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At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai

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Dillon, Mara and Jean C. Oi (eds.): *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xiii + 310pp., \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-8047-5619-8

Inspired by the work of the noted German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and perhaps hoping that an emerging civil society in post-Mao China might lead to a more liberal political settlement there, researchers since the 1980s have been intensively studying the public sphere of activity in 20th-century China's cities, especially Shanghai. As an international city at the center of China's modernization activities prior to the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power, Shanghai is a logical place to look for signs of an emerging public sphere. This is especially true of the Republican period, when the weakened state left a vacuum in the city and its environs which offered opportunities for civilian actors to build the kinds of organizations that could serve as institutional expressions of civic identity outside the framework of state power.

Historians have done a great deal to probe developments in Republican Shanghai, and as Dillon and Oi point out in their introduction to this anthology the scholarship is now approaching the point at which it may be possible to answer questions that, while derived originally within the context of urban studies in the West, offer opportunities to gain important insights to students of modern China: What was the relationship between the state and civil society? Was there a tendency for the two to clash? With respect to China directly, what was happening in the sociopolitical environment in China's cities before the consolidation of power by the People's Republic foreclosed the opportunity to develop institutions outside state control? Was China following a trajectory similar to that which Western cities traveled as civilian groups and organizations emerged to present a counterweight to an increasingly impersonal and powerful state?

One thing that the papers presented in this volume (ten chapters dealing with such topics as elite networking, middlemen and social brokers, philanthropy, the media, political parties, and popular protest) make clear is that during the Republican period there was no inherently necessary antagonism between the personnel and organizations of Shanghai's civil society and political authorities in the city; Chinese social relationships were far too complex to be framed easily by the paradigm of state-society contestation. In particular, personal networks and the associations that activist leaders from various walks of life formed through the exploitation of native place ties, business and underworld connections, or participation in educational, philanthropic, and civil defense works easily bridged the gap between the state and groups that were potentially antagonistic to it. These networks – multilayered and interlinked associations that engaged in a wide range of public activities – were built by activists who brokered between state and society in such a way as to mitigate the tensions between them. Thus, from the perspective of comparative history China diverges, as it often does, from Western patterns of development in which, according to the Habermasian model, a civil society composed of private groups emerged largely as a counterweight to public authority.

Moreover, while during most of the period covered by these studies Shanghai's political life was a shambles, stability was maintained and the city managed to function more or less smoothly due to the organizational success of elite networks such as those dealt with here. Together, the networks and the individuals who built them provided the glue that held Shanghai society together in the face of economic collapse, foreign invasion and occupation,

and internecine strife that might otherwise have ripped the city apart; by bridging the gaps between different segments of society – capitalists, workers, state and security officials, educators, philanthropists, and even gangsters – these networks were able to perform important public functions that helped keep the city intact.

Scholars who have worked with Shanghai elites in the Republican period will welcome this book. To historians, the relationships between actors in China's social and political scenes often appear murky; one senses that important networks are there, but one is not sure what they look like. Fortunately, these essays have done a great deal to fill this gap in our perception. By exposing the opaque world of elite networking, showing us that agents of civil society were quite capable of forging productive relationships within a wide range of civilian groups as well as with bureaucrats and other agents of the state, they have significantly deepened our understanding of the way elite brokerage can work and reinforced the notion that when dealing with modern China models for urban development that are based on the Western experience must be applied with caution.

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