

## Book Reviews

*Empire and Righteous Nation: 600 Years of China–Korea Relations*

ODD ARNE WESTAD

Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021

ix + 205 pp. \$29.95; £23.95

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From 2016 to 2019, as China's relationship with North Korea endured significant turbulence, the historian Odd Arne Westad was tracing the details as they developed. In search of deeper currents underneath the surface, Westad presented a series of lectures at Harvard University in 2017 in which he laid out the broader theme of Sino-Korean relations dating back to the Ming–Qing era. (The lectures are available on YouTube, running about six hours and incorporating commentary from Kirk Denton and Sung Yoon Lee.) Westad then brought his lecture manuscripts to Beijing, where he laboured to turn them into a book whilst occupying a Boeing-endowed chair at Schwartzman College at Tsinghua University. As he explored the specifically Korean geometries and flavours of Beijing's Wudaokou and Haidian districts, Westad was able to consult with many luminaries in the field, including Shen Zhihua, and even test-ran some ideas at the Beijing University Department of History.

Glimmers of this elite experience shine through in the resultant book, *Empire and Righteous Nation*, and the presence of Westad's conversation partners give the closing and highly contemporary segment of this book more than a short burst of think-tank energy. His interlocutors are variously described as “one observer of Korean affairs in Beijing” (p. 152), “a Chinese acquaintance in the foreign policy establishment, who also happens to be a relative hard-liner on Sino-American affairs” (pp. 169–170) or simply a “former top official” (pp. 145, 192). Drawing from these anecdotal perspectives, Westad illustrates interactions between North Korea and China that galled the PRC (pp. 145, 192), makes confident assessments of the mentality of Chinese military leaders (p. 158) and even conveys the views of the PRC's intelligence community (p. 146) toward North Korea. Westad acknowledges diversity among scholars and politicians towards North Korea but arrives at a conclusion which will surprise few readers: “[T]he countless hours I have spent discussing Korea with officials in Beijing have convinced me that the paternalistic view of a unique Chinese responsibility for Korea is alive and well in the Chinese capital” (p. 165). Fortunately, the *longue-durée* perspective does not devolve into Belt-and-Road panegyrics (indeed, mercifully, there is only one BRI reference in the entire volume), nor does Westad go the full Timothy Snyder by painting Xi Jinping as a neo-tributary authoritarian or pitch the book as some kind of roadmap for the vital business of resisting Chinese foreign policy in its every sinew.

Chapter one makes some broader points about the incongruity of reading imperial histories through nation-state paradigms, swims about in the style of Timothy Brook in some literature on comparative empires and makes a few basic points about the salience of neo-Confucianism. The discussion of cultural interplay and connectivity is sensitively written and includes a few nice details, such as the 16th-century Beijing scholar (quoted via the work of Joshua Van Lieu) who observes “People from Chosŏn really like books” (p. 45). The periodization as promised in the title is inevitably smudged, but a focus on the Ming emerges and Westad serves up the

main conflict in the chapter, otherwise known as the Imjin War (1592–1598). The war is set up primarily as a prelude to Qing rule, and Westad recommends JaHyun Kim Haboush's book *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation* (Columbia University Press, 2016) multiple times. The personalities involved get relatively short shrift; the Wanli Emperor at least arrives via some block quotes and a citation to work written or edited by Oxford University's Jay Lewis. The physical compactness and beauty of the book occasionally has its downside, in that the author largely leaves the distillation of structural transformation to the reader amid the nimble excitement of bibliographical attainments.

Chapter two places Westad in more familiar terrain, covering 1866–1992. Li Hongzhang gets bumped from the stage in favour of the more narratively efficient Yuan Shikai in Seoul. Again, some wonderful fragments appear in this chapter, some of them derived from Yuanchong Wang's research on tributary relations. Westad moves with admirable dexterity through previously mastered topics like the Chinese civil war, although his comment that the Korean War "radicalized CCP policies, so that campaigns against real or perceived enemies intensified and became more brutal and long-lasting" (p. 119) seems to beg for a counterfactual argument.

The concluding chapter of *Empire and Righteous Nation* provides a coda rather than the capstone to a unified whole; in other words, the implications of the tributary histories covered in the book's longer core might have been more abundantly worked out. But the text's temporal and thematic ambitions at least open up new questions, like the general imbalance in the literature where Xi Jinping's connections to the Chinese foreign policies of the past are constantly interrogated but Kim Jong Un's mere awareness of Korea's pre-colonial history, or Sino-Korean relations prior to 1894, is never discussed. In the end, this book represents an admirable effort to encounter and synthesize an exceptionally wide swath of scholarship, and the book will be useful for teaching, debate and for the occasional intelligence analyst trying to decipher Beijing's grand strategy on the peninsula.

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*Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics: Rhetoric and Restraint in China's Diplomacy*

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Amidst the mounting anxiety over China's supposedly more aggressive foreign policy, Angela Poh's valuable new book explores an intriguing puzzle: what explains China's restraint in using unilateral economic sanctions up until March 2018? Her answer is both innovative and important: China's longstanding rhetorical opposition to Western sanctions has constrained Beijing's own use of economic sanctions.

Faced with Western sanctions ever since the PRC's inception, Chinese policy-makers responded with what Poh labels a "counter-stigmatisation" strategy: denouncing the legitimacy of Western sanctions while insisting that sanctions should not be used to promote democracy or human rights and should only be imposed when agreed upon by the UN Security Council.