasenjit Duara’s and Rebecca Karl’s accounts of Chinese nationalism. Chen finds Duara’s account “conflat[ing] nation-making with state-building” in his attempt to rescue

history from the nation. Consequently, while Duara succeeds in rescuing history from the linear progressive narrative of state-building, he forgets about the Chinese resistance to European colonialism through imagining a nation (pp. 39–40). As for Karl's account, Chen finds her “shifting [the] focus from linear time to global space” by linking China to global anti-colonialism. In so doing, she limits China to “anti-colonial politics and revolutionary practices” without paying adequate attention to the domestic forces of change (pp. 40–41). In both accounts, Chen finds them giving too much emphasis to the global forces at the expense of the local.

For Chen, a more balanced approach would be to look at the mixing of the global and local forces. To do so, he focuses on the creation of study societies (*xuehui* 學會). As a new form of social organization, study societies stood between the imperial authority and the Confucian family. They occupied a neutral zone sandwiched between the loyalty to the emperor and the filial piety to one's biological family. This “middle realm” (as Joan Judge calls it) was an autonomous space where every member would be treated equally and fairly in pursuit of the public good. For this reason, the creation of these study societies was important in founding the Chinese nation. First, it was a noble attempt to establish a new set of social relations that would bring the Chinese, especially the educated elite, together from all over the country. Second, it was deemed achievable and sustainable because of the new printing technology and the spread of newspapers and periodicals. Ultimately, this middle realm would serve as the foundation of the new Chinese republic where citizens would actively and creatively participate in public life (pp. 33–55).

In his book, Chen chronicles the development of study societies from its germination (Chapters 1–3) to its fruition (Chapters 4–8). He depicts this euphoria of new social connectivity as a moment of liberation, a turning point in which the restrictive hierarchy of the imperial system was broken apart to allow the educated elite to lead the country (pp. 57–79). At the same time, Chen detests the subtle change in the goal of these new social organizations, which gradually shifted from peacefully cultivating a common identity among the Chinese to overtly promoting a violent revolution against the Qing dynasty. To Chen, this transformation was partly triggered by national crises such as the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), and the occupation of Beijing by the armies of eight foreign nations in 1900. But the transformation was also undergirded by a new consciousness that must be understood in sociological terms, especially Charles Taylor's argument for war making in building a nation-state (pp. 48–49, 169–70), William Sewell's theorization of the interplay between rules and resources in social transformation (pp. 49–51), and Norbert Elias's concept of the “civilizing process” (pp. 159–69). Taken together, these sociological theories add a depth to the seemingly simple story. They point to a deep-seated shift in the intellectuals' worldview that had moved away from “a non-violent,

civilized approach of competition” in the reformers to the masculine, militant mindset of returned Chinese students from Japan after 1900 (pp. 109–38). As it turned out, the shift had as much to do with intellectual trend as generational difference.

In analysing this shift in the intellectuals’ view, Chen deepens our understanding of the Chinese discourse of the nation. As the national crisis became severe and dire, the Chinese intellectuals changed their strategies to create a national consciousness. They were no longer satisfied with a peaceful expansion of the family structure (as the reformers suggested). Instead, they wanted to actively shape the collective identity of the masses by promoting a violent revolution against the Manchus. But Chen cautions us not to take this difference too far. The racist rhetoric notwithstanding, the revolutionaries were as fervently committed as the reformers in transforming the imperial subjects into fellow citizens.

As we look back to the history of China’s modernity, there is much we can learn from Chen’s “historical sociology.” First, in showing a structural continuity between the reformers and the revolutionaries, Chen underscores the importance of viewing the Chinese discourse of the nation on its own terms. Rather than focusing on the impact of foreign ideas such as anarchism, democracy, liberalism, linear progression, Marxism, and anti-colonialism, Chen calls attention to the significance of domestic forces or factors in transforming China’s socio-political structure. Second, Chen demonstrates that the paradoxes and contradictions in China’s entry into the “family of nations” were not entirely Chinese problems. Partly they were the results of the international system and the unbalanced power relationship between the West and the Rest. As such, a careful study of China’s transitioning into the global system will enlighten us on the complexity and inadequacy of our global system.

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Navigating Semi-Colonialism: Shipping, Sovereignty, and Nation-Building in China, 1860–1937. By Anne Reinhardt. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. Pp. xiii + 381. \$49.95/£35.95.

Among the core questions about modern Chinese history is China’s experience of and response to imperialism. While the issue has long been somewhat downplayed in the course of the reaction against John K. Fairbank’s “impact-response” paradigm, the pendulum is now swinging a bit the other way, with several scholars researching the