

B er nec  Guyot-R echard: Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962, (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

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This is a remarkable work of scholarship in a long-neglected area — state consolidation and frontier-making in the eastern Himalaya between 1910 and 1962. Unlike other books which have dealt with the high politics of the India-China relationship and boundary, it studies these issues from the ground up, from the point of view of the peoples and society. Coming when the Indian and Chinese states have accumulated hard power and are rubbing up against each other in their shared periphery, this history is a topical reminder of how we got to the present situation, and suggests alternate ways of looking at the processes of state formation and consolidation in the Indian and Chinese peripheries in the early 20th century.

The basic thesis is that existing analyses miss a fundamental element of Sino-Indian rivalry: the difficulty of coexisting in the Himalayas, a region whose distinct human landscape exposes India and China’s imperial nature. The 1962 war was preceded not just by military and diplomatic escalation but by an older and increasingly tense shadowing contest to convince the eastern Himalayas’ inhabitants that one state, and not the other, was the better alternative. Guyot-R echard sees India and China as post-imperial polities seeking to deepen their rule over the Himalayan region where they encounter people starkly different from their “core” citizenry. She distinguishes between the behaviour of China and India. While China uses colonial policies on its geographic peripheries, independent India’s unity-in-diversity ideal coexisted with imperial strategies, and China and India see themselves as each other’s ‘shadow state’ in the Himalayas.

Based on research in the Arunachal Pradesh and Assam archives, original primary sources, and extensive interviews with those involved, the book naturally focuses much more closely on the Indian side, where sources are accessible. For the Chinese side, where sources are unavailable, limited or patchy, the author relies on deduction and inferred motives from revealed Chinese state behaviour. This could have opened her to the accusation that she is looking for keys lost somewhere else under a street lamp because that is where the light is. But the objectivity with which she handles the material avoids most pitfalls of this method — of picking over Indian flaws and hesitations while the official Chinese narrative gains undeserved credence by comparison and equation. It is hard to see what more she could have done. She has obeyed the historian’s cardinal rule and followed the evidence.

The result of her considerable scholarship is an important book that covers significant themes in an increasingly important area with a professional historian’s care and precision. For instance, the book deals with the complicated and non-linear transition in the eastern Himalaya from empire to nation-state in India and China, where the process was completed in the early 20th century (and, implicitly, in Tibet where the transition from a pre-modern polity to the nation state was not completed). It describes competitive state expansion in successive episodes, the first of which, by China in 1910-12, set off what Guyot-R echard calls “shadow state” behaviour, where India and China reacted and mirrored what they thought the other was doing to consolidate power and sovereignty in this border region, and not only on their side of the Himalaya.

In describing this process, she is also alert to multiple side-shows which influenced the main flow of events in unpredictable ways. One was the triangular differences between London, Calcutta/Delhi and Assam. For London, imperial interests in keeping Russia out of Tibet dictated accommodation with China, recognition of Chinese “suzerainty” over Tibet, and ruled out an interest in expanding into the eastern Himalaya. New Delhi/Calcutta saw the exercise of British rule and recognition of boundaries as necessary both for security and commercial reasons but were unwilling to prioritise or invest. And, Assam saw Delhi’s regular relapse into a “policy of aloofness” as dangerous and sought a forward policy on the ground in terms of presence, civilian administration and development.

Another interesting theme was the impetus for the 1910 Treaty with Bhutan from Qing and Tibetan assertions of sovereignty in the eastern Himalaya, and Bhutan’s role in Calcutta and London’s Tibet and China policy. As for China, when she first tried to conquer Dzayul in May 1910 and entered the Lohit valley, the King of Bhutan was informed that his kingdom was China’s protectorate, and he was ordered to let Chinese currency circulate freely and to confine diplomatic relations to Beijing only — *plus ça change.....!* This first burst of Qing China’s forward policy in the eastern Himalaya was soon ended by Tibetan resistance and the fall of the dynasty at home.

This is a book full of discovered delights, of repetitive patterns of behaviour by governments in India and China. One of them is the ‘recourse to force [which] had been a long-standing way of managing vulnerability on the part of China-based polities’ that several instances in the book attest to. It is particularly good on the ebb and flow of administration in the eastern Himalayan borderland. Chapters 3 and 4 reveal the development dimension and the relationship between the people and the state in NEFA. The new Indian state differed from its predecessor, but carried on its legacy. With the 1950 Assam earthquake, independent India changed the coercive state vocabulary by adding development initiatives and relief. The story of state-building is told clinically and well.

The real value of this book is its emphasis on the role of the people of the eastern Himalaya, and what it says of “ever-changing state-society relations on either side of the eastern Himalayas”. It describes local peoples’ preference for the looser arrangements of India over the monopolistic Chinese approach to their polities and societies. It was this preference that saw the relatively smooth return of the Indian administration into these areas after the 1962 war, despite Chinese attempts during their two to three month occupation of large parts of NEFA to demonstrate their goodwill to the people and to prove their superiority over the Indian state. Guyot-Récharard argues that “arguably, the PRC’s demonstration of invincibility, impeccable efficiency and self-sufficiency had been *too convincing*.”

The book also brings a fresh perspective to China’s military victory in 1962, which Guyot-Récharard says could well turn out to be Pyrrhic. She argues that viewed solely in military terms or of control of territory the victory was undeniably China’s. But why then, as John W. Garver points out, is this China’s “forgotten war”? Is it because China’s leaders felt they miscalculated in launching it, and that it failed to resolve China’s coexistence with India or win over the populations of the eastern Himalaya? After the war, Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule continued, and NEFA’s people cooperated with returning Indian authorities. To that extent the narrative of Chinese victory loses its shine, she points out. My own sense is that the war was at least as much an internal political coup by Mao, which succeeded, but which can hardly be acknowledged. It is probably a combination of several of these factors that explains the Chinese treatment of 1962 as the ‘forgotten war’.

As China seeks to extend her strategic frontiers in several directions including the eastern Himalaya, and India seeks to maintain the natural geographic boundaries that have served her through history, this is a timely and useful book. It is also a useful reminder of the relatively recent and fragile nature of state formation in

the eastern Himalaya. Internal party-political games in the Northeast, toppling governments and stretching the law beyond its capacity, and failure to meet minimum standards of governance only lays in store trouble in a situation of weak and fragile state structures and fundamental social change in our Himalayan borderland. When China is increasingly active at our periphery, when she hosts insurgent leaders from the Northeast India like Paresh Baruah, and reactivates Indian insurgent groups, it is useful to remember that this has been an arena of India-China competition for over a century, where the two countries have shadowed each other, where new states and aggressive nationalisms are yet to find equipoise, and where development has proved its worth as an instrument in the past.

We need more work like this which takes us away from the monochromatic state and sovereignty-centred view of our borders to a fuller understanding of our own past that includes the agency of the people, and that show us the complexity of what we have inherited. In that complexity itself lies opportunity for the pragmatic policymaker, for the historian, and for those who are prisoners of our present constricted narrative on China, our borders and the history we share. Like a true work of history, it will have served a useful purpose if it brings us to question conventional wisdom, widens our vision, and provokes more scholarship on its themes, and on the domestic and internal political dynamics that drive India and China to do what they do. Do read this book. It is of value well beyond the limited circle of academic readers that the title might attract.