

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

impact of China's colonial experience.<sup>1</sup> This book by Anne Reinhardt attempts, with considerable success, to address the issues through a specific case study.

*Navigating Semi-Colonialism* is an extended analysis of the phenomenon of semi-colonialism in China through the lens of the steam navigation industry. It consists of seven substantive chapters, organized mainly along chronological lines. After an introduction that raises the issues, the next three chapters focus on the late Qing. Chapter 1 deals with the formation of the shipping network from 1860, Chapter 2 with the relationship between the source of capital for shipping businesses and the flags under which the ships sailed. The next chapter examines the Shipping Conference (cartel) as an example of Sino-Western collaboration. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the somewhat different history of the industry during the Republican period—the former concentrates on the early Republic, when the state withdrew from involvement, and the latter on the Nanjing Decade, when the state reasserted its role. Chapters 4 and 7 take a somewhat different tack, using Foucauldian concepts and cultural studies terminology to analyse the steamship as “social space”—focusing mainly on racial hierarchies among both crew and passengers. A brief concluding chapter continues the story up to 1956, when the Communist government nationalized shipping.

As its title suggests, the book's aim is “to use the multifaceted arena of steam navigation to reflect on China's experience of Western and Japanese imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 295). The core concept is that of “semi-colonialism,” used basically as a heuristic device to examine Sino-foreign interrelations in China, rather than as a comprehensive model of China's social formation as “[semi-feudal] semi-colonial.” Because, at least up to 1895, one foreign power—Great Britain—was dominant in the shipping industry, Reinhardt steers clear of the view of semi-colonialism that centres on the existence of and competition between multiple imperialisms. Rather, she uses the term to emphasize the fact that China continued to enjoy, albeit limited, sovereignty, stressing (p. 4) that she “keep[s] both sides of the hyphen under active consideration.” This approach allows her to successfully use the term to tease out the specificities of China's situation as well as to make illuminating comparisons with fully colonial situations; a short final section in each chapter compares the developments described in China with those in fully colonized India at the same time.

In studies of imperialism in China it is important to strike a balance between emphasizing the specificity of China's situation and recognizing the degree to which

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, eds., *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (London: Routledge, 2012); and Isabella Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

it suffered from a more general phenomenon of colonialism; between acknowledging the impact of imperialism and identifying areas where the Qing state still enjoyed a certain level of sovereignty; and between avoiding the Scylla of the crude anti-imperialism of some PRC works and denial of agency to the Qing, and steering clear of the Charybdis of glossing over external causation and overemphasizing purely Chinese dynamics (something that perhaps happened in the course of the reaction against Fairbank).

Reinhardt is successful in striking an appropriate balance in this respect, and skilfully uses her example of steam shipping to throw light on how semi-colonialism as embodied in the treaty system actually operated in practice. The system was structurally biased in favour of foreign interests and formed a framework for foreign penetration. In particular, steam shipping was an important mode of foreign expansion throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the dominance of British capital in both shipbuilding and global shipping intensified the advantages of foreign interests. Broader structural factors ensured that the Qing were unable entirely to resist demands for the opening of the Yangzi to foreign shipping.

At the same time, the Qing government was able to slow down (but not stop or reverse) the expansion of the foreign shipping companies and the shipping network, for example by limiting steamship traffic (Chinese and foreign) to the treaty ports and by establishing the China Merchants Steamship Navigation Company (Zhaoshang ju 招商局, hereafter CMSNC) to compete with the foreign companies. As early as the 1860s, Chinese merchants managed to establish a dominant position in domestic trade.<sup>2</sup> Even after 1898 when Britain obtained free access for foreign ships to any port, the Qing government, by requiring ships using non-treaty ports to pay Chinese customs duties and *lijin* 釐金, in practice limited the ability of the British to push home their advantage. Thus, by 1911 Chinese shipping made up 90 per cent of inland traffic. The Qing state's ability to resist the expansion of the foreign network was in stark contrast to India where full colonialism allowed British shipping companies quite rapidly to establish a network that they dominated almost exclusively.

While acknowledging the agency of the Qing state, the author argues against the common interpretation of late Qing officials as mired in conservatism. She points out that these officials were motivated more by the immediate fiscal or political concerns of the state than by any in-principle objection to modern technologies. This may be true, and there possibly has been too much emphasis in the past on issues such as feng shui 風水. But might one not also argue that allowing such short-term factors to dominate policy making could itself be an indicator of conservatism?

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Rawski, "Chinese Dominance of Treaty Port Commerce and Its Implications, 1860–1875," *Explorations in Economic History* 7, nos. 1–2 (Autumn–Winter 1969), pp. 451–73.

A key concept within the author's analysis of semi-colonialism is that of collaboration. Reinhardt eschews the common moralistic approach to the topic, instead following Ronald Robinson in seeing collaboration as involving mediation and negotiation between imperialist powers and local polities and societies. While the whole treaty system was an example of collaboration, the main case study here is the cartel known as the Shipping Conference. The author shows that the CMSNC and, by extension, the Chinese government collaborated with the main foreign (British) companies to establish and operate this cartel, with paradoxical results. It meant that they were subjected to a structure in which the dominant voice was foreign and the main benefits flowed to the foreign participants. At the same time, the arrangement also brought benefits to Chinese interests, guaranteeing the company survival with a reasonable level of profits (and the government a reliable flow of income), which may not have been easy to achieve in an environment of untrammelled competition. By contrast, in India the British companies were able to dominate the shipping network without the need to collaborate or compromise with local companies, using rate wars to squeeze out any Indian competitors.

After 1913, the broader collaboration was no longer viable or, at the very least, changed its nature. This was because from that time (at least until 1927) there was in practice no central Chinese state with which the foreign interests could collaborate. As a result, the author argues (p. 180), foreign expansion in China, and in particular in the shipping industry, slowed or even came to a halt, because there was no longer a single mechanism (the treaty system) through which that expansion could take place. At the same time, a more diffuse and inchoate opposition was difficult to deal with in a situation where no one institution could be held accountable for any violation of treaty conditions or foreign rights. Nevertheless, the book presents little evidence showing that these factors were at the forefront of the minds of the foreign interests in curtailing their expansion (if indeed they did: it is certainly less than clear that Japanese expansion did slow). Perhaps the new situation was rather the result of, for example, broader changes in the international system resulting from the First World War or the replacement of Britain by Japan as the most immediate imperialist threat to China.

After a period when the state was unable to play an active role in the control and development of the shipping industry, the rise of the Nationalist government in Nanjing encompassed an ambition to intervene and very specifically to restrict and roll back the power of foreign interests in that industry. Reinhardt shows, however, that the Nationalist government, for all its rhetoric about supporting Chinese companies in opposition to foreign interests, never actually delivered much support, except to the newly nationalized CMSNC. Private shipping companies, even those operated by the relatively well-connected Yu Xiaqing 虞洽卿, became increasingly disillusioned. This interesting story might have benefited from the use of Brian Martin's book on

the Green Gang,<sup>3</sup> which gives a different perspective on some of the negotiations and relationships during the Republican period. It could perhaps also have been used more extensively to throw light on broader controversies in modern Chinese history. For example, it would seem to support Parks Coble's view of the Nationalist government as essentially motivated by extending its own interests and military power rather than an opposing view that sees the Nationalists attempting, albeit imperfectly, to put in place the necessary instruments for the regulation of a modern capitalist society.

The case study of the warlord Liu Xiang 劉湘 in Sichuan does, however, contribute to the debate over the reach of the Nationalist state. Liu was more successful than the central government in rolling back foreign power. Just because he did not feel bound by ongoing negotiations to limit the foreign position, he was happy to establish his control vis-à-vis foreign interests not only by asserting his authority to search foreign ships but also through encouraging the use of weapons such as boycotts, against which the British believed they were "powerless" (p. 233). Having to decide how far it was worthwhile or even possible to fight back, the foreign interests—even the more assertive Japanese—tended to give way, and Sichuan and the upper Yangzi became increasingly dominated by Chinese shipping.

The principal privately owned Chinese shipping companies in this period, predominantly Lu Zuofu's 盧作孚 Minsheng Company 民生實業公司 and those operated by Yu Xiaqing, can, the author argues, usefully be analysed through the conceptual framework of "national capitalists." They followed a common nationalist agenda that aimed for rapid growth under state patronage in order to limit foreign economic penetration and advance Chinese interests, and shared a commitment to cultural and social modernization, with particular reference to their home areas. However, the author makes only a brief attempt (p. 243) to set the parameters and limits for the concept of "national capitalists"—what are the differences between these shipping entrepreneurs and other groups that she would not designate as "national capitalists"? Thus, the shipping companies' reliance on favours from the state—the Sichuan provincial authorities for the Minsheng Company and the central government for Yu Xiaqing's companies as well as for the CMSNC—can be seen as a form of rent-seeking, which perhaps suggests that, if one uses the Communist Party terminology, they might fall into the category of "bureaucratic capitalists."

Most of the book is about the politics and operations of the shipping industry. But Chapters 4 and 7 extend the analysis to social and cultural aspects of imperialism. During the late Qing the shipping industry embodied and illustrated the racial and social hierarchies of the day in its treatment of both staff and passengers, while at the

<sup>3</sup> Brian G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919–1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

same time the fact that China was a semi-colony rather than a colony meant that the hierarchies were enforced mainly through informal structures and practices rather than by formal rules and institutions. Thus, the officers on the steamships, whether British or Chinese, were overwhelmingly foreign, though companies attempted to justify this by pointing to the lack of accreditation procedures for Chinese staff and to the demands of the insurance companies, who were reluctant to insure ships captained by Chinese masters. The fact that the Chinese crew were (as was common in many industries in China at the time) recruited through intermediaries further blocked any avenues to promotion. In passenger accommodation, foreign first class was limited mainly, but not explicitly, to foreigners and was under the direct control of the master and hence the shipping companies. By contrast, all classes of Chinese accommodation were managed by compradors, whose incentive structure led to the chaos and overcrowding in the Chinese passenger space that reflected and reinforced racist Western stereotypes of “John Chinaman” and embarrassed the relatively few educated Chinese writers and journalists who reported on conditions on the ships.

In the Republican period, this began to change, and the Nationalist government introduced formal accreditation processes for Chinese captains and engineers, removing a key pretext on which they had earlier been excluded. Cost factors fairly quickly led to Chinese steamship companies hiring Chinese senior staff. The British companies followed suit, at least as regards more junior technical positions, though the Japanese (who paid their Japanese staff lower salaries than those enjoyed by Europeans) did not.

Among the most fascinating sections of the book is an analysis (pp. 263–78) of the “teaboy crisis” during the 1930s, which shows the limitations of foreign power when confronted with popular and diffuse resistance. The “teaboys” were men to whom the compradors sold positions on the ships to provide services for Chinese passengers; they were not part of the crew or under the authority of the captain. Because they bought their positions they were entirely dependent on winning (or demanding) tips from the passengers, while the cost squeeze by the shipping companies encouraged or even forced the compradors to sell many more teaboy positions than the number of passengers could support. This greatly contributed to the chaotic and unruly nature of the Chinese passenger quarters.

The foreign companies in particular came to regard the system as dysfunctional, for instance, in preventing them from cracking down on opium smuggling. They expressed a wish to reform the system, though their commitment was limited, as shown by the fact that they continued to contract out the Chinese passenger space to compradors and were unwilling to invest in new staff. Confronted with sit-ins by teaboys on their ships and lacking government support, they were forced into compromises, and were unable fundamentally to reform the system. It was only after the outbreak of war that high profits allowed the foreign companies to seize control

of the Chinese passenger business from their compradors.

On the other hand, the New Life Movement provided a context in which the CMSNC and to some extent other Chinese companies were able to introduce reforms. In particular, the author shows how Lu Zuofu's Minsheng Company succeeded in introducing a passenger experience on the "New Steamship" that avoided and indeed negated the previous stereotype (and to some extent actuality) of a chaotic and uncontrolled Chinese passenger space in contrast to the order and cleanliness of the foreign first class. Minsheng, probably because it was newly established, was able to operate with a directly hired, and much more highly trained and disciplined, service crew. Nevertheless, one has to wonder a bit how far the description of Minsheng's situation was too good to be true and whether it actually reflected aspiration rather than reality: much of the evidence for it consists of company publicity materials.

The broad availability of and rich information available in published newspapers, journals, and books mean that these form the main sources for most of this book. In addition, the author uses a wide variety of archival sources in English and Chinese (though rather less in Japanese). For example, she uses the archives of Jardine Matheson and Swire (who owned the two largest British shipping companies in China) to give a detailed picture of the operations of the Shipping Conference and of the way the foreign companies handled the teaboy issue.

Economic and business historians will find that the book provides considerable information about the business of the steam shipping industry in modern China. There is much valuable information on the China Navigation Company (run by Swire) and the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company (run by Jardine Matheson), and their relations with Chinese and Japanese competitors. There is also a useful spatial perspective on the treaty ports as nodes of a dynamic transport system rather than as isolated urban centres. *Navigating Semi-Colonialism* is, however, a work centrally on political rather than economic or business history, and a business or economic historian would probably look for more numbers and more than the one table presented in the book.

When analysing the impact of imperialism on China, any attempt to draw up a balance sheet for the whole country or the whole economy runs into serious methodological and data problems. But this book succeeds in offering a convincing and nuanced analysis by focusing on a particular sector. The author warns against too easy extrapolation from the case of shipping, but it would be surprising if this case study was not able to throw light on the issues in relation to other sectors and areas, and even in relation to the broader economy. *Navigating Semi-Colonialism* will be required reading for scholars working on the foreign impact on China.

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