This is an extensive revisionist history of China over the very long term. It revolves around the opposition that can be drawn between the Chinese conception of *tianxia*, a word broadly relating to the *ecumene* or inhabited world under a single exalted ruler, that underpins an expansionist China Order model of centralized authoritarian power, and the Westphalian system of nation-states, in which power is decentralized, fragmented, and competitive. The author resolutely disputes the current official Chinese governmental narrative about how periods in China’s history that came closest to the Westphalian system represent failure when contrasted with periods of centralized imperial rule. Rather, he sees periods such as the pre-Qin (685–241 BCE), the Song (960–1279 CE) and the Century of Humiliation at the Hands of Foreigners (1840–1949) as exactly the times when China was most prosperous and least prone to massive officially sanctioned violence. It is the Qin-Han imperial model (221 BCE–220 CE) that he associates with the Confucian-legalistic tradition at the heart of the China Order model. It is also this model that he identifies closely with centralized-despotic control over the historic core of China (Centralia), even when that control was later exercised by foreign agents such as the Mongols of the Yuan (1271–1368 CE) and the Manchus of the Qing (1644–1911). This is the model the book largely focuses on and tries to debunk as providing the sole basis for China’s geopolitical position in the world. The book is dedicated to the “Chinese people” and not to China as such. This phraseology captures very well the author’s overall intent.

The book is organized into seven substantive chapters plus an epilogue. The introduction lays out the overall argument of the book. Chapter 1 is concerned in particular with the terminology—*tianxia*, Centralia (*Zhongguo*), China, and so on—that animates debates about the history of Chinese polities. It is also provides a brief critical historiography of how “official” versions of China’s history have distorted the actual history to celebrate centralized power and emphasize the negative conditions when the country was less centralized and despotic. Table 1.1 (28) lays out the claims and counterclaims for the political-economic character of different periods/dynasties in very clear terms. Attention turns in the subsequent chapter to the characteristics of the Qin-Han polity that is the basis for the so-called imperial China model and the whipping boy, so to speak, for the book as a whole. Terms such as “authoritarian” and even “totalitarian” are applied to the model. Chapter 3 addresses “The Forsaken Turn” of the Song Era when the author argues China was under a “Westphalia-like world order” (75). Chapter 4 provides an assessment of the China Order Model that contrasts the claims made for it with its failure to deliver much for the Chinese population beyond the political elite. This chapter contains some provocative claims about, for example,
how “The China Order of the Qin-Han world empire is structurally and ideologically incompatible with independent and scientific reasoning, individual decision-based market economy, human rights-based civil society, and sovereignty-equality-based international community” (121). The golden eras of Chinese history have been exactly when the China Order model has been in abeyance.

Chapter 5 offers a completely different perspective on the so-called Century of Humiliation by pointing out how much in fact it brought progress in a variety of domains to the Chinese people and society. The author continues in this revisionist vein in chapter 6, contrasting a “tenacious but transforming authoritarianism” associated with the Republic of China with what is called “The Great Leap Backward” after 1949. In chapter 7 the author explores the conflict between the mandate of tianxia, on the one hand, and the protocols of the Westphalian system, on the other, with an eye to how compatible the current effort by President Xi to institutionalize a China Order model can be, in view of how the larger international system actually works. Whether this is best characterized as Westphalian, given the importance of hierarchy and imperialism well beyond China’s shores is, of course, open to doubt. In the epilogue, four scenarios are laid out: a less illiberal China Order, a hardcore China Order, a reborn nation-state/failed state, and lying low within the Westphalian system, as in 1970s–2012. None addresses the real constraints on Chinese government action exercised by China’s significant economic and social ties to the rest of the world.

The strengths of the book lie in its obvious erudition (including, for example, a 68-page bibliography of items in Chinese and English), the clarity of the overall revisionist argument, at a time when much commentary in English at least tends to well-established nostrums based on either liberal or realist postulates, and its extremely useful dissection of much of the terminology in which current debates about China’s foreign policies are conducted. Somewhat more problematic is the identification of the Qin-Han period as representing the complete genesis for the so-called China Order model and the serial recuperation of this model after long periods when it did not prevail rather than seeing it as a model of a centralized polity in episodic construction over time. Lying behind the author’s thinking is the logic of Lucien Pye’s (1993) claim that: “China today is what Europe would have been if the unity of the Roman Empire had lasted until now and there had not been the separate emergence of the separate entities of England, France, Germany and the like” (quoted on 117). The use of “Westphalian system” to characterize the alternative to China Order is also based on an idealization of interstate relations rather than the world as it is. Indeed, in a number of respects contemporary China seems to conform closely to the Westphalian model of strict territorial sovereignty. That paradox pervades the book and is nowhere addressed.

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