Neue Politische Literatur (2024) 69:453–455
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42520-024-00621-y

REZENSION

20. Jahrhundert

Westad, Odd Arne/Chen, Jian: The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform, 424 S., Yale University Press, New Haven, CT/London 2024.

Stefan Messingschlager

Accepted: 26 November 2024 / Published online: 13 December 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

In their book, Odd Arne Westad and Chen Jian examine one of the most significant yet complex transformations in modern Chinese history: the shift from a Maoist society to the reform and opening policies that propelled the People's Republic of China to global economic prominence by the 1980s. Anchored by a central question—how did China's leadership manage to navigate the radical ideological rupture of the Maoist era while maintaining political control?—the authors deftly analyze the "long 1970s" (1969–1984) as a period marked by deep uncertainty and political upheaval. These years, they argue, facilitated both internal reforms and a redefinition of China's global position. Crucially, they contend that this transformation cannot be understood solely as a product of internal dynamics; rather, it was profoundly shaped by broader geopolitical shifts, which actively drove these changes.

In the first three chapters, Westad and Chen examine the early 1970s, a time when the People's Republic stood on the verge of political and economic collapse following the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. The authors vividly depict how disillusioned cadres within the Communist Party recognized the necessity for change, even while adhering to Maoist ideology. During this period, tensions between factions within the Party—those advocating a return to ideological purity and pragmatists pushing for economic reform—intensified. Despite these internal conflicts, Westad and Chen argue that a subtle shift toward pragmatic economic policies had already begun well before Mao's death. These early chapters reveal that the political groundwork for the reform policies of the late 1970s and 1980s had been laid earlier than is often acknowledged, setting the stage for the more radical changes that followed.

Chapters five to eight provide particularly illuminating insights into the power struggles and ideological realignments that followed Mao's death, with Deng Xi-

✉ Stefan Messingschlager
Helmut-Schmidt-Universität/Universität der Bundeswehr Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
E-Mail: messingschlager@hsu-hh.de

aoping emerging as a pivotal figure in China's transition from a radically Maoist state to a market-oriented, globally integrated power. Deng recognized the need to integrate market mechanisms into China's socialist planned economy and to reorient the country toward pragmatic reform. Yet, as Westad and Chen detail, these reforms faced significant resistance from conservative factions within the Party, who feared that excessive liberalization would undermine the ideological foundations of socialism. The internal tensions of the late 1970s and early 1980s posed one of the greatest challenges to Deng's reform agenda. Yet his skill in navigating these power struggles ultimately enabled him to push through ambitious reforms.

However, Westad and Chen emphasize that China's transformation during the 1970s and 1980s should not be viewed primarily as an internal process. China's economic rise, they argue, was not driven solely by domestic factors but was significantly facilitated by international cooperation, particularly with the United States and Japan (chapters seven and nine). This is most evident in the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), such as those in Shenzhen, which acted as laboratories for market-oriented reforms. Westad and Chen provide a compelling account of how these zones attracted foreign investment and technological innovation, laying the foundation for China's economic boom. At the same time, the SEZs embodied the inherent tensions of China's modernization: While they enabled growth and global integration, they sparked anxiety within the Communist Party, where conservative voices feared the dilution of socialist principles. That such international collaborations became possible was a direct result of the geopolitical shifts of the 1970s. United States President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in 1972 and eventual rapprochement between China and the United States (chapters four and nine) are framed by the authors as pivotal moments that allowed China to gradually reintegrate into global political and economic systems.

This broader geopolitical context is essential for understanding China's transformation during the long 1970s and China's subsequent rise. Westad and Chen present this transformation as the product of both international exchange and cooperation, as well as a delicate balancing act between economic liberalization and the Communist Party's need to retain political control. Nowhere is this fragile balance more apparent than in the violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which, according to the authors, marked the definitive end of any hopes for political liberalization. The Tiananmen incident underscored the Party's refusal to compromise its authority, even as it continued to manage the process of economic modernization. As Westad and Chen argue, this uniquely Chinese model of state development—combining global economic integration with strict domestic authoritarian control—took shape in the aftermath of 1989.

"The Great Transformation" offers a rich and nuanced interpretation of the "long 1970s" as a critical turning point in modern Chinese history. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's concept of the "Great Transformation", Westad and Chen argue that China's transformation was driven by internal crises that forced the country to realign itself ideologically and economically. Yet their analysis of conflicts, crises, and decisive turning points makes clear that this transformation was neither linear nor inevitable. Rather, it was the result of a complex interplay between domestic upheavals and shifting global dynamics. Ultimately, the delicate and perpetually re-

calibrated balance between reform and political control provides critical insights into China's distinctive trajectory since the 1980s. With its depth of analysis and broad scope, the book sets a new benchmark for understanding China's history during this pivotal period and will undoubtedly become a definitive reference for both scholars and general readers.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.