“Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” were politically charged buzzwords among New Culture Movement intellectuals in early twentieth century China. Many activist intellectuals of the time believed that the two misters could revive a moribund China, so long dragged down by imperialist threat and internal decay. The precise meanings of “Science” and “Democracy” were never fixed, and certainly many of the young firebrands used the terms in a cavalier fashion to suit the needs of a moment. However, for some, the definitions could be more precise. Among these latter, more circumspect intellectuals are the Chinese geologists who are the subject of Grace Yen Shen’s book. The geologists encountered here firmly believed in, and forcefully advocated for the expansion of professionalized geology in China as key to building a powerful and modern nation-state, but simultaneously encouraged continued connections with geologists worldwide. This apparent quandary, between the demands of nationalism to wrest control of science for itself and the demands of science to be international, provides for much of the dramatic tension throughout Shen’s telling of the history of geology in China. Shen, ultimately, avoids taking a partisan position on the matter, but shows throughout how the intermingling of national and international forces worked together to create a modern, disciplinary geology in China.

After an introduction, which very ably introduces the relevant historiographies of science and empire, and nationalism and imperialism in China, Shen proceeds to tell her tale in largely chronological fashion. The first regular chapter explains the place of foreign explorers in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their role in the advent of disciplinary geology in China (most notably German Ferdinand von Richthofen, who worked on behalf of both European commercial interests and Chinese self-strengthening ones). The chapter ends with some discussion of early Chinese nationalist polymaths, like Lu Xun, who first made the case for the training of Chinese geologists as a necessary step in the age of competitive nation-states. The next two chapters provide case studies of several early Chinese geologists, who established geology schools, university departments and professional societies across the country in the 1910’s and 1920’s, and pushed their students and colleagues to move beyond books and embrace the notion of
fieldwork, thereby advancing empirical science and creating more firmly the notion of a Chinese national space. The fourth chapter introduces the 1930’s Nationalist Party state as it attempted to focus Chinese geology on goals with clear state-building potential, such as coal and oilfield exploration, and away from more academic pursuits, such as the study of Pleistocene China. Shen points out that the state was never able to get full control over the practice of geology at the time, partly due to the independent-minded Chinese geologists themselves who pushed for academic freedom, and partly due to the fact that the state could not fund geological enterprise to the levels it would have liked, thus requiring geologists to seek funds from non-state sources, both domestic and foreign. The final full chapter considers the experience of the geologists in exile in Western China during the War with Japan (1937-45), where virgin territory enthused them, but the practical pressures of lack of resources, lack of contact with the wider geological community and intensifying demands from the state constrained them.

Unearthing the Nation is an excellent introduction to the history of disciplinary geology in China, with particular attention to its relationship with nationalism. By a reasonable extension, Shen’s volume can also be read as a case study which sheds light on the development and role of all the hard sciences (and scientists) in early twentieth century China. Shen’s case for the complex intertwining of national and international concerns in the discipline’s formation is made all the more compelling due to the breadth of primary sources used throughout. Shen has mined numerous geological journals, popular periodicals, the personal papers of individual explorers and geologists, as well as government archives to tell the tale. There is much to appreciate here, and little to critique. There are a small number of instances where Shen rather uncritically relies on recollections made by geologists some decades after the events in question. This may skew our understanding of the Chinese geologists’ early motivations, to make them appear to have always been nationalist (or communist), whereas the reality may have been more ambiguous. There are also occasional uses of murky phrases, like “Chinese modernity,” which do not seem (to the present author) to add much descriptive value to the case at hand. Still, these caveats are trivial compared to the value of the volume, which deserves a wide readership. Scholars whose interests are in the history of science as it relates to European imperialism and nationalist reaction would benefit from Shen’s nuanced work, as would historians of Republican China in general, so that they might better understand the importance of the much-ballyhooned “Mr. Science.”