

## Out of China: How the Chinese ended the Era of Western Domination

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I was recently in a conversation with a friend who told us that his parents, who were communists in New Zealand, used to make him sit through slide shows on China in the 1970s. Young Philip was subjected to these presentations because China was, his parents told him, the closest place to utopia on this earth. Marian Ramelson, I discovered in this book, was a British communist and union official who had gone to China in 1949 and was one of a number of British leftist travellers who disseminated a picture of China as a utopia of justice, equality, unity, order, light, laughter and (amazingly) no flies throughout the English-speaking world – all while the upheavals of the Mao era were claiming the lives of tens of millions of Chinese.

In *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination*, Professor Robert Bickers realises the importance of myth-making in Sino-foreign relations and how the conflation of myth and history has often been a source of acrimony in Sino-foreign relations. He demonstrates this whilst pointing out the non-existence of the sign to a Shanghai park on the Bund that said, ‘Chinese and Dogs Not Admitted’ and later, by pointing out Lloyd George’s poor understanding of Taiping Rebellion. ‘The myth is the point’, Bickers comments, ‘not the facts’ (p. 29). It mattered during the Paris Peace Conference when Lloyd George based his recommendation to accede to Japan’s claims partially upon assumptions of China’s stagnation and it matters today, when Chinese nationalists reiterate the content of the Shanghai park sign.

At the same time, his book is an example of thorough, discerning scholarship that excavates fact from fiction, while also acknowledging the function of narrative creation in history. It is an important history book, because it explores the Sino-foreign relationship in its complexity and contradictions while charting the twists and turns in Western (mostly British and American) thought about China and showing how the Chinese actively shaped and manipulated narratives and events in their favour through skillful diplomacy. This wasn’t a simple task, since racism and reductionism underpinned justifications for imperialist encroachment. The story Bickers tells, then, is not just about the dismantling of the physical structure of the foreign presence in China, but also of the intellectual superstructure that supported it. In addition, it is about the interactions between Chinese and foreigners that infiltrated and shaped culture on both sides.

*Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* is a continuation of Bickers’ earlier book, *The Scramble for China, 1832–1914*.<sup>(1)</sup> He is interested in the construction, development and fate of

the foreign presence in China and how the Chinese adapted to, defended themselves against and manipulated the foreign presence. It's difficult to force a book of this scope and ambition into a category, but Bickers' interest is clearly in social and cultural history. Diplomacy, policy and high-level politics are all addressed skillfully, but presented as a background to how people – Western and Chinese, ordinary and famous, the elite few and the masses – lived and experienced Sino-foreign relations.

*Out of China* begins where *Scramble for China* left off, with the end of the First World War. The opening scene is one of universal elation. Peace has come to Shanghai and the multicultural community is harmoniously unified in victory. But, of course, the sense of camaraderie and shared purpose is fleeting. It always had been. In 1919 the Allied 'betrayal' of China at the Paris Peace Conference galvanised a Chinese anti-imperialist nationalist movement that trained its aim on the foreign presence. The book continues by detailing how anti-imperialism was utilised by the Guomindang and later by the Communists in their drives for power and how the unequal treaty structure was dismantled from the 1920s onwards. Throughout the Sino-Japanese War, the Pacific War, the Chinese Civil War, the establishment of the Communist state, the Cultural Revolution, and the reforms and opening-up from the 1970s onwards, the foreign dimension was always relevant to the massive changes in China. On the one hand, the chronological organisation is straightforward, but on the other, each chapter also functions as a focus on a particular facet of Sino-Western relations. Of particular interest is chapter five, 'China in the mind', which begins by detailing the content and impact of the 1935 exhibition of Chinese art at the Royal Academy of Art. Bickers also cleverly juxtaposes the aims of both Christian and Communist 'missionaries' in China (chapter three), surveys the cosmopolitan, corrupt and criminal world of the International Settlement and French Concession in Shanghai (chapter six) and provides a view into the (non-)functioning of the Maritime Customs during the Second World War (chapter seven). Binaries of urban/rural, diplomats/protesters, the GMD/CCP and openness/exclusion are also explored throughout the book.

*Out of China* is a well-written overview of 20th-century Chinese history, but while many of the events and issues mentioned would be familiar to anyone lecturing undergraduates on China, Bickers' talent is his ability to make history immersive and to move skillfully from addressing broad, important issues to writing about details, not in clinical, academic language, but with life and character. His style is trenchant – he is unsparing when addressing the sins of imperialism – but not without a keen sense of humour. On Shanghai and refugees in the Second Sino-Japanese War: 'flight from civil war had been crucial to its real-estate development since the 1850s' (p. 180). On the loss of the British Consulate compound on the Bund to Red Guards in 1966, he quotes a London official: 'Anyway, 122 years without rent isn't bad' (p. 344). Also, who knew that Comintern agent Mikhail Borodin's children went to the American school in Shanghai? Or that a thousand-year-old Chinese vase could inform Vogue's decision on the colour of the autumn season in 1937? Readers are even treated to a short account of the beginning of panda diplomacy shortly after the beginning of the Pacific War with the arrival of two baby pandas at the Bronx Zoo.

The book's strength lies in its accessibility and comprehensiveness. It is, while written with a strong individual voice, a survey of the best and most recent historical literature on China and Sino-foreign relations. It could almost function as a non-traditional undergraduate textbook – as a readable and enjoyable overview of historiography. Bickers' use of secondary literature is exemplary, as is his use of (mostly) Anglo-American primary sources. The Foreign Office archives and other official sources are used in conjunction with an impressive array of newspapers (especially English newspapers published in China), personal papers, films, memoirs and diaries. Bickers mentions in his acknowledgments that access to Chinese archives was difficult and is becoming progressively more so. But the book's subtitle, *How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination*, firmly asserts the agency of the Chinese people themselves, and more use of Chinese primary sources would have been welcome. Bickers tells the stories of various Chinese who understood and engaged with the world and were, more often than not, successful in their negotiations to dismantle imperialism. Yet, the descriptions of these Chinese, though replete with entertaining and illuminating facts, come mostly not from Chinese sources, but English ones. Perhaps, in the case of some of the most famous individuals (e.g. Chiang Kai-shek, Li Dazhao, Peng Pai, etc.), authoritative biographies drawing upon Chinese sources were sufficient. But is it good enough to write about C. T. Wang,

the Nationalist foreign minister who was instrumental in negotiating the revision of the unequal treaties, based on the writings left by his British interlocutor, Sir Miles Lampson? Perhaps other relevant sources weren't available. But the KMT archives at the Hoover Institution and the Second Historical Archives in Nanjing must have details on the personalities and aims of the Nationalist opponents to imperialism. There are more Chinese sources used in the second half of the book, but most are still from secondary sources like academic journals. Because the history is based mainly on Anglophone sources, it's still a history that comes from an Anglophone perspective of Chinese actions. The Japanese, Russians, the French and the Germans are discussed, but not nearly in as much depth as the Anglo-American presence. Perhaps this focus isn't entirely misplaced, since the British were the largest foreign Western presence in China until 1949 and the Americans (and Russians) were the greatest adversaries of China after 1949, but some readers may feel a bit misled by the title. The book isn't only about 'how the Chinese ended the era of Western domination', but also on how Westerners experienced it. The emphasis in the subtitle does not encapsulate the book as a whole. Also, for anyone looking for an in-depth account of how the Chinese technically ended imperialism by negotiating the repeal of the unequal treaties – this is not the book. It is not a pure diplomatic history, although it's arguably more interesting and more comprehensive than most accounts of treaty negotiations.

However, despite the reliance on Anglophone perspectives and sources, the book is generally sympathetic to China's plight and the Chinese personalities are well-drawn. The foreigners come off a bit worse. Though Bickers describes a colorful world of characters, the foreigners are somewhat one-dimensional in that as a group, they often come off as arrogant, narrow-minded and sometimes, a bit ridiculous. He rightly emphasises the Chinese role in undoing the unequal treaty regime, but does not fully allow that it was a negotiated process and that some foreigners may have been amenable to the loss of treaty conditions for reasons of their own. Churchill is quoted on the sending of the Shanghai Defence Force in early 1927: 'I trust that there will be no false logic and false sentiment and false humanity against using gas?' (pp. 65–6). The quote is shocking in its content and callousness. However, Bickers does not mention that in this particular case, the Cabinet were divided over the aims of the 'Shaforce' and that Churchill was, as might be expected, a hawkish outlier. Churchill mentions 'false sentiment and false humanity' *because* he was afraid much of the Cabinet and Parliament were subject to such weak considerations in relation to China. In fact, policymakers, one month before, had proclaimed a friendlier policy towards China, and, as a whole, were willing to finally deal with the Nationalists. The rendition of the smaller Hankou and Jiujiang concessions a year later were a small but symbolic victory for the Nationalist government and also the first steps of British imperial retreat. Although Bickers acknowledges the fact that there was considerable disagreement among British diplomats over conceding to Chinese nationalism, on the whole, they come off as a reluctant and racist bunch. Yet, this view neglects the paradigm shift in British thinking about China that had been happening since the beginning of the 20th century. An increasing number of policy- and opinion-makers had already begun to argue for 'retreat' from China, even before the negotiations. Bickers makes reference to almost universal sympathy for China in Britain by 1937, but does not mention that, despite the cynical nature of British policy, the British public were also largely sympathetic to China's claims in at Paris in 1919, in 1931 at the League and even as early as 1915 in the 21 Demands episode. The inter-war British public were not hawkish imperialists, nor were they completely uninfluenced by the attitude of the US. The portrayal (see, for example, p. 237) of earnest Americans vis-à-vis cynical, curmudgeonly Britons has some truth, but the reality was more nuanced. Bickers says that a shift in Western thinking about China happens from 1919–37, but attributes the shift to the National Government of China, who set this 'process of change in motion' (p. 171). The shift begins earlier and the agency for it does not solely belong to the Chinese. Britain's willingness to go along with the Chinese was forced by Chinese nationalism, but it was also informed by the international environment, domestic considerations and cultural changes within Britain.

Bickers asserts that those with expertise on China in Britain had little say or influence on contemporary affairs, but he neglects the role of people who had the ear of the Foreign Office, like the influential *Times* China correspondent, G. E. Morrison, who shocked the official world when he began lobbying for the Chinese republic (although Bickers does mention his contrary opinion in a footnote in chapter five, p. 435), William Soothill, a former missionary who became professor of Chinese at Oxford and a leading sinologist,

Henry T. Hodgkin, a Christian missionary and pacifist and Sir Charles Addis, a chairman of HSBC. They all advocated making major concessions to Chinese nationalism and, contrary to what Bickers argues (p. 145), all had much to say about contemporary affairs while actively seeking to shape public opinion in Britain. Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector-General of the Maritime Customs (1863–1911) was also an important early adviser who realised the need to accede to Chinese nationalism. Bickers claims that the writings of J. O. P. Bland and Rodney Gilbert, authors of sensational and racist accounts of China from the 1910s to 1930s, mattered more than Arthur Waley’s sensitive translations of Chinese poetry (p. 147) and that they ‘dominated public discussion’ about China, but one must note that some of Waley’s friends in the Bloomsbury Group – notably G. Lowes Dickinson, Leonard Woolf and John Maynard Keynes – were active in advising the government on China policy. By the end of the 1920s, Bland was rather bitter that his opinions were no longer being heeded by the British public, or indeed, being widely published. (This is evident in his private correspondence, held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Toronto.)

Bickers’ cynical portrayal of the (mostly) British imperialists is perhaps a necessary antidote to a glossing over of the ills of the imperialist past, but a bit more nuance on the foreign side would have been welcome. None of this, however, detracts substantially from a very well-written, exciting and important book on the Sino-Western relationship.

## Notes

1. Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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