

The Potential of Immobility: Silas Hardoon and Transimperial Agency in Shanghai 1874–1931

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Abstract

The New Imperial History has revealed the spatial dimension of empires by focusing on mobile individuals and moving beyond the poles of centre and periphery. By contrast, this chapter introduces a historical figure who, like most people in colonial settings, chose to stay put, demonstrating the analytical potential of immobile actors in revealing transimperial logics. Silas Hardoon, a Jewish merchant born in Baghdad, spent his entire life in semi-colonial Shanghai, where he encountered multiple imperial agendas. The density of the British, French, American and Chinese imperial regimes enabled Hardoon to amass a fortune in real estate and act as a mediator between rival political parties. As the paper argues, through the lens of this biography, we can also recognise the potential of immobility for transimperial history.

Keywords: transimperial, Silas Hardoon, Immobility, Cultural-financial intermediary, Shanghai

Silas Hardoon's rise from an anonymous migrant to Shanghai's richest inhabitant seems to be a classic rags to riches story. When the gifted real estate developer died in 1931, he owned almost a third of Shanghai's most lucrative shopping street, Nanjing Road, as well as large blocks of flats in the international concessions of the city. However, a deeper look into the life of this Ottoman subject who held the status of British Protected Person for most of his life, and simultaneously assimilated into Chinese imperial culture, makes clear how much the transimperial context made this rise possible in the first place. Rather than a single empire providing the background for Hardoon's trajectory, several imperial zones interacted and overlapped in his biography and shaped its outcome both privately and professionally. Transimperial competition, cooperation, and connectivity thus become discernible even in the biography of a man who was not particularly mobile and decided to stick to Shanghai for more than fifty years. Sketching out this life can help us to see more clearly the potential of such static life courses for explaining the logic and workings of transimperial settings.¹

¹ For an extensive account of Silas Hardoon, see Chiara Betta's unpublished dissertation, Silas Hardoon (1851–1931). "Marginality and Adaption in Shanghai," Phil. Diss., University of London 1997,

So far, the New Imperial History has tended to focus on particularly mobile actors, be they rotating governors, migrating workers, wandering pilgrims, or experts on their travels through empires. Tracing their pathways inside or outside an empire has made a spatial dimension visible which often lies beyond the poles of center and periphery.² In recent years, global mobility and the resources that individual actors gained from it, brought home, and often used against colonial rule have become a focus of research.³

But the overwhelming majority of people in the colonies or in transimperial spaces were not particularly mobile and preferred to stay where they were. However, under certain political circumstances and depending on their social and professional background, even actors much less marked by high mobility moved between imperial spaces and acted transimperially. Hardoon is a case in point. In Shanghai, several imperial concessions, constitutive of this semi-colonial city since 1842, formed the basis for different British, American, French, and Chinese imperial agendas to exist, collide, and compete with each other within a very narrow space. The particular density of Shanghai's multiple political regimes enabled also rather stationary actors to operate across different political, economic, and cultural zones without leaving the city. If this empirical reality seems unusual in the twenty-first century, it was more common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than traditional geographies of empires and nation-states suggest.⁴

Silas Hardoon was therefore confronted with a multiple imperial repertoire in Shanghai, which allowed him choices that were normally not available in classic colonial spaces. First, it was the small diaspora of Ottoman Jewish merchant

available in the SOAS library, London. See also idem, "The Land System of the Shanghai International Settlement. The Rise and Fall of the Hardoon Family, 1874-1956," in Robert Bickers and Isabelle Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports in Modern China. Law, Land and Power*, London 2016, S. 61-77; idem., "From Orientals to Imagined Britons. Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai," in *Modern Asian Studies* 37 (2003), 999-1023; Ulrike von Hirschhausen, Jörn Leonhard, *Empires. Eine globale Geschichte 1780-1920*, München 2023, 468-81.

² David Lambert, "Reflections on the Concept of Imperial Biographies. The British Case," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40 (2014), 22-41; David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds.), "Colonial Lives across the British Empire. Imperial Careerings in the Long 19th Century," Cambridge 2006; Desley Deacon et al. (eds.), "Transnational lives. Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present," London 2010; Tim Buchen, Malte Rolf (eds.), *Eliten im Vielvölkerreich. Imperiale Biographien in Russland und Österreich-Ungarn (1850-1918)*, Berlin 2015.

³ Jane Carey and Jane Lydon (eds.), "Indigenous networks. Mobility, connections and exchange," London 2014; Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, "Empires and the reach of the global, 1870-1945," Cambridge 2012; Ulrike von Hirschhausen und Jörn Leonhard, "Empires und Mobilität: Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) und Blaise Diagne (1872-1934)," in Eva-Marlene Hausteiner, Sebastian Huhnholz (eds.), *Imperien verstehen. Theorien, Typen, Transformationen*, Baden-Baden 2019, 225-54.

⁴ Pär Kristoffer Cassel, "Rule of law or rule of laws. Legal pluralism and extraterritoriality in nineteenth-century East Asia," Cambridge 2006.

families that enabled him to start as a real estate agent and allowed him to become an investor at all. Second, Shanghai's institutional set-up as a treaty port for multiple empires was of central importance. The city's division into several imperial concessions allowed Hardoon to trade in land across imperial borders. An essential condition was the legal instruments that especially the British Empire offered subjects of other empires. Relatedly, Hardoon was able not only to invest transimperially, but also to serve both in the British–American and in the French municipal council. Third, the culture of the Chinese empire that he encountered in Shanghai became a further turning point for his life. His life-long marriage to a Euro-Asian woman greatly influenced his decision to personally acculturate into imperial Qing culture, to engage privately as a patron of Chinese education and science and to become a Chinese philanthropist towards the end of his life.

The empirical reality of such a transimperial space in which Silas Hardoon worked for almost 60 years, also invites methodological suggestions of how to expand the current conceptual borders of the New Imperial History. Why is that necessary? Contextualized imperial biographies have established themselves as a key way of “putting a networked imperial model into practice as both a methodological tool for doing research and a means of communicating this perspective.”⁵ Underlying this approach is a conceptualization of empire as a dynamic network whose politics are enacted on various sites by mobile men and women. This approach has focused so far particularly on mobile agents and elites. Precisely because its aim is to reconstruct the connections between multiple metropolitan and colonial sites, the mobility of the actors in question is pivotal. Governors, doctors, military men, convicts, sailors, or indentured laborers alike have become visible as the prime actors making and unmaking empire.

This approach has prioritized flows and connectivity, evoking an inaccurate image of empires as polities in which particularly mobile agents seem to thrive. But the overwhelming majority of imperial or colonial subjects were not particularly mobile, but lived where they were born. We thus need to rethink how to explore traces of empire in stationary lives, which nonetheless reflect imperial politics and the limits of such politics, too. Under certain conditions, even transimperial phenomena manifested themselves in a stationary life. Silas Hardoon, after coming from Bombay to Shanghai as a youngster, remained there for almost sixty years, stuck to the place and certainly was not a particularly mobile man. Contextualizing his imperial biography illuminates how we may situate non-mobile agents in transimperial settings and reveal their analytic potential for explaining the logics and mechanisms of transimperial space.

⁵ Lambert, “Concept of Imperial Biographies,” 26.

Against this background, this chapter first explains the specific institutional context of Hardoon's biography. Then, it asks to what extent he himself was able to use that context for transimperial cooperation, competition, and connectivity. Finally, it summarizes the arguments for re-recognizing the analytical potential of largely static actors for transimperial logics, and ends with a plea to broaden New Imperial History by integrating transimperial connectivity into its repertoire.⁶

An Institutional Landscape: Hardoon's Shanghai between 1870 and 1930

Hardoon was 23 years old when he arrived in Shanghai from Bombay in 1874. Years earlier, his father had taken the family, including two-year-old Silas, from Baghdad to Bombay to work there for the Sassoons, an Ottoman merchant dynasty that had settled in Bombay to trade in silk, cotton, and opium. Now, in a bid to extend the Sassoon trade network to the new Chinese treaty ports, David Sassoon was sending dynamic, young Jewish men to Shanghai, preferably those who could read and write Judeo-Arabic, an Arab dialect written in Hebrew. In use in the Ottoman Empire and Arabic-speaking areas beyond, Judeo-Arabic was the language in which the entire balance sheets of the trading house were written. Silas Hardoon brought exactly this knowledge with him when his father made him travel to Shanghai to work there for the Sassoons. Hardoon was to live in Shanghai for almost sixty years and would experience the rise of the treaty port into Asia's most populous metropolis. When he arrived in 1874, Shanghai had 800,000 inhabitants; when he died there in 1931, there were more than 3 million. This massive influx was above all a direct consequence of Shanghai's status as a semi-colonial treaty port, where half of the city remained under Chinese rule while the other half was split up in Western-controlled territories, the so-called concessions.⁷

Treaty ports developed as a result of the inter-imperial conflict between the aggressive European empires and the Chinese Empire around the middle of the nineteenth century. Britain, the leading naval power and industrial nation of the world, was eager to enforce China's opening to international trade and did

⁶ Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Hée, "Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition," in *Journal of Modern European History* / Zeitschrift für moderne europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire européenne contemporaine, vol. 16, No. 4 (2018), 429–52.

⁷ Marie-Claire Bergère, "Shanghai. China's Gateway to Modernity," Stanford 2009, 98–99; Tomoko Shiroyama, "The Shanghai Real Estate Market and Capital Investment, 1860–1936," in Billy So and Ramon Myers (eds.), *The Treaty Port Economy in Modern China*, Empirical Studies of Institutional Change and Economic Performance, Berkely 2011, 47–74, here 52. Regarding the term "semi-colonial," see Anne Reinhardt, "Navigating Semi-Colonialism. Shipping, Sovereignty, and Nation-Building in China, 1860–1937," Cambridge 2018, 3–7.

so using military power in the First Opium War of 1842. China's defeat resulted in the so-called "Unequal Treaties," which secured the opening of five coastal cities to foreigners and to international trade. In 1842, a new colonial era began in Shanghai. The British, the French, and the United States set up enclaves, known as concessions, on the city territory, established their own city councils, and applied their own laws. Land registers, freedom of the press, and freedom of association, for example, all existed in the British Concession (which was soon to be united with the American into an "International Concession"), while at the same time, French civil law was applied in the neighboring French Concession. Unlike in the Chinese part of the city, the British magistrate hardly interfered in trade or craft, provided only the basic rules for buying real estate, and levied very low taxes, which made the British–American Concession increasingly attractive to Western foreigners and Chinese migrants alike. Much of China had been laboring under civil-war-like conditions since the middle of the century as a result of the uprising of the militant Taiping salvation movement and other protest mass movements. The treaty ports on the coast, however, had largely remained intact, and refugees and job seekers had been pouring into Shanghai in waves ever since. The advantages of these imperial enclaves within a Chinese city were as visible to the tens of thousands of Chinese migrants and traders as they were to Western foreigners or Ottoman merchants like the Sassoon brothers or Silas Hardoon.⁸

Ottoman Jews were only marginal Westerners among the many immigrants to Shanghai.⁹ Because of this, they formed a close network, as Silas Hardoon learned when he began working for the trading house Sassoon in 1874. Like almost all young Jewish men, he first moved within the culturally and religiously narrowly limited world of the small Jewish diaspora. His employer provided accommodation, and in return expected participation in Jewish rites and holidays and observance to the commandment of only intra-Jewish marriages. It was a tightly knit cultural world from which Hardoon would soon break out, professionally as well as privately. On a business level, the Jewish merchants oriented themselves towards the British Empire because their intercontinental trade and investment in Shanghai's real estate market in turn presupposed good relations with the British magistrate. Freedom of trade and low taxation plus the existence of land registers secured by the British council offered central advantages for their economic activity both locally and globally. Furthermore, the weakness of the Ottoman Empire since the

⁸ Debin Ma, "The Rise of Modern Shanghai 1900–1936. An Institutional Perspective," in So and Myers, *Treaty Port Economy*, 33–46; Bergère, Shanghai, 346–63.

⁹ Chiara Betta, "Marginal Westerners in Shanghai. The Baghdadi Jewish Community, 1845–1931," in Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot (eds.), *New Frontiers. Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1953*, Manchester 2000, 38–54.

1870s made it increasingly unattractive, both politically and economically, to the Jewish merchants who were nominally its subjects.¹⁰

As a result, many of the Jewish merchants who immigrated from the Ottoman Empire to Shanghai and whose legal position as Ottoman subjects was unstable, found closer proximity to the British Empire the most promising way to combine personal security with economic opportunities. Therefore, the majority of Jewish merchants from the Ottoman Empire tried to change their legal status, with the newly introduced category of “British Protected Person” proving particularly suitable for this purpose. The status had only recently been developed for Ottoman subjects living in British-controlled areas such as Egypt or India, but was also used for Christian minorities within the Ottoman Empire. It removed these persons from the control of their own state and placed them under British protection, something which was later to become a source of conflict between the two empires. It did not mean naturalization, so it could not be equated with British citizenship. But in semi-colonial Shanghai, being a “British Protected Person” (BPP) was invaluable. Unlike other Ottoman subjects, Jews with this status were no longer subject to the so-called Mixed Courts, which were composed of Chinese and Europeans, but could rely on British law in disputes. The trading house Sassoon had been able to negotiate a compromise with the British City Council as early as the 1860s, and the majority of its employees were now under British protection.¹¹

Silas Hardoon applied for BPP status in 1896. In the Western concessions, where he lived and worked, his legal status placed him largely on an equal footing with the Europeans there, which offered important advantages in terms of land purchases and trade. Between 1920 and 1930, a third of all Shanghai Jews held BPP status. Because of the legal protection that they enjoyed, the relationship between the British and the Jews in Shanghai seemed to the Jews less like that between the colonizers and the colonized, and more like one determined by a convergence of economic interests. This was underscored by a permanent Jewish seat on the British-dominated Shanghai City Council, while the 98 percent Chinese population in the Western enclaves had no such representation.

The more Shanghai's capitalism flourished, the more British, French, and American officers and merchants became interested in expanding the territory of their imperial concessions. Behind the ostensible argument of rapid immigration stood the political interests of the British and the French Empires, as well as of

¹⁰ Betta, “Marginal Westerners,” 43–45.

¹¹ Sarah Abrvaya Stein, “Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State and the Persistence of Empires,” in *American Historical Review* 116 (2011), 80–108; Eileen P. Scully, “Bargaining with the State from Afar: American Citizenship,” in *Treaty Port China, 1844–1942*, New York 2001.

the American government to extend their rule in Imperial China. The warships of the Royal Navy patrolling off the coast of Shanghai provided the appropriate threat setting for corresponding demands. The weakened government in Beijing had less and less to counter the military pressure on the ground and the political demands from London, Paris, and Washington. Against the will of the local Chinese city government, the European empires, with Imperial Beijing's consent, managed to push through the gradual expansion of their urban enclaves in Shanghai.

In 1850, the Western concessions had barely covered one square kilometer of the city's total area. By 1900, the British–American and French Concessions had expanded to 33 square kilometers and were home to about half of the total population of more than 1 million. Shanghai's economic and cultural powerhouse shifted from the ancient Chinese walled city in the south to the booming concession districts along the Bund in the west and north. Around 1900, the number of industrial and commercial enterprises here was ten times greater than in the Chinese part of the city, and land was worth many times what was paid in the Chinese-controlled districts.¹² The rapid rise in the value of land, which was also a result of the legal and economic freedoms in the imperial enclaves, was a major factor in enabling Silas Hardoon to start his own real estate business in the 1890s. Not only did the rule of Western empires help him become a successful businessman, Hardoon was also, due to his wealth, elected to the board of the International (that is the British–American) Concession, and served as well on the French Council between 1892 and 1902. However, he seems to have left no real traces in municipal politics, and his seat in the exclusive British “Shanghai Club” almost always remained empty. Nevertheless, the fact remains that more than 98 percent of those living in the Western-controlled areas of the city were Chinese, but their administration was entirely in the hands of wealthy Western merchants, mostly British or American.

Shanghai's rapid growth and the permanent influx of immigrants posed enormous challenges to the administration of all parts of the city. Police duties, tax collection, criminality control, and medical care could not be adequately implemented either in the Western concessions or in the Chinese half of the city. Chinese native place associations, which integrated immigrants according to their region of origin, started to fill this gap, taking on more and more functions, which the municipal authorities were unable to perform. This communal politicization reinforced an anti-imperial stance that the leaders of the Chinese native place associations were increasingly able to mobilize from the 1890s onwards when it came to fighting for Chinese rights against the “foreign imperialists” (as they were then referred to). Everyday life in the Western concessions reinforced this anti-imperial orientation. Working and living in Shanghai brought Chinese immigrants, who

¹² Ma, “Modern Shanghai,” S. 42.

formed the overwhelming majority of the population, into increasing contact with Europeans and Americans and the privileges that they enjoyed, and subordinated them to a foreign jurisdiction to which the new immigrants were now subject.¹³

At the same time, Western freedom of press, association, and assembly could usefully be exploited when conflicts arose in connection with foreign domination. Such conflicts increasingly did arise from the 1890s onwards, triggering a spiral of mass anti-imperial protests between 1895 and 1911 of which Shanghai became the center—mainly because the many freedoms in the imperial enclaves made it easier for Chinese nationalists to organize large-scale public resistance from there. A boycott of American goods was seamlessly followed by a railroad boycott that opposed the economic prerogatives of Britain and the United States in the Chinese railroad market and culminated in the revolution of 1911. As China disintegrated into rival territories under changing military leaders after 1911, close ties with the political leaders of the Chinese parties became increasingly important. Calling themselves “Shanghaianders,” hardly any of the Western merchants in Shanghai had such ties, identifying themselves primarily with the city which offered them such valuable economic opportunities, and less with the country as a whole.¹⁴

Silas Hardoon stood out from his Western business partners and from his Jewish co-religionists in this respect by systematically integrating himself into the Chinese society of Shanghai. He sought close contact with Chinese politicians and used part of his fortune to promote Chinese culture and science, thus pursuing a policy of cultural and social acculturation which also served his interests as an entrepreneur. When the political landscape changed radically after 1911 and gave way to a permanent rivalry of Chinese fractions and parties, he was able to become a neutral mediator between the different groups. For this too, the legal and cultural freedom that the imperial concessions continued to offer was a central institutional basis.

An Individual Career Between Empires and Cultures

Silas Hardoon took advantage of the institutional opportunities that Shanghai offered Western foreigners and Chinese immigrants in his individual advancement as an entrepreneur. British law was the most important basis for his rise as a real estate developer. Initially as an employee, and then from the 1890s as a partner in the Sassoon trading company, he experienced Shanghai's dynamic real estate

¹³ Bryna Goodman, “Native Place, City and Nation. Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937,” Berkeley 1995.

¹⁴ Robert Bickers, “Shanghaianders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937,” in *Past & Present* 159 (1998), 161–211.

market on a daily basis and increasingly began to concentrate all his energies in this sector. As a young employee, Hardoon had invested his private savings in a number of modest properties in Shanghai's international district, where for a variety of reasons, the land prices were increasing year on year. Firstly, a plot of land in the British or French concession area provided security for the owner that did not exist in the Chinese-administered half of Shanghai. If a buyer registered his land with the British or French consulate it was protected from illegal taxation, was sold under British or French supervision, and the owner was subject exclusively to Western jurisdiction in the event of a legal dispute. In addition, a cadastre maintained at the British City Council secured the registration with its own land registry entry. As a result, British- or French-registered land and real estate had been traded like liquid collateral since the 1860s and was accepted as loan collateral by all the banks in the city.¹⁵ Such economic tools became increasingly common in Shanghai's Western enclaves. These had initially been militarily imposed by the British Empire on China; later, the British Empire also imposed a system of extraterritoriality that exempted its subjects and other foreigners from local Chinese laws.¹⁶

But a view that focuses only on the lack of political participation by Chinese groups and the dependence of the Chinese government in Beijing on the Western empires overlooks what the treaty port actors themselves made of the diversity of overlapping legal systems there. These actors changed the institutional rules within the city, for example by developing new ways of buying, leasing, and mortgaging land that were independent of the nationality of the investors. Shanghai's real estate market also shaped the financial market, benefiting Chinese investors and entrepreneurs as well as Western merchants and non-Western immigrants such as Silas Hardoon.

Initially, Chinese inhabitants had been prohibited from purchasing land in the foreign neighborhoods. But the intertwined economic interests of the Chinese and the resident foreigners gave rise to contractual forms in Shanghai that circumvented such prohibitions and benefited both groups. One such contract was the "Quangbindan," a document which was to play a central role in Hardoon's career. The Quangbindan allowed the Chinese to buy land in the Western concessions while foreigners residing there registered it for them with the British or French consulate. Such hybrid contract forms, which were typical of Shanghai's urban capitalism, made Chinese merchants and traders important market players, especially since they could also keep their assets secret from Chinese authorities through concealed

¹⁵ Shiroyama, "Shanghai Real Estate Market," in So and Myers, *Treaty Port Economy*, 57–64.

¹⁶ Klaus Mühlhahn, "Geschichte des modernen Chinas. Von der Qing-Dynastie bis zur Gegenwart," München 2021, 120; Pär Cassel, "Extraterritoriality in China. What we know and what we don't know," in Bickers and Jackson, *Treaty Ports*, 23–42.

land registration. In 1926, for example, when land worth one billion U.S. dollars was registered in Shanghai under British names, about 37 percent of it actually belonged to Chinese owners. In the central business district, as much as 74 percent of the land was Chinese-owned. Figures like these document the economic rise of the Chinese bourgeoisie in Republican Shanghai.¹⁷

The massive immigration to Shanghai, the increasingly densely populated space in the Western concessions, and the possibility of legally securing real estate property with the consulates of the empires caused an almost unchecked real estate boom between 1870 and the 1920s. In 1865, a mu, the Chinese unit of measurement equivalent to about 660 square meters, had cost about 1,300 yuan. In 1907, the same area cost 9,600 yuan, and in 1933, when Hardoon's descendants were already fiercely fighting over his inheritance, which included 450 mu in prime locations, a mu of land in Shanghai's International Concession was trading at 34,000 yuan. At the time, that was roughly equivalent to \$170,000. Land values had increased 25-fold in the imperial territories between 1865 and 1933.¹⁸

When Silas Hardoon set up his real estate business in the 1890s, he was counting not just on land prices, but on Shanghai's remaining semi-colonial treaty port for the other benefits this conveyed. His status as a "British Protected Person" was enormously helpful in allowing him to trade in real estate in the British or French quarters, and it would have been catastrophic to lose it. However, ten years after he was granted BPP status, the line of the British authorities in Shanghai hardened considerably—in accordance with stricter laws in Great Britain that had been introduced to curb immigration from Eastern Europe. The Foreign Office in London was flooded with requests from Jewish merchants from Shanghai who had suddenly been denied the hitherto unproblematic extension of their status. Yet, when Silas Hardoon applied for the renewal of his status in 1907, the request was promptly granted. The decisive factor in this quick renewal was the prospect of the inheritance taxes that would be due on his by now enormous fortune. The British Consul General in Shanghai soberly noted in the files that "the loss to government revenue would be very considerable" if Hardoon were no longer to be a British Protected Person.¹⁹ In fact, the British Treasury was to receive over 500,000 pounds after his death in 1931.

In 1911, Hardoon left his long-time employer and invested ever more extensively in the Shanghai property market. His strategy was essentially always the same. He bought land in locations that seemed to him to have a particularly promising future and developed a very good instinct for this. Because land registered with the

¹⁷ Shiroyama, "Shanghai Real Estate Market," 59.

¹⁸ Ibid, 54; Betta, "Rise," 69.

¹⁹ Quoted after Stein, "Protected Persons," 97.

consulates of the empires could be used as collateral for new loans, he was always able to obtain new capital, which in turn he invested in development and in the purchase of yet more land. His lenders were large banks and insurance companies such as the China Insurance Company, the Union Insurance Society of Canton, and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, today's HSBC. The apartments built on his land were rented out on a large scale to Chinese tenants. Tenants in default so often ended up in court that they formed their own tenants' association, the Hardoon Road Tenants' Association, to negotiate compromises. Generally, however, they did not meet with much success.²⁰

Hardoon's early investment in Nanjing Road in particular proved extremely profitable against the backdrop of a decades-long real estate boom. Around 1860, what was then Park Lane was still just a swampy path, but by 1900, renowned Chinese and European stores had settled there. Hardoon was by then the street's third largest property owner, behind his former employer and now rival, Sassoon. Between 1913 and 1916 he bought more large properties there, making him, after the First World War, the largest property owner on the rapidly growing shopping street.²¹ The increase in the street's value was mainly due to the department stores that made the city a laboratory of Western–Chinese consumer culture in the 1920s. This was reflected above all in sharply rising land prices, which increased by a factor of 35 between 1910 and 1933.²² In 1918, the largest department store in East Asia, the five-story Wing On, opened its doors on land leased by Silas Hardoon to the Chinese-Australian entrepreneurial Guo brothers. The Sun Sun department store, which he leased to another Chinese-Australian family and which opened a short time later on Nanjing Road, was also modeled on American department stores and with its vast, open displays of merchandise was far removed from a traditional Chinese shop. The terms of the contracts for the large department stores proved to be extremely lucrative for Hardoon and were repeated in further leases on Nanjing Road. Before his death in 1931, one-third of his real estate holdings were located on East Asia's most famous shopping street.²³

Hardoon's willingness to gamble entirely on Shanghai's future as a treaty port, where the imperial presence of Britain, France, and the United States legally secured land ownership, paid off during his lifetime. Between 1920 and 1930, real estate prices climbed to new records. Only shortly before his death did the speculative

²⁰ Betta, "Rise," 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

²² Shiroyama, "Shanghai Real Estate Market," 56; Wen-Hsin Yeh, "Shanghai Splendor. Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843–1949," Berkeley 2007; Sherman G. Cochran (ed.), "Inventing Nanjing Road. Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900–1945," *Ithaca* 1999.

²³ Shiroyama, "Shanghai Real Estate Market," 69.

boom come to an end. In the early 1930s, in response to the Great Depression, the U.S. bought up silver stocks worldwide. The Chinese currency was pegged to the silver standard, so the deflation which resulted had an immediate effect on Shanghai's financial market. The financial crisis led inevitably to the devaluation of land prices, and ultimately to the collapse of the real estate market in 1934, forcing Hardoon's widow, Luo Jialing, to mortgage one-third of her real estate holdings. Her husband may have left her a fortune of \$150 million in land, but he had few liquid assets at the time of his death.²⁴

Two decades earlier, an already complex situation in Shanghai became even more complicated when, after the revolution of 1911, China disintegrated into rival territories under changing local military leaders.²⁵ Although a central government formally continued to exist in Beijing, individual "warlords" actually controlled the provinces and engaged in constant power struggles with one another. Even the Guomingdan Nationalist Party, founded by Sun Yat-Sen, was only one of several rival groups that were opposed by the Chinese Communist Party from 1921 onward. Against the backdrop of constant political power struggles and power changes, close relations with the political leaders of the various parties became increasingly important. However, hardly any of the foreign entrepreneurs and merchants in Shanghai had such contacts. The Western foreigners felt a strong connection to the city which provided them with such lucrative commercial opportunities, but not necessarily to the country as a whole. Culturally, too, they were oriented toward the dominant British milieu.²⁶

Silas Hardoon stood out in this respect among his fellow Jews and wealthy Westerners by systematically integrating himself into Chinese society in Shanghai. With his close contacts to Chinese politicians and his commitment to the promotion of Chinese culture and science, he pursued a policy of acculturation that at the same time served his interests as an entrepreneur. His forty-year marriage to Luo Jialing played, of course, an important role in this. Hardoon had married Luo Jialing, the daughter of a Chinese seamstress and a French sailor from the poorest of backgrounds, in 1886, possibly according to both Jewish and Chinese rites. In order to eliminate any legal doubt about the marriage in view of the enormous fortune that he later acquired, the two married again in 1928 before the British Consul. Just as Hardoon's status as a British Protected Person enabled him to purchase land in the International Concession, he and his wife used her Chinese affiliation to purchase land in the Chinese parts of the city, where foreigners like him otherwise could not

²⁴ Betta, "Rise," 67.

²⁵ Sabine Dabringhaus, "Geschichte Chinas 1279-1949," München 2006, 78-79; Mühlhahn, "China," 273-78.

²⁶ Bickers, "Shanghaianders," 194-204.

work in real estate. In her private life, Luo Jialing became increasingly committed to Buddhism over the years and surrounded herself with Buddhist monks who also acted as advisors to the couple. His wife's considerable influence greatly strengthened Hardoon's networking success in Shanghai's Chinese milieu.

The Hardoons' residence, the "Aili Gardens," certainly provided a suitable platform for networking. The couple had had a classical Chinese palace built around 1900, whose large gardens were surrounded by high walls. Here, in Shanghai's International Concession, they lived with eleven adopted children who were taught the Jewish religion but were influenced much more by Chinese culture. During the 1911 revolution, Silas Hardoon made his estate available to Chinese revolutionaries for their meetings, and when China split into competing militarist regimes, Hardoon cast himself as a host to and middleman between the political factions. He himself initially supported the conservative modernizer, Sun Yat-Sen, who briefly became the first president of the Chinese Republic in 1912.²⁷ Time and again, when he came to Shanghai to cultivate his contacts with the city's Chinese entrepreneurs, Sun Yat-Sen was a guest in the Aili Gardens. Concerned by the changing governments in Beijing and a hardening of the conflict between the imperial powers and Chinese interests, Hardoon repeatedly tried to act as a mediator between the rival factions, hosting various political actors whom he also advised financially. Because he remained politically neutral, he skillfully positioned himself in a role that was even accepted by Chinese nationalist politicians and entrepreneurs.²⁸

In the decades between 1900 and 1930, Hardoon's estate became a refuge for Chinese politicians, persecuted intellectuals, and Taoist monks on the one hand, and an educational center for conservative Chinese thought on the other. The scholars whom the Hardoons supported financially were nationalistic, but they always referred to basic Chinese values and Confucian models when discussing the question of the path which a republican China should take in the future.²⁹ Around 1920, the Hardoons' school and college housed some 500 boys and 200 girls who were all taught the classical Confucian doctrine. A separate publishing house coordinated and financed the translation of important Chinese works into other languages and, conversely, commissioned a Chinese translation of the Koran in

²⁷ Marie-Claire Bergère, "Sun Yat-sen," Stanford 1998, 246–86.

²⁸ Betta, "Silas Hardoon," S. 133–66.

²⁹ Though the specific ways in which religious affiliations and influences played out in the political and confessional microcosm of the Hardoon's household lie beyond the scope of the current chapter, it represents an interesting case through which to explore the longer history of the complex interaction between Buddhism and Confucianism. For more on each of these religions' role in the history of the region and the relationship between them, see Mario Poceski, *Introducing Chinese Religions* (London: Routledge, 2009), ch. 6 ("Schools and Practices of Chinese Buddhism") and 8 ("Later Transformations of Confucianism"); Ronnie Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Tauris, 2010).

1928. Learned societies held their scientific meetings several times a year in the Aili Gardens, embodying the very traditional scholarship that students and activists in the rest of Shanghai were increasingly protesting against.³⁰ High walls from an outside world, which after the First World War had become enormously politicized, were to shield the pupils and students of Hardoon's conservative schools. The surreal effect was not lost on contemporaries: "The Aili Gardens form a small separate world unto themselves. The lives of its many young residents seem as self-contained as in a monastery, and Luo Jialing's efforts to design her educational projects along very traditional principles are indeed so formative that students could easily imagine themselves living in the 19th century rather than the 20th."³¹

But the new intellectual currents would eventually penetrate even the high walls of the Aili Gardens. In April 1919, news of the Paris peace negotiations reached all of China's major cities. The Treaty of Versailles stipulated that the former protectorates on the Chinese peninsula of Shandong should be handed over to Japan instead of being returned to China, in violation of the right of national self-determination. This led to mass protests in Beijing, Shanghai, and many other major cities. Among the tens of thousands of demonstrators protesting against the treatment of China by the victorious powers and the continuation of its semi-colonial status were mostly students, but also many artisans and small merchants. Students at the Hardoons' private schools also demanded to be allowed to participate in the protests, which sparked fierce conflicts between school administrators, the two patrons, and the students. For Silas Hardoon, Shanghai's transimperial status had formed the basis of his own career both as an entrepreneur and as a patron of the arts. For the majority of the Chinese population, however, this very status represented a national humiliation that had been giving rise to vehement anti-imperialism and nationalism in Shanghai's urban society since the turn of the century. In 1923, finding no way to reconcile the traditional outlook of their schools with the anti-imperial, nationalist protest mood gripping Shanghai, the Hardoons eventually closed them.

Silas Hardoon and Luo Jialing had dedicated themselves at enormous financial cost to the promotion of classical Chinese culture. The legal and cultural freedom offered by the imperial territories of Shanghai was a central condition for this patronage, through which Hardoon and his wife, both of them border crossers between religions and cultures, wanted to become part of the emerging Chinese bourgeoisie. But in a society that continued to see him as a foreigner, the attempt ran up against barriers that could not be overcome with money. While he was, to

³⁰ Dabringhaus, "Geschichte Chinas," S. 81; Jürgen Osterhammel, Shanghai, 30. Mai 1925, "Die Chinesische Revolution," München 1997, 60–134.

³¹ Quoted after Betta, "Silas Hardoon," 185.

some extent, able to play the role of a neutral mediator in the political arena, there were limits to his acculturation in the Chinese milieu. Even his contemporaries were struck by the discord between the extreme focus on past culture in his patronage of Chinese arts and sciences, and his complete commitment to the present and the future as an entrepreneur. The combination of very different cultural and religious traditions, Buddhist, Jewish, and Chinese, that characterized Silas Hardoon's funeral service in July 1931 reflected in its ambivalence his life between empires and cultures, a life which eluded clear attributions.

The importance of imperial affiliation, which had been decisive for Hardoon's career as an entrepreneur, was also to shape the disputes over his inheritance. In his will, he had bequeathed his entire fortune to his wife. Shortly after the will was opened, seven alleged members of the Hardoon family from Baghdad appeared before the foreign minister of Iraq, which was under British control, and sued against its execution. They argued that Luo Jialing was not the legal wife of the deceased, that the eleven children were only adopted, and that most of the assets were due to relatives in Baghdad. The decisive argument of the Iraqi relatives was aimed at Hardoon's legal status. He had been an Ottoman subject and should be considered a citizen of Iraq after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. His status as a "British Protected Person," which also determined succession, violated not only Iraqi national law but also international regulations, since Hardoon had never lived in Great Britain, whose protection and right of succession he could therefore not claim posthumously. The relatives' interest in the inheritance of millions was cleverly linked with an argument that placed national affiliation to Iraq above the imperial status of "British Protected Person."³²

A legal dispute flared up which lasted several years, involving the government of Iraq, the Shanghai Jewish community, experts in international law, and British lawyers. They all had different answers to the question of the succession of a Jewish billionaire from Baghdad who had been married to a Chinese woman, lived in Shanghai for almost sixty years, and had been under British legal protection there. The British judge finally ruled that Luo Jialing was the rightful heiress of the property since Hardoon was indeed subject to British succession laws—a decision which underlined the validity of his imperial categorization as a "British Protected Person" and its precedence over national legal concepts. It was not until Communist rule that all relics of this transimperial biography disappeared: in 1953, the Chinese authorities moved the couple's burial place to the outermost city limits and built the House of Soviet-Chinese Friendship on the site of the Aili Gardens.

³² Stein, "Protected Persons," 101–104.

Conclusion: Rethinking Biographies as a Tool of Transimperial Research

Silas Hardoon's biography directly reflected the ambivalences and contradictions of a transimperial and semi-colonial space like Shanghai. A typical phenomenon for spaces of this kind was the overlapping of different imperial regimes and their legal orders, from which Hardoon as a migrant and member of a religious minority was able to benefit. From the personal protection offered by the imperial category of "British Protected Person" to the hybrid contract forms that made the Shanghai land market largely independent of nationality and ethnicity, to his financially merited membership of the British and French city councils: the institutional foundations of the semi-colonial city favored Hardoon's individual rise as an entrepreneur and allowed him a status that lay beyond the categories of colonized and colonizer.

At the same time, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious metropolis like Shanghai also offered cultural choices that suited Hardoon's individuality. His marriage to the Chinese-European, Luo Jialing, did not conform to the fixed rules of the Jewish diaspora. Hardoon's efforts to integrate himself into Chinese society distanced him even more from his Jewish co-religionists as well as from his British business partners and club co-members. His wealth enabled him to promote Chinese literature and culture and to found numerous schools. But with a focus on the Confucian tradition, Hardoon promoted a cultural conservatism that increasingly conflicted with the socialist and democratic mass protests in Shanghai in the 1920s.

The limits of his acculturation into the Chinese milieu proved equally clear on the political level after a certain point. Although his wealth allowed him to play a role as host and mediator between Chinese politicians, Chinese anti-imperialism and nationalism constituted a boundary that prevented further involvement. Hardoon did not become an acolyte of the Guomindang party, nor did he give up his imperial status of "British Protected Person" as his Chinese partners repeatedly urged him to. He simply remained a mediator and neutral observer in the political struggles of the Republican era.

In which respect does profiling this extraordinary biography help us to open up new methodological approaches and conceptual perspectives in the New Imperial History? In my view, four arguments speak for the potential of such biographies to yield new answers to the opportunities and limits of transimperial contexts.

1. Critical inquiries into imperial formations have greatly benefited from what we now call "imperial biographies": Tracing imperial lives across an empire yielded a new understanding of how imperial actors managed difference on the ground, how they represented empires, and above all how different imperial sites and

regions became interconnected through mobile agents.³³ Whether in continental or in maritime empires, the mobility of these actors remained pivotal to exploring the mechanisms of imperial rule between metropolises, colonies, and extra-imperial sites. As a result, mobile actors often seem to have benefited from the Empire, while losses and gains of non-mobile actors have been neglected in such re-conceptions of empires as networks or webs. Yet the overwhelming majority of imperial or colonial subjects were not mobile. Semi-colonial sites and transimperial spaces, however, created specific conditions under which even men and women who did not leave their homes faced choices as well as pressures from different imperial sides. Often, the inhabitants of such zones were forced to economically, politically, or culturally act in a transimperial manner which is why the complexity of such zones was also reflected in the agency of rather static life courses. Contextualizing biographies such as Silas Hardoon's can help us rediscover the analytical potential of rather stationary lives while also explaining the logics and mechanisms of transimperial space.

2. Correspondingly, such transimperial spaces often create conditions which undermine familiar binaries of colonizers and subalterns, of Western and non-Western agency. A plethora of political loyalties, ethnicities, and cultural choices, as Silas Hardoon encountered them in Shanghai, complicates any black and white analysis of identity and belonging. Confronted with such variety, the young Ottoman merchant decided to transcend his religious confines as much as his imperial affiliation and cultural origins. His choice was deliberately transimperial. He replaced his Ottoman citizenship with the protection of the British Empire, yet declined to assimilate into British culture, as many of his co-religionists did, and instead chose Chinese culture as his personal lifestyle. He also overcame his religious roots in Judaism by marrying a devoted Buddhist and sharing her religious priorities. Was he a Westerner, a religious outsider, or did he see himself more as a patron of Chinese culture? The categories of colonizer and colonized do not seem appropriate to adequately describe this transimperial biography. If anything, Hardoon's life brings the hybrid choices of individual actors to the fore, which actually point to the modernizing potential of transimperial settings, particularly in their urban form.

3. Further, Silas Hardoon's biography helps to contour more closely the consequences of multi-imperial agency on the ground. Rather than a single colonizing

³³ Lambert, "Concept," 30–33; Ulrike von Hirschhausen, "A New Imperial History? Programm, Potenzial, Perspektiven," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41 (2015), 734–37. See also Rolf and Aust, *Eliten*; Aust, Martin and Fritjof Benjamin Schenk, "Imperial Subjects." *Autobiographische Praxis in den Vielvölkerreichen der Habsburger, Romanovs und Osmanen im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2015.

government, there were multiple imperial powers at work in nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century Shanghai. The consequence of the treaty port system was that several municipal regimes were in power in close proximity, all competing with each other. This created a variety of overlapping or rival legal orders, hybrid financial instruments, and varying cultural offerings. Local agents, be they Westerners or certain groups of Chinese society, profited from the transimperial order economically and culturally. Instead of strengthening the colonizing force, the presence of several empires, including the Chinese, actually weakened any collective imperial might and made a stronger local agency viable. Silas Hardoon was able to profit economically and culturally from this transimperial constellation just as the Chinese native place associations, to cite another example, were able to take over political responsibility in the absence of a strong unified municipal force. A decisively transimperial context with the political fragmentation it entails seems to provide a broader arena of possibilities to a semi-colonized society than direct confrontation with one single imperial power allowed for.

4. Transimperial relations and ruptures are by no means to be found only along imperial borders, in wars, or monarchical festivities, to name just some familiar sites of such encounters.³⁴ Hardoon's life in Shanghai can serve as an example for areas where empires overlap, cooperate, confront each other or other states, and where statehood often became fragmentized beyond the familiar picture of empire or nation-state. Transimperial encounters can equally take place in a single site claimed by different imperial or national powers, or peopled by different colonized groups. China's treaty ports, in particular Shanghai, were spaces shaped by interactions, competitions, and cooperations between Western empires and the Chinese Empire and later Republic. India's princely states also became zones of contested sovereignty, where rulers and administrators presented alternatives to British colonial modernity, sometimes resulting in an overlapping of various imperial and non-imperial judicial systems.³⁵ Alternatively, transimperial connections could unfold equally well in one imperial center where colonized migrants came in and developed anti-imperial stands, as in Paris during the 1920s and 30s.³⁶ In Brussels, for example, several imperial governments founded the International Colonial Institute, where colonial practices of rule were discussed between 1893 and the

³⁴ Paulmann, Johannes, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg*, Paderborn 2000; Bühner, Tanja et al. (eds.), *Imperialkriege von 1500 bis heute. Strukturen, Akteure, Lernprozesse*, Paderborn 2011; Pešalj, Jovan et al. (eds.), *Borders and mobility control in and between empires and nation-states*, Leiden 2022.

³⁵ Eric Beverley, "Hyderabad, British India, and the World: Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty, c.1850–1950," Cambridge 2015.

³⁶ Michael Göbel, "Anti-imperial Metropolis. Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism," Cambridge 2015.

1980s, not the least to prevent colonies from becoming independent.³⁷ In light of these empirical realities, we need a new sensitivity for historic spaces that do not belong to one empire or nation-state, but rather lie at the crossroads of different political regimes or their manifestations. Restoring the local to transimperial questions can shed new light on the permeability and fluidity of imperial borders and boundaries and deconstruct any idea of empire as a totalizing power.

This chapter has aimed to sketch new avenues for transimperial research by introducing a formally colonized agent and his rather static life course in a both semi-colonial and transimperial treaty port in the early twentieth century. The margins of sovereignty were left to the Chinese government while Western imperial powers simultaneously exerted control through municipal regimes in Shanghai's Western concessions. In a semi-colonial setup such as this, even the biography of a rather static broker such as Silas Hardoon has the potential to shed light on the logics and mechanisms of transimperial contexts. The very existence of multiple powers rather than one single colonial authority produced a political fragmentation and a cultural variety that local agents used to enlarge their individual autonomy. Thus, the future agenda of the New Imperial History should include the restoration of non-mobile biographies to the exploration of transimperial contexts and their ambivalent modernizing potential.

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³⁷ Florian Wagner, *Colonial internationalism and the governmentality of empire, 1893-1982*, Cambridge 2022.

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