In her book on the role of international geographical knowledge in the formation of modern China and the modern world, Shellen Xiao Wu has charted the development and influence of a field of knowledge she calls “geo-modernity.” By this, Wu means a particular “modern” combination of geographical, agricultural, geological, and population knowledge. This geo-modernity formed the knowledge and ideology behind an exploding frontier expansion in modern history. The book thereby deals extensively with empire building and imperialism and especially frontiers and settler colonialism, both in theory and practice. It is within the scholarly traditions devoted to these phenomena that we should place Wu's book, which makes a valuable contribution.

Geo-modernity is expressed through international networks of scholars, explorers, and advisors, typically men and women with careers spanning different continents. Wu traces the field's development in four countries: China, Japan, Germany, and the United States. We read about lesser-known, even obscure people like Horace Capron, Kuroda Kyotaka, Ellen Semple, and Hans Rempel, and well-known personages like Zuo Zongtang and Matthew Perry. The interconnections among these individuals are stressed; for one of the numerous examples, Wu considers how Isaiah Bowman was a correspondent of such Chinese scholars as Hu Huanyong and Chang Chiyun. Furthermore, Wu early on points out how a series of “hub points” for the production and dissemination of knowledge played key roles, and these places in time serve as a way to organize the book, with each chapter covering one hub.

The book’s seven chapters take us from 1852 to the mid-twentieth century (the Cold War era). Chapter 1 starts with 1852 (the aftermath of 1848 revolutions, the early phases of the Taiping War) as Wu covers the then expanding global trade, knowledge circulation, and ecological crisis. Chapter 2 analyzes late nineteenth-century “ex-
perimental grounds” for frontier expansion across East Asia. Chapter 3 explores different concepts of the frontier as the discipline of geography developed in the 1870s-1900s. Then, in chapter 4, Wu discusses the birth of geopolitics in the interwar period following the Versailles negotiations. Chapter 5 focuses on rural developments in the 1930-40s as initiated by American NGOs and Chinese warlords. Next, chapter 6 deals with plans for settler colonialism in the same period as drawn up by the German and Chinese WWII regimes. Chapter 7 is on frontier concepts in the postwar years and their contribution to the Cold War world order.

The book’s title indicates a story about “geopolitics” and “modern China,” and in particular about the role of frontier development and frontier ideology. Through its temporal progress, the book builds its arguments while narrating around the above-mentioned people and places. Geographically, “China” serves as the stated subject of the book and is emphasized throughout while the other three “focus countries,” Japan, Germany and the United States, are visited as they fit the narrative. While the book ultimately covers a relatively long time span, most individuals appear only once or a few times: we continuously hear about how they related to each other, but it is hard to trace the story on a personal level. This is perhaps one way to write the history of knowledge production. Adding dates to the title and chapter titles could streamline the narratives.

The book is written in an engaging style, which makes it easy to turn the pages until one reaches the conclusion; a selection of time-appropriate illustrations is also helpful. We hear of numerous colonization and settlement schemes, both executed and which never progressed beyond the planning stage. There is much to be learned about historical events, personages, ideologies, and scientific advances that can help readers understand critical developments in modern history from other perspectives. A key strength of the book is that the author demonstrates a solid grasp of the four focus countries and their respective languages and materials in the study period. Importantly, Wu stresses how the predecessors of so-called geo-modern knowledge in China (and the other three countries)—geography and especially agricultural science—paved the way for the field’s influence as “gateway sciences” (p. 168). More depth could certainly have been provided here on the complex history of such sciences in each country, but it would have added needlessly to the work’s length. Still, while existing scholarship often emphasizes the harsh conditions of frontier areas and frequently frustrating development efforts, little attention is given to a topic like traditional disaster relief, which (in China) historically formed a key part of agricultural knowledge.

While overall appreciable, the book has points that perhaps could be improved. Whether “geomodernity” is a useful addition to scholarly discourse is key to evaluating this book. New sciences including advances in human and natural geography and agronomy certainly played an important part in nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments across the world, and these had to be conceptualized in new ways, beyond traditional sciences. The author argues that actors at the time rushed to embrace these new sciences to further their national projects, which we can often term colonial endeavors (pp. 68, 174). China, just like Japan, the US, and Germany, was an active participant in colonial efforts, which were not unique to Western powers (p. 20). While there are good reasons to stress this, it may not surprise many readers. Actors and places are not always clearly defined as more or less important; the “hub point” perspective is similarly unclear, as the setting often changes. Could, for example, Suiyuan and Xing’an, as mentioned later in the book, be counted among these hub points? Additionally, there are a few errors in the text, which are minor annoyances to readers. For example, the Georg-August University in Göttingen once appears as the elusive “Georgia August University” somewhere in
Germany (p. 40). (Elsewhere, the university’s proper name is used.) Similarly, “Yukuts” is an unfortunate misnomer for the Yakut-Sakha people (p. 222).

These minor issues do not detract from the work’s value. Ultimately, I find Wu’s book an important contribution to the scholarship on the history of China, history of geographical and geopolitical science, global history and colonial endeavors. I would recommend the book to historians of “frontier” and colonialism studies, especially when searching for a non-Western point of view, as well as to students and researchers of modern China.

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