

EXTERNAL INTERVENTION AND THE POLITICS OF STATE FORMATION: China, Indonesia, and Thailand, 1893–1952. *By Ja Ian Chong.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. x, 293 pp. (Tables, graphs maps.); US\$96.95, cloth., ISBN: 978-1-107-01375-9

This book examines the role of external or foreign intervention in sovereign state formation, which according to the author has not received sufficient attention, either “empirically and theoretically” (1), by political scientists studying sovereign state creation. The scholarship has mainly focussed on “three broad categories—namely the bellicist, institutional commitment, and ideological approaches” (37). The author does not reject these explanations but “suggest[s] that even if they offer good accounts of sovereign state creation and systems change under particular circumstances, further theory development can still supplement understandings of state formation—especially across contexts” (37).

He clearly and persuasively lays out his case and framework of analysis in chapters 1 and 2. He defines a state as “an arrangement of political structures that allows the exercise of coercion over a delineated geographical space and population” (11). While there is a general view that external intervention in domestic politics contributes to political fragmentation and subjugation, he believes that “when sufficiently competitive, foreign rivalries and interventions in a weak state can in fact foster state sovereignty. This is what he tries to show in the book. The author begins with the assumption that “wealth and power stand at the heart of competition in world politics,” consequently the perennial need to secure access to markets and resources. Thus, what motivates external powers to intervene in the domestic politics of weak states is competition over access to these states (27). He then introduces the concept of “opportunity cost expectations,” which is the starting point of his analysis (29). When the opportunity cost of intervention is high, contending foreign powers tend to discard their inclinations for total supremacy in favour of supporting sovereign statehood as their next best option in order to forestall the domination of the target state by adversaries. Convergent expectations about high intervention costs would advance the development of sovereign statehood in weak states while divergent expectations promote fragmentation by encouraging external actors to adopt different and incongruous approaches to limit their opponents’ influence.

To test his hypothesis, the author chose three countries to reconsider the dynamics behind their state formation: China, Thailand and Indonesia, which he described as “least likely” cases because they have supposedly “different, but individually well-established, accounts of sovereign state formation that run counter” to his hypothesis (6). Most accounts identify sovereignty as reactions against foreign intervention. His chosen time frame is between 1893 and 1952 because during this period there was “substantial rhetorical support for national self-determination, systemic wars, and significant

nationalist mobilisation for polities in Northeast and Southeast Asia” (18).

China is his main case study and he devotes 4 chapters to it (chapters 3–6). Indonesia (chapter 7) and Thailand/Siam (chapter 8) are his secondary and comparative cases. In the case of China, he shows that between 1893 and 1922, an impasse in foreign rivalries “was key” to maintaining China’s feudalized statehood and freedom of action in international politics and diplomacy whereas foreign interventionist positions contributed to China’s polity movement from feudalized to sovereign statehood between 1923 and 1952. As for the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, he showed that between 1893 and 1922, the Hague calculated that the opportunity cost of intervening in the East Indies was “moderate” whereas other powers active in the region found intervening to be “prohibitively high” and as such Holland “was left as the only power able to shape governance in the archipelago” (174). The situation changed from 1923 to 1952 when “shifts in the aggregated effects of external intervention, conditioned by perceptions of opportunity costs of intervention” caused state form in the East Indies to change (196). In the Siamese experience, the early movement toward sovereign statehood between 1893 and 1922 was a consequence of the French and British perception of the high opportunity costs of intervention, which continued between the early 1920s and 1950s.

Each of the case studies ends with an “alternative takes/explanations/perspectives” section. As the author explains, the persuasiveness of his main argument also “rests, in part, on how it fares next to other perspectives put forward to explain the change” in the three countries. I found this very section useful and important, but unfortunately somewhat brief and underdeveloped. The author’s argument could be further strengthened if these alternative perspectives were more fully presented, and even better, woven into the main narrative(s).

This reviewer, although a student of history rather than a political scientist, recognizes that this book is a commendable effort to synthesize international relations, comparative politics and history, the theoretical and the empirical, in the political science literature. But as for historians, they have never really ignored the role of external powers in the state formation of the three countries. The difference or disagreement with the author is perhaps on its relative importance vis-à-vis other factors, which the author considerably plays down. Still, this is undoubtedly a well-executed study in its own terms.

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