

***External Intervention and the Politics of State Formation: China, Indonesia, and Thailand, 1893–1952.* By Ja Ian Chong (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Hardcover: 293pp.**

From the 1950s through to the 1970s, political scientists and historians working on Asia were often in conversation. They worked on related topics and utilized approaches and methods that were, if not the same, mutually understandable. In recent decades a chasm has emerged between the fields: historians have stepped away from political topics, and methodological developments have drawn political science ever further from the kinds of research that interest historians. Ja Ian Chong's *External Intervention and the Politics of State Formation* marks a welcome return of political science to Asian history.

Chong uses a comparative approach to explore the question of how sovereign states came into being in East and Southeast Asia in the middle of the twentieth century. His theory is that strong states tend to intervene in weaker states to secure exclusive access, and to prevent competitors from gaining access. He argues "Sovereign statehood develops in a weak polity when foreign actors uniformly expect high costs to intervention and settle on a next best alternative to their worst fear, domination of that state by a rival" (p. 2). The decisions of foreign states to support or accept the establishment of strong government — rather than nationalist movements, military competition, or norms of self-determination — were vital in the establishment of sovereign states in Asia in the middle of the twentieth century. Chong uses China between 1893 and 1952 as his primary example, and then adds a chapter each on Indonesia and Thailand.

At the core of his book are the four chapters on China. Utilizing the language fashionable in political science (independent variables and dependent variables, avoiding statements about causality), but often annoying to those in other disciplines, Chong avoids the emotive language of imperialism and domination that is so common in the historical literature. He shows quite convincingly that the actions of foreign powers to support local proxies and claim exclusive rights in certain regions contributed to the weakening of the Chinese state from 1893–1922. Between 1923 and 1953 foreign powers except for Japan made choices not to intervene in China, and that generally speaking they acted in ways that supported the assertion of power by a central government. He asserts that the

common interpretations of the establishment of a strong central government under the Chinese Communist Party — nationalism, norms of self-determination, the alliance of the Communist Party and the peasant class, or the “bellicist” model whereby states are created out of military competition and the extraction of resources — are flawed. “Available evidence indicates that the case for the interventionist claim about the establishment of sovereign statehood in the Chinese polity between 1923 and 1952 seems much stronger than the alternatives” (p. 171). In the conclusion, the author elaborates: “Instead of some wellspring of popular backing, what gave nationalist groups the financial, military and political wherewithal to persist against the challenges they faced was often patronage by foreign powers” (p. 231). He tempers his argument slightly, suggesting that while the role of nationalism was of limited importance in state formation it “was especially important for state-building after the creation of sovereign statehood” (p. 232).

Chong deserves credit for bringing a fresh perspective to state formation in modern China, and particularly bringing much needed attention to the role of foreign intervention. His four chapters on China are an impressive synthesis of a wide ranging literature on foreign intervention in China, as well as some use of published primary documents (mostly in Chinese). Historians since the early 1980s have tended to ignore the impact of foreign intervention. Chong makes a convincing case that foreign involvement in China needs to be taken much more seriously as a factor in the formation of a unified sovereign state in mid-twentieth-century China.

Chong’s willingness to place China in a broader comparison with both Thailand and Indonesia is also welcome. While differences abound, Thailand remains one of the most interesting comparisons with China in their shared experiences of a mode of foreign domination widely described as “informal empire” or semi-colonialism. The Indonesia comparison opens up a valuable question: how different is decolonization from the revolutionary experience of China?

Ultimately, however, this reviewer thinks Chong takes his argument too far. First, the author’s dismissal of the role of nationalist movements is overstated. Indeed, foreign acquiescence, while perhaps necessary, was certainly not a sufficient condition for the creation of an effective sovereign state in each situation. Indeed, throughout his accounts, Chong is quiet about *why* foreign powers determined that the opportunity costs of intervention were too high. Nationalism, and the efficacy of the existing Chinese governments, influenced foreign perceptions of the costs of intervention. For example, in

China, British responses in the wake of the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925, were deeply coloured by an understanding that popular Chinese nationalism was a force to be reckoned with. Similarly, the efficacy (or otherwise) of both the Kuomintang government and its Communist rival influenced American choices in China in the 1940s. The Indonesia case seems open to similar objections.

Second, the author's definition of sovereign statehood — focusing on external autonomy, political centralization and territorial exclusivity — is oversimplified. The creation of effective state institutions is ignored. Likewise the influence of international norms and the functioning of international society are not considered. Finally, the author assumes that the Chinese state of the mid-twentieth century should have replicated the boundaries of the Qing empire, ignoring the bounty of recent historical and anthropological scholarship which emphasizes the ethnic diversity of the Qing empire, and the existence of strong minority identities in regions like Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia and the southwestern borderlands. In the eyes of many scholars, it is surprising that the Qing empire did not devolve into a number of national states, much as occurred to the Ottoman empire, and later to the European empires in Asia.

External Intervention and the Politics of State Formation is a frustrating book. At its best it is a stimulating effort to bring together International Relations theory ideas into conversation with state formation and transcend the boundaries of national histories in posing comparative questions. But Chong seems imprisoned by the desire — common in American political science in recent decades — to find parsimonious explanations for complex political phenomena. State formation is a complex process, and any attempt to make sense of it requires sensitivity to multiple causes.