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## ‘Decolonisation’ in China, 1949-1959

Jonathan J. Howlett

While historians of empire have embraced the differences in the forms, natures and fates of imperialisms across the world in the last several decades, China remains largely peripheral to models largely focused on India, the Dominions and Africa. This is perhaps because China was never a formal colony and also because it is often considered to be exceptional. Yet, as the other chapters in this volume demonstrate, China was connected to the networks of the imperial world and was itself a site of imperial competition and interaction. Britain’s relationship with China was far more complicated than can be allowed for under models that posit simplistic state-to-state relations. This chapter explores the ending of that particular relationship after the Communist revolution of 1949, approaching it as a process of ‘decolonisation’ affected by a multiplicity of state and non-state actors.

The literature on decolonisation has also largely neglected China, except perhaps when establishing the context for events elsewhere (such as in Malaya and Singapore). When it has been studied, decolonisation in China seems to have followed a rather neat narrative: the processes surrounding the abrogation of extraterritoriality and the normalisation of Sino-foreign relations in the Republican period (1911-49) have, for example, been well covered.<sup>1</sup> There were, however, always two spheres of Sino-British interaction: one at the level of treaties, trade and diplomacy, and the other on the ground level within China.<sup>2</sup> If we consider decolonisation to be more than a matter of high-level diplomacy and define it instead as implying the removal of outside influences from a country, it is clear that when the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, much remained to be done.

Such a flexible definition of decolonisation is not new: in recent decades decolonisation has been explored in all its variety and confusion and in a profusion of local contexts. Historians have long acknowledged that decolonisation is a historical process defined more by exception than by rule.<sup>3</sup> Histories of decolonisation have ‘shifted South’ along with scholarship on the Cold War: placing increasing emphasis on the agency of post-colonial states in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Goscha and Ostermann’s volume *Connected Histories* is an excellent example of recent work in this area: ‘connecting’ previously separate histories of decolonisation and the Cold War in Asia.<sup>5</sup> Among the contributors to *Connected Histories* was Chen Jian, whose chapter explored China’s stance as an important champion of anti-imperialism in the 1950s and its role at the Bandung Conference as well as in conflicts in Korea, Malaya and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> What Chen neglected was the fact that for the CCP, imperialism within China was not a thing of the past. The idea, first advanced by Mao Zedong in October 1949, that under the CCP China had ‘stood up’ and expelled the forces of imperialism seems to have been widely accepted both in and outside of China, but in fact the CCP struggled to eliminate foreign, especially British, influences from within China throughout the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

The early years of Communist rule have been re-conceptualized by historians over the past two decades and it is vital, as Kirby has observed, that international and comparative elements are not forgotten.<sup>8</sup> New insights can be gained through deploying concepts and comparisons from wider literatures on decolonisation. While recognising that the Chinese developed many pragmatic and original strategies, this chapter will also suggest that in its moment of transformation, China was not necessarily exceptional. Across the world, the 1937-45 conflict triggered a violent reordering of international relations and relations

between governments and their populations. This era was defined by the parallel (and sometimes linked) processes of the accelerated decline of the Europe-centred order through decolonisation and the emergence of a new socialist world led by the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> China sat at the confluence of these two movements, facing state-building challenges familiar to the governments of new and reconstructing states across the world.

## **DECOLONISING A 'SEMI-COLONY'**

The nature of the British presence in China has long been disputed. Regardless of whether it is labelled 'semi-colonialism' or 'informal empire', it certainly shared many of the characteristics of imperialism, including territorial enclaves, extraterritoriality and intervention in the domestic and foreign policy of the colonized.<sup>10</sup> Osterhammel has argued that this was primarily a 'business system', predicated on the interlocking interests of companies and states.<sup>11</sup> Such a definition is useful, but it also obscures the great variety of foreign influences in China that bore testimony to its complicated position within global networks of empire, war and migration: as this volume has shown, Britons and other foreigners went to China for a variety of reasons and interacted with Chinese people in a myriad of ways. In November 1950 the CCP counted a total of 11,939 foreigners in Shanghai alone, belonging to around forty different nationalities. Among them were 1,315 'British' people (many of whom were from the wider empire), constituting the largest national group from a Western country.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of how historians define British and other foreign influences, Chinese nationalists were certainly convinced that their country had been subjected to imperialist aggression.<sup>13</sup> By the time of his death in 1925, Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary acclaimed by the CCP as the

‘forerunner’ of their revolution, had come to see anti-imperialism as a prerequisite for national renewal.<sup>14</sup> As soon as Sun’s party, the Guomintang, came to power in 1927 they had begun campaigning for the normalisation of Sino-foreign relations. In response, British diplomats carried out a protracted, negotiated surrender of their privileges (the trappings of ‘imperialism’) in order to preserve business interests. This retreat was not uncontested by business and settler groups.<sup>15</sup> This was one example of a familiar pattern, followed across formal and informal empire, though as White has observed, the relationship between business and policy-makers was not always an uncomplicated ‘gentlemanly-capitalist’ partnership and after 1945 Cold War concerns often overrode economic considerations.<sup>16</sup>

By the early 1930s sovereignty had been regained over almost two thirds of the foreign concessions and control was reasserted over China’s customs, salt and postal administrations. The Shanghai International Settlement was occupied by the Japanese in 1941 and in 1943 the British and Americans negotiated its return to Chinese sovereignty and the abrogation of all their remaining treaty privileges including extraterritoriality.<sup>17</sup> By 1949 the Guomintang had undone much of the legal and political framework underpinning foreign imperialism, but their achievements were downplayed by the CCP who portrayed them as compromised collaborators.<sup>18</sup>

While the formal bases of imperialism were undermined, informal influences were still apparent in 1949. Despite the departure of large numbers of foreigners before the CCP takeover, China remained home to extensive networks of foreign businesses, diplomats and missionaries. The CCP saw the final elimination of the foreign presence as a vital precursor to securing the independence of ‘New China’.<sup>19</sup> Mao famously declared that the ‘big house’ that was China had been made ‘too dirty, too chaotic by Western imperialism,’ and that only

‘after the house has been swept clean’ could the CCP ‘invite in guests’. In linking China’s independence to the need to eliminate foreign interests, especially commercial interests, Mao was foreshadowing international debates about neo-colonialism which rose to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s (though he not the first to do so).<sup>20</sup> While there have been studies on how the house was ‘swept’ after 1949, this process has not yet been approached as ‘decolonisation’.<sup>21</sup>

Robin Winks has argued that the decolonisation of ‘informal empire’ was a messier process than that of ‘formal empire’: he quotes a Mexican proverb which says that to divorce one’s spouse is a matter of simple law, but to divorce a lover is impossible. In formal empire, he argues, indigenous elites could be groomed, handovers could be delayed and in the end the birth of a new nation offered a fresh start. The ‘internal partners’ of informal empire, on the other hand, were left in limbo and colonial legacies were incompletely purged.<sup>22</sup> We should, of course, be wary of presenting the decolonisation of any part of the world as a formality, it was a complex and often violent process, but Winks’ question remains valid: how did the Chinese, the ‘internal partner’ here, approach the elimination of the legacies of semi-colonialism after 1949?

## **ECONOMIC DECOLONISATION**

In January 1949 Stalin’s advisor in Beijing suggested that the Chinese should nationalize all foreign property except for American assets, as only the Americans were capable of retaliation. The CCP had first decided on a policy of nationalisation in 1928, but now Mao replied that they would have to move slowly because foreign capital was so closely intertwined with the domestic economy.<sup>23</sup> Foreign firms dominated China’s banking,

insurance, real estate, public utilities and shipping, amongst other important sectors. In a later conversation, Mao told Stalin's envoy that 'in order to destroy the enemy, one should grow strong economically' and this meant avoiding risks.<sup>24</sup> China's economy had suffered greatly during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) and a series of economic crises between 1945 and 1949 had contributed to the collapse of the Guomindang by degrading their ability to make war and eroding their credibility as an effective government.<sup>25</sup> The CCP leadership saw that the economy needed thorough reconstruction: employment and economic security were paramount, but how could this be achieved alongside the elimination of foreign companies?

In hindsight, the British withdrawal from China appears to be a logical consequence of post-war decline, yet this was not apparent at the time.<sup>26</sup> Britain remained influential on the world stage: it was America's chief ally, it was a founder member of the United Nations Security Council and it still possessed one of the world's largest economies.<sup>27</sup> Britons in China desired to maintain a trading presence and it was widely believed that the Communist government would require their services in order to access world markets.<sup>28</sup> In 1949 there were 1,104 foreign enterprises in China. Although the Americans represented global Communism's great nemesis, the British remained more significant on the ground: around 35 per cent of all foreign businesses in China were British-owned and British interests accounted for 68 per cent of the total capital invested.<sup>29</sup> When American diplomatic personnel were withdrawn in early 1950 and US assets were frozen in December that year, the British were the most significant foreign contingent remaining.<sup>30</sup>

China's policy towards foreign businesses in the 1950s was shaped by three main factors: domestic trends in the nationalisation and socialisation of the economy; the need to ensure economic stability; and the desire to avoid 'neo-colonial' dependence. At first, foreign firms,

like their Chinese counterparts, were offered protection under the banner of ‘New Democracy’ (*xin minzhuzhuyi*), an interim period of moderation designed to lay the groundwork for a later transition to socialism. Private business was allowed to profit as long as capitalists worked in the ‘national interest’, while strategically vital companies were brought under state control.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of their nationality, all companies struggled under the pressure of deflationary measures, high taxes and the Guomindang’s economic blockade, which affected access to materials and markets. Between 1950 and 1952 foreign businesses were weakened using administrative measures, such as punitive taxation, as well as pressure from workforces, to extract capital and increase liabilities, but this did not yet amount to a plan for nationalisation.<sup>32</sup> To prevent a mass withdrawal, foreign firms were not allowed to dispose of their assets through sale or closure unless they first obtained the government’s approval. Approval was seldom forthcoming as the government feared unemployment and harmful effects on production.<sup>33</sup> Foreign managers were denied exit permits until their companies’ affairs were settled, a policy that has become known as ‘hostage capitalism’.<sup>34</sup>

The short-term impetus for the purging of foreign businesses came with the socialist transformation of the Chinese economy. Historians have long seen the New Democratic policy as little more than a rhetorical device used to veil the CCP’s true intentions. Bennis Wai-yip So has argued that in the economic sphere at least there was no hidden agenda to eliminate the private sector before 1953. The Communists, he argues, were initially reluctant even to form state-private joint enterprises, for fear of alarming capitalists who might see this as a step towards nationalisation. Such enterprises were only created when the company had previously been part-owned by capitalists who had fled, or to safeguard crucial companies. The CCP did, however, conceive of capitalism as being a chaotic phenomenon that was unsuited to the creation of a stable economy and so they regulated it through central

planning.<sup>35</sup> The private sector gradually recovered and capitalists made profits: production in 1951 was 60 per cent higher than in 1949.<sup>36</sup> The problem, So argues, was that because the CCP placed strict controls over the supply of raw materials and the purchase of finished products private factories essentially became state contractors. Attempts to develop the private sector failed under the state-controlled system.<sup>37</sup> The elimination of the Chinese private sector necessitated an accelerated removal of foreign companies.

The Chinese were not alone in going down the path of nationalisation to speed post-war reconstruction: after the Second World War there was a global shift towards state intervention and planned economies, even in capitalist states like Britain and France, in order to provide basic guarantees of work, welfare and stability. For many Communist and nationalist parties across the world (especially those with bad memories of dealing with Western businesses), the Soviet model of fast industrial growth under the aegis of a strong Party-state based on egalitarian values was very appealing.<sup>38</sup> The Soviet Union's economic and technological lead was followed in a diverse range of countries, with Soviet experts guiding the process (some invited, others imposed).<sup>39</sup> Many states in transition towards Communism had periods of New Democracy in common and there are strong parallels (yet to be thoroughly explored), between the China after 1949 and the Central and Eastern European Communist states after 1945. Between 1945 and 1949, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania all nationalized large sectors of their economies. The majority of foreign companies in these countries were expropriated (with or without compensation).<sup>40</sup>

In China, very few foreign businesses were expropriated, with the major exceptions being a few strategically important companies, including the public utilities in Shanghai.<sup>41</sup> Rather, the

Chinese decided in 1952 to adapt their 'policy of squeeze', previously used to heap liabilities on foreign companies, to engineer their exit on favourable terms, controlling the pace of closure to prevent disruption.<sup>42</sup> In late August 1951 the Yee Tsoong Tobacco Company had set a precedent for the closure of all large foreign companies by offering the Chinese government all of its assets in exchange for its liabilities and permission to close.<sup>43</sup> A Foreign Office observer described their 'stock pattern':

Their aim is to make a firm give up its property by its own act, so that no claim can lie against the Chinese Government for restitution or compensation. Their method is to make the firm totally insolvent by denying it the possibility of continuing its business, by multiplying its liabilities and by refusing it permission to meet these liabilities by sale of property & stock. The means used are unfair and very effective.

This policy was not directed explicitly against British firms: it was simply the case that the majority of those remaining were British.<sup>44</sup> These practices were, according to another Foreign Office specialist, 'standard practice throughout the Soviet orbit'.<sup>45</sup> The number of British firms in Shanghai declined from 376 in May 1949 to 25 in 1954.<sup>46</sup> It is difficult to assign a value for lost British assets: A commonly quoted (unofficial) estimate of their 1949 value was £300 million.<sup>47</sup> Some British firms moved faster to shed their liabilities than others, *chargé d'affaires* Humphrey Trevelyan, noted that Jardine, Matheson & Co., for example, had made 'concession after concession' in their haste.<sup>48</sup> They were keen to shed their unprofitable fixed assets and shift to a new pattern of trade via Hong Kong.

'Surrender' on the Yee Tsoong model was seen by the Foreign Office as having potentially disastrous international implications. At this time, China was not necessarily priority: but

policymakers were more concerned with the situation in Iran.<sup>49</sup> After the nationalisation of the strategically important Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 the British and the Iranians were locked in a standoff over the ownership of the world's largest refinery at Abadan until 1953 when the nationalist premier was replaced with the pro-Western Shah in a *coup d'état*. Events in China were one part of a worrying trend: as Britain's military and political prestige declined, so did the country's ability to secure the former spheres of influence in which commerce was conducted. This, no doubt, informed the Foreign Office's decision not to support a wholesale withdrawal of British firms from China.<sup>50</sup>

The decolonisation of any country poses an economic challenge: there must be either a withdrawal of foreign businesses, which creates a vacuum, or the continuance of existing commercial businesses, which carries the risk of neo-colonial economic dominance.<sup>51</sup> In Southeast Asia for example, the Pacific War had devastated the economies of the region's emerging nations, like China, these states wanted to reconstruct and develop their economies. Most used state-directed central plans to do so.<sup>52</sup> As Lindblad has observed, they all faced the same dilemma: all sought to reduce their reliance on colonial trading networks and develop indigenous industry through import substitution and industrialisation, as had been tried in China as early as the 1930s, but such restructuring required huge amounts of capital. Financial hierarchies replaced colonial ones. The Philippines offered a prime example of the dangers of 'neo-colonialism': after independence in 1946, their economy remained dominated by American companies.<sup>53</sup> Malaysia found it similarly difficult to break away from British trading networks.<sup>54</sup> Despite their pragmatic gradualism, the CCP's aim was to eliminate Western economic influences thoroughly and secure true economic independence. China was quite effective in severing its old ties of dependency, making use of foreign trading companies when needed, as agents of the state trading monopolies, while promoting

self-reliance and trade with other socialist states. China's policy was echoed in Sukarno's Indonesia. After Indonesia's independence in 1945, British and American shipping, banking and manufacturing companies, many of which had also operated in China, continued to dominate large sectors of the Indonesian economy. In the late 1950s and early 1960s they came under pressure from nationalist economic policies (under 'Sosialisme Indonesia') before eventually being nationalized (albeit temporarily) in 1963-65.<sup>55</sup>

## **CULTURAL DECOLONISATION IN SHANGHAI**

Just as economic independence was crucial to any decolonising state, so was the removal of foreign influence in the cultural sphere and its replacement with indigenous (traditional or invented) practices and culture. In China, this was particularly important in the nation's largest and most commercially developed city, Shanghai. The city was described in CCP propaganda as the "fortress bridgehead" of imperialist aggression against China'.<sup>56</sup> May 1949 marked the birth of 'New Shanghai' and 'Old Shanghai' was vilified.<sup>57</sup> As imperialism was believed to have permeated all aspects of city life, corrupting and degrading its citizens, a thorough re-ordering of Shanghai's politics, economics and culture was needed. A few aspects of the CCP's transformative efforts are discussed below. A desire to reform Shanghai was not new: the Guomindang had seen civic and national renewal and anti-imperialism as being inextricably linked.<sup>58</sup>

Mass political campaigns were a commonly used tool for inducing social change in the early period of Communist rule, they differed in form and function, but here we shall briefly examine the impact of the Campaign to Resist America and Aid Korea on the cultural transformation of Shanghai. With their ability to penetrate all levels of society and to

politicize daily life, campaigns were extremely effective tools for social engineering.<sup>59</sup> The nation-wide Campaign to Resist America and Aid Korea began in late 1950, its practical aim being to support the efforts of the Chinese armies in Korea through production drives, fund-raising and other economic measures. It was also intended to educate Chinese citizens on the dangers of imperialism and to encourage them to sever any remaining emotional ties to the West.<sup>60</sup> The Campaign attacked both ‘hard’ targets, such as cultural, educational, religious and charitable organisations and ‘soft’ targets in consumer culture and daily life. As Shanghai was both China’s most industrialized and most foreign influenced city, the campaign was carried out particularly thoroughly there.<sup>61</sup>

The elimination of ‘imperialist propaganda organs’ was seen as a crucial step. Mao had noted in December 1949 that the British predominated in commerce, while the Americans dominated the cultural sphere, especially in missionary associations.<sup>62</sup> The outbreak of the Korean War accelerated the process, especially because the freezing of American assets meant that the majority of foreign-subsidized organisations were in dire economic circumstances. In early 1951 the State Council announced measures for dealing with foreign-subsidized organisations, including schools, hospitals and churches. Through ‘registration’ the CCP exerted control over foreign-run and foreign-subsidized organisations, restricting their actions and turning them into private or state-run Chinese organisations.<sup>63</sup> A total of 666 organisations were registered and among these 545 received foreign funds. Of this number, 121 were actually managed by foreigners; 263 relied on US funds; and 32 on British. The majority were closed or made into Chinese-run organisations later that year.<sup>64</sup>

Attempts were also made to remove more indirect foreign cultural influences from everyday life. For example, Shanghai was famous for its many cinemas which had brought Hollywood

(and Pinewood) fashions and culture an avid movie-going public.<sup>65</sup> Foreign films were not immediately cracked down upon and in fact they continued to draw large audiences: the Shanghai Culture Bureau reported that 646 British and American films were shown to 14,505,773 people between April 1949 and November 1950.<sup>66</sup> The CCP were anxious to provide an alternative to these ‘immoral’ films and so new regulations emerged in April 1950, stating that at least a quarter of each cinema’s monthly programme had to be devoted to Chinese or Soviet ‘progressive films’ and the advertising of foreign features was carefully restricted.<sup>67</sup> That same month, the CCP strengthened control over the Chinese film industry, making it clear to all concerned that cinema was no longer simply about business or art, but rather a highly politicized medium, subject to strict ideological censorship. In July, an advisory committee was established to police the industry.<sup>68</sup> New Chinese films were moral in tone: one Beijing shop worker was reported as saying ‘Nowadays films teach people how to be good persons. They are not like the old pictures that dealt with crime and the extravagant living of rich people and foreigners.’<sup>69</sup> An advertisement for the Sino-Soviet collaborative effort ‘Chinese People’s Victory’ in October 1950 announced it to be ‘the first picture of a high artistic standard and a political and educational significance that ever appears on the screen!’<sup>70</sup>

The CCP’s English-language newspaper *The Shanghai News* pointed out to its readers in June 1950 that: where once the listings pages were overrun with Betty Grables and Errol Flynn, now Chinese movie-goers were flocking to see Chinese and Soviet pictures. They reported that admissions to American and British films had fallen from 46.9 per cent of the total in November 1949 to 28 per cent in May 1950. This change was not brought about through coercion, they maintained, ‘but by penetration through study groups and political

awakening on the part of the people themselves. ‘All this goes to indicate,’ the article continued,

that even the sub-colonial urbanites in Shanghai have undergone a thorough overhauling, that they have forsaken Hollywood and all that goes with it, its make-beliefs, its compradore culture, and what not.<sup>71</sup>

The Shanghai authorities capitalized on the momentum of the Campaign to Resist America and Aid Korea to purge foreign films, making their prohibition seem as though it came in response to popular demands. Shanghai’s young people’s ‘hostility towards American imperialism had been awakened’ said the Cultural Bureau, as it sent propaganda teams to speak at mass meetings on the need to ‘liquidate’ the ‘poisonous ideology’ of cultural imperialism. By December, Western films had been banned.<sup>72</sup>

Spatial reordering and the politicisation of the lived environment were seen as integral to reshaping society. At this time new ‘socialist spaces’ were created throughout the Communist world and old spaces were assigned new meanings and functions.<sup>73</sup> In Shanghai, some sites of ‘imperialist influence’ were demolished while others, like the Bund, were occupied. In 1951, for example, it was announced that the site of the city’s ninety-year-old racecourse would be taken over to build a huge ‘People’s Square’ which was to be a centre for revolutionary activity. The racecourse, the CCP said, had been established by ‘British imperialist gold diggers’ to corrupt the city’s citizens, it had bankrupted the Chinese people, morally and financially.<sup>74</sup> At the ground-breaking ceremony vice-Mayor Pan Hannian declared that this was a symbolic moment in the process of reclaiming Shanghai:

Everyone knows that this ground has been branded with the indelible mark of the big powers' aggression against China... this piece of land which has been occupied by the imperialists for over 90 years has returned to the embrace of the people of Shanghai... it is to be used by the people of Shanghai!<sup>75</sup>

Shanghai's new municipal sites tended to be inland, away from the riverside Bund, reflecting perhaps the city's shifting role, from an outward-looking trading city to a city that served the Chinese revolution, atoning for its past indulgences. This was a pattern reflected in other Asian port cities, including Rangoon.<sup>76</sup>

## **HUMAN LEGACIES**

In the late 1940s many Shanghai youths had come to define themselves as 'little aeroplanes' (*xiao feiji*). These youths were the Chinese equivalent of American bobby-soxers: teens known for their wild jazz dancing. These free-spirited youths wore knitted sweaters inscribed with phrases such as 'I Love You'. By January 1951 they had been made the target of a press campaign accusing them of immorality, robbery and rape.<sup>77</sup> They were an example of one of the least well studied legacies of the spread of Anglophone culture in China: its adoption by middle and upper class elites. Throughout Shanghai's history, foreigners had relied on the cooperation of English-speaking Chinese people who occupied a Sino-foreign grey-area in which they worked variously as 'comprador' middlemen, cultural influencers and political negotiators and lived in close contact with foreign employers, colleagues and friends.<sup>78</sup> Many attended English speaking colleges and others studied overseas. As nationalism intensified, the cultural space they inhabited narrowed and their cosmopolitanism put their authenticity as loyal Chinese in doubt. Recent decades have seen an explosion of literature on the fate of the

victims of class warfare during the Cultural Revolution, but little remains known about the struggles of Westernized men in the early 1950s. This is perhaps because of the difficulty of locating source materials: such people can usually only be happened upon from time to time in the archive and sometimes in the literature, usually with reference to the fate of capitalists or the implementation of campaigns.<sup>79</sup>

The story of Westernized men in China has parallels in global patterns of decolonisation: ‘Decolonisation’ argued Frantz Fanon, ‘is the veritable creation of new men’ and thus, we might infer, the destruction of ‘old men’. In Fanon’s opinion, the ‘national middle class’ of ‘under-developed countries’ had been remarkable only because of their ‘spiritual penury’ and their tendency to be set in a ‘profoundly cosmopolitan mould’. They were products of colonialism: ‘not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour, [they were] completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type.’ In the eyes of the revolutionary they lacked the necessary ambition and skills to build the nation anew and so they had to be destroyed in order to prevent neo-colonialism. The CCP would no doubt agree with Fanon’s assertion that the ‘proof of success [of decolonisation] lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up’ and that this is ‘always a violent phenomenon’.<sup>80</sup>

The long-established British-China firm Butterfield & Swire were extremely concerned over the fate of their senior Chinese staff. Once Swires withdrew, these men would be forced to register as unemployed, necessitating a lengthy investigation into their pasts, as well as criticism and self-criticism sessions aimed at transforming them into functioning members of the new society. Swires told the British Government that they feared that, because of their association with foreigners, the Chinese staff would be labelled as counter-revolutionaries or

spies. At the very least they would be denied good jobs and the chance to join union-based welfare schemes. Writing in 1955, British Consul General Fred Garner disagreed, he suggested that they would not be 'subjected to actual persecution' as their skills were needed. At worst, they would receive low status jobs. He refused suggestions that the British Government should approach the Chinese on the men's behalf requesting that they be allowed to go to Hong Kong ('impossible'), or kept on retainers ('it was not B.&S. that started the revolution!'). 'We also have to remember', he concluded, 'I think, that the Chinese are great actors and quite expert at adapting themselves to different circumstances. They would have to learn the language of the revolution,' he said, quoting the Chinese saying: "When the wind blows, the grass bends".<sup>81</sup> Garner was over-optimistic: instead men and women such as these endured nearly three decades of political attacks and humiliation, culminating in outright persecution during the Cultural Revolution.

It is likely that many Westernized, Anglophone people were among those who suffered, were demeaned, executed or who committed suicide during the CCP's early campaigns. In April 1951, for example, one of the British textile firm Patons & Baldwins' sub-managers was executed along with his whole family in front of a crowd of 15,000 as part of the Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries. He was one of an estimated 712,000 people executed across China, a number determined by quota.<sup>82</sup> According to Patons' manager, the execution had been preceded by almost a year of 'full dress' attacks 'under the guise of production' because the man had been identified as a class enemy.<sup>83</sup> The Three and Five Antis Campaigns (1951-52) saw suicides of capitalists and managers become commonplace in Shanghai and elsewhere.<sup>84</sup> Suicide was an extreme course, taken by some as the ultimate rejection of the new government (but for the CCP it was also the ultimate confession of guilt). The *New York Times* reported that in Guangzhou on 'Bloody April 14', 1952, as many as seventeen

shopkeepers, merchants and managers committed suicide. The day apparently culminated in an act of public spectacle as the managers of two companies loudly denounced the Communists through megaphones from a rooftop before jumping to their deaths.<sup>85</sup> Another prominent suicide was that of a leading member of the First National People's Political Consultative Committee, Lu Zuofu. Lu was a shipping and industrial magnate from Sichuan and he had previously appeared to be the archetypal 'national capitalist' cooperating under 'New Democracy'.<sup>86</sup> There was, of course, some room for accommodation (the CCP were certainly not as fanatical in their millenarian violence as the Khmer Rouge who's efforts to remake Cambodian society between 1975-79 resulted in the deaths of an estimated one to two million people, or roughly one third of the population<sup>87</sup>), but the hardships experienced by these men remained the product of the coming to power of a regime that was hostile to their class backgrounds, their lifestyles and indeed, their very persons.

One man in a difficult situation was Linson Dzau (Cao Linsheng). Dzau was born to the one of China's richest families and had been educated in the United States.<sup>88</sup> He represented several British and American firms and in late 1949 he was invited to Beijing to discuss business by his Tsinghua University fraternity brother Dr. Ji Chaoding, who was now an important figure in the Financial and Economic Affairs Committee. Dzau later reported to the American Consulate in Shanghai that he had been received cordially, but after ten days of interviews, he was delivered to the Political and Legal Affairs Committee, where the interviews became 'unfriendly': he was told that there had been bad reports and that not even Ji could save him if he did not clear his name.<sup>89</sup> He wrote an evocative letter to a British business contact describing the atmosphere:

... I feel at times that some institution should pay me for the sleepless nights and the hours of discussions in smoky, drafty [sic.] rooms requiring at all times nerve-mind balancing feats to be able come out still as a Chinese befitting their conception of a Chinese and yet fair to foreigners without appearing at any time a ‘running dog’ of imperialists and capitalists.<sup>90</sup>

Archival traces suggest that after this Dzau experienced a period of prolonged rootlessness: dallying in the company of ‘third force’ politicians and ‘guerrilla generals’ of varying authenticity in Hong Kong.<sup>91</sup> Penniless, he then left for Macao where he worked eighteen-hour days to earn money to send to his family in China. He wrote of this time:

I suffered extreme depressions, almost lost my mind ... Faith in Christ's word and a resolve to work to the brink of exhaustion, forgetting losses of the past, praying that Mai and the children be granted exit ... was my only remaining strength

Several years later, Dzau was helped by former classmates to set up a private academy, where he was joined by his wife and grandchild.<sup>92</sup> Although his story is atypical, because of his background and connections, it remains illustrative of the plight of those who did not fit into the new political and social order. As revolutionary nationalism intensified, people like Dzau, living in the intermediate Sino-foreign zones, proved to be neither Chinese enough to stay and adapt, nor foreign enough to have an obvious exit route.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is much to be gained from exploring the elimination of the British presence in China with reference to literature on decolonisation and in its international context. While there are many obvious differences between China and the countries to which models are most often applied, it is also apparent that China shared many experiences, including: having to explore pragmatic ways to shape the national economy after the withdrawal of previously dominant foreign businesses; eliminating the cultural legacies of imperialism; and dealing with its human legacies, the compromised 'bourgeois elites'.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be drawn from such comparisons is that although China went through enormous changes after 1949, they were not necessarily changes that were particular to it. Across the world, states had to find ways to reconstruct or to build something new: the decolonising states of Southeast Asia struggled to reorient their economies and to free them from colonial networks; the New Democracies of Eastern Europe turned to the Soviet model to build their socialist economies. One way of conceptualising decolonisation is that the withdrawal (sometimes partial) of colonizers created vacuums in different spheres that needed to be filled. The CCP took different approaches to different aspects of foreign influence: their economic policy was largely aimed at preventing the creation of such a vacuum through prolonging the departure of foreign companies, but in the cultural sphere, they created a sharp dichotomy between 'old', imperialist Shanghai and 'new', socialist Shanghai. Foreign 'propaganda' could not be tolerated as it offered a dissenting voice just as the new regime sought to cement its revolutionary legitimacy. Similarly, English-speaking middle and upper class people were quickly ostracized in a society defined by class struggle and anti-imperialism.

From the British perspective, was it, as Winks suggested, easier to decolonize formal empire than informal empire? Britain certainly had less control over the withdrawal here, but the stakes also remained considerably lower than in formal empire. Winks posited that the decolonisation of informal empire is messier because there is no fresh start. In China the Communists certainly wanted to remake society anew, but their efforts to eliminate the legacies of the old society were necessarily (and frustratingly) patchy and incomplete in the 1950s, with decolonisation of different fields taking place at varied speeds. This demonstrates that even at the moment that a strong Chinese state was able to begin purging China of unwanted Western influences, it still remained difficult to differentiate between what was truly 'Chinese' and what was 'British', 'foreign', 'semi-colonial' or 'imperialist'.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A comparative approach to the end of the colonial empires*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 93-9, 108-112, 168, 236.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (eds), *Connecting histories: decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Chen Jian, 'Bridging revolution and decolonization: the "Bandung discourse" in China's early Cold War experience' in Goscha and Ostermann (eds), *Connecting histories*, pp. 137-166.

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<sup>38</sup> Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, pp. 473-4.

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