

Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850-1910*, Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2008, 328 pp..

## **Dominique Tyl**

In the very clear and extremely useful introduction, the author explains why and how the concept of imperialism or colonialism, can be applied to understand the relationship between Qing empire and its neighbour, the Choson kingdom of Korea. If the thesis is well enunciated in the first pages of the book, the demonstration has to go through the turns and twists of history as succession of significant events.

This gives a beautiful reading, but sometimes difficult to follow step after step. Would only the specialists be able to really see through all re-readings of years rich of rapidly cumulative events? The book is the outcome, considerable reviewed, of a Ph.D. dissertation, and not an historical novel.

Happily, with a lively style in many pages, take you by hand all along the period under scrutiny, and you reach the end of the book with the satisfying feeling that you know a lot about Qing imperialism, but also with debates concerning this policy inside China, herself entangled with other imperialist powers on her soil, Japan's ambition, Russia advance toward the East, Britain's diplomacy in Korea, and this country's troubled government and society.

Maybe, when you read the first pages of the book intending to go from beginning to end, you may see the introduction as another piece of concept clarification, somehow abstract, followed by summary of each chapter, as customary. Well, before reading a chapter and at the end of it, go to the introduction, think again over the concepts (imperialism under various forms), and appreciate the clear line or two on the subject-matter of what you have just read.

Suggestion for a reading which reaps harvests beyond initial intention of many a reader. You will be attracted by this part of the world where actors are not strong western powers versus poor, anachronistic Asian declining forces. Of course, Japan is a case of ambivalent position. But high imperialism was somehow late to come, and limited in time. Of obvious significance, of course; but not enough to understand all that happened there during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and probably at least some aspects of our own time.

So, what happened? First, the author invites to re-evaluate the tribute system, whose too simple interpretation by J. K. Fairbank cannot do "justice to the multiplicity of relationship between China and Korea over the centuries." (p.24) Then, appear influential Chinese persons...

During the period under study, Li Hongzhang, of course is very present (see the

useful, but not too detailed index). He is the main figure among the reform-oriented modernizers aiming at strengthening China, even at the cost of concessions in order to avoid uncertain open conflict. (p.57) He also approved the installation of a telegraph line in Korea linking more efficiently the two countries and checking Japanese influence. (p.136). His end came with the defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese war in 1894.

Yuan Shikai, another important figure, does not invite to sympathy. Called the *de facto* king of Korea (p.130) when he was Qing high commissioner in this country, he was described by nearly everybody as intelligent, ambitious, brutal, intriguing, coarse, etc... Li Hongzhang made repeated effort to refrain his activities, but Yuan did succeed to enforce a policy of domination in Korea.

Less known, Chen Shutang is credited with successfully promoting official Qing diplomatic and commercial presence among Korean people. Merchant, sometimes soldiers, and other ordinary Chinese people should not be forgotten, and we see them quite alive along the pages of the book...All this does not summarize all the data, descriptions, and analysis of the book, which show how China tried to keep its advantages in Korea, in adopting a multilateral imperialism approach, but failed at the end...

What about Korea? We have already noticed that the tributary system should not be seen in a too simplistic Sinocentric order accepted by China's neighbors. The book ends with the pure colonization of Korea by Japan, with an evaporating presence of Great-Britain. For a variety of reasons, Qing China was more interested in expanding westward (books of Perdue and Emma Teng on Chinese expansionism, cited by Lars, have been reviewed in this journal).

It is also significant even for today to read that Korea has a strong sense of identity and a decisive ability to guard her autonomy (p.291); any special relationship, here meaning friendly, between China and Korea does not completely erased, among the Koreans, the worry of any resurgence of Chinese imperialism. (p.293)

The footnotes, which are often substantial, besides giving references, are welcome to be edited this way. It facilitates very much their reading, as they add much interesting information and quotations enriching the text. A good editorial decision of a book whose author seems to say it was fun to write (p.vi). The adjective would not exactly apply to its reading, probably a better word would be captivating.