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## Book Review: *Modern China's Network Revolution*

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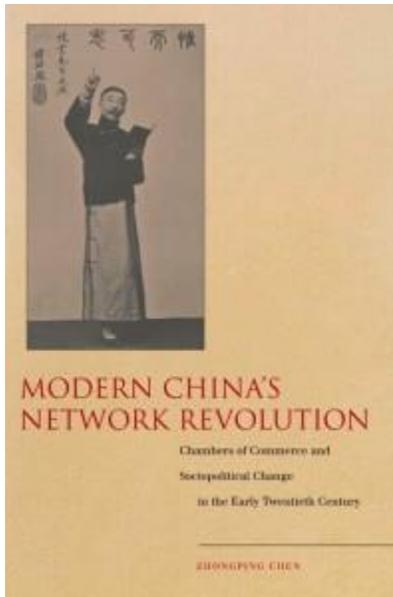
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## [Book Review: Modern China's Network Revolution](#)

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Chen, Zhongping. [\*Modern China's Network Revolution: Chambers of Commerce and Sociopolitical Change in the Early Twentieth Century\*](#). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. xxi, 289 pp. \$55.00 (cloth)

By Brett Sheehan

The title of Zhongping Chen's new book has a double meaning. *Modern China's Network Revolution* refers both to his claim for new, revolutionary forms of networking among lower-Yangzi Chinese elites at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries and to the revolutionary roles of those networks in elite mobilization, especially in the 1911 revolution which overthrew the Qing. As such, the book makes a meaningful contribution to debates on the nature of Chinese organizational practices, especially merchant organizational practices, and to debates about the nature of late-Qing elite mobilization and the relationship of those mobilized elites to the state.

The first three chapters focus on the new organizational forms, or what Chen calls associational networks (p. 7). Chen traces the beginnings of chambers of commerce, their growth and their burgeoning relationships with each other. Specialists will appreciate the detailed information on specific merchants and organizations in these chapters, though general readers might find the number of names daunting. In theorizing about new organizational forms, Chen does not dismiss particularism as important in network formation, but he does argue for the importance of formal organization. Chen summarizes the gist of this organizational revolution as a series of new institutional norms and links: "formal leadership, membership, periodic meetings, competitive elections, network hierarchy" (p. 208). The result was organizations which were neither natural results of earlier guild evolution nor simple imitations of Western counterparts (p. 18).

Chen shows the “revolutionary” results of these new institutions in a series of fascinating case studies. Chapter four discusses the extension of relationships among chambers of commerce as they banded together for the 1905 anti-American boycott, became involved in municipal governmental affairs, especially in Shanghai, and as they helped found other new organizations such as the extremely important merchant militias. Chapter five portrays chamber activities in the commercial and industrial realms as chambers organized tax protests, became involved in the Railroad Rights Recovery Movement, organized the Nanyang industrial exposition, and negotiated with American business interests. Chapter six provides an absorbing account of chamber involvement in the growing constitutional movement and then eventually in the revolts and secessions of the 1911 revolution which overthrew the Qing dynasty. Chen argues that the revolution did not, as some have claimed, grow out of the railway rights recovery movement which peaked in 1907, four years before lower-Yangzi businesspeople broke from the Qing (pp. 158-159). Chapter seven carries the story beyond 1911 to discuss the fates of lower Yangzi chambers in the republican period after 1911, but this chapter has less detail and is less satisfying than the other rich cases studies.

Chen’s topic fits within a series of important debates about local elites in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Taking a middle ground in terms of the balance between state and local power, the book portrays chambers as a combination of state-down direction and bottom-up mobilization on behalf of merchants (p. 56). Thus, initially the Qing court preferred merchant leadership for chambers so these new organizations would not enhance the power of the government’s own provincial officials at the expense of the center (p. 52). At the same time, once formed, “official attempts to divide and rule chambers failed” (p. 76). The chambers were creatures of the state and simultaneously tools of local elites. Merchant elites, however, were not just interested in local dominance, but also showed public interests and joint actions with the populace against both the Qing government and foreign encroachment (p. 14).

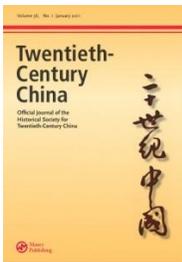
Although this last conclusion echoes the public sphere debates of two decades ago, Chen is careful to avoid this terminology. He shows that the relationship between merchants and the state is more complex than many arguments about the public sphere allow, and he presents a picture of “interactive dynamics and changeable relations with the state” (p. 16). Some of Chen’s more interesting examples of this interaction come when chambers cooperate with the state in some areas while simultaneously protesting against the state in others. During the railway rights recovery movement, merchants approached the Qing court for an under-the-table loan to finance joint projects with Americans in spite of their disgust with the government over the railway issue (pp. 156-159, 167).

In some places Chen’s terminology is hard to pin down. For example, he excludes “old style” shops from his list of capitalist enterprises without defining capitalism (p. 92). The reader is left with the impression that capitalist simply means Western. More central to Chen’s argument, he divides merchants as either “elite” or “common” with the former having elite connections and gentry training (p. 77), but throughout the book there are references to elite merchants, chamber leaders, gentry, and sometimes just “elites” without any clear sense of discrete groups.

In addition, Chen argues for connections between merchant elites and the populace through shared provincialism, nationalism, and economic interest (p. 156). While large crowds showed

up at chamber-sponsored patriotic events and people subscribed to railway shares in fairly large numbers, it is hard to see what shared economic interest elite merchants and ordinary Chinese shared. Chen himself acknowledges elsewhere that chambers' primary concern was for elite merchant interests (p. 148).

Most importantly, it is clear from the evidence in this book that chambers of commerce were only part of the story of elite networks. At almost every turn, the chambers of commerce cooperated with other elite groups such as education associations and local gentry. Chamber of commerce organizations were clearly only one manifestation of larger elite networks and a fuller description of those networks might show more personal links and less reliance on formal organization. Thus, the book effectively proves that late Qing chambers of commerce were important both at the local and national levels, but the claim of “institutionalized and irreversible change” (p. 207) is less convincing.



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