

Book Review

China as a frontier nation: A review of *Frontier Fieldwork: Building a Nation in China's Borderlands, 1919–45*, by Andres Rodriguez. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2022, 240 pp. ISBN: 9780774867559

Ying-Kit Chan*

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Studies on the American frontier, particularly the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner's (1861–1932) thesis on how the supposed closure of the frontier, or the increasingly perceived lack of virgin lands for conquest and settlement, could weaken American exceptionalism and national character, have featured as a key theme in the history of the United States as an imperial formation. In comparison, in the field of China studies, while monographs and journal articles have explained how the Qing Empire, the final dynasty of imperial Chinese history, practised different forms of internal or settler colonialism to govern its peripheral regions, less has been said about how the Chinese Republic, its successor state, coped with the dual threat of foreign imperialism and territorial disintegration when inheriting the borderlands, whose boundaries were more fiction than fiat. The few scholarly works exploring this topic tend to focus on the issue of ethnicity and national identity, which was only one of many concerns in the minds of the agriculturalists, missionaries, photographers, college students and social scientists who traversed the terrain. Andres Rodriguez's brilliant *Frontier Fieldwork: Building a Nation in China's Borderlands, 1919–45*, which examines how a multitude of Chinese and Western agents of social and political change committed themselves to the notion of “fieldwork” to understand and chart the future of a China that seemed ill-equipped and especially ill-informed for transformation, is a much-needed corrective to such tendencies.

Frontier Fieldwork highlights China's southwest as a region that held immense interest and promise among not only Western explorers and scientists but also Chinese intellectuals and political reformers who sought to transform it from *terra incognita* into a strong bastion of national defence and rejuvenation. Western missionaries were pioneers in this respect. They saw the borderlands as a field where they could nurture their mental and physical strength and build a corpus of knowledge for their evangelism; the Chinese frontier was where they could reap spiritual gains by confronting physical obstacles. The Chinese Republic drew inspiration from the missionary method of deep and thoughtful immersion in local cultures, Qing models of colonisation and new models of agricultural settlement across the world to establish sovereignty in China's borderlands. Soldiers and scholars were imperative to the Chinese Republic's colonial manoeuvres during the 1920s, whereby local administrators and the Chinese experts whom they hosted, invited or recruited tried to emulate the practices observed in neighbouring British India by installing both military battalions and outposts of mapping and ethnographic surveying in remote settlements. A particularly interesting innovation of the Chinese during this period was the 1929 Frontier Region Customs and Products Exhibition, a one-time event sponsored by governor and warlord Liu Wenhui (1895–1976) in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, replete with everyday utensils (ethnographic objects), photographs of land surveyors and agricultural technicians interacting with supposedly incredulous native communities, and pictorial depictions of their stoicism in the face of hardship. The objective of such images and publications, as Rodriguez has eloquently expressed, was the “visual performance of a modern practice of frontier administration and fieldwork that aimed to legitimize Han Chinese colonial expansion while at the same time instilling a sense of wonder and curiosity among a wider Han Chinese audience” (p. 44). The empathy and genuine affection felt by Chinese scholars towards their ethnographic subjects in the field disguised the military nature of Chinese rule over the borderlands.

In many ways, the Chinese anthropologists, ethnologists and social scientists exploring the southwestern (read: Sino-Tibetan) borderlands were engaged in a form of scientific imperialism, not unlike that of the missionary pioneers. As they tried to establish epistemological authority over the economic orientation of southwest China, mobilising latent resources and promoting among Chinese the idea of southwest China as a potentially wealthy frontier awaiting trade, settlement and the use of its abundant natural resources, they developed into a scientific community with common interests in the region. While missionaries of the past had been lured by the prestige of belonging to scientific societies back at home in the West, many of the Chinese social scientists taking their lead from working in the field were already members of such societies. The West China Border Research Society, formed in 1922 by like-minded missionary-settlers in southwest China to co-ordinate the exploration of Sino-Tibetan peoples, was increasingly indigenised by the 1930s, with an increasing number of Chinese academics appearing in the society's meetings and an increasing number of published writings in its flagship journal by Chinese scholars who conducted

state-sponsored expeditions or those accompanying international scientific expeditions. Journalists and photographers from other parts of China actively reported on the academic activities, often physically following scholars to establish the facts behind many of the conflicts in frontier hotspots that included Manchuria and China's northwest. For the Chinese social scientists, being in the field did not confer authority in its own right; approaching the field through the lens of science was a prerequisite to making sense of the ethnic and geographical diversity that travellers encountered in China's frontier regions. In what historian Tong Lam calls the "social science movement," data and evidence from eugenics, statistics and surveys were deemed property of the Chinese nation and must be handled by the Chinese themselves – a phenomenon that Rodriguez has corroborated in his chapter on the "frontier fever" of Chinese social scientists.

By the time Chinese nationalism held full sway due to Japan's invasion of China in the late 1930s, Chinese intellectuals had embraced a feeling of empathy and were impelled to enter the field in order to understand the plight of their compatriots; emotions not only broke down barriers between observer and subject but also built up a sense of national identity or solidarity in the face of a common enemy. This is encapsulated in the words of photographer Zhuang Xueben (1909–1984), who was known for his ethnographic images of minority peoples in northwest and southwest China: "I am a simple traveler. I certainly don't need military troops coming along and adorning my traveling expedition. My objective for my survey is not to require military might that will isolate the feelings of the locals" (cf. p. 93). If Zhuang's words are representative, they indicate a shift in the mentality of a younger generation of Chinese intellectuals who were much more eager than the Western missionaries and those Chinese scholars dispatched by local warlords to disengage from the hard, raw and naked power of colonialism and dissociate from the soldier-scholar complex that had characterised the scholarship on China's southwest frontier. While young Chinese intellectuals had adopted missionary strategies of becoming proficient in frontier languages and well acquainted with local customs and situations, they also paraded their own blending into local communities and highlighted their physical discomfort and spiritual cultivation in the process. More importantly, they emphasised scientific methods of analysis and calibration and a deep understanding of indigenous traditions and the interrelated function of each of their elements, eschewing the method of mere immersion in favour of detailed participant observation of cultures. By 1949, scholars who had long championed the idea that the Chinese nation was multicultural joined the ranks of the new communist state, sharing with the latter the infrastructure of knowledge building that they had helped create and contributing to its vision of socialist modernity on China's borderlands.

Although much of what we already know is merely reinforced by additional anecdotes and case studies, this book retains a keen eye on contextualising scholarly fieldwork in southwest China and relating it to broader global phenomena and relevant developments that occurred elsewhere in the world. The book thus performs an understated yet important task of placing China's

borderland fieldwork within global history, which it has admirably accomplished. With this book, the links between Western and Chinese models of colonisation are confirmed, and the ongoing reconceptualisation of the modern Chinese state as a national empire is almost complete.

* Dr. Ying-Kit Chan [陈英杰] is Assistant Professor, Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore. Email: chscyk@nus.edu.sg