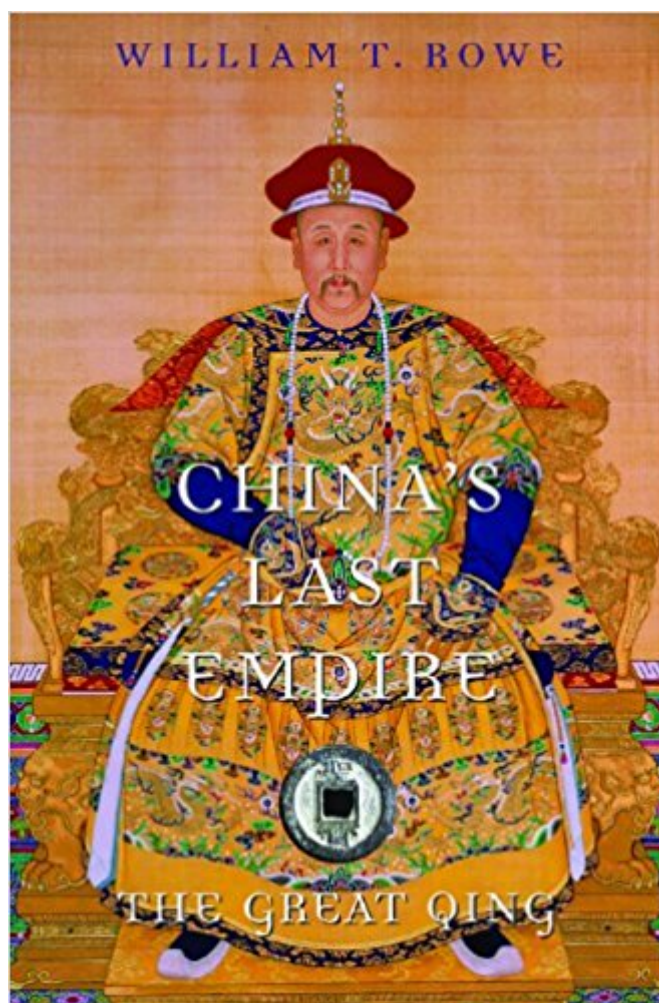


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China's Last Empire: The Great Qing (History Of Imperial China)



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. The Great Qing was the second major Chinese empire ruled by foreigners. Three strong Manchu emperors worked diligently to secure an alliance with the conquered Ming gentry, though many of their social edicts—especially the requirement that ethnic Han men wear queues—were fiercely resisted. As advocates of a “universal” empire, Qing rulers also achieved an enormous expansion of the Chinese realm over the course of three centuries, including the conquest and incorporation of Turkic and Tibetan peoples in the west, vast migration into the southwest, and the colonization of Taiwan. Despite this geographic range and the accompanying social and economic complexity, the Qing ideal of “small government” worked well when outside threats were minimal. But the nineteenth-century Opium Wars forced China to become a player in a predatory international contest involving Western powers, while the devastating uprisings of the Taiping and Boxer rebellions signaled an urgent need for internal reform. Comprehensive state-mandated changes during the early twentieth century were not enough to hold back the nationalist tide of 1911, but they provided a new foundation for the Republican and Communist states that would follow. 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

In a fine, well-written study, Rowe brings the latest scholarship in Qing history to a wide audience. This book reflects a lifetime of reading in the field, and is written in the fluent manner of an accomplished and very successful author. Responsible and judicious, it makes an important contribution to our understanding of Chinese history. (R. Kent Guy, University of Washington) Here is a new narrative for Chinese history. It is based on the path-breaking scholarship of a small body of principally American scholars who have shown that after the non-Han Manchus conquered the Ming in 1644, traditional China was gradually replaced by something very different. This meant that the previous explanations, emanating from the Harvard school, led by the persuasive John King Fairbank, which emphasized a succession of essentially unchanging dynasties, must be abandoned...In short, as Professor Rowe sets out in this important book, "the inward-looking and hermetic Celestial Empire" has vanished and something far more interesting has come convincingly before us. (Jonathan Mirsky Times Literary Supplement 2009-12-04) A very fine book, drawing on the best new scholarship on this pivotal period in Chinese history. (K. E. Stapleton Choice 2010-03-01) This series on China, brilliantly overseen by Timothy Brook, is a credit to Harvard University Press. Above all, it encourages us to think of China in different ways. (Jonathan Mirsky Literary Review 2010-11-01)

William T. Rowe is John and Diane Cooke Professor of Chinese History at Johns Hopkins University. Timothy Brook is Professor of History and Republic of China Chair at the University of British Columbia.

This is sadly the last book in Harvard's "History of Imperial China" series, edited by Timothy Brook. It is too bad there are no further empires following the Qing, so that the saga could continue. Although the series featured several different authors, it has held together as a whole stylistically and artistically. Most of the previous features are well represented in this present volume. Timothy Rowe in large does a good job in under 300 pages encapsulating the past and current historiography of the Qing. In the 20th century seen as a failed state, stagnant and insular, the Qing are re-envisioned as an expansionist multi-ethnic corporation in the new millennium. Rowe takes us through the Ming conquest narrative, the "golden age", the Taiping rebellion, and the imperialist and republican challenges. There are thematic chapters on the government and economy interspersed

within the chronology. Noticeably absent are the chapters on religion, family and literature that figured prominently in previous volumes. This is unfortunate as these chapters transformed the series from standard textbooks into something more holistic. This last installment is nonetheless well written and up to date. If it not quite up to the breadth of the prior books, it is still worth reading if you've come this far and don't otherwise know how the story ends. Incidentally, if you consider together all six volumes of roughly 350 pages each you have a combined work of over 2000 pages. This is not an inconsequential contribution to recent surveys available.

Once in a long time, comes a history that departs from the unpalatable choice of over-specialized/detailed research topic versus unoriginal/padded general overview. William Rowe's survey volume on the Qing Dynasty is happily one such volume. Rowe has not only thoroughly digested the ever-accumulating [and now fairly massive] specialized research on the period, but also fashioned a new conception of the dynasty that deserves the attention both general readers and specialists. As a past history major, I am usually quite cynical about those who talk of history as a "building block process" in which the specialists lay the bricks and the generalists make the buildings. But in this case, Rowe has built a fine structure that also does honor to those whose contributions he utilizes. This is now the finest general volume on the Qing and is not to be missed.

Well written, beautifully illustrated....Will revisit it many times.

This was an enjoyable series.

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. It is richly documented. It includes interactions with the West and people who played a part in the 20th century. I can advocate this book as a panorama to anyone willing to have fun reading history. For anyone who wants to dig deeper, its footnotes and bibliography provide extensive guidance, explaining what one could gain from reading various Spence or Wakeman titles as well as dozens of other specimens of the academic literature. Page for page, it's a bargain and a good read.

Not many books deal with the rise and fall of the Qing Dynasty. A little light on pure history, and more oriented towards analysis. For instance, there is no deep dive into the reign of Cixi. If you "Look Inside the Book" at the Table-of-Contents, you will see that it is mostly broken down by different concepts, and only loosely unfolds chronologically. I've read through around a dozen big, mainstream books on Modern Chinese History, and this one has by far the best, and clearest overview of how the Manchus arose, and managed to take over the biggest country on Earth. On my first time through I found it tough to read at times. The author sometimes uses really long sentences where you have to stop mentally break them down to understand what they actually mean. HOWEVER, there is a lot of good information in this book that I haven't found elsewhere, and unlike many books, I never have reason to doubt the truthfulness or intellectual-honesty of the text. I first read through this book about 3 months ago, but I am constantly browsing back through it all the time now, and I no longer find it difficult to read anymore. I strongly recommend this book for anyone interested in this time & place in history.

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