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A CRITICAL REVIEW
of
STRANGERS AT THE GATE

Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861 is a page-turner.

Author Frederick Wakeman Jr. is passionate about Chinese history and he brings the reader into a world of secret societies, international diplomacy, and revolution. The first line, “[t]he Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) was the world’s most disastrous civil war,” sets the dramatic tone for the whole book. Using the I Wu Shih Mo document collections and Cantonese gazetteers as sources, Wakeman’s engaging prose is strengthened by his non-partisan perspective and his ability to connect Chinese social disorder with Britain’s impact on China’s government and economy. The shortcomings of *Strangers at the Gate* are connected to the lack of coherence through the text. In a sense, this is appropriate; Wakeman writes that the confusion surrounding the influence of the West created both contemporary and historical misunderstanding of this complex era in China’s history. As a narrative intended to instruct, however, the book would have benefitted from additional editing.

Written in 1966, the non-partisan perspective of *Strangers at the Gate* transcends the nationalist divide separating historical accounts of that generation. Typical narratives either portrayed the Chinese as ignorant savages resisting modernization or vilified the British as militant philistines. Throughout his career at Berkeley, Wakeman—who recently passed away—championed a cross-cultural dialogue based on mutual respect. The benefit to the reader is

evident in *Strangers at the Gate*; instead of a superficial narrative, Wakeman articulates the complex challenges that faced all parties. Indeed, Wakeman effectively demonstrates that competing interests within Chinese society complicate the standard Britain v. China perception. Among the people who stand out in Wakeman's inclusive perspective is Ch'i-ying, a Chinese politician who struggles admirably to appease both "British demands and the antiforeign movement."ⁱ

The second major contribution of this book is Wakeman's ability to connect the "globalization" of China with growing internal discord. According to Wakeman, although it is "unfashionable to speak of Changeless China," the conflict with the British in the mid 19th century did indeed transform what was a self-perpetuating dynasty into a struggling modern nation.ⁱⁱ Before the intrusion of the West, Chinese progress was not linear, but a "series of circles, of returns, of repetitions."ⁱⁱⁱ *Strangers at the Gate* outlines how the opium trade, British military power, and the radical egalitarianism of Christianity created irreparable fissures in that societal pattern.

Although it has been well documented how opium addiction in China led to a net export of silver during this time period, Wakeman digs deeper and demonstrates how the resulting imperial "war on drugs" empowered the rural gentry and upset the "delicate balance between the powers of the district magistrate and the gentry."^{iv} In addition, the overwhelming power of the British military placed Chinese leadership in a difficult position from which their authority was ultimately undermined. The proud and xenophobic citizens of southeast China viewed any compromise as unforgivable weakness, if not betrayal. However, it was clear that an attempt to defeat the British militarily would fail. Wakeman shows how concessions from urban Manchu

leadership in the face of an attack on the city of Canton led to growing distrust of merchants. As time passed, the local peasants and rural gentry created a myth about “treacherous rulers” that formed as a basis for the later antiforeign movement.”^v In the past, the increasing class divisions and tension between rural and urban China might have led to peasant rebellions and possibly to a new empire with a mandate from heaven, but nothing that would challenge the Confucian dynasty. By 1850 Christianity was gaining influence, and a radical Chinese sect called the Society of God Worshippers mobilized the people who were marginalized by British treaties and class divisions. This development threatened the whole Chinese political system and represented the greatest imbalance caused by Western influence.

While recognizing the importance of Wakeman’s theoretical contributions stated earlier, there is room for improvement in this work, namely with regards to narrative clarity. Admittedly *Strangers at the Gate* was an ambitious book and perhaps the difficulty of the task itself led to its incoherence—it can’t be easy to cover two decades of Chinese economic and political history in 175 pages. But Wakeman didn’t himself out by arranging his book in such short, choppy chapters. Additionally, the lack of a conclusion leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Because the intended reader was presumably from the West, Wakeman could have been more sensitive to the challenge of reading Chinese history for non-Chinese. Foreign names and places are introduced by the dozens and the reader is left grasping at straws to make sense of it all. A suggestion for improving this deficiency is limiting the scope of the work. In a short book, Wakeman’s attempt to describe specific details—the three levels of rebellion, intricate clan tensions, and others—is not effective as an admittedly general history would be. By the end, the reader is left disoriented.

Strangers at the Gate is strong enough to overcome these weaknesses. By looking at Chinese history through a fair perspective, and illuminating the connection between Western influence and social disorder in China, Wakeman contributes an important book to the historiography of the Far East. As the relationship between China and the West continues to grow and opportunities to engage the “other” increase, it will be important to continue Wakeman’s legacy of mutual respect and exchange.

ⁱ Frederick Wakeman Jr., *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 74

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 3

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 29

^v *Ibid.*, 5