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Review Of "Meeting Technology's Advance: Social Change In China And Zimbabwe In The Railway Age" By J. Z. Gao

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Meeting Technology's Advance: Social Change in China and Zimbabwe in the Railway Age by James Zheng Gao

Review by: Timothy Burke

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Throughout the encyclopedia, archaeology and prehistory provide the main story-lines, so to speak, but careful attention has been paid to issues that are less central but without which the story would be incomplete, including the politics of archaeology, critical changes in historiography, and controversies in interpretation. With so many contributors and separate chapters, it is expected that there will be some unevenness of quality, style, depth, and bibliography—these are reasons why few want to take on the task of producing such volumes. But this product was well worth the effort. The logical organization of the entries, and thorough but clear substance of the volume, tempts one to suggest that, with some further editing and reformatting, it could be turned into a new text on African archaeology. The size and expense would preclude using it as such at this time, but it could well be the basis of an even more widely useful book. Even as it stands, the book would be a solid resource to use as reserve reading in an African archaeology course, to back up and update existing texts and readers. Other obvious uses include as a reference for archaeologists who need a reliable synthesis of topics outside their own expertise, as a review of early African history for historians of later periods, and as a survey of the field for the educated, general reader. Congratulations to the editor for taking on a project of this scope.

ADRIA LAVIOLETTE

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MEETING TECHNOLOGY'S ADVANCE: SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHINA AND ZIMBABWE IN THE RAILWAY AGE. *By James Zheng Gao.* Contributions in Comparative Colonial Studies 34. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. Pp. xiv, 218. \$65.00.

A precisely focused comparative study of the role of railway technology in the advance of British imperialism in two divergent areas of the world, James Zheng Gao's book provides a convincing picture of how pre-existing social and economic conditions shaped imperial rail-building projects in distinctive ways in China and Zimbabwe. This monograph adds important texture and detail to current discussion of the general relationship between technology and imperialism. For Africanist readers, this book also casts some new light on the particularity of the southern African experience in comparison with other imperial territories.

Gao's study tracks the interplay of railroad technology and imperialism in the two regions from the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s. Comparative colonial history is often an empirically rich subgenre of world history, and Gao's work demonstrates some of its strengths. Gao argues that the contrast between China, with its large, complex internal transport system of considerable antiquity, and the Zimbabwean plateau, with its relatively limited system of transport using human carriers and oxen, played a key role in shaping the introduction of railways

into the two societies. Gao also takes careful note of the major differences between indirect imperial influence over Chinese affairs and the direct colonial conquest of Zimbabwe, which meant that Chinese elites were able to shape the growth of rail technology in a manner denied to subjugated African rulers. In addition, this book deals with the considerably divergent impact that imperial railroads had on labor migrancy and commodity markets within each territory. A great deal of control and care is evident throughout this manuscript, and Gao often rises to the difficult challenge involved in mastering multiple bodies of scholarly literature.

However, Gao's treatment is sometimes so controlled that it verges on being diagrammatic. Details abound, but they sometimes are not directly relevant to the key issues. As with many monographs that adapt material from a dissertation, this study is perhaps too dutiful in its attention to the widest range of possible background material.

Gao also follows an overly straightforward chronological and topical schematic that constrains the possible insights and analysis covered by the book. For one, the book's narrative ends sooner than it ought: the 1930s and 1940s were crucial times for the evolution of rail transport in both countries, and are highly relevant to the comparison that Gao is pursuing. Similarly, Gao does not pause to examine the more subtle, pervasive, and less easily narrativized effects that the coming of the railways had on the cultural imagination and general social practice of both societies. By sticking to the most obvious structural effects of rail transport on labor, trade, and imperial power, Gao misses a whole secondary layer of issues.

Gao also is more or less content to echo the general argument about railroads and imperialism found in the work of Ronald Robinson, Daniel Headrick, and others, namely, that railways largely constituted a form of colonial underdevelopment that extended imperial power at the expense of colonial subjects, in contrast to the positive and central role of railroads in the industrialization of the United States and Western Europe. Gao supplements this argument by suggesting that a modest degree of economic growth or positive social change was also due to railway construction in both China and Zimbabwe. However, Gao does not particularly reflect on the place of technology within larger debates about the causes of imperial expansion, and he largely accepts without question the contention that railways and other technological improvements *caused* economic development in the West. A stronger theoretical framing of this monograph in terms of these sorts of debates would have enhanced its usefulness and potential life span.

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