

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

Spring 1991

Review Of "Commercialization And Agricultural Development: Central And Eastern China, 1870-1937" By L. Brandt

Lillian M. Li

Swarthmore College, lli1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Lillian M. Li. (1991). "Review Of "Commercialization And Agricultural Development: Central And Eastern China, 1870-1937" By L. Brandt". *Pacific Affairs*. Volume 64, Issue 1. 96-97. DOI: 10.2307/2760371
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/298>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Review

Author(s): Lillian M. Li

Review by: Lillian M. Li

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 96-97

Published by: [Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2760371>

Accessed: 26-06-2015 17:54 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

provided flexibility and dynamism to Chinese capitalists. She reveals the involved family structures of several of the major bourgeois families such as the Rongs (of textile and flour mill fame). Bergère concludes that the bourgeoisie modernized through using a combination of traditional practices (such as relying on regional ties) and new techniques (such as western industrial technology and banking practices), a combination she labels "Confucian-style modernisation."

The last portion of the book, "The Bourgeoisie and the Quest for Power and Modernity," is based less on Bergère's own research and is not as satisfying. She sees a very limited role of the bourgeoisie in the 1911 revolution, especially beyond the lower Yangtze. With the collapse of state power, the bourgeoisie was still too weak to build a new structure, and, in Bergère's view, its independence was curtailed with the reemergence of the bureaucratic state in 1927. In the final analysis, Bergère concludes that the bourgeoisie made an important contribution to China's modernization and conceivably might yet become an autonomous social force in China.

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, U.S.A.

PARKS M. COBLE

COMMERCIALIZATION AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: Central and Eastern China, 1870-1937. *By Loren Brandt. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1989. xiii, 232 pp. (Figures, maps, tables.) U.S. \$42.50, cloth. ISBN 0-521-37196-1.*

IN THIS IMPORTANT STUDY of modern China's economic history, economist Loren Brandt challenges some of the most widely held views of China's economy in the late Qing and Republican periods.

In the first half of the book, Brandt shows that, starting in the late nineteenth century, the price of rice at Shanghai became highly correlated with the rice prices in South China, Siam, Burma, and India. Rice prices elsewhere in central China such as Hangchow, Wuhu, Nanchang, and Changsha, as well as smaller trading centers in the interior, were, in turn, closely correlated with Shanghai prices. Through regression analysis Brandt demonstrates that domestic prices, in the rice and cotton markets at least, were determined more by international prices and by changes in the gold price of silver than by domestic factors. Brandt observes: "One cannot help noticing how this situation fits the textbook description of competitive markets: a large number of participants operating on both sides of the market, freedom of entry and exit, mobility of capital and other resources, and so forth" (p. 36).

In the second half of this book, Brandt argues that the commercialization of agriculture expanded rapidly, and that the rate of agricultural growth in central and east China between the 1890s and 1930s may have been double that of the population growth rate. Contrary to the widely held view that agricultural productivity stagnated when population pressure was not matched by technological change of expansion of cultivated land, Brandt argues that rural wages rose, and labor productivity probably increased in

this period. Contrary to the view that foreign trade and increased commercialization produced greater economic stratification, Brandt argues that their distributive consequences were likely to have been favorable, reducing, rather than increasing, income inequalities.

This Adam Smith view of the Chinese economy is likely to provide controversy, if not outright protest. While Brandt's purpose is bold, however, his method is painstaking and deliberate. Ultimately his conclusions must be evaluated in terms of their overall argument, methodology, and evidence. For this reader, the general direction of the book is persuasive, and the findings about the integration of prices within the region, and between this region and international markets in particular, seem difficult to refute. They seriously undercut the view that the smallness of China's foreign trade meant that it could not have had much impact on the domestic economy.

More open to debate, and inviting further work on local economies, however, are the chapters dealing with the distributive and other socio-economic implications of accelerated commercialization and closer ties with external markets. Brandt has been diligent in finding various types of evidence to build his estimates, but inevitably his selection of data will be challenged. Limitations of space prevent a full discussion, but chapter 6 is most representative of this problem. Brandt argues that landholdings did not become more concentrated in the Republican period, and that even if they did, landholding should not be considered the only form of rural wealth in the context of expanded opportunities for rural employment and enterprise. The latter is an important theoretical point, and ought to change the terms of the debate about income distribution and related issues in modern Chinese history. Yet, for the purpose of this book on central and eastern China it is regrettable that the data employed come exclusively from a survey of north China villages, and that the empirical base could not be stronger.

Together with the recent work of Thomas G. Rawski (*Economic Growth in Prewar China*, University of California Press, 1989), this book offers a new view of the economy of the Republican period as a period of growth and increased productivity instead of stagnation and rural immiseration. This view is difficult to reconcile with the record of warlordism, banditry, famine, and migration, and yet, future studies of the economy and society of the Republican period will need to take these macroeconomic findings into consideration. Ironically, this new, more positive, view of the Republican period economy finds ready sympathizers among economists and economic historians in China. Much of the agricultural commercialization and expansion of rural development in the last decade resembles the growth processes of the Republican period, which now can be seen as the beginning of a trend that was interrupted by a long and costly detour into collectivization.

Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

LILLIAN M. LI