



C. Patterson Giersch. *Corporate Conquests: Business, the State, and the Origins of Ethnic Inequality in Southwest China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 284 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-1164-1.

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In his first monograph on the development of China's Southwest, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (2006), C. Patterson Giersch examined the efforts of the Qing government to bring under imperial control an ethnically diverse, often autonomous region of the Chinese Empire with close links to mainland Southeast Asia. In this most recent study, the author explores the emergence of a twentieth-century capitalist economic order and its local challenges in this same diverse region of the Chinese nation-state. At the center of this study is inequality, based on geography, ethnicity, and government policy. As Giersch writes, "we must consider that China's borderlands and its minority communities may have been underserved by economic development not simply because of location and geography, but because of how their home regions and their populations have been perceived and treated over long periods" (p. 4). In this groundbreaking book, the author has offered the reader important insights regarding the balance between local control and state directives in the twentieth-century economic development of southwest China.

Commenting on the balance between natural and social factors that direct economic change, Giersch writes, "we need to realize that ... the fixed

aspects of geography, including climate, terrain, and natural resources, are important to making some regions and communities more prosperous than others, but so too are the historical events and human institutions that structure access to and exploitation of these resources" (p. 4). The ethnic dimension of Giersch's study draws on the long history of China's Southwest as a politically and economically autonomous region. The leading merchant families, the Dong, Yan, Yang, Yin, and Cun, had maintained elite status in the area since the Three Kingdoms period. China's Southwest was a significant portion of the vast upland area John K. Whitmore and I defined as the Dong World, which remained a largely autonomous region until Mongol conquest and Ming settlement began to incorporate this territory into the large Chinese Empire.[1] Until the late imperial period "the dong and their valley inhabitants (remained) in key positions to vigorously mediate between this mountainous terrain and the actions of the outside world, negotiating and, where possible, benefitting." [2] Giersch describes in his book the point at which these local elite lost their last vestiges of independent authority. To illustrate this argument, the author focuses on several Tai-speaking merchants, in particular, Fang Kesheng, a descendant of Tai elite from the Sino-Burmese

border region. Having served as a delegate in 1947 to the first People's Participatory Conference, Fang returned to Yunnan to assist with the economic transformation of his home region and to quell any attempts by local elite to resist the modernizing effort of corporate interests Fang concluded would bring an invigorating energy to local communities. Giersch demonstrates how Fang and other reform-minded elite were instead sidelined as the new Communist state privileged Han-led business interests and treated local peoples as obstacles to be removed in the effort to create a more modern Yunnan.

Giersch personalizes the narrative through the lives of impactful figures, including the Yunnanese merchant Cun Haiting (1855-1925), a wealthy financier of educational and corporate reforms in Yunnan and a supporter of the 1911 Revolution; the Khampa farmer and medicinal herbs merchant Peldengyel, a victim of late Qing state intervention into the local trade of the Kham region; and the native son and technocrat Miao Yuntai (1894-1988), an advocate for state control of mining in Yunnan as a buffer against Franco-British imperialist intrusion in the industry in Southwest China. Giersch's study differentiates between groups within Yunnan's larger community of merchants, who would benefit early on from the trade networks that connected with the Chinese *neidi* heartland to the East and the Chinese jade merchant community that established itself in China's southwestern neighbor Burma under British colonial rule. Tai merchants attempted to reap the benefits of expanded infrastructure and new educational institutions, while protecting their spheres of local authority, even after the Republican era government with Han merchant support began to retract local privileges given Tai elite in an early period. Giersch contrasts the experience of Tai merchants with the "disempowered development" that Kham merchants of the Northwest were subject to after the Qing establishment of the Sichuan-

Yunnan Frontier Affairs Commission in 1905, under the rapacious Qing official Zhao Erfeng (p. 97).

Giersch is interested in the late Qing period of transformation of merchant culture in Yunnan when there was a Weberian rationalization of commercial activity and leading families found high social status as leading traders, while fostering educational institutions to promote their community's values. The author argues that Yunnan merchants in this period developed a "business culture" that contained pragmatic training in business matters with the moral education retained in a traditional neo-Confucian learning (p. 56). Nation-wide intellectual trends that had a local impact included elements of "evolutionary thinking, industrialization, and progress toward modern nationhood," which for reform-minded merchants on the borderlands included a drive to establish sovereignty defined by international legal standards and outright control of borderlands communities (p. 133). Giersch raises throughout the book the fascinating point that indigenous elite had already reached beyond the Qing government representatives and Han merchants launched efforts to "modernize" the borderlands region, noting that one Tai *saopha* (hereditary chief) had early on sponsored local youth to study commerce in Japan (p. 142). This forward thinking, however, would not permit these indigenous elite to remain on the vanguard of economic and social change without subordinating themselves to Han-led institutions of reform.

As for the organization of the text, Giersch writes that structuring "the entire book is its positioning at the intersections of business, state building, and the borderlands" (p. 9). Biographical sketches of these figures are used to demonstrate how their lives were intertwined with others who either cooperated with or fought against these efforts to let commercial interests guide state policy through 1949, at which point state interest shaped commercial activities. At times it seems as though the study is a set of separate case studies stitched

together with these historical figures. The through line is not always clear, as the reader moves forward through time in one geographical region and then bounces back in time to follow the life of another figure. The main themes of the book remain clear, but the connection between events across regions and the context for changes is sometimes difficult to discern. Another area of vagueness is the cultural and societal context notes that the author includes in some sections of the text. These notes could perhaps have been consolidated in a single introductory note at the beginning of the monograph. For example, the notes on Tai elites and the description of *saopha* authority on page 180 could have appeared much earlier in the study, because these elites are mentioned periodically throughout the text.

Giersch employs a variety of materials to construct this depiction of a merchant community deeply involved in both local affairs and national debates. He incorporates analysis of architectural styles to bring specificity to his descriptions of capitalist changes in merchant culture. The author's inspired use of commonplace commercial sources, such as ledgers and "daybooks" (*lishuibu*), brings new depth to his analysis (p. 43). The variety of commodities mentioned is extraordinary. I was fascinated to learn of the role tin played for the burgeoning global canned food industry from Yunnan's Gejiu region. Regional events caused enormous shifts in local markets. The 1937 Japanese invasion of China caused Yunnan suddenly to become the conduit for many foreign goods once produced in other areas of China or self-sufficient in new areas of production, so that, for example, imported Burmese cotton through Yunnan skyrocketed.

I found the author's discussion of the end of the local authority of Tai elite to be the most thought-provoking aspect of the study, which admittedly is due to the fact that I have been immersed in the emergence of these elite a thousand years earlier in my own work. The failure of Fang

Kesheng's vision of removing the barriers between Han and non-Han communities and their participation in a locally grounded economic order is fascinating. Readers of Giersch's study will likely read with interest another recent publication from across China's southern border, that is, Christian C. Lentz's *Contested Territory: Dien Biên Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (2019). Lentz describes the physical and social complexity of this upland region located directly to the South of the Tai-speaking region Giersch describes, and Lentz also notes how local elite had thwarted many lowland governmental efforts to impose direct control over the Black River region through the period of French colonial rule and anti-colonial resistance. Lentz describes how the Việt Minh military annexation of the Black River region with local Tai elite support, which culminated in the famous siege at Dien Biên Phu in 1954, was a very different process from the effective administration of the same region as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's Northwest Zone, and he examines various challenges in socializing this borderlands territory within the larger Vietnamese geobody. In this example, from the other side of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, we can see similar scenarios of upland-lowland cooperation for one cause giving way to local resistance to state-led intervention that largely served the interests of the lowland centers of power.

In *Corporate Conquests*, Giersch focuses primarily on the period of twentieth-century Chinese history before 1949, but there are elements of PRC government policy today that is echoed in the author's analysis. The Belt and Road Initiative has brought greater commitment to economic development in China's border areas, but these initiatives have not often included an equal commitment to the cultural autonomy of the indigenous communities of these regions. Looking back on the events of modern history through the events described in *Corporate Conquests* offers the reader a valuable means for discerning how

these borderlands communities elsewhere in the PRC will fare in China's future.

Notes

[1]. *Dong* 洞 refers to mountain valley riverine communities throughout this region. See James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore. "The Dong World: A Proposal for Analyzing the Highlands between the Yangzi Valley and the Southeast Asian Lowlands," *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 44 (2017): 8-71.

[2]. Anderson and Whitmore, "Dong World," 53. See also Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud, *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 136-40, 157-59.

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