

Informal Empire in Crisis: British Diplomacy and the Chinese Customs Succession, 1927–1929. By Martyn Atkins. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1995. Cornell East Asia Series, X, 127 pp. US\$20 (Cloth), US\$12 (Paper).

This is a small but useful book. It is a good complement to some relatively recent works dealing with the British position in crisis in China during the first half of the twentieth century, e.g. Chan Lau Kit Ching, *China, Britain and Hong Kong, 1895–1945* (1990), and Edmond S. K. Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat: Britain's South China Policy, 1924–1931* (1991).

The succession question portrayed in this book was not the first occurred in the customs service. In fact, for many years before Sir Robert Hart's final departure from the Customs, he had been sorely exercised by the task of deciding on a successor to himself. The succession question then lasted from 1897 to 1911, altogether fifteen years and it was "a long drawn-out, complicated and entangled affair". (Chan Lau Kit Ching, "The Succession of Sir Robert Hart at the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs Service", *Journal of Asian History*, 1975: 1–33). Eventually, Sir Francis Aglen succeeded Hart, the long serving Customs chief, revered by foreigners and Chinese alike.

In his book Martyn Atkins deals with the succession to Sir Francis Aglen who had been summarily dismissed by the Chinese early in 1927. The British government was involved on this and the previous occasions but with one major and significant difference. In the earlier instance, although Britain maintained a relatively strong position in China, it was still important to obtain approval from the Chinese who, after all, were the masters of the Customs. In the later instance, the British position was being overrun by the Chinese Nationalists, Chinese consent was not only important but imperative. After all it was difficult to forget that the succession question had emerged in the first place because of what Wellington Koo called "insubordination" on the part of Aglen. The two contenders to the post vacated by Aglen were A. H. F. Edwardes and Frederick Maze. Atkins deals competently with the tension, politics, and intrigue affecting not only the two competitors but the various sectors of what the author calls the British "informal empire" and the Chinese.

Apart from Edwardes and Maze, there were two other main actors in the drama: Sir Miles Lampson on the British side, and T. V. Soong on the Chinese side. Lampson's role and attitude are generally convincingly portrayed, based on his official correspondence with the British government and his diaries. T. V. Soong's part, on the other hand, could have been substantially strengthened by consulting the voluminous *T. V. Soong Papers*, which are housed in the Hoover Institution in Stanford, the bulk of which is in English.

This point leads directly to the question of sources and bibliography and one of the more serious flaws of the book. The work is based exclusively on sources in English. The absence of Chinese references in the bibliography not unnaturally creates the apprehension that the reader might not be presented with an unbiased picture.

Atkin's book is short and therefore space should not be a problem. Yet one is always under the impression that space is a problem and that things have to be greatly compressed, not infrequently at the expense of clarity. For instance, more could have been gainfully said about the circumstances of Aglen's dismissal (p. 35), and of John King Fairbank's interview with Maze in 1932 (p. 109).

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Reading *Informal Empire in Crisis* in Hong Kong at this particular juncture of its history has special meaning. In witnessing the British empire at the very verge of extinction, one could not help but compare Governor Christopher Patten with Edwardes, the Customs candidate rejected by the Chinese nationalists and therefore had to be abandoned by the British government in the end. According to a veteran China expert in the Foreign Office at the time Edwardes had one serious fault against him: "The plain fact is that Edwardes is *persona non grata* to the Chinese. He lacks the one thing that is essential for anyone in his position to have, namely, the knack of getting on with the Chinese. On the contrary, he always seems to rub them up the wrong way." However, it may be that it was then, and it is now, not just a matter of skill and style, but a question of difference in principles.

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