

*Industrial Eden: A Chinese Capitalist Vision*. Brett Sheehan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 9780674967601

*Industrial Eden: A Chinese Capitalist Vision* gives a new view of Chinese economic activity from the late nineteenth century Qing dynasty through the early People's Republic in the 1950s using the lens of a family of businesspeople, the Songs. Brett Sheehan uses a close analysis of the family business of Song Chuandian and Song Feiqing to raise issues of imperialism and Chinese business practice. Through the Songs, he also highlights that controlling the narrative of business's role in society became its own business strategy for the Songs and reflected "moral and patriotic concerns" (4). Finally, Sheehan presents the argument that the Songs (and other businesspeople like them) came to pragmatically accept and work within increasingly intrusive roles of five different regimes cycling in and out of the life of their companies. To execute his argument, Sheehan subtly folds these four layers together in concert using a wide variety of sources from the Song family's company archives, missionary sources, and oral histories from the Cultural Revolution.

The book's focus on a single family (for the most part) allows Sheehan (and the reader) to trace the business practices of the family's enterprises and companies along seven decades, illustrating the onslaught of changes that unfolded throughout that time. Thus the chronological frame of the Songs' business lives provides a landscape on which Sheehan constructs his narrative. This tight focus allows Sheehan to make a narrative from a close reading of the family's history and is valuable as an example for readers looking for ways to write histories of their own in this style.

The narrative progresses along two thematic lines. The first theme, comprised of chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7, deals with how the Songs piloted their companies through the changing political landscapes of Shandong province and the city of Tianjin from the late nineteenth century to the

end of the 1940s. Chapters 3, 5, and 8 focus on the establishment of their visions for industrial modernization as a driving force in transforming their business ventures to reflect the Songs' view of their business as a microcosm of China.

Following the theme of company pragmatism in the cycle of regime changes as a means to survive, the book traces Song Chuandian's school and business life and here closely connects him (and his son Song Feiqing) to the influence of their missionary education. This sets up one of the first main threads make up Sheehan's concept of "industrial Eden." For Sheehan, Christian influences play a large part in the Songs' creation of a workplace discipline at their respective companies. The first chapter develops out of this Christian background and sets up Song Chuandian as the patriarch who moves into politics to help further his business, the Dechang Hairnet Company. However his political activity and consequent affiliation with local warlords spelled his undoing during the Nationalist party's Northern Expedition from 1926-28 to crush warlord autonomy and consolidate the Republic of China.

Song Chuandian's son Song Feiqing becomes the central figure of the narrative in the following chapters. The book follows his negotiations to keep the company (now named Dongya) afloat. First he and the company navigated the inconsistent economic policy of the Nationalists prior to the Japanese occupation. Then Sheehan shows us how the company dealt with the Japanese military occupation government of Tianjin that began in 1937 and the post-war Nationalist failed economic state. Last, the company's story concludes with the short-term economic alliance between factory owners and the Chinese Communist Party during the early days of the People's Republic after 1949.

One of the keys to this portion of Sheehan's work is the chapter on the Japanese occupation. In the narrative, the Japanese army threatens to intervene in Dongya's autonomy and

put the company under military control. That would spell the end of Song Feiqing's control of the company and the end of his vision there and so the chapter focuses on Song's efforts in keeping such a takeover from happening. This tense situation ironically provided Dongya with its greatest profits ever during 1939 by exploiting wartime monopolies. The company's success certainly complicated my preconceived notions (and quite probably other readers' as well) about the unilateral devastation of the war and brutality of Japanese policies under the occupation state. True enough such things existed, but Sheehan's argument adds another shade to the prism through which the war and occupation can be seen. The success under the threat of military confiscation of Dongya's production line offers the strongest testimony for Sheehan's argument on the skill of Dongya's board in protecting the company's autonomy and thus protecting Song's "industrial Eden" vision.

The second theme that frames the narrative is the construction and cementation of the vision of an industrial (and, transitively, modern) China. Sheehan devotes three chapters to this concept as he explores the ways that Song's company sought to modernize itself, its workforce, and the market. Using advertisements, the company's periodicals, and training not only for jobs but in the morals the company wished to espouse, the Dongya corporation sought to mobilize its company and employees into a force for modernization. These three chapters focus first on the development of a market for Dongya's wool product line as a way of selling products that were emblematic of modernization. The chapters also focus on the development of the "industrial Eden" vision as carried out in the company. In addition to setting rules for workplace conduct, the board promoted workplace and societal ethics that Sheehan argues were influenced by Christian and Confucian themes. Sheehan argues that these two expectations of workplace and societal ethics were tied together in Song's mind. The book carefully notes how these guides for

employees fit into Song Feiqing's view of a modern China. Finally, the book's last chapter deals with the legacy of "industrial Eden" and Song Feiqing's efforts to control the legacy of Dongya as a company. This last point is important because Sheehan views the company and Song's vision as inextricably tied and the survival of each is paramount and central to his argument.

Sheehan's argument that the example of the Songs complicate notions of the impact and influence of imperialism is among the strongest and best developed in the book. Too often imperialist practices and the unfairness of the treaty ports are seen as pervasive and monolithic and applicable on a universal scale. Sheehan cautions against this and shows that the Songs were capable of traversing the areas of imperialist influence that allowed their business to thrive, adopting those which helped them and avoiding those that they perceived as harmful (6). This follows the same vein as modernizing individuals such as James Yen and his Mass Education Movement in rural Republican China about whom Charles Hayford has written. In this way, Sheehan is showing us as readers that imperialism has no single universal meaning to illustrate the struggle of autonomy in a pre-Communist China. While a pervasive imperialistic attitude nonetheless existed, Sheehan takes an important step to show that its presence did not predicate a zero-sum game of political or economic agency for people like the Songs.

My one criticism of the book, however, stems from the idea of Confucian paternalism that crops up periodically throughout the book as part of the project of "industrial Eden." It seems the narrative takes the existence of this phenomenon as point of fact for the Songs. However, the assertion of Confucian paternalism as part of the Songs' vision of "industrial Eden" does not receive enough support in the narrative. Unlike the well-documented Christian influences, for which there are ample citations, there are only very few pieces of evidence presented for the Confucian side of the vision. This is particularly present in Sheehan's

invocation of the “golden rule” where the citation he draws from the *Analects* is surrounded by discussion of Christian influence and the endnote only refers to the passage of the *Analects* and discusses nothing of the Songs’ interest in Confucian teaching (123). Moreover, while the reader is aware of and can trace the origin of the Christian influences in the Songs’ lives, it is hard to know where the Christian-educated Songs may have found the passage from Confucius that Sheehan cites. A reasonable guess would be that their first exposure to it came as part of their Christian education as their teachers may have been keen to point out the similarities between the values of the *Analects* and those of the Gospel. If this were true, it would complicate the roots of how we as readers see Song Feiqing’s vision in the same way that Sheehan complicates the universality of imperialism. Despite his relatively privileged education, just because Song Feiqing is Chinese does not automatically make him fully literate in even the basics of Confucianism however likely that actually may have been. We as readers need to see evidence for that, first, before we can then make a logical leap to the idea of Confucian paternalism in the philosophy of Song’s company.

Overall, however, this is a powerful book for its view of a singular effort to pursue a modernization agenda along private lines unfolded in one place at one time. The scope of the book is small and the work never pretends to be bigger than it is. This makes it an accessible narrative and herein lays its power. In viewing one vision and experiment of modernization over the course of several decades, readers see a piece of China as it was and as it could have been.

Eric Becklin is a Ph.D. student in the department of History at the University of Minnesota.