

Adapted from *Readings in Global History, Vol. II*, Revised 2nd Edition. Edited by Anthony Snyder and Sherri West. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1997. Pages 149-150. Re-printed by permission of Kendall-Hunt.

Looking at China

The comments of Thomas Meadows, a 19th century British observer of Chinese culture, provide a window onto British attitudes towards China.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Meadows describe Chinese government? What checks and balances existed?
2. Was rebellion a legitimate and accepted part of Chinese society? If so, what role did it play? Does Meadows view this in a positive light?
3. Might Meadows also be using his evaluation of China as a means to comment on the state of affairs in Britain? If so, what does his article tell you about 19th century Britain?

Reading

From T. T. Meadows, *The Chinese and Their Rebellions* (Smith, Elder, London, 1856), pp. 23, 24, 401–403.

The real causes of the unequalled duration and constant increase of the Chinese people, as one and the same nation . . . consists of three doctrines, together with an institution. . . . The doctrines are:

- I. That the nation must be governed by moral agency in preference to physical force.
- II. That the services of the wisest and ablest men in the nation are indispensable to its good government.
- III. That the people have the right to depose a sovereign who, either from active wickedness or vicious indulgence, gives cause to oppressive and tyrannical rule.

The institution is . . .

The system of public service competitive examinations. . . .

The institution of Public Service Examinations (which have long been strictly competitive) is the cause of the continued duration of the Chinese nation: it is that which preserves the other causes and gives efficacy to their operation. By it all parents throughout the country, who can compass the means, are induced to impart to their sons an intimate knowledge of the literature which contains the three doctrines above cited, together with many others conducive to a high mental cultivation. By it all the ability of the country is enlisted on the side of that Government which takes care to preserve it in purity. By it, with its impartiality, the poorest man in the country is constrained to that if his lot in life is a low one it is so in virtue of the “will of Heaven,” and that no unjust barriers created by his fellow men prevent him from elevating himself. . . .

The normal Chinese government is essentially based on moral force: it is not a despotism. A military and police is maintained sufficient to crush merely factious risings, but totally inadequate both in numbers and in nature, to put down a disgusted and indignant people. But though no despotism, this same government is in form and machinery a pure autocracy. In his district the magistrate is absolute; in his province, the governor; in the empire, the Emperor. The Chinese people have no right of legislation, they have no right of self-taxation, they have not the power of voting out their rulers or of limiting or stopping supplies. They have therefore the right of rebellion. Rebellion is in China the old, often exercised, legitimate, and constitutional means of stopping arbitrary and vicious legislation and administration.