



**Eugenia Lean.** *Vernacular Industrialism in China: Local Innovation and Translated Technologies in the Making of a Cosmetics Empire, 1900-1940.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 416 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-19348-1.

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*Vernacular Industrialism in China* is a historical biography about a transitional man, Chen Diexian. "Transitional" in scholarship on modern Chinese history means educated in late nineteenth-century dynastic schools rather than modern universities. Men like Chen came from the fading "gentry elite," a rentier class dependent on patronage and examination success. Eugenia Lean's focus on a relatively ordinary man extends a foundational genre in the field, established by Benjamin I. Schwartz's *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (1962) and expanded upon by Schwartz and others in the decades since, including, most recently, Dominic Sachsenmaier's *Global Entanglements of a Man Who Never Traveled: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Christian and His Conflicted Worlds* (2018), which gives biographic attention to another relatively ordinary man, Zhu Zongyuan. Because Lean structures her book around Chen Diexian's life it falls into a familiar historiographic pattern, the "life and times" study, which culturizes individual actors' experience. Although Chen established a reputation for inventive marketing in his time, he is not a political, economic, or cultural theorist; however, and this is Lean's point, he should be "counted" because he contributed to nationalist com-

modity making, commercial competition, and popular new media.

Also, again historiographically speaking, Lean's book falls into a genre that award-winning historian Sherman Cochran pioneered in his multivolume investigation of what he called "Sino-Western rivalry," and which I would call corporate imperialism in small commodity markets. Cochran's social economic histories include *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia* (2006) and the pathbreaking *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890-1930* (1980). Cochran argues that the world urban capitalism opened up during China's treaty port era, also characterized as "semi-colonialism, semi-feudalism," had an overall positive impact on Chinese entrepreneurs, and that foreigners and Chinese people operated on a relatively level playing field. Furthermore, Cochran assumes that China and the West are culturally (as per Clifford Geertz's theory of "thick culture") distinctive, and that this explains different economic patterns. All of these assumptions have been questioned, of course, and the issues Cochran's oeuvre raised are vital. I introduce them here to sharpen a contrast I think is particularly significant now: the recent flood of books historians might call "global history," including most re-

cently Victor Seow's *Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia* (2021) and Ying Jia Tan's *Recharging China in War and Revolution, 1882–1955* (2021). Global commodity scholarship in East Asia studies began in earnest with Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi's edited volume *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (2000), which addressed how multinationalism worked to force opium commodification and what effect opium marketing had on China's then political economy. In other words, new-wave historians of coal extraction, electrification, and opium are commodity focused and systems oriented, rather than focused on biographies, because they seek to establish sound economic historical backdrops allowing us to generalize at a deeper level than the China field has been able to achieve heretofore.

Set in these US-based historiographic channels, Eugenia Lean's study contributes a deeply researched argument regarding an identifiable social fraction she calls "vernacular industrialists." Chen Diexian's importance, then, is not just his successful businesses and acumen but also his representation of a larger subclass in a changing world. Like the historical biographies mentioned above, the genre seeks microhistorical truths or corrections to the microhistorical tradition. Lean takes a deep dive into material that is singular to Chinese social history. When she characterizes Chen as being important historically, she describes his "elegant experimentation," within his thick "local networks of connoisseurship," where local gentry continued to fete and banquet each other while at the same time introducing industrially produced new commodities such as gadgets and soap products (p. 47). Consequently, when Lean takes up Chen's fascination with chemical foam fire extinguishers, the topic of chapter 3, the point is to illustrate that Chen's fraction were not, contrary to popular cliché, terrorized by commodification, or modern chemistry, or gradually increasing numbers of new objects. Indeed, this line of argument appears to hang on the thesis that gentry

elites were unabashed and unconcerned by the new commodity culture and did not perceive the new objects to be threatening to their way or life or social importance. Lean expands her thesis of unconcern at the grassroots elite level in her discussion of how Chen made money, adapting to the new learning and new industrial and commercial worlds, in "print culture, but also industry, science, and capitalism" (p. 3). Here she is pushing back against Joseph Richmond Levenson's infamous argument regarding the amateur ideal of this class and what Levenson proposed, in the early 1960s, to be the gentry's uncongenial stance toward modern science.[1]. Lean's counterpoint here is that despite their amateurism, the gentry elite Chen exemplifies were open to, even entranced by, new things, from printing presses to fire suppressants to recipes for making chemistry-based cosmetics at home.

Lean's goal, it seems, is to illustrate and credit what she believes to be a vital native world that offered its own synthetic solutions to the problems of imperialism and modernization. In specialist US China historiography, a long history of statist solutions runs from May Fourth, 1919, or the Chinese Enlightenment, to the immediate post-Mao 1980s. Historians conventionally focus on cultural critique, translation, and invention of singular Chinese solutions to industrial capitalism, class struggle, and state foundation. In the world Lean reifies, vernacular industrialists like Chen Diexian are presented as having contributed "informal, contingent, nonsystematic, and variegated practices [that] need to be understood not *solely* from their role in modernizing Chinese industry" (p. 16). In other words, successful in their own terms and a lot more fun to have around than the dour revolutionary youth, their importance should be measured in relation to "the heterogeneity of the historical reality that was China's industrialization" (p. 16). I think this goal is difficult to achieve given that heterogeneity exists always, and the modernizationists did win the day. On a more mundane level it is difficult to sustain the argu-

ment because the preponderance of evidence recently suggests that the native products movements, the kind of products Chen manufactured, did not successfully compete against foreign brands. This case has been made by historians Man-Bun Kwan (*Beyond Market and Hierarchy: Patriotic Capitalism and the Jiuda Salt Refinery, 1914-1953* [2014]) and Karl Gerth (*China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* [2003] and *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution* [2020]).

There are other important themes running through this study. For instance, Lean takes up the difficult topic of how native products (i.e., knock-offs of European and US-branded commodities) were imitating rather than stealing, and further, that imitation is the sincerest form of innovation. This thoroughly contemporary concept—*shanzhai* in Chinese—is a copyright issue in today's trade and may, if Lean is correct, have originated a century ago in vernacular capitalisms. Another theme involves intra-native or vernacular competition. Here she gives remarkably detailed data about how hard competitors worked to protect their brands, not against Pond's or Sunlight Soap products but against one another. Also, because Lean correctly links media to other industrial commodities, her account of how Chen made money writing lowbrow fiction in the new media markets to sustain his more focused efforts at supporting his Butterfly brand products spills into another interesting discussion about publishing and selling “how to” books on common-sense *changshi* knowledge. Scholars such as the late Rudolf G. Wagner have paved the way for more studies of mass publication, which seems to have been an extension of household economies and family self-sufficiency.[2]

Chapter 5, “What's in a Name: From Studio Appellation to Commercial Trademark,” contributes a particularly important discussion. Lean begins her chapter semiotically, noting that Chen

Diexian moved from Hanzhou to Shanghai with a basket of “butterfly”-affiliated products and practices. His company featured butterflies, as did his own name; he sold stories in a genre called “Mandarin duck and butterfly” fiction; and he competed against another butterfly brand established by the movie star “Butterfly Wu,” whose commodities and image were splashed across the advertising pages of mass media. Echoing the work of many commodity historians, Lean beautifully demonstrates the range of small commodities that Chen gathered under the aegis of the butterfly association and image—from magical powders that canceled body odor and athletes' foot, to tooth powder—and how the butterfly served as an umbrella for all products that Household Industries, his corporate name, innovated. But the crux of the chapter revolves around the internationalized quality of Chen's advertising practice. Lean is able to show in the narrow case of Lux soap how a native product, Butterfly brands, competed head to head with a European firm, Unilever, as the latter pitched Lux brand beauty soap using movie star images to boost the brand's desirability. I would have appreciated a fuller investigation of Unilever or Lever Brothers, because its corporate marketing tactics were by no means limited to Lux, but Lean's argument showing how the native brand, Butterfly, was able to market to expatriate Chinese in Southeast Asia is significant for a number of reasons. It establishes the sustaining power that Chen's multinational Household Industries maintained until the outbreak of war, as well as showing that Chinese small industrialists were employing the same tactics in their marketing plans as the Osaka capitalists who sold Jintan and Three Beautiful Girls cosmetics products. The overlap of overseas Chinese marketing and Japanese imperialist corporations is fascinating.

Historiographically, it strikes me that exposing the everyday fun that elites were having in this transitional period does not, in the end, negate the political critique, or the so-called May Fourth tradition, which by and large saw the Japanese and

European powers as potentially destabilizing, and later, for obvious reasons, as hostile to the interests of an integrated modern Chinese nation-state. In other words, making clear a strand of social history populated by fun-loving and successful gentlemen (apple) is not comparable to histories of anarchism and feminism, communism and social democracy (oranges) that modern intellectuals launched against what they felt was a colonial-feudal state. These strains of thinking coexisted. Keeping that fact in mind should help specialists better grasp how commodity culture emerged in Chinese treaty ports over the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Sherman Cochran, too, struggled over why the Chinese knock-off brand of the Japanese digestive pill Jintan never succeeded in getting market share despite Japanese aggression and repeated calls to boycott Japanese goods. Commodities are, as Karl Marx animatedly argued, mysterious things—fetishes, in fact. Repeatedly historians have shown that you

can make a native product and try to sell it to natives, but you cannot make them buy it if they prefer the foreign package, its mystique, its seeming efficacy, its modernity. That is the magical part of histories of industrialism, whether these are vernacular, foreign, multinational, or otherwise. How consumers spent their money is the other side of vernacular industrialism, and a question that remains enticingly unanswered in this interesting book.

#### Notes

[1]. Levenson, “The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Ch’ing Society: Evidence from Painting,” in *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 15-48.

[2]. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Rudolf G. Wagner, eds., *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870-1930): Changing Ways of Thought* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014).

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