




SURVEY AND SPECULATION

The multi-imperial dimensions in treaty-port Tianjin and its historiographical significance

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Abstract

The modern history of Tianjin, a northern port city in China, offers an intriguing urban case for scholars interested in comparative colonial practices. From the 1860s to the 1940s, Tianjin was home to up to nine foreign concessions and a sequence of different Chinese municipalities. While much scholarship on colonial history has focused on the interactive dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, Tianjin's colonial past draws attention to the multiplicity, multilateralism and multilayered trajectories at the heart of the colonial experiences of both imperialist powers and the Chinese. At the heart of this short survey are some reflections on the multi-imperial dimensions of the city of Tianjin. It also explains how the multi-imperial dimensions operated in Tianjin in its treaty-port incarnation and offers some considerations of how the Tianjin case contributes to broader historiographical conversations germane to the imperial–global–urban complex.

Introduction

The modern history of Tianjin, a northern port city in China, offers an intriguing urban case for scholars interested in comparative colonial practices. From the 1860s to the 1940s, Tianjin was home to up to nine foreign concessions and a sequence of different Chinese municipalities. While much scholarship on colonial history has focused on the interactive dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, Tianjin's colonial past draws attention to the multiplicity at the heart of the colonial experiences of both imperialist powers and the Chinese. At the centre of this short survey are some reflections on the operation and interactions of multiple imperial authorities in the context of treaty-port Tianjin. Following an overview of the historical context of Tianjin, the main body of this survey explains how the multi-imperial dimensions operated in Tianjin in its treaty-port incarnation. It also offers some considerations of how the Tianjin case contributes to broader historiographical conversations germane to global imperialism and Chinese urban studies.

Historical background

Historically known as a gateway to the capital city of China (Beijing), Tianjin owed much of its pre-eminence to its geographical location. Situated at the northern terminus of the Grand Canal, Tianjin functioned for centuries as a pivotal trans-shipment hub of vital tax grain from south and central China to the capital at Beijing in the north. Located approximately 120 kilometres from Beijing, Tianjin was the closest port city through which foreign ships could reach China's capital via a maritime route. By the late seventeenth century, Tianjin's status as a major commercial port in northern China had been firmly established. Despite its regional significance, Tianjin did not rise to political and economic prominence until the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, Tianjin became a centre of China's Self-Strengthening Movement and a crucial laboratory for military, industrial and infrastructural transformations.

What is more pertinent to the present survey, however, is the city's colonial history. The development of colonial concessions in Tianjin can be divided into three phases.¹ In 1860, Tianjin was opened to foreign trade as a 'treaty-port' according to the Convention of Beijing. Britain, France and the United States acquired their respective concessions in the city. The increase in foreign trade, accompanied by the development of the railway system in northern China, further enhanced Tianjin's economic and strategic importance, which, in turn, attracted more attention by the international powers. Germany and Japan claimed their own concessions following the Qing Dynasty's humiliating defeat during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95). The second phase of Tianjin's colonial history coincided with the height of imperialist expansion in China at the turn of the twentieth century. Shortly after the victory of the eight-nation allied army over the Boxers in August 1900, Russia, Belgium, Italy and Austria-Hungary secured their leased footholds in the city. By 1902, nine foreign concessions had been secured along two sides of the Hai River, making the city the second largest treaty-port city (after Shanghai) in modern China. In the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising, Tianjin was fully colonized during this two-year interval when an international colonial administration – known as the Tianjin Provisional Government (TPG, 1900–02) – governed the city for 25 months. The inter-war period marked the third and last phase of the history of Tianjin's foreign concessions. There was a decline in colonial influence and the foreign concessions in China were progressively dismantled. China restored sovereignty over all former concessionary spaces by the end of World War II (Figure 1).

Multi-imperial dynamics in Tianjin

Tianjin's multicolonial character has been studied by a number of scholars. Perhaps the most memorable conceptualization of the city's colonial history is the term 'hyper-colony' coined by Ruth Rogaski. As a descriptive term, the idea of 'hyper-colony' is useful in 'drawing attention to the potential implications that arise when

¹'Concessions' were essentially leased foreign enclaves. Although nominally the sovereignty over these enclaves belonged to the Chinese, these concessions were not subject to Chinese jurisdiction. It is reasonable to conceive of these concessions as a 'micro-colony', where foreign residents enjoyed special prerogatives.



Figure 1. Map of Tianjin, 1925.

Source: <http://tianjin.virtualcities.fr/Maps/Collection?ID=1519> (accessed 20 Apr. 2024).

one urban space is divided among multiple imperialisms'.² Other scholars have focused either on the roles of these colonial spaces as 'occupied spaces, global showplaces, and above all, economic investments' or on the historical transformation

²R. Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, 2004), 11.

of individual concessions.³ Overall, existing scholarship on Tianjin's colonial past has not fully explored how multiple imperialist powers interacted with one another within a confined urban space, nor has it explained the implications of such interactions for the development of urban politics, or on the transformation of Tianjin's urban landscape.

At the heart of my research is the question of how multiple imperialisms shaped, and were shaped by, the city of Tianjin. More specifically, it attempts to unravel the interconnected history of multiple empires in the production and sharing of knowledge and practices related to urban planning and governance, in a sequence of political activities and reterritorializing manoeuvres, as well as in their attempts to transform the urban built environment. A case in point is the history of Tianjin under the rule of the multinational military government known as the TPG (1900–02) following the Boxer Uprising. Comprised of military representatives from Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Russia and Japan, this international government bore the responsibility for administering and reconstructing the city of Tianjin for about 25 months. The same period also witnessed a remarkable reterritorialization of the city: imperialist powers that had already secured their concessions in Tianjin (Britain, France, Japan and Germany) managed to expand their existing territorial acquisitions, whereas late coming powers such as Russia, Belgium, Austria-Hungary and Italy established new footholds in the city as well. Tianjin at the turn of the twentieth century was thus defined by a distinctive political environment, in which an international colonial administration co-existed alongside several colonial concessions. Nearly all municipal projects, ranging from renovating the city roads and improving traffic flow to promoting the development of Tianjin's trading economy through conservancy works on the Hai River, had to result from co-ordination between the TPG and the other foreign consular authorities in the city.

It is worthwhile to further elaborate on the conservancy works on the Hai River by the TPG to provide a more grounded perspective on how multiple colonial, imperial and municipal authorities shaped the city's infrastructure at the turn of the twentieth century. The policy of major infrastructure work, as exemplified by the Hai River conservancy project, involved co-operation between the TPG, the consular and municipal authorities, as well as the business communities of the Tianjin foreign concessions. By the turn of the twentieth century, the mouth of the Hai River had been severely obstructed, which posed a threat to the normal navigation to and from Tianjin. Under these circumstances, the TPG Council began to plan the conservancy project in January 1901.⁴ The TPG was not the only party concerned with the navigability of the Hai River. A couple of weeks later, the TPG Council invited the Chamber of Commerce, the consular body, the presidents of the British and French Municipal Council, the Tianjin maritime customs commissioner and the Russian, German and Japanese consuls to attend a meeting on the conservancy project.⁵ Other

³E. LaCouture, *Dwelling in the World: Family, House, and Home in Tianjin, China, 1860–1960* (New York, 2021), 87; M. Marinelli, 'Making concessions in Tianjin: heterotopia and Italian colonialism in mainland China', *Urban History*, 36 (2009), 399–425.

⁴*Procès-verbaux des séances du gouvernement provisoire de Tientsin*, translated into Chinese as *Baguo lianjun zhanling shilu* (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexue yuan chubanshe, 2004), 22 Jan. 1901, 148, and 1 Feb. 1901, 161.

⁵*Ibid.*, 13 Feb. 1901, 184.

forms of co-operation involved the provision of funds needed for the project which were provided by both the TPG and by the mercantile communities of the foreign concessions, with the former offering to duplicate the amounts raised by the latter. From June 1901 to August 1902, the TPG Council also made monthly contributions (Taels 5,000) to the conservancy project. The initial conservancy work was supported through the funds provided by the TPG, which laid a solid foundation for future construction.⁶

At the same time, an equally important question concerns how 'the city made empires'. The close juxtaposition of multiple colonial concessions, along with Chinese municipalities, conditioned the ways in which imperial powers operated within these urban spaces and interacted with one another. The creation and extension of the Tianjin foreign settlements rarely occurred independently of one another. Rather, the emergence, development and transformation of any colonial concession was inextricably linked to those of the other foreign settlements in the city. When discussing the creation of new concessions or the expansion of pre-existing ones, it is important to bear in mind that these actions were not simply driven by distinct national initiatives but rather by a reaction to the other foreign powers' activities on the ground. The same could be said about Tianjin's decolonizing process. One example is related to China's involvement in World War I. When the Chinese Republican government attempted to restore sovereignty over the Tianjin German and Austrian Concessions at the war's end, the question of administrative rights to these former concessionary spaces became a bone of contention between the Chinese government and the imperialist actors, as well as among the imperialist powers themselves. The fact that multiple imperial powers held colonial concessions and had considerable commercial interests in Tianjin meant they had significant vested interests in the city and were thus compelled to watch the retrocession of the ex-German and Austrian Concessions with gnawing anxiety and speculation. There were efforts by other imperialist authorities in Tianjin to integrate these former concessionary spaces into their own administration: the Tianjin British Municipal Council made repeated petitions to the British ambassador in Beijing in the hope of bringing the ex-German Concession under British control. At the same time, the authorities of the Tianjin Italian Concession also intended to incorporate the coterminous ex-Austrian Concession into its own administration. These attempts, however, were either deterred by Chinese diplomatic manoeuvring or undermined by objections from the other imperialist states in Tianjin.

Broader historiographical significance

The urban case of Tianjin, I would suggest, is uniquely poised to offer useful food for thought for scholars interested in the history of colonialism in China and beyond. China historians have proposed a variety of terms – most prominently semi-colonialism, informal empire, hyper-colony and more recently transnational colonialism – to differentiate the country's colonial experience from those of other

⁶*Decennial Report of Imperial Maritime Customs* (Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1933), 586.

colonized contexts.⁷ Terms such as ‘semi-colonialism’ and ‘informal empire’ are often used to emphasize China’s distinctive colonial conditions where the nation’s territory was never totally occupied by one single colonizing power but was rather subjected to the sway of other forms of imperial influence, notably military threat and economic dominance. ‘Hyper-colony’ and ‘transnational colonialism’, in the same vein, are more apt at capturing the regional variation of colonialism in China, but their applicability is nonetheless constrained by specific locales or institutions. Just as ‘hyper-colony’ is a useful descriptive term to generalize Tianjin’s colonial past, the notion of ‘transnational colonialism’ is deeply informed by Isabella Jackson’s object of analysis – the Shanghai Municipal Council, a locally elected body consisting of non-state, transnational actors across the world. While each term describes different colonial phenomena in the Chinese context, most of these analytical notions have been primarily preoccupied with the incomplete, partial and fragmentary nature of colonialism in China. My case-study of Tianjin demonstrates, however, that another crucial element that defined China’s colonial history lies in the very multiplicity and overlapping trajectories of various imperial powers operating in China alongside one another.

In the meantime, an overemphasis on Chinese colonialism being somehow different or ‘less’ than other colonial settings unwittingly limits the possibility for comparison. Instead of emphasizing the ‘distinctiveness’ of Tianjin’s colonial conditions because of the density and concentration of multiple imperialist influences, this survey suggests that it would be more valuable to consider the city’s colonial past as part of the shared history of global colonial processes and to situate it in a global comparative framework. Tianjin during the treaty-port era was consistent with other colonized settings where different imperial actors interacted and where overlapping imperial trajectories existed. ‘The Scramble for Africa’ is perhaps the most well-known example of multi-imperial entanglements at a continental level. It is important, however, to be mindful of the categorical distinction between the Chinese and the African contexts. Unlike the African case where Western European powers partitioned most of the continent into separate territorial possessions, the ‘scramble’ in Tianjin took place at the urban level where the city space was effectively divided into multiple ‘spheres of influence’. Whereas Africa was a target of colonization only for Western European powers, Tianjin attracted the attention of non-Western imperialists such as Russia, Japan and the United States as well. Most importantly, while most African states, apart from Liberia and Ethiopia, were subordinated to direct colonial rule, by 1914 Chinese sovereignty over Tianjin, albeit impaired, was never fully lost.⁸

Other comparable cases include territories that were not ‘colonies’ under the control of one single foreign power, but were subjected to domination by multiple imperial powers, with cities and regions in the Ottoman empire and Thailand falling into this category. Just as the Siam state (nowadays Thailand) was subject to intensive

⁷For these conceptualizations, see J. Osterhammel, ‘Semicolonialism and informal empire in twentieth-century China’, in W. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London, 1986), 290–314; B. Goodman and D. Goodman (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (London and New York, 2012); I. Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China’s Global City* (Cambridge, 2017); Sh. M. Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley, 2001); Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 11.

⁸The only exception was the period under the TPG rule from 1900 to 1902.

European pressure in terms of both economic imperialism and threat of territorial conquest, several territories within the Ottoman empire were under varying degrees of control by European imperialist powers. Another equally important, and yet often under-explored, way in which multi-imperial intersections played out was through successive rather than simultaneous colonization. It is important to recognize how new colonial influences were often grafted onto and co-mingled with pre-existing traces of former imperial powers. The colonial history of Taiwan – a territory once subjugated to successive rule by the Dutch, Qing and Japanese empires and subsequently under the protection of the US military during and after the Cold War – most tellingly manifests this type of colonization.⁹

Moreover, the multi-imperial history of Tianjin can be fruitfully brought into the orbit of discussion on worldwide parallels and relationships involving cities and empires. The colonial city, as a distinctive urban typology, has its own historiographical genealogy.¹⁰ What this survey is more concerned with, however, is the relationship between cities and the spatial order of modern colonial empires. By viewing foreign colonial projects as spatial processes, historians of empire have increasingly recognized the central importance of territorial imperatives in the act of modern empire-building.¹¹ Cities were, and have been, a crucial territorial variation of colonial geographies. In essence, the organization of urban space was instrumentalized to define and modify the relationship between territory, sovereignty and subjects within the foreign imperialistic project. But the production of these imperial spaces did not always take very predictable forms. Cities like Tianjin represented the organization of imperial spaces as a composite of enclaves with multiple imperial influences. As a result, the treaty-port-era history of Tianjin was fundamentally characterized by its political fragmentation, legal differentiation and often undefined borders between concessionary spaces. The division of administration and fragmented sovereignty of Tianjin thus constituted an important spatial variation of global imperial political terrains.

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⁹ A. Dirlík, 'Taiwan: the land colonialisms made', *boundary 2*, 45 (2018), 8; W. Cheng and Ch. M. Wang, 'Introduction: against empire: Taiwan, American studies, and the archipelagic', *American Quarterly*, 73 (2021), 335–41.

¹⁰ For a succinct summary on the nature of colonial city, see T. Metcalf, 'Colonial cities', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013), 753–69.

¹¹ See T. Ballantyne and A. Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global: 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 27–79.

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