GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The British empire was not only extensive; it was also exceptionally complex and diverse. Just how complex and diverse is very well revealed in this book. The author demonstrates the manner in which the treaty ports and international settlements in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries operated as 'semi-colonies', imperial enclaves acting as the drivers of the system of informal empire in the Far East. These enclaves have seldom been incorporated into the work of imperial historians, while their position in the historiography of China has been ideologically formalised or stereotyped. In fact their history has a good deal to offer studies of both the imperial and the Chinese past.

The treaty ports represent an aspect of the imperial project which was in many respects repudiated by the imperialists themselves. They rested uneasily within both colonial and diplomatic structures, and they often seemed to offer more problems than they solved. Yet in retrospect their economic, social and cultural history provides many insights into the myth that trading relations within unequal networks of power and uneasy racial and cultural relationships required such systems of foreign settlement and extraterritoriality. They acted as a distorting prism through which the West viewed China and China viewed the West. It was a prism which was frequently shaken and twisted into producing strangely refracted versions of cultures grappling with each other. But in many ways their history also reflects the development and transformation of East-West relations in the course of the twentieth centuries.

Robert Bickers offers the most comprehensive account yet of the cultural and social, political and economic history of these foreign settlements. He has much to say about the strategies of expatriate companies and missionary societies, municipal councils and the military and policing guardians of empire. In the spirit of the new globalised imperial history, this book should be read by all with an interest in imperial and Far Eastern history as well as by those concerned with representations and fragmentary enclavism. Much remains to be written about the treaty ports and international settlements, not least about the ways in which they brought together multiple minorities in strangely overheated political and cultural contexts, but this book will remain a vital starting point for all such work.

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