

federal and public agenda, it is a persuasive reminder of past precedents of successful public-private engagement that benefited all.

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

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Reviewed by Fei-Hsien Wang

Tracing the fascinating career of Chen Diexian (1879–1940), a cultural entrepreneur, self-made inventor, and industrialist, Eugenia Lean tells a riveting microhistory with broader historiographical ambitions in her new book. As its title indicates, “vernacular industrialism” is the key concept Lean employs to approach and analyze Chen’s industrious activities and the making of his cosmetic empire, the Association for Household Industries Co., Ltd. By focusing on the local, homegrown, informal, and unconventional pursuits Chen and his contemporaries shared in manufacturing and technologies (especially chemistry), Lean challenges our conventional understandings of Chinese industrialization and modern science on multiple fronts. This book shows that China’s traditional men of letters—a group so stigmatized by the New Culture Movement as hopeless book-learning connoisseurs—were in fact willing and able to assume hands-on experimental and manufacturing activities. They also used existing intuitions and new media to explore and expand epistemological boundaries. Moving beyond the formal, professional, state-endorsed industrialization (heavy industry, transportation, etc.), Lean uses Chen’s case to highlight the informal industry and science’s contribution to cultural and economic development in modern China. It further illustrates how clever and bold vernacular industrialists like Chen used unorthodox marketing strategies and manufacturing practices to utilize print media, patriotic consumerism, and local raw materials to overcome the lack of substantial state support and to navigate and survive in global capitalism. The core of Chen’s vernacular industrialism is what Lean calls “tinkering” (pp. 26–27). Chen’s “tinkering” process might be easily categorized and dismissed as

copycatting, piracy, and/or reverse-engineering in the contemporary (Western-centered) intellectual property regime, because it often involved copying, translating, adapting, and improving existing technologies or knowledge rather than creating or inventing something new. However, as Lean rightfully points out, copying and innovation are not necessarily at odds, and tinkering should not be considered a lesser or inferior means of knowledge production. Tinkering was not only a crucial factor of Chen's business success but also an essential aspect of modern Chinese industrialization we need to understand to fully comprehend China's engagement with global capitalism and its recent *shanzhai* culture.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on a particular stage of Chen's vernacular industrious endeavors. Part 1 tells how Chen transformed himself from a traditionally educated elite to a cultural entrepreneur profiting from Western learning in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Hangzhou. Like many of his contemporaries Chen faced increasing intellectual and economic anxiety, but he skillfully used familiar practices and institutions (pen names, elegant gatherings, poetry) to authenticate and legitimize his new and unconventional pursuits (foreign stuff, scientific experiments, profit seeking). Through such self-branding, Chen established himself as a genuine, sensible, but playful practitioner of new knowledge and technologies, even when his primary concern was money.

Part 2 focuses on Chen's overlapping and interconnecting endeavors in literary production, manufacturing, and commercialized print culture when he became a successful professional author-editor in Shanghai during the 1910s and '20s. Chapter 2 closely examines the how-to recipes for daily-use domestic items that Chen and his contemporaries produced for popular journals that mainly targeted genteel female readers. Chapter 3 uses Chen's promotion of the foam fire extinguisher as an example to discuss how his popularizing of *changzhi* (common knowledge) and amateurism doubled as a path to both intellectual authority and commercial profit. In these two chapters, Lean brilliantly and beautifully demonstrates how Chen's textual production (recipes, how-tos) and material manufacturing (fire extinguisher, tooth powder, hair tonic) comprehended and reinforced each other. The mode and logic of production/creation behind his literary practices—translation (*bianyi*), compilation, and editing—and his industrial tinkering—emulating, experimenting, improving—is essentially the same. His manufacturing endeavors were built on the profit and fame he generated in his successful literary career; when promoting and disseminating “common knowledge” and the promise of vernacular experiments to

his readers, he was also turning them into the potential consumers of his products and brands.

Part 3 turns to Chen's cosmetic enterprise, Household Industries, and its manufacturing and marketing strategies. Chapter 4 explores how Chen employed the tinkering approach of modest improvement and local adaptation, such as modifying translated recipes, using domestic (and thus cheap) ingredients and copying machines produced abroad, to produce "native" but "modern" everyday items like tooth powder and vanishing cream. Not all of Chen's tinkering attempts were successful, and Household Industries still relied on imported materials; nevertheless, his effort at "improving" technologies and products to compete with foreign companies resonated well with the nativism and the ideal of self-reliance that were celebrated in the Republic period. This in turn enhanced Chen's reputation and brand power and allowed him and his butterfly branding to fashion themselves as a champion of the National Product Movement (Chapter 6). Chapter 5 traces the making and evolution of Chen's butterfly branding. Lean miraculously shows how Chen's literary branding (Diexian as "Butterfly Immortal") and industrial branding (butterfly trademark) constituted each other. Employing a wide range of legal tactics and marketing campaigns, the company further connected Chen's persona, the products, and the image/symbol of a butterfly to stake ownership and authenticity, as well as to forge an attachment and trust between the brand and Chen's readers/customers.

Lean's decision to focus on an individual entrepreneur makes this book highly readable for students of modern Chinese history and general readers who are interested in business history, knowledge production, science, and industry. The microhistory approach allows her to bridge different fields and capture the complicities and ambiguities of Chen's remarkable career, but it is not without limitations. While Chen published an enormous amount of texts, he and his company left little in the way of archives for Lean to dive into and discuss in depth how/whether tinkering was materialized in the scale of mass production. Lean ingeniously connects literary studies and industrial history (what an unusual pair!) to explain how Chen's textual and material production intertwined, but it still leaves readers wondering how much of Chen's success was due to his vernacular industrialism and how much to his clever self-branding? That said, Chen was not the only Chinese entrepreneur who mastered self-branding, tinkering, or navigating between the local and the global. We see resemblances of Chen and his Household Industries in other household "native" brands, such as in Huang Chujiu and his Great Eastern Dispensary Ltd., or Wu Yunchu and his Tien Chu Ve-tsin MSG Co. The tinkering approach can also been

commonly observed in industrial sectors beyond light manufacturing; for example, China's railroad companies and army were known for their unorthodox practices of modifying and cobbling together imported machines/weapons with local parts. What *Vernacular Industrialism in China* reveals might be not an "unconventional" path to industrialization and modernity but a "mainstream" shared by many Chinese companies and enterprises. I believe that many will soon follow Lean's insightful approach to rethinking China's "copycat" culture, and anyone interested in modern Chinese intellectual property rights, business, and entrepreneurship should definitely read this book.

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Le Crédit agricole (1951–2001): De la banque des campagnes à la banque universelle. *By Hubert Bonin.* Geneva: Droz, 2020. 472 pp. Figures, tables, index. Cloth, €39.00. ISBN: 978-2-600-06068-4.

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Reviewed by Eric Godelier

Hubert Bonin is an author recognized for his contribution to the history of banking in France. This book is a "commissioned history" written at the initiative of Crédit Agricole (CA). It is primarily a work of popularization for the members of the company, but it is also of interest to the academic world as part of an important list of works published on the CA, notably by André Gueslin. This book presents a period that has not yet been studied. Between 1951 and 2001, CA successfully went from a local mutual bank serving farmers to a major player in finance and credit in France and throughout the world. For a foreign reader, the history of CA is an essential lever for understanding, through the evolution of farmers and the rural world, the structuring of the geographical and economic spaces of France at least since World War II. Originally a mutualist cooperative, created in 1894 by the law initiated by Jules Méline, Minister of Agriculture, this bank aimed above all to satisfy the financing needs of small farmers. It developed thanks to a growing number of regional banks, but it kept this model and strategy until after World War II. This network of regional banks constituted a rural bank whose main activity was the management of deposits and housing loans. They were grouped together within an association, the Fédération nationale du Crédit agricole (FNCA), based in Paris. Long after 1951, the company's center of gravity was clearly located in the