

BOOK REVIEW

The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform

By Odd Arne Westad, and Chen Jian. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025

Xianda Huang

MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, Yale University, USA, and MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, Yale University, USA

Email: xianda.huang@yale.edu

In *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform*, Odd Arne Westad and Chen Jian, both accomplished historians of Communist China, offer a rich and nuanced interpretation of the way in which politics combined with market and capital to produce what they term China's "great transformation." The authors aim to describe how the country went from a "dirt-poor, terrorized society in the late 1960s to one of hope and expectation by the mid-1980s" (p. 2). The book addresses a significant gap in scholarly literature, which has largely focused on the Cultural Revolution and the Economic Reform era while attending less to the transformative period during the long 1970s—the central focus of Westad and Jian's account.

Borrowing its title from Austro-Hungarian social philosopher Karl Polanyi, who argued that markets and economic systems in nineteenth-century Europe did not emerge naturally but were shaped by historical contingencies, Westad and Chen extend Polanyi's concept to modern China. They contend that China's transition from Maoist socialism to early capitalism was neither inevitable nor predetermined. At every critical juncture in late twentieth-century China, historical contingencies could have led the country down very different paths domestically and internationally. The authors further argue that these contingencies were largely driven by grassroots initiatives within Chinese society, which created openings for alternative possibilities.

The 11 chapters of this book are organized chronologically from revolution to reform. The first third (chapters 1–3) provides a detailed examination of the Cultural Revolution's impact on Chinese politics and society. Drawing on a wealth of published and unpublished sources, including party documents, biographies, memoirs, and Chinese and Western texts, Westad and Chen vividly depict the fluid and often contentious relationships behind the scenes between Mao Zedong and senior CCP leaders such as Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Lin Biao. The authors argue that Mao came to believe that the greatest challenge to China lay within the party itself, leading him to launch a nationwide revolution aimed at "transforming party,

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state, and society in accordance with his ideals” (p. 38). This section concludes by illustrating how the turmoil of the Revolution set the stage for later reforms, as disillusionment with Maoist policies fueled growing demands for pragmatic change.

The second third of the book (chapters 5–8) examines the leadership transition from Hua Guofeng to Deng Xiaoping between 1976 and 1980, alongside the new visions and economic restructuring that shaped the post-Mao political landscape. Chapter 5 traces Deng’s rise and fall, highlighting the instability and “duality of political power” in China during the mid-1970s as he vied for influence against left-wing leaders (p. 120). Chapters 6 and 7 explore the emerging leadership of Mao’s successor Hua Guofeng, the coup against the Gang of Four, and Hua’s early plans for agricultural reform. Chapter 8 details the shift in political power from Hua to Deng, culminating in the Third Plenum, where Deng’s slogan “seek truth from facts” gained broader support than Hua’s “two whatevers” within the party. Once again, this section underscores the role of contingency. Whether under Hua’s leadership or later under Deng and his team, including Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, China’s ruling class was uncertain about how far and how fast to push reforms.

The final third of the book (chapters 10–11) focuses on the early to mid-1980s, a period in which China “could still have moved in many different directions” (p. 247). By 1982, the country had ended up with “more liberalism in economics and more authoritarianism in politics” (p. 273). While economic policies shifted toward market mechanisms, Westad and Chen argue that this transformation was “also a story of missed opportunities” for greater political openness, as “there was so little fundamental reform in administration and political system” (p. 300). As late as 1983, for instance, China redoubled cultural repression through the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, which led many Chinese to disengage from politics and focus instead on private and commercial pursuits. The authors also highlight the social and gender inequalities that accompanied market reforms. While economic growth benefited many, others were left behind, exacerbating social tensions.

Chapters 4 and 9 stand apart from the book’s broader focus on domestic developments, as they shift attention to China’s international engagements. As global and Cold War historians, Westad and Chen convincingly demonstrate that China’s transformation was not purely internal but was deeply intertwined with global economic and geopolitical shifts. Chapter 4 examines how the shared threat posed by the Soviet Union facilitated Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s, a pivotal moment in China’s reintegration into the global economy. Chapter 9 further explores how diplomatic efforts enabled China to engage with the capitalist world on a massive scale in pursuit of trade, technology, and hard currency. Building on the scholarship of Julian Gewirtz and Pete Millwood, this book broadens the discussion of foreign politicians and diplomats to include unexpected foreign figures in unofficial settings—ranging from the US table tennis team to Japanese professors and German designers—and highlights their active role in China’s modernization.

One of the central arguments of the book is that “the revolution from below did more to change China than any orders issued by the CCP” (p. 306). While acknowledging the role of political elites, Westad and Chen place greater emphasis on the agency of ordinary people in driving economic reforms—initiatives that began far earlier than commonly recognized and laid the groundwork for China’s modernization. Chapter 3, for example, highlights how some of China’s most prosperous agricultural regions began experimenting with work unit incentives in the early 1970s. It was, as the authors note, “the farmers’ own concern with the disasters of the past and hope for a better life in the future that pushed production to the fore”

(p. 77). Additionally, in Chapter 11, the authors present compelling case studies of the rise of major private businesses in the 1980s, including Zhang Ruimin's Haier, a home appliance giant that became one of China's most successful global brands, and Wang Shi's Vanke, a real estate powerhouse in China's urban housing market. They argue that this phenomenon represents "one of the most remarkable aspects of China's transformation," as "a country that had no business but state business suddenly started spawning companies that would become key not just to China's growth but to many global developments" (p. 280). One way this book could be further strengthened is by incorporating a broader range of perspectives from those they term ordinary people beyond businessmen and farmers—particularly women, migrants, environmentalists, religious groups, and those who neither engaged in business nor accumulated wealth. Exploring how these groups participated in this great transformation would provide a more comprehensive view. Of course, no single work can capture all voices or narratives, and this book has already provided rich details on individual experiences.

While *The Great Transformation* primarily focuses on political and economic change, it also addresses the social and cultural shifts of the period. From the "dominance of revolutionary operas" in the 1960s to the rise of "Scar Literature" and the popularity of Taiwanese music in the 1980s, the book vividly captures how popular culture emerged as a powerful medium for personal expression and a break from traditional norms. Change rippled through the social lives and everyday experiences of ordinary Chinese people, fundamentally altering the nature of "popular" culture.

To conclude, Westad and Chen's emphasis on historical contingency, grassroots agency, and international influences provides a nuanced perspective on this crucial period in Chinese history. The history of China's "great transformation," the authors argue, is key to understanding how China became the authoritarian state that it is today. It also raises an important question for future scholars: Is it possible to integrate the various aspects of development—political, economic, cultural, intellectual, and environmental—into a cohesive framework that fully captures the complexity of China's transformation? It is a challenging task, but we are fortunate to have this book, which sets the stage for future exploration.

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