Professor Kirk W. Larsen’s study is a part of the recent research trend on the Qing Empire that places Qing imperialism in “the broader streams of world history,” and shows how “the Qing [like Western imperial powers] used a variety of sophisticated ideologies and practices to manage its large multi-ethnic empire” (7). However, Larsen observes that the late Qing Empire’s (1850-1910) relations with Chosŏn Korea remain “a calm backwater largely undisturbed by these wider currents of historiography,” (8) and that Qing policy toward Korea has been portrayed largely as an attempt to “reassert” its traditional “suzerainty” (9). Instead, Larsen contends that “the motivations, strategies, and successes (and failures)” of the Qing imperial ventures in Chosŏn Korea “should not be seen as exceptional or separated from the broader streams of regional and world history” (10).

In the introduction of this book, the author is kind enough to illustrate major concepts that inform his understanding of Qing imperialism in Korea. Instead of precisely defining “imperialism” as practiced by the imperial powers in general, Larsen enumerates several key characteristics of imperial theory and practice that help the reader to understand Qing imperialism in Korea. First, the intriguing concept of “informal empire” (11) makes possible the existence of imperialism without direct territorial occupation. In “informal empire,” as Jürgen Osterhammel contends, economic advantages are secured by means of unequal treaties and institutional arrangements as well as by political meddling and military coercion. Second, as commercial interests are one important motivation for imperialistic enterprises, the Chinese merchants from the treaty ports in China played a prominent role in “commercial warfare” (13) in Korea. Third, knowing quite well the power of treaties and international law, Qing policy makers used them to protect and promote the Qing’s commercial and security interests. Fourth, like its Western counterparts in other areas of the world, the Qing aggressively employed advanced technologies and inventions such as gunboats, telegraph lines, and so on in order to exercise its influences and interests in the Korean peninsula. Fifth, the informal empire imposed on East Asia was “multilateral imperialism,” (14) under which the imperial powers were guaranteed equal privileges through the most-favored-nation principle, while the victim countries’ territorial integrity and autonomy were protected, albeit in a severely weakened fashion.

This book has nine chapters, the last of which serves as a conclusion summarizing how multilateral imperialism met its end with the establishment of a protectorate in Korea. The first chapter titled “Pre-Nineteenth-Century Sino-Korean Relations” offers an overview of the long and complex relationship between Korea and China, which had become highly institutionalized by the time of the
Ming and Qing, up until the nineteenth century. Larsen points to “hierarchy and distance” (31) as the two governing principles of Ming- and Qing-Chosŏn relations, a period lasting for five centuries. Korea declared its inferior position and loyalty vis-à-vis the Chinese Empire through regular tributary missions to the imperial court. Korean motivations for participating in this tributary system of hierarchical interstate order were both pragmatic and ideological. The tributary submission was considered the best way to obtain security for Korea, and at the same time, as an obvious way to acknowledge and perform the dictates of the Neo-Confucian world order. On the other hand, the tribute system served as the best means to maintain distance from China and of avoiding Chinese interference, thus allowing Korea to enjoy autonomy.

Chapter two, “Nineteenth-Century Challenges and Changes,” examines both the internal and external challenges that ultimately transformed the conventional relationship between the Qing and Chosŏn. Within China, Larsen draws attention to two important developments: the establishment of systems and institutions for handling foreign trade and diplomacy and the rise of Li Hongzhang as the leading policy maker toward Korea. The ever growing contact and exchange between the Qing Empire and the Western maritime powers resulted in three important institutions, as Larsen points out, “the treaty-port system, the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, and the Zongli yamen,” (49) all of which were also relevant and influential in the interactions between Qing and Chosŏn. In the meantime, Meiji Japan imposed the unequal Kanghwa Treaty on Korea in 1876, and pursued a policy of monopolistic imperialism “designed to maximize Japanese access and privileges while keeping potential competitors away” (63). Alarmed by the aggressive actions of Japan, and concerned that Russia might act similarly, the moderate reformers, led by Li Hongzhang, in contrast to the hawkish Purist Party, took the “mainstream approach” (57) to persuade the Korean court to enter into treaties with Western powers and to strengthen the self-defense ability of Korea so as to counter Japanese and Russian advances into the Korean peninsula.

In chapter three, “Treaty and Troops: Bringing Multilateral Imperialism to Korea,” three critical events of 1882 that paved the way for ever deepening Chinese involvement with Korean affairs are treated: the mediation of Korea’s treaties with Western powers, the dispatch of troops to suppress the Korean soldiers’ mutiny, and the signing of Sino-Korean trade regulations. In the negotiation of Korea’s first treaty with the United States, Larsen perceptively notes the efforts of Li Hongzhang and Ma Jianzhong to protect the interests of Korea, such as tariff autonomy, apart from the unsuccessful endeavor to maintain China’s claim of suzerainty, thus making for “a somewhat kinder, gentler, albeit still unequal treaty” (78). While the conclusion of Korea’s treaty with the Western powers was purposefully intended to introduce multilateral imperialism into Korea by the Qing officials, Larsen convincingly argues that the Sino-Korean trade regulations, initially intended to promote Chinese commercial privileges, became instrumental in giving economic benefits to multilateral imperialism through “treaty renegotiation and tariff standardization” (91) based on the most-favored-nation principle, especially as pursued by Britain and Japan, thus turning the Chinese exclusive privileges into “the