

Contemporary China

By Alan Hunter and John Sexton
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 226 PAGES

Capturing the full breadth of Chinese history, geography, politics, economics, social life, and cultural life in one short volume would present a challenging task for any author. In *Contemporary China*, Alan Hunter and John Sexton have generally succeeded, providing a work that is accessible to junior- and senior-level high school students, undergraduates, and the general reader. Attentive to detail and journalistic in tone, the book assumes little previous knowledge of China. Where the authors might have chosen to shy away from expressing opinion in order to cover more factual material, they instead provide selective, but insightful and even-handed comments regarding both Chinese and U.S. policies, as well as critiquing scholarly opinion on a variety of issues.

Considering that the focus of this book is on contemporary China, the opening two chapters on Chinese history and geography are surprisingly complete. As they do throughout the book, Hunter and Sexton provide useful chronologies, charts, and biographical boxes in these chapters. The geography chapter, for example, includes a full-page box of key facts about China, as well as graphs on agricultural production and population growth. Aside from the bare-bones but well-communicated factual information that this chapter provides, it also covers key theoretical approaches to understanding the political and historical geography of China, such as Chinese scholar Chi Ch'ao-ting's concept of "key economic regions" and anthropologist G. William Skinner's more recent (and highly influential) division of the core, eastern area of China into macro-regions. The chapter would benefit from one or two detailed maps to supplement the political map of "China's provinces and major cities" provided on p. xiii.

In the first half of chapter 3, "The Chinese Economy," Hunter and Sexton cover the Maoist legacy, focusing particularly on the social and economic consequences of the "Great Leap Forward" of the 1950s; the transition in the 1980s from a planned to a market economy; agricultural and rural industry reforms; the growth of domestic private enterprise; and the reformation of state industry, financial structures, and commercial law. The second half of the chapter focuses on foreign trade, foreign investment, and the consequences, both good and bad, of the new Chinese economy. Among the most useful charts and graphs are those that provide key facts about the Chinese economy, comparative output of domestic private enterprise vs. state-owned enterprise, and principal financial institutions of the People's Republic of China.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover Chinese political life, the social system, and Chinese culture, respectively. These sections form the real core of the book. Useful charts on "The Structure of the Communist Party" and on "The Government of the People's Republic



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of China" help the reader navigate through the often confusing maze of the Chinese political system. Of particular interest is the authors' summation of the critique of Maoism offered by Chinese scholar Su Shaozhi in 1979; their discussion of New Marxism vs. New Authoritarianism among Chinese reformers; and their spin on recent challenges to party authority.

Hunter and Sexton begin their chapter on the Chinese social system with a nod toward the postmodernist critique of the concept of tradition, pointing out that "while some Chinese customs



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may be ancient, others may date only from late imperial times.” They go on to question several long-held stereotypes about China: for example, China as “evil empire” and Chinese social development as stagnant and tradition-bound. From this follows a socio-historical discussion of family and clan structures, social stratification, the changing role of women, and education reform.

The chapter on “Chinese Culture” begins auspiciously enough with a warning to the reader to beware of generalizations regarding a specifically Chinese “national psychology” and specifically “Chinese” racial characteristics. Their own caveat notwithstanding, the authors then go on to engage in some questionable anthropology, speculating that Chinese infants may be less vocal than Caucasian infants for genetic reasons and that martial arts such as *taijiquan* are “quasi-religious, or, perhaps, superstitious.” While these are minor points that Hunter and Sexton make only in passing, they do indicate that this section might have benefited from a deeper and wider reference to the growing anthropological literature on everyday life in urban China. Nevertheless, the chapter will leave the nonspecialist reader with a generally well-balanced picture of the changes that art, religion, and intellectual life have undergone in contemporary China.

The final two chapters cover China’s international relations and prospects for the twenty-first century. This discussion is particularly useful in its treatment of China’s relationship with its immediate neighbors and in its critique of the notion that China presents a military threat to the region.

Contemporary China can stand on its own as a solid, basic text for an introductory course on China. It will work even better in the classroom as a foundation text, supplemented with maps, computer multimedia, ethnographic film, and other resource material. Hunter and Sexton are, of course, aware that a book of this length cannot possibly cover everything, and they are kind enough to provide a list of supplemental readings and useful Internet sites. Overall, they have filled a gap by producing an up-to-date, concisely written treatment of contemporary China. ■

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