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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, faint, light-colored mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features intricate geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

REVIEWS

EXPLORING THE «UNDERGROUND» OF CHINA'S MODERNITY:
COAL, SCIENCE, IMPERIALISM AND STATE-MAKING
BETWEEN THE END OF THE QING DYNASTY AND THE EARLY REPUBLIC

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Shellen Xiao Wu, *Empires of Coal: Fueling China's Entry into the Modern World Order, 1860-1920*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. xii + 266 pp. (paperback) (ISBN: 978-0-8047-9284-4).

The history of coal has seldom received the attention it deserves beyond the scholarly circle focused on the economic and industrial history of China. Certainly, some studies have looked at the role of coal in the context of the differences between European and Chinese paths towards the industrial age, as Kenneth Pomeranz's insightful *The Great Divergence* has shown.¹ Nevertheless, thinking of coal as the subject of a cultural history of global modernity in China is something altogether different and a very welcome addition to our understanding of modern China.

This is what Shellen Xiao Wu does in her book. She makes the reader aware that coal has a lot to tell us about the making of modern China. As the book's title says, from the second half of the Nineteenth century, coal was in fact an important engine of China's entry in the international order, as its extraction and deployment were increasingly being conceived of as criteria to measure the country's status in terms of wealth and status. Wu brings to light the «underground» world of coal mines and mineral resources with its «multiplicity of meanings and connotations» (p. 189). She illuminates the complex interweaving of science, imperialism, industrialization and State-building which was hidden deep under the surface of the Earth. In this way, Wu offers a narrative of the changing worldview of the elites from the last decade of the Qing dynasty until the

1. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000 (Italian translation Il Mulino, 2012).

early Republic with particular reference to the significance they attributed to natural resources in the process of industrialization, and the station of China in the global order.

Wu's postulation is that, from the second part of the Nineteenth Century there was a convergence between Western and Chinese attitudes towards mineral resources as an effect of the global world created by imperialism. In this perspective, the book aims explicitly at illustrating the interplay between local and global factors in the making of Chinese modernity. She explores several actors who produced a new discourse about coal – and mineral resources in general –, from the beginnings of geological exploration to the acknowledgement of geology as a modern science and the introduction of modern extractive technology under the Qing in the context of new legal and administrative structure affirming Chinese sovereignty on underground wealth against imperialist pressures.

The book tells this story in six chapters, developing a narrative from a chronological perspective and unfolding the multiple layers of this process in a global framework. As a premise, Wu describes how mining had been long an interest of Chinese officials and literati, as mineral extraction, usually privately pursued, was an important source of revenue for the imperial State since ancient times. The most well known examples were iron and salt, not to mention the relevance of copper and silver for market transactions and tax payment in late imperial times. Coal was used for heating in North China. Its price was monitored since it was basically considered a necessity for daily life even if it was regarded as an inexhaustible resource.

This view began to change following the work of the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, whose current fame is due to his being the «inventor» of the «Silk Road». Von Richthofen gave a fundamental impulse to the development of modern geology in China. He explored inland regions during several journeys to China from 1868 to 1872. His work was to map China from a geological point of view – a task whose outcome was a two volumes treatise in German published after his return. Its impact on Chinese public opinion was especially due to his comments in the English language Press about the wealth of mineral resources of the Qing Empire, and especially of coal in Shanxi province. Von Richthofen's experience must be considered as a sign of «the importance of energy concerns to both colonizers and the colonized as the world industrialized» (p. 35). He carefully built an image of China as a country rich of primary resources of strategic relevance for foreign investors and Qing officials alike.

The book's narrative then shifts to an investigation of the origins of modern geology, studying Western missionaries' translation enterprise in introducing a modern knowledge of rocks and minerals within a broader discourse of the scientific approach to nature as a modern State's concern.

Enriching her work of a new perspective, in chapter 4 Wu discusses the role played by German mining engineers hired by the Qing provincial

leaders Zhang Zhidong and Li Hongzhang, who were the main supporters of the process of industrialization. These experts were, at one and the same time, considered a strategic resource to advance their homeland's interests in China by the German Government, and a fundamental aid to build a modern energy industry by Qing officials. Wu offers a balanced and detailed portrait of these cultural intermediaries, showing how, from 1880s to the end of the century, they supported the making of the German colonial empire in China but also promoted the technical modernization of Chinese mines. Actually, in this period, within the framework of Sino-German relations, an «underground empire» (p. 115) centred on the famous Hanyeping mines emerged from the global elites' shared faith in the pivotal role of science and industry as the pillars of modernity, in spite of competing foreign imperialisms and the practical limitations imposed by cultural and financial circumstances.

The core of the book is constituted by this chapter and chapter 5 that deals with the scramble for mining concessions in the high age of foreign imperialism in China – from the late Nineteenth Century to the First World War – and the Chinese national and provincial governments' struggle to affirm its sovereignty on mines on legal terms. Alongside railways rights, the fight for a recovery of national rights of exploitation of mineral resources was an important feature of the Chinese nationalist movement in the first decade of the last century. Wu argues that it is necessary to consider Chinese activism in this field as a consequence of «the global aspects of changes in the theory and exploitation of mineral resources in the nineteenth century» (p. 159), which had emphasized the role of the State in their management.

In the two final chapters, Wu looks at the connections between the emergence of modern geology as a scientific discipline and nationalist concerns generated by this global trend. Geology in China was not born out of intellectual interests, but as a form of knowledge practically tied to the needs of mining technology, and consequently subordinated to the goal of making China wealthy and strong. This feature did not fade in the course of time, but its legacy continues in the Twentieth-Century. It is one face of the significance assumed by science in the Chinese experience of modernity and of the role attributed to systematic knowledge and exploitation of nature as an expression of State power.

Wu's analysis is detailed, and based on a wide use of archival and other primary sources. Though not all the chapters are comparable in analytical depth and there are occasional redundancies, the author succeeds in putting together global and local perspectives on her chosen topic. She moves effectively between different layers of analysis. On the whole, the book is an interesting contribution to the reassessment of Qing China's capacity to be positively engaged with technological innovation. Focusing on the specific role played by German scientists and engineers, it also enriches our understanding of the complexity of the cooperative and competing

relations between China and the Western nations in the age of European imperialism. Finally, as the author herself suggests, it gives the reader the opportunity to reflect on the cultural roots of an attitude towards nature that still makes the intensive extraction and use of coal dramatically affect Chinese and world environment to this day.