

*Jürgen Osterhammel*

**China und die Weltgesellschaft. Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in unsere Zeit**

München: C.H. Beck, 1989, pp xvi, 607 S., hardcover, DM 84,-

To even the most superficially informed contemporary on some benighted shores of the Far West there could be scant doubt that Chinese civilisation is one of the world's splendid monuments to human genius and industry. The historical grandeur of "Cathay" - give and take a quibble here or there - should admit of little debate and should in turn imbue the modern denizens of the former "Celestial Empire", or "Middle Kingdom", with that serene confidence in one's own solidity which only a long and glorious tradition can confer.

Leafing through a present-day *vademecum* for the spiritual edification of the citizens of the People's Republic of China<sup>1</sup> we find, however, for the readers' instruction - and not least the young ones according to the preface - under the entry "national self-respect" that "the Chinese people are a great (*wei-ta*) people with a high degree of national self-respect (*min-tsu tzu-tsun-hsin*)". The news on the wireless or the papers will report some Chinese official statement protesting against a foreign government's policy in regard to China which includes passages such as "the Chinese people have stood up [scil in 1949 when Mao Tse-tung pronounced words to this effect at the founding ceremony of the People's Republic in T'ien-an-men Square] and will never give in to ..." and young Shanghai hopefuls who aspired to long-term study in Australia unfurled banners proclaiming that "Chinese cannot be hoodwinked" when protesting in front of the Australian Consulate General last year against new visa regulations adopted by Canberra.

The foreign observer may be forgiven a certain surprise at the patriotic tetchiness, a shrillness altogether incongruous with the expected self-assured poise of those who, along with modern Jewry, are the only inheritors of an unbroken cultural tradition spanning its very beginnings as well as the modern era while all around are "mere" derivations, like contemporary Christendom or Islam whose primeval foundations have long receded into remote history intelligible only to those versed in recondite skills such as knowledge of classical Latin or Greek or cuneiform script. By contrast, any modern Chinese youth with a sound high school education can make good sense out of most of the Chinese literature produced during the time of the Punic Wars.

There are causes for such nationalist chips on many Chinese shoulders: The mighty Kingdom of Cathay whose vastness and wealth had awed Marco Polo and, which, as the mirage of a perfect secular commonwealth, had captivated the European philosophers of the Enlightenment was to be bullied, starting with the Opium War of 1840-42, by a succession of Western, and later Japanese, gunboat people whose men-of-war spewed fire and cannon ball on Chinese coasts in defence of "free" trade and its lucre - not least the trade in opium which founded the fortunes of many a trading house now sedately prosperous in XX-century fin-de-siècle Hong Kong. As Palmerstonian do-gooders of many colours went

1 Sixiang xiuyang xiao cidian, Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1985, p 81.

about their business of "battering down the Great Wall of China" (as Messrs Marx & Engels would metaphorically have it in their "Manifesto") fulfilling the civilising mission of Capital among the "heathen Chinee" whom the Western world came to know to be "peculiar", the quintessentially satirical magazine "Punch" delighted its metropolitan readership with the finding that "John Chinaman a rogue is born, the laws of truth he holds in scorn"<sup>2</sup> and the valiant Kaiser, not to be denied his place in the limelight, contributed his more intemperate rhetoric about sempiternally securing German min-tsü tsün-hsin in China when seeing off at Bremerhaven in July 1900 the expeditionary force sent to help relieve the Peking legations during the Boxer Rebellion.

Communist victory in the civil war with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang and the establishment of the People's Republic on the Chinese mainland concluded over one-hundred years of foreign military incursion and attempts at economic domination, domestic rebellion, mostly unbidden Christian mission, warlordism, Japanese aggression and, after Japan's defeat, more fratricidal conflict. But mainland China's advance, by leaps and bounds, towards "modernity" still keeps her people locked in a laborious effort to "escape from predicament", in a self-conscious struggle with the impedimenta of a heritage often viewed by many Chinese as a burden intermittently dragging the country back into bouts of autarchic mismanagement or sheer obscurantism as during the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" instigated by the late Mao Tse-tung.

Dr. Osterhammel examines the long period of China's integration, or absence of it, into modern "international society" and its global division of labour from Ch'ing China's Indian summer of self-sufficient independence during the reign of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor (1736-95) to the eve of atavistic repression against the students of T'ien-an-men Square in 1989. The study centres on the twin themes of diplomacy and economy in China's secular grappling with the encroaching outside powers, from the dégringolade of the Sino-centric system of tribute diplomacy in the wake of initial border treaties with Tsarist Russia, to bellicose Pax Britannica and the informal empire established by the West on the back of a malleable imperial government, through the "open-door policy" and "spheres of influence" towards the fall of the dynasty in 1911 and the cataclysmic rebirth of functioning national government after the Second World War. The author judiciously eschews any attempts to read the period under investigation through the prism of all-encompassing grand theories purporting to explain definitively why, for instance, China had "failed" to take off, as the leading Western economies had, into a fully capitalist stage. He rather tests such theories on various branches of trade and industry, such as foreign trade in Chinese silk, the cotton textiles sector or foreign investment in railways and mines, to highlight their achievements as well as their deficiencies. Equally, one finds refreshingly little in the book about the "nature" or "origins" of the Communist revolution but much that is illuminating about specific outside attempts, and their frequent failure, to dominate Chinese social processes or

2 Cited in: *Raymond Dawson, The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*, London: OUP, 1967, p 133.

to tap the reputedly boundless potential of the gigantic Chinese market. Increasing foreign economic relations did not always mean heightened external control or displacement of domestic enterprise in China, before or after 1911 - the planters of Kenya or Malaya or the colonial overlordship of sundry East India companies chartered for conquest and plunder had no equivalent in China. Domination through large overseas concerns remained the exception, whatever the conspicuousness of such pervasive organisations as the cigarette manufacturer BAT (British-American Tobacco Corporation), some foreign oil companies or certain foreign-invested railways. Traditional home producers continued to exist, retaining large shares of such markets as textiles, but foreign toeholds in key sectors do seem to have stunted the growth of modern indigenous enterprise even when not eliminating traditional industry. More incisively, successive Chinese governments, since the T'ai-p'ing and Boxer Rebellions in particular, had increasingly lost their ability to raise revenue through regular taxation to modernise the country's economy and administration. the lost war against Japan of 1894/95 and the Boxer débâcle in 1900 provoked new spates of reparations and indemnity payments. During this period also certain foreign bank loans were pressed upon China by banks which took advantage of the imperialist preponderance of their own home governments to secure for themselves financial conditions far beyond what commercial dealings would have permitted. Various important Chinese sources of tax revenue were pledged to these banks as security and this financial amputation may have sped the Ch'ing régime even faster towards the extinction which overtook it in 1911. It was only in 1931 when large-scale and sustained military aggression by Japan established on Chinese soil the puppet state of Manchoukuo as yet another handmaiden of Tokyo's interests in Northeast Asia besides already colonised Korea that the old-style "spheres of influence" and the policy of "informal empire" were replaced by colonial rule *tout court*. The diversity of Sino-foreign contacts and conflicts in China's modern history emerges distinctly from Dr. Osterhammel's study, and this emphasis on the diversity of impacts seems well placed today when the "Four Modernisations" are again reshaping the country quite unevenly, with future trends seeming much beyond the province of generalising theories of development. While the tortuous "rise of modern China" may not lend itself to easy formulae, Dr. Osterhammel's elegant dissertation has certainly demonstrated the value of analytic concepts with a prudently measured range. It is to be hoped that in the area of Chinese historical studies in Germany Dr. Osterhammel's cool but empathetic voice will continue to be heard.

*Wolfgang Kessler*