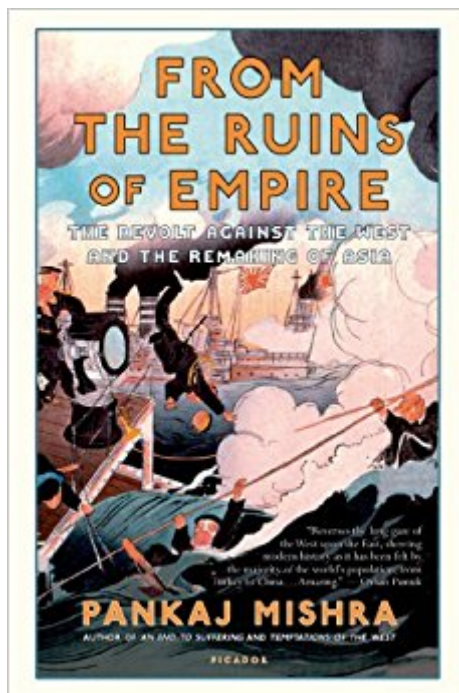




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# From The Ruins Of Empire: The Revolt Against The West And The Remaking Of Asia



## Synopsis

A Financial Times and The Economist Best Book of the Year and a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice A SURPRISING, GRIPPING NARRATIVE DEPICTING THE THINKERS WHOSE IDEAS SHAPED CONTEMPORARY CHINA, INDIA, AND THE MUSLIM WORLD A little more than a century ago, independent thinkers across Asia sought to frame a distinct intellectual tradition that would inspire the continent's rise to dominance. Yet this did not come to pass, and today those thinkers—Tagore, Gandhi, and later Nehru in India; Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen in China; Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Abdurreshi al Ibrahim of the Ottoman Empire—are seen as outsiders within the main anticolonial tradition. But as Pankaj Mishra demonstrates in this enthralling portrait of like minds, Asia's revolt against the West is not the one led by faith-fired terrorists and thwarted peasants; rather, it is rooted in the ideas of these once renowned intellectuals. Now, when the ascendancy of Asia seems possible as never before, *From the Ruins of Empire* is as necessary as it is timely—a book indispensable to our understanding of the world and our place in it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Reverses the long gaze of the West upon the East, showing modern history as it has been felt by the majority of the world's population, from Turkey to China...Amazing.”

Orhan Pamuk “Essential reading for everyone who is interested in the processes of change that have led to the emergence of today's Asia.” Amitav Ghosh, *The Wall Street Journal* “Timely and important...An astute and entertaining synthesis of these

neglected histories. *–* Hari Kunzru, The New York Times Book Review *–* “From the Ruins of Empire retains the power to instruct and even to shock. It provides us with an exciting glimpse of the vast and still largely unexplored terrain of anticolonial thought that shaped so much of the post-Western world in which we now live. *–* Financial Times (London) *–* “Subtle, erudite, and entertaining. *–* The Economist *–* “History is sometimes a contest of narratives. Here Pankaj Mishra looks back on the 19th and 20th centuries through the work of three Asian thinkers: Jamal al-Din Afghani, Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore. The story that emerges is quite different from that which most Western readers have come to accept. Enormously ambitious but thoroughly readable, this book is essential reading for everyone who is interested in the processes of change that have led to the emergence of today’s Asia. *–* Amitav Ghosh, author of Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke *–* “With uncommon empathy, Mishra has excavated a range of ideas, existential debates, and spiritual struggles set in motion by Asia’s rude collision with the West, leading to outcomes no one could have predicted but which, after his account, seem more comprehensible--and that is no mean achievement. Above all, Mishra sheds new light on an important part of our collective journey, the inner and outer turmoil we inhabited, the price we paid, and what we did to each other along the way. We might yet learn from it and redeem ourselves in some measure. *–* Namit Arora, 3 Quarks Daily *–* “After Edward Said’s masterpiece Orientalism, From the Ruins of Empire offers another bracing view of the history of the modern world. Pankaj Mishra, a brilliant author of wide learning, takes us through, with his skillful and captivating narration, interlinked historical events across Japan, China, Turkey, Iran, India, Egypt, and Vietnam, opening up a fresh dialogue with and between such major Asian reformers, intellectuals, and revolutionaries as Liang Qichao, Tagore, Jamal al-din al-Afghani, and Sun Yatsen. *–* Wang Hui, author of China’s New Order and The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought and Professor of Chinese Intellectual History at Tsinghua University, Beijing *–* “Pankaj Mishra has produced a riveting account that makes new and illuminating connections. He follows the intellectual trail of this contested history with both intelligence and moral clarity. In the end we realise that what we are holding in our hands is not only a deeply entertaining and deeply humane book, but a balance sheet of the nature and mentality of colonisation. *–* Hisham Matar *–* “Mishra’s survey knowledgeably presents an intellectual history of anti-imperialism. *–* Booklist *–* “Meticulous scholarship *–* .History, as Mishra insists, has been glossed and distorted by the conqueror *–* [This] passionate account of the relentless subjugation of Asian empires by European, especially British, imperialism, is

provocative, shaming and convincing. — Michael Binyon, Times (London) — “Superb and groundbreaking. Not just a brilliant history of Asia, but a vital history for Asians.” — Mohsin Hamid, author of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* — “Fascinating — a rich and genuinely thought-provoking book.” — Noel Malcolm, Telegraph — “One can only be thankful for writers like Mishra. From *The Ruins Of Empire* is erudite, provocative, inspiring and unremittingly complex; a model kind of non-fiction for our disordered days. May well be seen in years to come as a defining volume of its kind.” — Stuart Kelly, Scotsman — “Deeply researched and arrestingly original — this penetrating and disquieting book should be on the reading list of anybody who wants to understand where we are today.” — John Gray, Independent — “Mishra has no time at all for big, broad-brush accounts of western success contrasted with eastern hopelessness. Instead, he is preoccupied by the tragic moral ambivalence of his tale. . . . From the *Ruins of Empire* gives eloquent voice to their curious, complex intellectual odysseys as they struggled to respond to the western challenge . . . Luminous details glimmer through these swaths of political and military history.” — Julia Lovell, *The Guardian* — “[An] ambitious survey of the decline and fall of Western colonial empires and the rise of their successors. . . . A highly readable and illuminating exploration of the way in which Asian, and Muslim countries in particular, have resented Western dominance and reacted against it with varying degrees of success.” — The Tablet (UK) — “From the *Ruins of Empire* jolts our historical imagination and suddenly places it on the right, though deeply repressed, axis. It is a book of vast and wondrous learning and delightful and surprising associations that will give a new meaning to a liberation geography. From close and careful readings of some mighty Asian intellectuals of the last two centuries who have rarely been placed in this creative and daring conversation with each other, Pankaj Mishra has discovered and revealed, against the grain of conventional and clichéd bifurcations of ‘The West and the Rest,’ a continental shift in our historical consciousness that will define a whole new spectrum of critical thinking.” — Hamid Dabashi, Columbia University

Pankaj Mishra was born in India in 1969 and lives in London and Mashobra, India. The author of *An End to Suffering* (FSG, 2004) and *Temptations of the West* (FSG, 2006), as well as a novel, *The Romantics*, he writes for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *The Guardian*.

My wife picked up Pankaj Mishra's "From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia" for me at a bookstore in Mumbai with the help of another customer there, Irrfan Khan. The subject of the book couldn't be more relevant than it is today. In fact, hardly a day hasn't gone by in which the issues dealt with by Mishra weren't manifest in the morning news -- from the protests against the Chinese government in Hong Kong to Bill Maher's unfortunate declaration last week that liberal Western culture is superior to all other cultures to the bloody fallout of the Arab Spring. The book chronicles the writings and travels of prominent Indians, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Japanese, Chinese, and others who struggled around the turn of the 20th Century to develop strategies to throw off the yoke of Western imperialism. Europe had several centuries of alliances, wars, peace treaties, royal weddings, church-state battles and genocides under its belt to ultimately be able to present to the rest of the world a set of nation-states that reflected, relatively speaking, national unity, modern militaries, centralized and modern infrastructures, and a commitment to liberal democratic free-market policies -- all of which, Mishra points out, provided the tools to subjugate and often murder Asians and expropriate their national resources, while devastating local markets and customs. To these big-thinking Asian intellectuals, the Eastern nations had to not only find a way to liberate themselves, but also to compete with these Western countries, who were decades, if not centuries, ahead. Such progress can't be achieved without unity and national movements. Each of the intellectuals brought different perspectives. Some saw liberalism, democracy, and capitalism as flawed, essentially soulless, and unworthy of emulation as those philosophies justified the oppression of Asians by foreigners; they sought instead to find prosperity and justice in their own traditions. Others sought to compete by copycatting the West. Japan and Turkey are, of course, the best examples of this. All these individuals learned from each other and exchanged ideas. The Asian nations were not ignorant backwaters. Japan, before it emerged as a brutal empire in its own right, served as a safe-haven and incubator for those interested in liberation. Regarding Islamism, it is crucial to note that early 20th Century Islamists weren't terrorists, although some of their ideological descendants would become as much. Indeed, one of the early Islamist thinkers was often accused, accurately it would seem, of being an atheist. Even Gandhi, according to Mishra, toyed with pan-Islamism as a political counterweight to Western imperialism. Bill Maher's statement the other day that liberal Western culture is superior is exactly the kind of sentiment -- baked into Western foreign policy at the time -- "the white man's burden" and

all) -- that persuaded Asians that Western "liberalism" was a fig leaf for something more dastardly. As if there weren't already enough evidence of why Asians should turn away from Western thinking in order to find national greatness, the greatest of Western liberals at the time -- Woodrow Wilson -- turned his back to them. Asian intellectuals bought Wilson's promises of self-determination lock, stock, and barrel -- Bengal's Tagore even promised to dedicate a book to the American president. The sense of betrayal was acute when it became clear that not only would Asian independence not be discussed at Versailles, but the Asian nations wouldn't even be given a seat at the table. Western moral "supremacy" is perhaps an easy case to make when comparing ourselves to Islamic fundamentalists, but when comparing ourselves to India and China and Japan and Vietnam and Korea? That's a much harder case to make, but it didn't keep a "liberal" like Maher from making it. Our inability to imagine a perspective different from ours explains why we find it so confounding that the repressive Chinese government continues to enjoy the support of its modern, middle class, worldly citizens. We expect free markets to bring political liberalization, but it didn't because, maybe the Chinese value things differently than we do. In fact, that's what gives this book its most value. It will help a Westerner who hasn't been exposed to this history to understand that the Bill of Rights and the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights aren't the end-all-be-all of making a decent society. The reader is exposed to the notion that there are other ways to view what an individual's relationship to society and government is in a just society without having to concede any moral ground to Arab terrorists or African genital mutilators --- which is, of course, what defines non-Western culture to people like Maher. The events discussed in the book were a century ago, but the fallout is apparent today. The long-term subjugation of a nation leaves long-term psychic damage. Islamists, who were first under the boot of Western imperial powers and then subjugated by Western-backed "modernizing" strong men, increasingly focused their humiliation into more violent strategies. Vox.com, just today, writes that what drives Chinese foreign policy, including its dispute with protestors in Hong Kong, as a persistent fear of weakness. The article quotes a China expert who says, "The rest of the world may see China as strong, but its leaders see it as weak, threatened, and politically unstable." This inferiority complex is a direct result of the shame it felt as it was abused by Europe first and then Japan. It's like national PTSD and a lot

of Asian nations still suffer from it in the form of terrorism, civil war, and sectarian violence. It's easy from our perch to dismiss those cultures, but it's a shaky perch to be sitting on. China, despite its insecurity, is no nation of villagers. It did, at great cost, what the other Asian intellectuals wanted, matching the West in wealth and power, as did Japan and Korea, with India perpetually on the verge. If we continue to believe that liberty has but one meaning and that wealth equates to success, then we won't recognize the competition before it knocks us off that perch.

Let me caveat the rest of what I write by saying that I've only gotten about a third through the book. Much of my critique might be found in the final chapters. My primary critique is that Mishra is in awe of centers and rather neglectful of peripheries. He's making a valid argument that a response to colonialism was the construction for the homogeneous, centralized, nation-states that could hold their own ground. I'm not yet finished with the book, but I'm hoping that he'll come back to a defense of an intellectual tradition of pre-modern Asian statecraft that had far less interest in direct-rule and interference in peripheries (Ottoman millet system; China's tributary system; 'padi states'). So far, there are no Uighurs, Tibetans, Visayans, Tanka, Hmong/Miao or anyone else that didn't lay the intellectual foundations for the modern Asian nation state power that eventually arose. It's a history of rising power told, I believe incorrectly, as a history of the subaltern. We are supposed to watch with awe as Chinese emperor's capture the steppes people and Japan beats Russia in colonizing Korea. Mishra is right that the West-centric story of Asian modernity is insufficient. But Mishra is writing the intellectual history of the Ayatollah's, Mao's, Xi Jinping's, Aquino's, and Modi's. If we look a little harder, we'd also find a neglected local body of intellectual development that prizes diversity, autonomy, and political-cultural pluralism that could serve as an intellectual foundation for the politically frustrated youth and scholars in Hong Kong. Without this history, they're largely turning to 'Western' ideas, history, and scholarship to express their desires. So far, an American Yale professor who tends sheep between writing books and teaching classes in is one of the only scholars giving voice to this tradition.

This book exposes us to whole lines of thinking that are never (or rarely) discussed in American history classes or media. It's interesting to look at the history of colonialism from the perspective of highly educated and thoughtful writers who were trying, from within the colonized countries, to articulate a response to the overwhelming power of the western countries. A lot of history, including recent developments, is illuminated by this book. I found the organization of the book challenging at

times -- sometimes the author spends quite a lot of time on one writer or development, and other times seems to jump quickly from topic to topic. This can perhaps be excused because of the immensely complex subject. And despite this difficulty I found the book to be completely engrossing. I disagree with some of the negative reviews which treat the book as an anti-Western, left-wing diatribe. It isn't. It's telling the other side of the story, one which understandably is somewhat uncomfortable for Americans (and probably Europeans) to read. It's just one book, and undoubtedly it misses some points along the way; but it has helped me more than any other single book to understand how things came to be the way they are in East Asia and in the Middle East.

While I don't question the accuracy of anything in this book, which focuses on the rapacity and evil nature of the imperial powers, it's all old stuff. I can't think of a book written in the past half century that doesn't take the same view. The fact that this one was written by a non-European doesn't add anything. In fact, it sounds kind of whiny. It opens with a discussion of how encouraged colonial peoples around the world were by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. True enough, but the author fails to mention that the Chinese had probably not forgotten that Japan's first exploit as an imperial power was to subjugate their fellow Asians in China. He also bemoans how English language was imposed on India, replacing Arabic and Parsi forgetting to mention that these were also foreign languages imposed by conquest.

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