

China in the 21st Century What Everyone Needs to Know

BY JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM

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155 PAGES

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Reviewed by Mary Cingcade

Jeffrey Wasserstrom's book *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* tempts the reader with its intriguing title. Written in question-and-answer format, the volume features 108 questions culled from questions posed over two decades by lecture audiences. Wasserstrom writes,

The goal of this book is to help normalize discussions of China . . . My aim is to clear up sources of Western misunderstanding about China, provide insights into issues of significance relating to it, and, above all reveal that . . . we can arrive at a basic understanding of its nature.

With this work, he adds his voice to the mix of writing about China in a way educators will find useful. Wasserstrom presents an accessible two-part volume. Part I, "Historical Legacies," consists of three chapters arranged chronologically—"Schools of Thought" (chapter 1), "Imperial China" (chapter 2), and "Revolutions and Revolutionaries" (chapter 3)—that take readers briefly through schools of thought and the early dynasties, and then on to the modern period through Mao; the latter section is the subject of two-thirds of "Historical Legacies." The first chapter primarily provides background about Confucius and the ways that his image and ideas are used today. The questions Wasserstrom presents vary in complexity, as they do throughout the book, from basic identification questions—"Who was Confucius?" (1)—to questions that cut to the heart of current issues, "How exactly is the new regime using Confucius?" (13). The next two chapters mainly provide identification of events and figures in China's modern history. Questions such as "What was the Opium War?" (25) and "Who was Chiang Kai-shek?" (44) provide the novice with the knowledge to contextualize current events. Others go below the surface—"Is the Chinese Communist Party a new dynasty?" (34).

Part II, "The Present and the Future," examines the 1980s to the present in "Mao to Now" (chapter 4), "U.S.–China Misunderstandings" (chapter 5), and "The Future" (chapter 6). In Part II, Wasserstrom continues to cover the basics, but overall the questions and comments deepen: "Is contemporary China utterly unique?" (96). Chapters 5 and 6 in particular are most successful for the discussion they could generate on complex issues. In these chapters, Wasserstrom succinctly addresses Americans' misunderstandings of China and provides frameworks for alternative interpretations. He begins with, "What is the most common thing Americans get wrong about China?" (103). His answer,

Americans' too-limited appreciation of China's diversity, which leads to a view that China is populated by people who are all pretty much alike, or . . . who can be neatly divided into one large group and a small number of people who stand apart. (103)

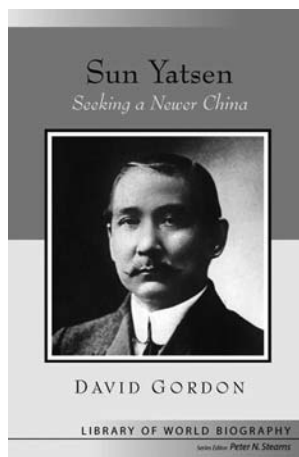
He addresses other misunderstandings in this chapter and concerns in the one that follows—"Is China bent on world domination?" (116)—before

ending with an imperfect antidote. He argues for Americans to focus more on commonalities than differences:

Some things happening in China today are much like things that happened in the United States when it was industrializing rapidly and rising in global prominence . . . [and] even though leaders often present the two countries as completely unlike one another, people in other parts of the world sometimes view the PRC and the United States as belonging in the same category. (131)

At a time when China is often singled out, this simple recommendation provides a dose of perspective. Instructors of high school and undergraduate courses will find many uses for this text. When assigning readings, instructors will want to keep in mind the two levels of discussion provided in the text. As noted, some chapters focus primarily on identification of events and figures, seldom straying from a basic narrative (chapters 2 and 3, for example), while others present insightful commentary on key issues (chapters 5 and 6). The latter chapters are appropriate as stand-alone reading assignments to spark discussion. Alternatively, the "Historical Legacies" material could supplement other readings that require definition of historical references. Overall, the accessibility of the text and its ability to push discussion to the next level make it appropriate for students with mixed background knowledge of China. There is something for everyone here. Finally, the bold subtitle—"What Everyone Needs to Know"—deserves another mention. In a short volume, inevitably much is left out. Instructors could consider assignments that play on the title by asking students to propose an additional chapter. Or, following the author's concluding remarks, students could discuss the content of "The US: What Everyone (in China) Needs to Know" as an enjoyable way to conclude discussion of this useful book. ■

MARY CINGCADE is Associate Director of the East Asia Resource Center in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. She holds an MA in China studies and provides professional development programs for K–12 teachers as part of the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA).



Sun Yatsen Seeking a Newer China

BY DAVID B. GORDON

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192 PAGES

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Reviewed by David Kenley

This eminently readable biography of Sun Yatsen offers high school and undergraduate students a window into the life of the "father of modern China." Though Sun is frequently overshadowed by his more politically savvy successors, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong, he is an excellent choice for the *Library of World Biography* series. More so than either Chiang or Mao, Sun epitomizes cross-cultural encounters in world history. Written by David