

BOOK REVIEW

The Making of China's Post Office: Sovereignty, Modernization, and the Connection of a Nation

Weipin Tsai. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2024. 450 pp. \$75.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780674295889

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Tsai Weipin's *The Making of China's Post Office* is the latest monograph to be authored by one of the team of distinguished scholars who participated in the Chinese Maritime Customs Project led by Robert Bickers and Hans van de Ven in the early 2000s. Like the other excellent monographs that have come out of the Customs Project, Tsai's book seeks to explore the history of the modern Chinese state, the role of foreigners in modern Chinese history, and the process of globalization in China. There is no better institution to study the intersection of these factors in modern Chinese history than the Maritime Customs Service and its "daughter," the Imperial/Chinese Post Office (IPO/CPO). Although the financial contributions of the Customs Service to the growth of the modern Chinese state cannot be denied, the IPO/CPO arguably became the more important institution. At its greatest extent in the mid-Republican period, the Post Office consisted of 72,000 offices, a staff of 40,000 employees, and a network of 400,000 miles of mail routes. It was, by far, the largest civilian branch of the Chinese state.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive history of the IPO/CPO from its founding in 1896 to the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Tsai has wisely chosen to focus on two important issues in its history – the politics of its founding and the logistics of its early expansion. In the first half of the book, Tsai addresses the question of how and why the "enormous, nationwide institution" of the Imperial Post Office came into being in the late 19th century. In chapter one, Tsai delves deeply into Qing imperial politics by situating us in the late 1850s and early 1860s during the end of the Second Opium War and establishment of the Zongli Yamen. This context is important because the leaders of the Zongli Yamen, the Prince of Gong and Wenxiang, immediately assumed oversight of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service and its new inspector general, Sir Robert Hart. In chapter two, Tsai examines the origins of Hart's famous "bystander's view" reform proposal in 1865, in which he first seriously advocated for the establishment of a state-run postal service open to the public. Just at that moment, the Prince of Gong began encountering political troubles, Wenxiang wavered in his support for reform, and rising powerful governors-general like Li Hongzhang, who little favoured the idea of a national postal service run by a foreigner, kept the Court from approving Hart's plans. Chapter three covers the negotiations over the Margary Affair in 1876, when Sir Thomas Francis Wade refused to push the postal idea on Li Hongzhang, but Hart was allowed to experiment with an overland postal service in North China between customs houses. Hart entrusted Gustav Detring, the Tianjin Customs Commissioner, with operating this new Customs Post, a service mostly used by foreigners and often resisted by local Qing officials. In the fourth chapter, Tsai discusses the establishment of Li Hongzhang's *wenbao* bureaus and Liu Mingquan's Taiwan Post as evidence of the increasing consensus around the need for a national postal service. It was not, however, until the immediate aftermath of

the Sino-Japanese War that the Guangxu Emperor authorized the establishment of the Imperial Post Office on 20 March 1896.

In the second half of the book, Tsai explores the various trials and tribulations experienced by the Imperial Post Office as it expanded in the last fifteen years of the Qing period. The primary themes in the second half of the book are Hart's *festina lente* (make haste slowly) approach to postal expansion, the inexperience and failures of the early postal secretaries H. Kopsch, F. E. Taylor, and J. van Aalst, the successful strategy to make the Post Office "Chinese" under Hart and Théophile Piry, who ran the day-to-day operations of the Post Office from 1901 until his retirement in 1916, and the various logistical challenges of building a national postal service. Chapters five and six trace the expansion of the IPO outside the treaty ports, the use of steamers and railways to carry mail, and the ultimately fruitless efforts by Qing officials like Zhang Zhidong to wrest control of the Post Office away from Hart. In Chapters seven and eight, Tsai argues that the IPO became an instrumental part of the "grand design" of the late-Qing state to express its sovereignty in the borderlands – Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang – to counteract imperialist encroachment by establishing postal routes and offices in these areas. The main narrative concludes in chapter eight with the somewhat contentious separation of the Post Office from the Customs Service in May 1911, Piry's successful strategy to protect the integrity of the Post Office during the 1911 Revolution, and the decision to withdraw post offices from Tibet in the early Republic. Chapter nine, which feels tacked on to the rest of the book, recounts efforts by early postal employees to celebrate their accomplishments, the work of early Chinese scholars on the history of the Post Office and, finally, the construction of the "longest overland postal route" through Mongolia into Xinjiang in the early Republic.

While the two sections of the book ably engage many of the complicated and important elements in the founding and expansion of the IPO/CPO, Tsai's primary focus on studying the establishment and expansion of the Post Office as a "modernization project" (p. 2) is less compelling. Nowhere in the book does Tsai explain or define what she means by "modernization." This reviewer is sympathetic to Tsai's plight – to find a theme tying together all the disparate elements connecting the Post Office to state and society – but is unconvinced that "modernization" sheds any particular light on its history.

Overall, though, Tsai has made an important and original contribution to our understanding of the late-Qing state, the reasons for the "long gestation" of the postal idea, and the challenges of postal expansion up to the 1911 Revolution. The entire book is filled with her wonderful analytical insights into archival sources from Belfast, Boston, London, Nanjing, Taipei and Tianjin. It is these, rather than her focus on modernization, that make this book essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the late-Qing state, the role of powerful foreigners in its transformation, and the government's momentous decision to establish a national postal service as an arm of an expansionist state.