

**Robert Bickers, Jonathan Howlett, eds..** *Britain and China, 1840-1970: Empire, Finance and War*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$160.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-65876-8.



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For nearly a decade now the British Inter-university China Centre (BICC) has generated new historical scholarship on China, Sino-British relations, and the British community in China. *Britain and China, 1840-1970: Empire, Finance, and War* in several ways manifests these efforts. A volume of conference papers edited by center co-director Robert Bickers, a professor of history at the University of Bristol, and Jonathan J. Howlett, faculty at the University of York, *Britain and China* offers new research by historians trained and supported by the center. Other essays, contributed by scholars in the United Kingdom, United States, Hong Kong, and China, point to the reach of BICC's conference organizing efforts.

Published as part of the Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia series, *Britain and China* sits alongside several other Routledge publications, published in the last ten years and forthcoming, that take up similar topics and themes, namely treaty ports, foreign power, and foreign-owned or -dominated institutions in China. Together, these publications constitute a lively field

of research that touches on foreign colonialism and imperialism in China as well as Chinese nationalism. This volume makes two important contributions to the field. First, a good number of the chapters “decentralize and destabilize any easy notion of the simple, bi-lateral relationship” between Britain and China (p. 10). Second, they show the “complicated position” China held “within global networks of empire, war, and migration” (p. 223). Thus the volume broadens the frame of British imperial history to incorporate China and contributes to a surging field of scholarship that places Chinese history within a global frame.

The chapters take up Chinese-British economic, diplomatic, human, and imaginative interactions spanning the 1830s to the 1960s, and they speak with each other across various axes. One line places British activities in China in conversation with broader dynamics of the British Empire. Bickers shows how China, as part of a regional opium economy and geostrategic Asia (both centered on British India), became a destination for British Indians who traveled there as merchants,

soldiers, and labor for municipal police and businesses; Benjamin Mountford tells how the flow of Chinese to Australia in 1888 created crisis in the Colonial and Foreign Offices, which had to balance London's trade interests in China with the colony's cry to exclude Chinese immigrants; Paul Bailey's work on the migration of Chinese contract laborers to France and Britain during World War One points to the resources and anxieties generated by outposts of foreign power.

A second line of conversation places China within a global economic and geopolitical frame. Koji Hirata, Chen Qianping, and Hans van de Ven show how global capital both generated political conditions in China and reacted to them. Sherman Lai shows how the geopolitics of the Allied war effort shaped Chiang Kaishek's fluctuating feelings about Great Britain. Jonathan Howlett puts early People's Republic China (PRC) economic and cultural policies within a framework of global decolonization and post-WWII reconstruction. In contrast to such regional and global framing, Isabella Jackson draws a map of an expansive and defensive foreign territorial authority in Shanghai; Stephen Platt explores how the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion produced competing images of the Qing Empire and British military involvement in China; and John Carroll recovers voices amongst the British community in Canton that problematize standard narratives of the Opium War.

The editors note that improved access to Chinese archives has made possible "new archival-driven understandings of the British relationship with China" (p. 10), and each chapter is a fine-tuned empirical study that makes use of multiple archives, usually in two or more languages. The researchers have drawn widely from published sources such as memoirs, political pamphlets, travelogues, correspondence, newspapers, and periodicals. Some of these, such as letters written by inspector generals of the Maritime Customs and treaty port pamphlet literature have been

widely employed by previous studies. Others, such as memoirs of Indian soldiers and Chinese laborers, insert new voices. A large bulk of the archival sources come from government archives in Britain, the United States, and France. These are placed in conversation with records available in the PRC from the Chinese Maritime Customs and Shanghai Municipal Archives. Contributors also make good use of many collections of historical material published by institutions in the PRC and Taiwan since the 1990s. Access to these materials has generated multifaceted and multi-archival stories, and this approach is significant because it allows the authors to either disrupt the construct of a unitary "China" and unitary "Britain" (Carroll, Platt, Bickers, Mountford, Jackson), to view history through both Chinese and British eyes (Bailey, Hirata), or to point to global dimensions of local historical change (Howlett).

The volume's archival findings broaden what is known about the content and context of Anglo-Chinese interactions. But they also often leave on the table questions and comparisons that would mobilize these interactions to speak to larger historical questions. For example, Bickers and Mountford examine moments of Chinese and British Indian migration as British imperial geostrategic and administrative problems. This novel approach to the issues of migration and diaspora poses a question that broader framing or some comparison in the chapters may have addressed. Namely, given the increasing scale and changing contours of population movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were Britain's intra-imperial challenges unique? That is, was global political-economic integration working differently on the British Empire or were its challenges symptomatic of larger historical shifts? Bailey's work with migration, on the other hand, contextualizes wartime labor mobilization relative to the broader history and controversies surrounding Chinese "coolie" labor. The mechanisms and conditions of wartime recruitment broke with previous migrations, and Bailey proposes

that images of “self” and “other” help explain the contours of Chinese contract labor at this time. Yet, here too, a wider frame would be helpful. Some comparison between the images discussed in the essay and those of other subject or “semi-civilized” populations might help clarify why, as Bailey observes, the images seem to echo anxieties of “colonial discourse” studied by other scholars (p. 112). In other words, were all asymmetrical power relations the same, or did this instance of contract labor enact and destabilize domination differently? This said, Bailey’s turn to positive Chinese images of the contract laborers provides an interesting glimpse of how China’s leaders used Chinese labor to navigate a specific geopolitical hierarchy.

The issue of images appears again in Carroll’s essay, where he recovers a plurality of voices within the Anglophone treaty port community in 1830s Canton. Earlier historians’ choices of sources, he argues, distorted interpretations of how the British viewed China, what they wanted in China, and why they went to war in 1839. The issue of interpretation is also central to the essays by Jackson and Howlett, which reinterpret other familiar topics, namely the Shanghai Municipal Council and Maoist reconstruction, with reference to broader colonial and decolonization projects. Jackson and Howlett are exceptional within the volume for offering an explicit global comparative framing, but neither goes the length to suggest that studying China’s experiences might point towards new conclusions about the content and form of colonialism or decolonization.

The volume’s studies of “the complex economic underpinnings that defined Sino-British relations” (p. 12) offer new research, but their interpretations end in familiar places. Chen’s finding that most “foreign” capital in China was in fact generated in China with Chinese partners suggests a critical reevaluation of the foreign/Chinese categorical binary that structures most studies of the period. Yet, he uses it to reinforce a well-re-

hearsed, if popular, argument that China’s “chaotic political environment” caused the underdevelopment of Chinese national capital (p. 149). While disrupting the categorical binary Chinese/foreign does not undermine a basic thesis that politics may have undermined economy, it does suggest lines for reconsidering how a dynamic internationalized economy may have undermined polity. Similarly, Hirata’s reconstruction of how railway loans in Sichuan turned into political problems for Qing authorities provides a fascinating glimpse of how international finance intervened in the relationship between elites, local infrastructure development, and the imperial court. Yet his focus on the exercise of power by the British government and local Chinese resistance brackets the historically novel character of international finance as a tool or imperative of statecraft in the period. In both studies the historically novel organization of capital, its expansion as a tactic of statecraft, and its potential for creative destruction go unnoticed. Van de Ven’s essay on Maritime Customs inspector general Francis Algen, in turn, gives a face to the new imperatives of capital accumulation and debt servicing that shaped actions by the Chinese state. Van de Ven helpfully places Algen within the context of a global “rise of a professional financial managerial elite” (p. 180) mediating between political regimes and capital. The rise of “experts” to guide the modern state was, of course, a broader phenomenon not limited to finance. So, while van de Ven limits his purview to assessing the politics of Algen’s tenure and his personal intentions, this seems to be a missed opportunity for historicizing new standards and tactics of statecraft during the period. Perhaps future research can begin to unpack why, in China, as elsewhere, new techniques of statecraft developed to manage participation in the global economy and geopolitical order.

As individual empirical studies, the chapters in *Britain and China* offer new understandings about the range of British activity in China, of British reflections on China, of interactions be-

tween the two governments, and of Chinese leaders' thoughts about China and the Chinese within the broader world. These pictures also speak to how China was part of historical developments that reached beyond its own borders, such as global finance, world wars, decolonization, and the administration of the British Empire. In these two ways the volume achieves its goal to remind readers of the roles China and Britain played in each other's histories and helps to bridge the gap between "China" studies and "empire" studies. It also offers a counterpoint to recent emphasis elsewhere on the local histories of treaty ports as the proper lens for studying China's engagement with foreign presence and power.

Yet, I have reservations about how the volume as a whole approaches China's experience with colonialism and British activities in China. With the exception of Bailey's essay and other passing glimpses of global context, the chapters adhere tightly to a bilateral focus on the national entities called "Britain" and "China." While a key point the contributors want to make is to fragment "China" and "Britain" into multiple standpoints and voices, yet, these place-based categories seem to limit the scope of historical interpretation. For example, while the incursion of finance and capital into China may have taken the form of foreign bondholders and merchants, the nationality of finance and capital was ultimately less responsible for the destruction of Qing order than how the two reconfigured relationships between the imperial government and the populace. Similarly, the historical developments shaping Chinese and British Indian migration included professionalization of policing, the globalization of wage labor, and new practices of military planning and resource procurement. Such strategies and tactics of production, administration, and organization, as James Hevia, Timothy Mitchell, and others have shown, are productive sites of historical change, whose significance lies not merely in the agents who enacted them, but in their capacity to create new realities, norms, and practices.

Bringing more attention to strategies, tactics, and mechanisms of creating geopolitical and economic order could provide a productive avenue for advancing analysis away from the categories of "Britain" and "China" that the contributors themselves find uncomfortable. As a method of historical analysis that invites comparison and thinking about conditions of possibility, this approach might also help identify what was particular in Anglo-Chinese interactions and how they were imbricated in broader historical processes. Individually the essays describe novel ways of organizing space, labor, geopolitical relations, capital, and social goods. And it seems that different choices about the horizon and categories of analysis could more clearly connect these to what was changing between the Qing Empire and the Chinese nation-state as well as the meaning of Chinese-British entanglements. While it is helpful to broaden British imperial history to include China and to find China within global, decentered networks, more could be done explain how historically specific ways of organizing and thinking about the world shaped these networks as well as China's and Britain's place within them.

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