

Odd Arne Westad and Chen Jian, *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024. xx + 410 pp. ISBN 9780300267082. Hardback. £30.00.

In *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform*, Odd Arne Westad and Chen Jian draw on Karl Polanyi's enduring insight that markets are not natural or autonomous forces, but socially and politically embedded institutions. By invoking Polanyi's 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation*, the authors frame China's post-Mao reforms as a similarly foundational reordering of state–society–economy relations – one that is neither inevitable nor linear, and certainly not free of multiplex contradictions. The result is a richly layered political history of China's "long 1970s," from the Cultural Revolution's aftermath to the consolidation of reform with the Third Plenum's passage of The "Resolution on the Reform of the Economic System" on October 20, 1984. The book offers a richly documented perspective on a familiar historical period by bringing Polanyi's theoretical framework to bear on China's transition from command socialism to market authoritarianism.

Westad and Chen are explicit in their Polanyian inspiration. They open by noting that "markets are neither necessary nor inevitable, and to understand them we have to understand the specific conditions under which they were created" (ix). Accordingly, they offer a narrative of the post-Mao adoption of market reforms as a contingent, often incoherent, and multi-sited process. Far from the product of deliberate, top-down policy sequencing, the reform process as described by Westad and Chen is portrayed as a series of ad hoc improvisations in response to systemic failure, elite struggles, social ferment, and international reorientation. Their perspective thus pushes beyond that of elite decision-making by Deng Xiaoping and party strategists to include those of ordinary people experimenting with self-preservation strategies, local cadres improvising institutional change, and mid-level bureaucrats navigating ideological ambiguity.

Central to this account is the claim that reform emerged "from below" before it was sanctioned "from above." The authors document how rural households began circumventing collective labour schemes during the final years of Maoism, how township enterprises exploited regulatory grey zones, and how urban consumers created informal economies. In Polanyian terms, these were not spontaneous market acts, but social responses to the disintegration of an overextended planned economy: as iterative and uncoordinated acts of rebellion "against the earlier system in order to save themselves and their families" (3). Westad and Chen emphasize that, "before economic reform was declared at the central level," it was at the grassroots of society that China's "great transformation originated" (306). When central Party leaders did eventually embrace market reforms, they did so less out of ideological conversion than out of political necessity and practical exhaustion. Thus, markets were not simply "introduced" in China – they were embraced, adapted, and socially embedded from the outset through the "millions of little and great compromises that ordinary people had to make with the authorities in order to succeed" (307).

The authors are particularly effective in showing how international pressures and opportunities shaped China's reform trajectory. They emphasise how the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the acceleration of global capital flows in the 1970s served as vital precursors for China's opening. The recalibration of US–China relations, initially strategic in nature, also laid the groundwork for economic integration. Westad and Chen argue that China's leaders perceived not only the widespread ideological decay that was endemic within the Soviet bloc, but also the strategic vulnerability caused by persistent

lagging technological and economic performance. In response, they sought to insert China into global circuits of trade, finance and technology – albeit in a manner that preserved Party dominance. This external context reinforces the authors’ core argument: markets were embraced not as an end in themselves, but as instruments for national renewal within a deeply state – and Party-- centred tradition.

To be clear, Westad and Chen find less inspiration in Polanyi’s “double movement” thesis. While they document how reform produced new forms of inequality, rural marginalisation, and gender exclusion, they stop short of tracing sustained counter-movements aimed at re-embedding the economy in social protection. Indeed, the Chinese party-state, unlike the 19th-century European regimes Polanyi studied, vigorously and consistently pre-empted counter-movements through either violent repression or authoritarian management rather than democratic negotiation. In this respect, China’s transformation represents not a straightforward repetition of Polanyi’s narrative, but an authoritarian variant of it – one in which market expansion is not tempered by social demands, but orchestrated by political fiat and contained through coercive control.

There is, however, a tension in the book’s treatment of the Party-state’s role. On one hand, the authors insist that reform was not a fully planned elite project. On the other, they show that reform could not have proceeded without strategic political decisions, especially after 1978. The Polyanian focus on social embeddedness could have been further deepened by analysing how the CCP co-opted, reshaped or suppressed various social actors – peasants, workers, intellectuals – in order to manage the contradictions of market transition. While the book does address periods of repression and ideological retrenchment, these are not consistently integrated into the reform narrative as structural mechanisms of governance. Doing so might have enhanced our understanding of the hybrid character of China’s post-reform political economy: simultaneously marketised and authoritarian.

The book’s empirical breadth is impressive. Drawing on archival sources, elite biographies, press accounts and a wide range of secondary literature, the authors narrate key turning points – Mao’s death, the fall of the Gang of Four, the re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping, the 1978 Third Plenum – with verve and clarity. Particularly effective is the chapter on the international dimension of reform, which situates China’s trajectory within broader transformations in global capitalism. The authors also take care to recover subaltern voices, documenting the lived experiences of farmers, migrants, factory workers and women whose fates were often obscured by triumphalist reform narratives. This attention to social texture serves to reinforce the volume’s Polyanian emphasis on the human costs and contradictions of economic change.

Despite its sweeping scope, *The Great Transformation* remains accessible and lucid. Westad and Chen avoid jargon and provide clear signposting throughout the chapters. At times, their narrative is somewhat cautious in pushing theoretical boundaries: a more direct engagement with the extensive and growing literatures on state capitalism, developmental authoritarianism and hybrid regimes would have been welcome. Nonetheless, their careful historical reconstruction and interpretive modesty remain noteworthy strengths in their own right, especially in a field often prone to overgeneralisation or ideological polarisation.

Westad and Chen’s *The Great Transformation* represents a major contribution to the historiography of China’s reform era and to the comparative study of capitalist transitions. By reviving Polanyi’s framework in the Chinese context, the authors offer a powerful reminder

that markets do not emerge from thin air – they are bitterly contested, powerfully managed, and continuously reshaped through political struggle. In today’s China, where the Party-state is vigorously reasserting control over private capital and recalibrating its development model, the Polanyian lens remains more relevant than ever.