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This book explores the activities of nine Western scientists from Britain, France, the United States, Germany and Sweden that were active in the Chinese borderlands from late Imperial China to the end of the Republic in 1949. It especially looks into the Westerners’ views on the various cultures and peoples that they met in their fieldwork.

Erik Mueggler examines the travels, photography and writings by the British botanists Reginald Farrer (1880–1920) and George Forrest (1873–1932). The author especially points to the contradictions in Forrest’s work. Although Forrest initially witnessed and wrote about the violent and racist behaviour of the British colonial troops in India, he soon himself adopted a colonial attitude towards the peoples that he met in his travels. To his own surprise, however, he developed a liking to local Tibetan tribes in Yunnan Province and especially to the men that he trained and hired for his fieldwork. While Forrest participated in the British colonial project, Mueggler points out that it was actually his local crew that made his work successful, as their eyes could see “in ways that he could not, in an alien form of vision” (p. 54).

Denise M. Glover contributes with a study on the English botanist Ernest Henry Wilson (1876–1930). Wilson spent in total eleven years in China making plant collections in the provinces of Hubei and Sichuan. While Wilson’s professional work aimed at getting plants for commercial and scientific purposes, he was also dedicated to inform and educate the public through popular publications. The author argues that Wilson’s travelogues are attempts at presenting “ocular proof” (p. 66), as they give baselines of facts that are “captured and preserved in language” of what he observes while his photographs in turn aid the reader to see the “objective ‘truth’ to which he refers” (p. 67). Wilson’s view on the indigenous peoples, especially in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, reflected both an ethnocentric
and romantic view, Glover explains. To Wilson, local peoples were “happy, unsophisticated children of Nature” and yet represented a contrast and different way of life compared to the industrial and modern life at home.

Tamara Wyss explores the travels by her German grandparents Friedrich and Hedwig Weiss who worked as diplomats for the Weimar Republic, stationed in Sichuan and Yunnan. In 1913, the Weiss couple made a short, but rewarding journey to the Nuosu people in southern Sichuan. Hedwig Weiss (1889–1974) wrote a report from this journey in which she accounted for the Nuosu way of life and for the tribe’s clashes with the expanding Han Chinese. The author notes that the Weiss couple identified themselves more with the Nuosu than with the Chinese. Like Wilson, they idealized the virtues of the “noble savage” (p. 106), and Hedwig Weiss, inspired by the German Romantic movement, even drew parallels between the Nuosu warfare against Han Chinese troops and the ancient fights that Germany’s forefathers had with the Roman Empire. Wyss argues that the Weiss couple had a lust for adventure and travel, which they could realize because of the imperial ambitions of Germany. Although the Weiss couple felt and were truly German, their Jewish background gives another dimension to their fieldwork in China. Their otherness within their own culture places their encounter with the Nuosu in the context of their own lives and backgrounds, Wyss explains.

One chapter, written by five different authors, is devoted to the Austrian-American explorer, linguist, botanist and geographer Joseph Rock (1884–1962). Rock, born to an Austrian servant, immigrated to the United States to become a respected, self-taught botanist based in Hawai’i. He spent almost three decades in the field in China where he stayed for longer times with the Naxi people in northwestern Yunnan. He wrote about the Naxi history, culture and religion and made a dictionary of their language. He was a scholar of the old school, formally dressed even in the field, ordering European meals to be cooked by his servants and playing classical recordings in his tent.

Margaret B. Swain contributes with a study of the Franco-Catholic missionary Paul Vial (1855–1917), active in Yunnan Province. Vial was a devoted ethnographer and linguist who studied the Sani culture and language while actively striving to improve the situation for this people. He wrote a Sani-French dictionary and created a model community in Lunan County where he promoted modern education, housing, irrigation and the Catholic faith. Like the Weiss couple, Vial likewise found himself closer to the local people than to the expanding Han Chinese. He was, as Swain explains, “a conflicted colonial imperialist” (p. 150). While converting local peoples in the Catholic faith, and striving for modernization, he also took a “fierce pro-indigenous Sani stance against Han rule” (p. 150).
Next, this book devotes two chapters on the activities of the American Baptist missionary and scientist David Crocket Graham (1884–1961). Graham was a trained anthropologist, archaeologist, ethnologist and field collector working in Sichuan Province between 1911 and 1948. In 1932, Graham became curator of the Museum of Art, Archaeology and Ethnology at West China Union University (now Sichuan University) where he also taught comparative religions, archaeology and anthropology. As the authors point out, Graham had a modernist Christian bias in his views on the indigenous population. Yet, he believed in the universality of religions, and regretted the decline in local religious tradition. Moreover, Jeff Kyong-McClain and Geng Jing point out that Graham’s ethnographical and archaeological researches actually became part of the nation-building process in Republican China. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the Chinese government was forced to move its capital to Sichuan, which made it more important for the Han Chinese to bring the borderlands and their inhabitants under central control. Within the political situation of this time, Graham’s work came to conform to Republican Chinese needs. While he always took a keen interest in the sake of the indigenous communities, he also participated “enthusiastically” in interpreting his findings in ways “that unified rather than split the new nation-state” (p. 237), the authors conclude.

The final chapter looks into the collaborations and friendship between the scientists Johan Gunnar Andersson (1874–1960) and Ding Wenjiang (1887–1936). Andersson, a Swedish geologist and self-taught archaeologist, worked as a mining adviser for the Chinese government between 1914 and 1925. He then worked closely with the reform-minded Ding Wenjiang who was the first head of the National Geological Survey of China and a leading promoter for modern science of the time. Both Andersson and Ding shared a passion for fieldwork and believed in science as a tool for progress. However, new data from Andersson’s archaeological fieldwork questioned the traditional narrative on China’s ancient history. The Swede’s discovery of the prehistoric Yangshao Culture proved the existence of a “proto-Chinese” culture that he argued could be related to even earlier cultures in Central Asia. Was the Yangshao Culture therefore the result of an ancient migration from the West?, he asked. Fiskesjö explains that this theory challenged the classical narrative of the civilized Chinese state versus the “barbarian” peoples in the peripheries. Yet, the interpretation of the findings was soon adapted to suit the traditional narrative on ancient China. While Ding supported Andersson from a scientific viewpoint, he suggested that the new findings could possibly be related to the mythical Xia Dynasty, mentioned in ancient sources. Even Andersson, despite his western origin theory, aligned his discovery to fit in with the modern idea of nation-states. As Fiskesjö points out, Andersson described the Yangshao as “an early
Chinese culture” and even later abandoned his western origin theory after further examinations of the data. Both Ding and Andersson were affected by the political situation in China of their time. Fiskesjö also argues that the Yangshao Culture today has become part of a new nationalistic narrative on the formation of China: The Yangshao people has turned into “a sort of vanguard of Chinese civilization in a sea of primitives […] in the new origin myth” (p. 261), as the author concludes.

In his introduction, Stevan Harrell summarizes the various characters covered in the book, their part in the European-American exploration of the Chinese borderlands, and their view on the peoples and cultures that they met on their journeys. As he rightly points out, although the Westerners often took for granted ideas of white or European-American superiority typical for the era under which they lived, they all shared a joint belief in science and in social progress for humanity. They believed that their work contributed to the general scientific knowledge. What the book does not problemize, however, is the surrounding geopolitical situation that further influenced scientific activities in China’s borderlands at the time. Foreign activities in the region were often a part in the tug-of-war between the Big Powers for increased control and exploration of the Far East and of Central Asia. Not only European and American field scientists became involved in this game, but also a large number of Russian and Japanese explorers that likewise collected data and mapped the region. Moreover, the later part of the period also witnessed a growing number of Western educated Chinese scientists that also began exploring and collecting data in China’s borderlands, which is only briefly mentioned in the book. These later activities were propelled by the foreign activities in the area, an awakening Chinese nationalism and by the formation of modern Chinese scientific institutions, such as that of the Academia Sinica in 1928. Moreover, there were—of course—also many more members of the Western scientific community present in the field in this era than the nine explored in the book. Yet, despite of this is the Explorers & Scientists in China’s Borderlands 1880–1950 well worth reading for its diverse examples and insights into the thinking of these specific members.