
Synthesis is serious work in the right hands. In the course of a stellar career William T. Rowe has shown himself a master of several genres, though no one can mistake his overriding preoccupation with serious, systematic, disciplined social history. *China’s Last Empire* is Rowe’s first venture into synthetic survey history, and it is remarkable. In a trim volume he has managed not only to produce an effective survey narrative, but also to provide a rich flow of historiographical commentary. The result is a book neither wholly committed to narrative nor to analysis. It balances deftly between, making it both provocative for specialists in Qing history and accessible to those undergraduates who may still prefer text to graphics.

In a very short introduction, Rowe reviews the major trends in the writing of the history of the Qing, refreshingly beginning not with John King Fairbank but with the ‘dynastic cycle’ concept inherited from Chinese historiography. The flow from Fairbank’s ‘traditional’/‘modern’ divide of 1842, Paul Cohen’s ‘discovering history in China’, Jonathan Spence and Frederic Wakeman’s ‘Ming-Qing’ and ‘late imperial’ innovations, and an ‘Inner Asian turn’ to a contemporary ‘Eurasian turn’ is succinctly sketched. The threshold established in the book is an essential one for any reader, as Rowe makes it clear that his intention is to enter the field as one writing in a discursive field in which ‘sinicization’ is no longer regarded as an important tool for understanding the progress of China’s cultural, social, and political history, and in which the military expansion of successive empires based in China is no longer seen through the somewhat charismatic haze that earlier historians had cast over it. Quite apart from its content, the introduction sets the tone for the book, which allows a historiographical meta-story to develop in the canopy of a more straightforward, utilitarian narrative. In the text as well as in footnotes, Rowe allows the reader to overhear the conversation of historians—from Chen Zilong and Gu Yanwu to contemporary historians from within and without China—on causes and effects, on paradigms and contingencies. Even Rowe’s own previous findings are subject to modification in the developing colloquy.

More than being a work circumscribed by the conventions of our current state of revisionism, however, *China’s Last Empire* is a synthesis based upon Rowe’s own commitment to making China’s history intelligible through
the standard terms of modern social history, and it very reasonably fea-
tures much of Rowe's own work on trade, on commerce and urban life, on
‘guilds’, on land and law, on crime and corruption. Though readers are not
force-fed new interpretations of the period’s history, certain explanations
are implied. The source of much of Qing instability, Rowe suggests, was
the underfunded and undersized state in relation to the growing number
of hungry combinations of officials, merchants, farmers, and criminals as
well as the eighteenth-century Qing appetite for continuing conquests in
Central and Inner Asia; the cause of the small state size, apparently, was the
Kangxi emperor’s freezing of the land taxation rate in 1713.

On the first point Rowe is correct; on the second point, however, a more
expansive view would yield other explanations. While Rowe consistently
narrates the weak state's vulnerability to manipulation and challenge by
rising organizations with a local or particularistic orientation, the degree
to which the state as designed in the Kangxi years was dependent upon
local cohesion and, to some degree, initiative is not a strong thread in
the story. Rebellion is, partly as a consequence, treated as the product of
a failed plan of government, not of a plan that may have succeeded too
well. There is no typology of rebellions, all being narrated from a shared
explanatory template. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) goes by in a
comparative flash, which one fears will not permit students to understand
the profound significance of this long and almost uniquely destructive civil
war. And the aftermath of the war is perhaps the most enigmatic portion
of the book. In Rowe's narrative, the Qing empire survived, in a substan-
tial sense, the Taiping war and went on to a meaningful ‘restoration’. The
empire dissolves under the pressures of imperialism (including Japanese),
and nativism.

Many readers will be perplexed by a framing of Qing history that leads
with fresh concepts of imperial construction and the creation of a long-term
conquest state, then invokes venerable paradigms such as ‘secular change’
and ‘cyclical decline’ in analysis of the crowding of difficulties in the late
Qianlong and early Jiaqing years, and concludes with narrative tropes that
would seem more probable in the hands of Fairbank or Mary Wright.1 Part
of the explanation lies in Rowe’s judicious approach to revisionism overall;
he is not one to judge the credibility of an interpretation by its vintage. In

1) Mary Clabaugh Wright, The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T’ung-chich Resto-