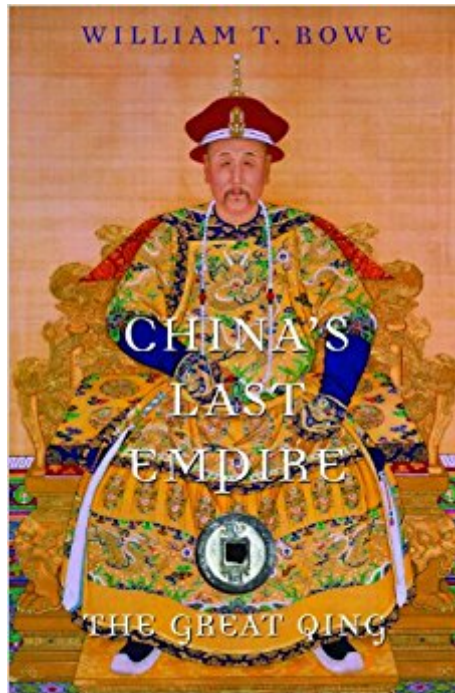




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China's Last Empire (History Of Imperial China)



Synopsis

In a brisk revisionist history, William Rowe challenges the standard narrative of Qing China as a decadent, inward-looking state that failed to keep pace with the modern West. This original, thought-provoking history of China's last empire is a must-read for understanding the challenges facing China today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A well written and thoughtful overview of the last Chinese empire, the Qing. This is not a conventional narrative survey. Rowe's approach is to concentrate on major structural themes - the formation and organization of the Qing state, social structure, economy, interactions with the Western world, and then to trace changes in these features across the history of the Qing Empire. While not a conventional chronologic narrative, Rowe skillfully folds in the important political history, focusing on major transitions - the formation of the Empire, the 18th century zenith, the traumas of the 19th century, and the collapse of the Imperial state. Given the length of the period covered, the large secondary literature, and the complexity of the topics covered, this is an impressive

performance. Rowe emphasizes a number of particularly interesting points that have emerged over the past generation of Qing studies. One is the creative nature of Qing state formation. Far from blindly adopting Chinese governmental structures, Rowe shows the Qing as creatively combining Chinese-Confucian traditions with other traditions to form a polyglot imperial state with the Imperial court at the center. The Qing expanded China to its present borders. While not discussed extensively, Rowe sets Qing state development in the context of "early modern" empires, Muscovy - Ottoman Turkey, the British empire - that emerge in approximately this period. Rowe also emphasizes the relatively modest nature of the Qing state. From the early 18th century on, the Qing limited taxation and the size of the imperial bureaucracy.

Note that there are more reviews on the Hardcover version's page. I came to this book having a decently thorough knowledge of Chinese history and having read the five "History of Imperial China" books leading up to it. I was not especially interested in the Qing, and this uniquely exciting treatment of the subject enabled me to understand why, and why I had been led to misunderstand this historical period. Rowe reviews the latest research, the research trends over decades since Wakeman changed things and Spence started his Qing journal in graduate school, while also showing how Western prejudices played their part in creating a hugely oversimplified stereotype: the stagnant Qing ruled by its inadequately modern rulers. In some ways I can measure a Chinese history book now by how many pages I can read without getting overwhelmed and needing to stop for the day in order to absorb what I have read. By that standard, this book has REALLY taken me a lot longer than I expected. The whole series has an amazing topical approach that each volume pursues with various merits, but in this, Rowe's volume, there is an intellectual excitement and a sense of the greater underlying story that I encourage anyone to allow themselves to engage with, with an open mind. China is vast and if you don't want to feel overwhelmed I cannot recommend reading any GOOD books about China. So much of the fun investigating China is the scope, the consistent framework, coming at familiar pieces of it all in unfamiliar ways, the regional and ethnic diversity and their endless implications, and of course the amazing efforts of Chinese civil servants who help Western readers like me NOT feel sorry for ourselves. Wow they had it hard. There is a 3D aspect to the Qing.

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