



Chinese Law in Imperial Eyes: Sovereignty, Justice, and Transcultural Politics (Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University)

Li Chen

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Before the First Opium War (1839–1842), China had control over the terms of its relationship with Western powers, refusing to grant foreigners extraterritorial privileges or sign international treaties fully recognizing their political status. This dynamic has been largely overlooked in prior studies that emphasize China's semicolonial vulnerability after the First Opium War, but it has important implications for the attitudes and policies that have dominated Sino-Western relations over the past three centuries. Li Chen draws a richly textured portrait of Sino-Western relations during the century before 1843. Focusing on the role of law in Sino-Western encounters, Chen brings fresh insight to the legal disputes, cultural borrowings, and heated negotiations over imperial interests and sovereignty that profoundly shaped Sino-Western conduct in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Western empires endured numerous contradictions, humiliations, and anxieties while maintaining a profitable relationship with the Chinese. This book captures the cultural impact of the ever-shifting balance of economic and political power on the self-imagination of Euroamerican and Chinese actors in their contact zones and beyond. In a narrative populated with Manchu governors, Dutch merchants, American missionaries, Russian Sinologists, French philosophers, Portuguese settlers, and British politicians, Chen investigates the forces that created, contested, and normalized imperial ideology, national sovereignty, cultural tradition, and international order in a critical era. His findings contribute to recent debates on liberalism, humanism, sentimental imperialism, Orientalism, international law, and identity politics.

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