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Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750*. New York: Basic Books, 2012. Pp. ix, 515. ISBN 978-0-465-01933-5.

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In *Restless Empire*, Odd Arne Westad¹ (London School of Economics) approaches an often told story from a foreign policy perspective, demonstrating the central importance of outside influences—in ideas, commerce, and technology—to China’s mercurial modernization in the past two centuries. However, without ignoring internal factors, the author goes a step further in stressing critical European and American contributions to the development of a Chinese “hybrid culture”:

What drove me on was a need to present my students and other readers with a somewhat revisionist take on China’s foreign relations—one that stresses cultural transformations and hybrid identities as much as conflicts and nationalisms, and one that gives equal treatment to missionaries and diplomats, businessmen and revolutionaries, workers and bosses....While it has no overall hypotheses of single factors that have driven China’s interaction with the world, the book does emphasize the rapidity of change in the modern era and China’s unique ability to absorb such change.... At the center ... is the tale of China’s metamorphoses in the nineteenth century. It was a time when people who viewed themselves as Chinese transformed their lives and practices into those of participants in global forms of modernity (13-14).

Westad’s style of writing is accessible and directed at the nonspecialist. That said, a basic understanding of the last two hundred years of Chinese history will be beneficial to readers seeking a deeper knowledge of current Chinese foreign policy. The core of the book is its analysis of the two means by which foreign ideas have entered China. The most obvious is the Europeans, Americans, and Japanese who settled in China. The second is Chinese who emigrated overseas yet maintained strong bonds with their homeland. Westad rejects the “repeated truism that all change in China comes from within” (329).

Foreign presence in China long predates the modern era, but, before the nineteenth century, foreigners were sequestered from Chinese society. The Manchus of the Qing Dynasty took great pains to maintain their cultural and linguistic independence even from the Han masses they ruled. The decline of Qing power, which reached its nadir in the first Opium War (1839-42), allowed a rapid incursion of outsiders into the country. Generally, the resulting treaties, which included the creation of extraterritorial European enclaves in Chinese port cities, were examples of arrogant colonial aggression.

Westad prefers to concentrate on the positive results of the growing foreign presence in nineteenth-century China. Shanghai was the epicenter of a vibrant hybrid culture where businesses, peoples, and values mixed and adapted to local conditions and tastes. Cosmopolitan Shanghai had its conservative critics, who found it deplorably immoral and polluted by foreign cultures. Nonetheless, for Chinese who yearned to better their lot or just for something different, “Shanghai symbolized the kind of existence they wanted for themselves and their children—cleaner and more well-ordered than the actual city, perhaps, but with the dynamism, fun, and riches that was [sic] contained within it as nowhere else in China” (180). Shanghai, Macao, Hong Kong, and the other treaty ports funneled others’ culture, art, and technical know-how into China.

Another vital but usually ignored factor in creating hybrid communities in China was Western corporate law. Westad succinctly illuminates the impact on traditional Chinese business practices of Western legal notions of limited liability and modern banking. He observes that Chinese businessmen favored ownership by family members and trusted associates. This was a consequence of the lack of protections under

1. A professor of international history, he received the Bancroft Prize for *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2005). His fluency in Mandarin and frequent stays in the People’s Republic of China since 1980 have enabled him to observe firsthand the vast cultural changes there over the past thirty years.

Chinese law and the patriarchal character of Chinese civil society. “Only gradually did Chinese entrepreneurs learn how to expand without giving up control of their companies, or, if they wanted to, to give up control to maximize profits. Businessmen learned how to look after their shareholders after the company went public. In a country where legal protection was weak, such an application of Confucian principles was both necessary and profitable” (185).

Westad argues that the Chinese Communist Party—by building the Great Firewall of China—has worked hard to prevent foreign influences from undermining its power. But Chinese economic successes in Hong Kong and Singapore have made them compelling models. Further, Chinese living abroad have had an enormous and ever-increasing effect on mainland China in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Westad treats the insanity and isolation of Mao’s rule (late 1950s to 1976) as a bizarre and destructive aberration. It did not take long for Mao’s successors to reassert Chinese regional leadership in East Asia by rebuilding the economy along the lines of prosperous Chinese expatriate communities. “In the late 1970s Singapore was a powerhouse. It was in most respects everything Deng [Xiaoping] wanted China to become” (420).

In the book’s final section, Westad catalogs the evolving relations between post-Mao China and its regional neighbors; he discusses hotspots like Tibet and the South China Sea, and border tensions with India. He believes China’s authoritarian central government will endure for the foreseeable future, although Beijing will have to allow greater local autonomy to prevent civil unrest and stimulate economic growth.

The chief shortcomings of *Restless Empire* are its acultural approach and occasional self-contradictory statements. Writing of Mao’s crimes, Westad asserts that “there is no doubt that the willingness to sacrifice for the common good, a notion always strong in China, came into play among victims and perpetrators,” adding that “Because it was an Asian country, which in the Western mind predisposed it to collectivism, it was seen as succeeding in implementing Communism even in areas where the Soviets had failed” (323–24). But do such stereotypes exist only in the “Western mind?” Apparently not: “America challenges much of what *Chinese think of as their values*: tradition, family, and concern for the collective” (365, my emphasis). This qualification is odd, unless Chinese values can be something other than what the Chinese value.

Despite his expertise on the subject, Westad is strangely reticent in defining what exactly makes Chinese culture Chinese, even after centuries of contact with the West. He misses a wonderful opportunity to do so when he states that “Mao’s new dream was a China entirely purged of its past, its people a blank slate on which a superior form of modernity could be inscribed” (334) and goes on to compare Mao’s murderous megalomania with Stalin’s, Hitler’s, and Pol Pot’s. However, he does not much discuss which traditional Chinese cultural values survive and thrive to this day.

Restless Empire is a good source of information on the history of Chinese foreign policy and includes judicious views on the future of China’s relations with the outside world. I recommend it to readers, but not before they have studied a more general work on Chinese history.²

2. E.g., Ray Huang, *China: A Macro History*, rev. ed. (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1997); John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985* (NY: Harper, 1986); Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3rd ed. (NY: Norton, 2012); and, above all, Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1992).