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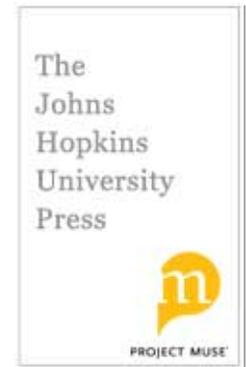
*Quest for Power: European imperialism and the making of
Chinese statecraft* by Stephen R. Halsey (review)

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Quest for Power: European imperialism and the making of Chinese statecraft

By Stephen R. Halsey. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Stephen Halsey poses a provocative question to scholars of Chinese, imperial and global history: Why did China not succumb to Western imperialism? By 1914, Europeans had conquered 84.4 percent of the world, and much of what remained unconquered was Chinese. China was one of only six non-Western countries to retain its independence (along with Japan, Thailand, Ethiopia, Persia, and what became modern Turkey). Given the “developmental gap” produced by Europe’s industrial revolution and its global dominance (40), Halsey asserts, “[a] cursory glance at the historical record suggests that China *should* have collapsed in the 1800s and become a formal colony of one or more of the great powers” (27). That it did not, and was subjected only to informal empire, Halsey attributes to the strength and adaptability of the Chinese state.

Halsey’s narrative is essentially the classic one charting “China’s response to the West,” but in revised form.¹ Where John King Fairbank, who formulated this narrative, identified the Qing rulers of China (1644–1911) as ill-equipped to deal with the foreign onslaught, Halsey finds rather that they were quick and competent in reforming their approach to governance. Halsey criticises what he claims is the standard Western narrative for adopting the dynastic cycle theory from traditional imperial Chinese history and seeing the nineteenth-century Qing as in inevitable decline. The literature has in fact moved on significantly from such a representation, as Halsey acknowledges briefly with reference to Kenneth Pomeranz.² Halsey’s contribution is more to integrate the development of Chinese statecraft with that in early modern Europe by identifying the creation of a new “military-fiscal state” based on European norms “through both conscious imitation and independent trial and error” (8–9). This rendered the state sufficiently strong to repulse European imperial encroachment. Halsey does not consider Robinson and Gallagher’s argument that Britain sought imperial influence “[b]y informal means if possible, or by formal annexations when necessary,” pursuing a free trading empire on the cheap.³ Nor does he acknowledge

how distracted Britain, for example, was in South Africa when the Qing was at its weakest. He makes a persuasive case for the comparative strength of China vis-à-vis South Asia or Africa, but it is possible that European empires did not need to fully colonise China to trade as they wanted or that China was simply not worth colonising given the vast costs and limited returns at a time of great tests of imperial power elsewhere.

Chapter One outlines the growth of European empires, providing an excellent synthesis of the secondary literature and integrating China into the global narrative. Halsey acknowledges that South Asian states like Mysore did seek to modernise in response to the Western threat, but were less successful than China. Contrasting China with the annexation of Malaya and Burma is telling, but comparison to Latin America, which threw off earlier imperial control and then succumbed to informal imperialism, is absent. A Latin American comparison would support Halsey's argument about the importance of a strong state but lessen China's apparent uniqueness. He also summarises the historiography on the colonisation of China, stressing the aspects that indicate Chinese strength. Usually the post-1895 era, following Japan's defeat of China, is seen as the peak of the "scramble for China,"⁴ but Halsey points out that land given over to foreign control after this point was for set lease-periods, not in perpetuity. Chapter Two, on foreign trade, shows how Chinese merchants avoided the disruption to trade experienced by their Bengali counterparts by integrating foreigners into existing trade patterns through the use of compradors (middlemen). Halsey argues that both Chinese traders and the Qing state profited more than suffered from foreign trade, generating additional funds for state-building projects. This was true fiscally, but the reputational damage to the Qing of depending largely on the British-managed Imperial Maritime Customs Service was a high price to pay.

The remaining five chapters offer the meat of Halsey's argument, showing how the state's coffers were strengthened, the bureaucracy developed and the military modernised, and how state-run enterprises improved transport and communications. Just as early modern Britain overhauled its tax system in order to fund foreign wars, so external threats prompted the Qing to develop new tax sources to fund military modernisation. Qing efforts were rewarded with a tripling of revenue in real terms between 1842 and 1911 from per capita taxes and tariffs as opposed to the traditional

reliance on agrarian taxation. New bureaux opened throughout the empire to oversee the collection of taxes, and a new government department of foreign affairs, the Zhongli Yamen, represented China's interests to foreign powers. The late Qing New Policies developed a new police force and army as well as educational institutions, chambers of commerce, provincial assemblies and cabinet ministries modelled on Western states. Many were weak, but their establishment counters claims of terminal state decline. The rapid advances in the state's military capacity were not rewarded in war, but were nonetheless real: in 1850 Qing soldiers still carried swords and spears but by 1900 they used magazine rifles and rapid action guns. The government established the China Merchants Steamship Company to stop foreign firms stealing Chinese profits, meeting the transport needs of the economy between the decline of canals and the dominance of rail transportation and briefly becoming the largest steamship company in China. The Imperial Telegraph Administration facilitated state control over the vast empire via the latest technology. The language of sovereignty and rights used by these companies and their champions, particularly statesman Li Hongzhang, showed that not only the external forms of Western state-making but also conceptions of statehood had been adopted and adapted. Finally, Halsey's Epilogue charts the continuities of late Qing state-making into the Republican and communist eras, following the recent trend of breaking down supposed boundaries between eras.

While the book's claims for originality are sometimes overstated, it provides an important and provocative corrective to two traditional narratives: one that sees the Qing as irrevocably weak in its response to the West, and another that downplays the significance of the Western impact on China. Most historians would avoid straying too far into either camp, but Halsey's emphasis on the successes of the Qing "military-fiscal state" is important for drawing attention to late imperial China's strength and adaptability. Much of the supporting evidence is gleaned from secondary works, with supplementary research in archives and published collections, but a major contribution of this book is its comprehensive coverage of the Chinese-language literature. The regular comparisons to Western Europe and other sites of imperialism make this a valuable addition not only to the history of China but also to imperial and global history.

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Notes

¹ John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

² Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Making of a Hinterland: State, society, and economy in inner North China 1853–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

³ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade.” *Economic History Review* New Series 6, no. 1 (1953): 3.

⁴ Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).