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Odd Arne Westad

RESTLESS EMPIRE

China and the world since 1750

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One page of China's newly issued passports features a watermark map of the country. The map looks boring beside the muscular images of eagles and cowboys inside my US passport, but it has provoked formal protests from many of China's neighbours. The Philippines and Vietnam have responded to the map's claim to islands in the South China Sea by refusing to stamp Chinese passports when issuing visas. Indian diplomats, troubled by the map's inclusion of disputed Himalayan territory, have gone a step further, stamping visas with a retaliatory map more to their liking.

In *Restless Empire*, Odd Arne Westad begins his story of China's relations with foreign countries, goods, ideas and people in 1750, when the Manchu-led Qing dynasty held sway over far more territory than the People's Republic of China governs (and claims on maps) today. The Manchu emperors presided over an expanding multi-cultural empire that encompassed Mongolia and parts of Central Asia and Russia. The Qing's longevity (1644–1911) stands in stark contrast to the rapid political changes and turbulence of the twentieth century. Westad attributes this to the dynasty's cultural inclusivity and outward-looking approach: expansionist in Central Asia, treaty-based with Russia, and focused on trade with coastal Asia.

Weakened by internal rebellions and imperialist aggression in the 1800s, the Qing's willingness to adopt foreign ideas and technologies sparked a "remarkable comeback" in the 1870s and 1880s. Sino-foreign hybridity even carried over to Qing civil service exams. Section one of the dynasty's last national-level exam, held in 1902, asked candidates to write an essay on "The proposals of Liu Guangzu (1142–1222) for stabilizing the Southern Song dynasty". Section two featured prompts on "The Japanese use of Western models for educational institutions" and "The industrial basis of wealth and power".

Similarly telling nuggets pepper the narrative. Many details are drawn from the work of other historians, but some come from the author's original research in archives and libraries. Westad has a laudable grasp of a wide variety of sources, from obscure early-1900s periodicals to recent doctoral dissertations.

Westad celebrates cosmopolitanism and hybridity while damning close-minded nationalism and insularity. Neither the Nationalists nor the Communists look impressive by this measure (especially when compared with the Qing), but Westad clearly prefers Chiang Kai-shek's foreign outlook from the 1920s through the 1940s over Mao Zedong's after 1949. According to Westad, not only was Chiang "never a fascist"; his reluctance to stand up against Japanese military aggression in the early 1930s "made eminent sense". Chiang – not the Communists – deserves credit for restoring China's sovereignty by gradually working to eliminate foreign concessions. In Westad's view, Mao's Communists took over the mainland in 1949 not because they had popular support, a smart strategy, or effective policies, but because the Nationalists committed military blunders and alienated people. The Communists waltzed into the vacuum, "open society" ended, and the "dark decades" of isolation under Mao began. It is disappointing to see such overly simplistic Cold War-style binaries coming from an eminent expert on the global Cold War.

When Westad writes that "many Chinese" in the Mao era longed for connections with the outside world beyond exchanges with the Soviet Union, North Korea, Vietnam and Albania, he really means "many urban educated Chinese". More than 80 per cent of China's population during the Mao period was rural. Foreign contact and ideas were not irrelevant to villagers' lives, but were not at the top of their list of worries. This is still the case.

One day in 2005, when I was conducting interviews in a village only an hour's drive from Beijing, I made the mistake of waiting for the bus just as middle school students were going home for the day. The teenagers surrounded me, shouting, pointing and wanting to talk. I was the first foreigner many of them had seen in person. I enjoyed the encounter but knew what was likely to happen next, so after a few minutes I walked down the road to escape the hubbub. But the local police station had heard the noise about a foreigner. A patrol car pulled up next to me. Two officers asked who I had spoken with in the village, told me that "for my safety" I should leave immediately and not come back, and finally returned my passport after having examined it with great curiosity.

Any passport, an American one with an imposing Liberty Bell or a Chinese one with provocative map, would have been a fascinating novelty to the village cops. To understand why the map that appears in the Chinese passport has angered diplomats outside China, Westad's perceptive accounts of the Sino–Indian War of 1962 and of more recent squabbles over islands in the South China Sea are essential. But his urban bias and Cold War lens have caused him to fall short in his attempt to represent the views and experiences of "many Chinese".