

Book Reviews

Asia

Negotiating asymmetry: China's place in Asia

Edited by ANTHONY REID and ZHENG YANGWEN

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This book, which was prepared by a research group working on 'Southeast Asia China interactions', contains nine studies and a general introduction by Anthony Reid. It deals, in essence, with China's role in Far Eastern politics and history, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. Most articles depart from what may be perceived as a kind of dichotomy between the Westphalian system of international relations on the one hand, and China's traditional code of viewing and dealing with the outside world on the other. The latter is associated with a certain degree of asymmetry, hence the title of the book. This asymmetry has in fact not remained static but has been moving through various stages of development and interpretation — in China as well as in other countries.

In the introduction, reference is made to two earlier works – J.K. Fairbank's *The Chinese world order* (1968) and M. Rossabi's *China among equals* (1983) – both of which are seen as 'predecessors' to the present collection. However, whether *Negotiating asymmetry* will ever become an equally essential item for our understanding of China's position in recent history, I venture to doubt. Some articles in this book do shed fresh light on certain issues, it is true, but, with only a few exceptions, they are mostly characterised by 'Western' modes of thinking, or rather, by Anglo-American ways of looking at the 'other'. Differently put, the complex political semantics around which *Negotiating asymmetry* is built suggests the existence of objective parameters, but these parameters in themselves are, ultimately, derived from 'images' bred, refined and whitewashed in the 'Occident'. More directly, apart from the fact that several sections of this collection follow a journalistic sound track, echoing public opinion, or what 'Western' ears may be accustomed to hear these days, most pieces seem to convey one simple message: China's self-perception, as rooted in its own past, and its more recent political manoeuvres should be closely watched, by all means, because Beijing might become a dangerous player in the years to come.

Even the Chinese contributors to this book – I exclude the insightful paper by Shi Anbin – seem to worry about this point. Wang Gungwu, wrapping his concerns in a package on the rhetoric of 'family and friends', remains – as usual – very diplomatic on the issue (but his views are clear), while Zheng Yangwen, currently based in the UK, is much more direct. She furnishes a very detailed discussion of the unequal treaties, telling us, *en passant*, about the 'positive' sides of the opium trade and of China's misery in the nineteenth century, and rounds off her paper by comparing modern Chinese patriotism with a bomb that can blast at any time. I should better not comment on that.

Patriotism, if overdrawn, may lead to awkward forms of nationalism, it is true, but in order to be more precise on such issues, clear definitions must be furnished, and that, I am afraid, was not always done. There are, I should like to add, a number of non-English 'Western' publications on the theme of China's 'nationalism', but these did not get cited. This brings me to yet another point. The concept of 'Western'/'West' is currently debated by Chinese and other scholars, who have made proposals to overcome this (rather outdated) category, or, at least, to split it up into more acceptable 'subunits'. Yet, by and large, and somewhat disappointingly, 'Western' is a term still instrumentalised by many of 'us' in highly unreflected ways. Implicitly, and contrary to what I had expected, this also seems to be the case with *Negotiating asymmetry*.

Although the present book looks at the early twentieth century more than anything else, as was said, it also X-rays the present and alludes to the future. China's quest for international recognition, (former) territorial aspirations, and the wish to improve her status – all this gets addressed, from different perspectives, but now and then – paradoxically – the discussion does not really move beyond the purely conceptual, or general. Military issues, to be sure, are rarely quoted. The fact that, currently, a vivid discussion is led on *haiquan* ('sea power'), naval affairs, and the control/domination of the oceans in the twenty-first century, does not seem to have aroused the analytical curiosity of anyone. No one furnishes a systematic chapter on recent debates about the applicability of China's traditional 'values' to the larger global context, partly in substitution of Anglo-American dominance and politico-legal 'categories'. Can such a book be placed in line with Fairbank and Rossabi?

Needless to add, the nature of the articles in this collection varies tremendously. That also applies to the use of sources. While, for example, the contribution by Junko Koizumi (China-Siam, late nineteenth/early twentieth century) is well researched, the paper by Prasenjit Duara, on India–China relations, cites a few works only. Recent books on this second topic – for example, by Amardeep Athwal, Gerhard Schweizer, B.R. Deepak, Madhavi Thampi, Peter O. Oberender, David Smith, L. Alan Winters and Sahid Yusuf, Bill Emmott and so on – may not matter very much, but perhaps readers might have liked to see some of these titles mentioned in the notes. Other observations pertain to 'technical points': occasionally, one finds inconsistencies in the transcription of Chinese characters and in some cases the characters are missing or wrong. Even the short explanation of the cover illustration would require amendments.

In spite of these (unimportant?) shortcomings *Negotiating asymmetry* makes interesting reading. Above all, we learn how China was, is, or may be perceived by its southern and eastern neighbours, depending on different viewpoints, intentions and other criteria. The opposite view – how China saw and sees herself, and her Asian friends – is also presented, but often through an outside filter. It transpires from these layers of the discussion to what extent the enormously flexible 'tribute' system – and the never-ending quest for harmony – can be distorted in the minds of worried 'Western' warriors. I am sure Kangxi and the Jesuits were more relaxed: they simply followed two words — *jingtian*.

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