Abstract  The Great Qing Imperial Post Office was set up in 1896, soon after the First Sino-Japanese War. It provided the first national postal service for the general public in Chinese history, and was a symbol of China’s increasing engagement with the rest of the globe. Much of the preparation for the launch was carried out by the high-ranking foreign staff of the Chinese Maritime Custom Service, an influential institution established after the first Opium War. With a mission to promote modernization and project Qing power, the Imperial Post Office (IPO) was established with a centrally-controlled set of unified methods and procedures, and its success was rooted in integration with the new railway network, a strategy at the heart of its ambitious plans for expansion. In order to root this new organisation effectively, the IPO adopted three critical strategies. First, incorporating the existing privately run native letter hongs, making use of their extensive distribution networks to facilitate delivery of inland mail. Second, a focus on what today would be called ‘branding’: emphasising the IPO’s Chinese credentials and character both to drive the general public to use the service, and to encourage local officials to collaborate in the creation of post offices and delivery networks. And third, enlarging national postal networks in parallel with the developing railway network, principally through putting pressure on the railway companies to agree exclusivity in the carriage of mail. The IPO succeeded in acquiring a monopoly in the use of rail for postal deliveries, which in turn allowed it to differentiate itself in competition with the native letter hongs. Through exploring the execution and impact of these strategies, this paper examines the history of postal service expansion to China’s interior and recounts how the IPO rapidly managed to establish itself across the whole country.

Dr. Weipin Tsai is a historian of modern China, focusing on processes of globalisation and localisation from the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. Her research interests are in cultural exchange and the institutional formations of Chinese modernity in a world context. Current research topics include the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, the Chinese Postal Service, modern Chinese cartography and Chinese journalism.

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome!