

BOOK REVIEWS

China

A New History

ENLARGED EDITION

By John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman

CAMBRIDGE AND LONDON: BELKNAP
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XIX + 546 PAGES



One perennial challenge encountered in teaching the undergraduate introductory survey course in disciplines such as history and religious studies is the persistent student question, "How is this relevant to me today? Why should we know about, much less care about, Han administrative, economic and cosmological patterns?" While as instructors we strive to associate ancient patterns of behavior and institutions with those of the modern day, the standard text-

books at our disposal are often unsatisfactory.

This is not true with the enlarged edition of John K. Fairbank's *China: A New History*. Succinct, highly readable and "down to earth," this updated version of Fairbank's last work combines the erudition born of a half-century of scholarship with the educator's sense of relevancy and organization. While unfortunately slighting some periods and areas of study, Fairbank consistently alerts the reader to the continuities within Chinese history and the parallels with contemporaneous issues facing the West.

Obviously comfortable in his role as the foremost scholar in Chinese studies, Fairbank abandons the formality of many introductory texts and assures the reader that, for instance, "today's White House photo-ops and sound bites would have seemed quite natural" to the Imperial Son of Heaven (p. 62). For "those readers who missed the world history lecture on Islam," the author offers a brief synopsis of the tradition and its history in the Mediterranean region (pp. 192–193). While maintaining the objective eye of a highly disciplined scholar, Fairbank does not hesitate to offer pointed observations on the leadership qualities of both Mao and Reagan. Throughout the work, he avoids both pretension and the simple recitation of fact, weaving together a remarkably complete history of China into a refreshingly fast-paced narrative.

As a specialist in China's late imperial period, with particular interest in politics, foreign affairs and economics, Fairbank focuses much of his attention on these specific areas of Chinese history. Divided into four parts (the Rise and Decline of the Imperial

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Autocracy, Late Imperial China, the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China), the text uses Chinese dynastic history for its organizational framework. Fairbank begins with some theoretical considerations, including a survey of approaches to understanding Chinese history. He is particularly interested in the promise of G. William Skinner's "macroregion" construct for studying China's economic and demographic history. As opposed to the standard "provincial" model of analysis, Skinner proposes a division based on economic geography, concentrating on eight macroregions centered on river drainage basins (p. 11). Believing that this approach more accurately reflects economic reality, Fairbank effectively uses this scheme throughout the balance of the text.

Two major themes emerge out of the introduction. The first sets the basic tone for the remainder of the book; namely, how is it that a once dominant Chinese civilization could, by the end of the nineteenth century, be reduced to second rate status, "ignominiously condemned by Western and even Japanese imperialists" (p. 2)? Accordingly, much of the work sets up Fairbank's evaluation of the economic and political factors involved in China's inability to compete effectively with the modernized West. In fact, the perfunctory manner in which he covers China's first three thousand years (only about one-third of the book) reflects the author's conviction that "to understand the social and human factors in China's falling behind the West in the modern period, we must look more closely at her prehistory, her rice economy . . . and many other features of her high civilization to see how they all may have played a part" (p. 3). Unfortunately, this objective relegates a great deal of China's cultural history, in the more limited sense of literature, religion and so on, to a marginal role in the scope of overall coverage.

At the same time, Fairbank's second theme centers on the remarkable longevity and ultimate consistency of China's general cultural foundations. One of the most effective ways in which Fairbank draws the reader into his narrative, and emphasizes the contemporary relevance of earlier Chinese history, is to show how China maintained its basic institutions and way of life despite periodic invasions. As he points out, China's survival in the face of persistent Inner Asian aggression rested on its ability to find "refuge in social institutions and feelings of cultural and aesthetic superiority." Indeed, Fairbank maintained that this "culturalism" endured as "something that alien conquest could not take away," although it would be severely challenged by the coming of the West (p. 25).

A third paradigm, emerging out of his discussion on Han unification, concerns the symbiotic relationship between the government's reliance on violence (*wu*) and the Confucian

valuation of "cultured civility" (*wen*). As Fairbank shows, from its inception in Han "Imperial Confucianism," the balancing act between the governmental right to use force and its dependence on moral vindication has marked China's political and societal equilibrium up through the Cultural Revolution. While not directly addressing the issue in relation to the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations, one suspects that Fairbank would have drawn parallels here as well.

The principal strength of the text lies in its accessibility for all readership levels and Fairbank's veiled insistence that the past is indeed germane. The author's keen sense of what is important also manages to propel the narrative along in an engaging and interesting manner. While offering no new groundbreaking research of his own, Fairbank successfully integrates the most recent scholarship into his account, including several major works that had appeared in the last year of his life. He routinely introduces a historical problem, reviews the major interpretations of the past fifty years, and offers his own integrative analysis. More than fifty illustrations, a half-dozen charts and twenty-four clear, uncluttered maps provide effectual visuals to supplement the text. One feature that I found most useful and of inestimable value to students was Fairbank's practice of concluding major sections with challenges and issues for further research and contemplation. These questions are not only conducive for inspiring thought and discussion on the part of students, but can also offer specialists fresh avenues of inquiry. It is also refreshing to find a scholar of Fairbank's stature admitting that he did not have all the answers and that a tremendous amount of research still lies ahead.

Merle Goldman's additional sections on "The Post-Mao Reform Era" and "China at the Close of the Century" are wonderful complements to her teacher's final work. Rather than falling into the trap so common in introductory supplements, namely a blasé survey of contemporary developments, Goldman writes with energy, enthusiasm and genuine substance. True to the text's themes, she draws many parallels between contemporary events and their historical precedents. Like Fairbank, Goldman hints at the interplay between *wu* and *wen* as she describes both the authoritarian, militaristic character of the Chinese government and the individual gains in autonomy fostered during Deng Xiaoping's rule. In addition, the concluding chapters emphasize the cultural and intellectual spirit of post-Mao China, something routinely neglected by Fairbank. Of particular interest is the concluding section on "cultural pluralism," in which Goldman traces the impact that Deng's economic, political and social reforms had on China's cultural milieu. Again, the emphasis is placed on present realities and their relationship to earlier trends and events. Her epilogue sounds an optimistic note insofar as China is discovering new ways to address old problems; in doing so, she balances Fairbank's apprehension about China's future.

In my estimation, the text's lack of coverage in cultural matters represents its greatest drawback. As noted, the majority of the work focuses on China's demographic and institutional character, leaving little room for discussion on religion, art, literature, music, philosophy or any other realm of cultural achievement. Given the rich and varied nature of Chinese innovations in each of these areas, the work displays a notable deficiency, particularly as an introductory text. Educators would

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be well served to supplement student reading with a source book such as Patricia Ebreys's *Chinese Civilization and Society* (Free Press, New York, 1993) or de Bary's classic *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1960, 1998). Either text would provide a good balance to Fairbank's presentation.

Broader coverage for the first three thousand years of Chinese civilization would also be welcome. As noted above, nearly two-thirds of the text is devoted to the period from 1644 to the present. The speed with which Fairbank examines China's early history unfortunately leads to the slighting of important eras and dynasties. The most glaring example comes with coverage of the Song Dynasty, in power for three centuries, ennobled with the epithet "China's Greatest Age," and yet afforded less than thirty pages. In his desire to discover why China fell behind the West, Fairbank unintentionally leaves the impression that the first three millenniums served as little more than a prelude to the present.

Students familiar with contemporary events will also be curious about the lack of attention given to Tibet. Only mentioned about a half-dozen times, and never in the context of the 1950 "liberation" from imperialist control or the 1959 suppression of anti-Chinese protests, Tibet is virtually absent from Fairbank's otherwise extensive review of Inner Asian relations. Given the recent visibility and popularity of the Free Tibet movement, the general reader and student will be disappointed with this deficiency. This is particularly surprising given Fairbank's introductory assertion that as for culturalism, "we must broaden our sights: the Inner Asian peoples have been a critical part of the history of the Chinese people" (p. 25). Therefore, while peripheral to the story of China per se, the Tibetan situation nevertheless represents another important aspect of China's relation to the rest of the world and its perception of itself.

Finally, two minor improvements would bolster the effectiveness of the text. For advanced students and Sinologists, the inclusion of Chinese characters would be a welcome addition. I also found that the extensive list of suggested readings, while helpful, was nevertheless awkward to use and would benefit from tighter correlation to the text. In this regard, footnoting would also help those wishing to pursue further study. An "author index" cross-references the reading list with textual citations, but tends to be cumbersome in usage.

Despite these shortcomings, *China: A New History* provides the general reader and students with a highly accessible and readable introduction to the vast history of one of the world's oldest surviving civilizations. Clearly suitable for the undergraduate introductory course, it may also lend itself to advanced secondary school instruction. Overall, this text is a fitting culmination to an exemplary life devoted to both teaching and research. ■

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Sweet and Sour

One Woman's Chinese Adventure, One Man's Chinese Torture

by Brooks Robards and Jim Kaplan

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XI + 234 PAGES

Like other books by Americans traveling to Third World countries, this book dwells too much on the discomforts and not enough on the local people. Travel accounts seem to be egocentric, telling us more about the writer's peccadilloes and emotions than about the place being visited. The early chapters that relate the authors' decision to go, preparations, and initial problems are a very long introduction to the real heart of the book. It is not until chapters 15, 16 and 17 that we finally learn about the jobs they had and the people they met. These chapters are the best in the book in that they provide some insight into the life of people in China and the thoughts of individuals as they try to accomplish their jobs and fulfill their dreams. The first several chapters seemed to be stuck on culture shock and the adjustments necessary to living in a Third World country, some of which I felt they should have expected and been prepared for.

It is tiresome reading about the meals the travelers ate, communication and language difficulties with taxi drivers, the public and private sanitary accommodations, and the interesting foreign friends they made in the Friendship Hotel. Some of these observations are useful to people who have never lived outside the United States but seem to be endlessly repeated in travel tales by Americans abroad. You almost want to ask, "Why didn't you stay home?" Having coped with these concerns myself in earlier stays in Korea (1968-71) and in China (1994-96) as well, I felt one of the best ways to manage them was merely to accept them, deal with them, and get on with it.

If you expected things to be as at home, why did you travel in the first place? Some of the insights provided by various companions were interesting, as Marilyn Goldstein's observation, "Poor China. They're committed to Confucianism, Communism and capitalism at the same time" (on page 212), but I would rather have had the space devoted to the authors' own experiences of working with Chinese and their insights into Chinese life as a result. While they encountered some charming and talented companions in the Friendship Hotel, it seems that they are more interested in them than in the Chinese. As many foreign journalists are thought to derive all their knowledge of China second hand through the eyes of other foreigners at the Press Club rather than by mingling with the population and relating their own experiences, this seems to be true of Robards and Kaplan as well.

As recounted in their experiences with bridge players and film directors, both of the authors had wonderful opportunities to learn about China. The interviews and experiences in chapters 15,