

Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions

A Brief History with Documents

BY TIMOTHY CHEEK

NEW YORK: PALGRAVE, 2002

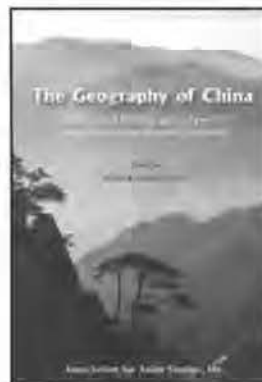
HARDCOVER: 259 PAGES, ISBN: 0-312-29429-8

Mao Zedong retains significant symbolic potency in the People's Republic of China. Whether as an intransigent youth, voluble guerilla leader, or fulminating toward the Cultural Revolution, Mao's figure shows no sign of receding from the stage of history. Today, the "fourth generation" of Chinese Communist leaders brandish Mao as a talisman against instability and a patron saint for the peasantry whose steady influx into Beijing could ultimately dislodge the Chairman from his tomb in the shadow of Tiananmen.

Timothy Cheek's collection of Mao's writings, and writings about Mao, provides a point of entry into this central and towering figure of modern Chinese history. The text presents ten significant extracts from Mao's works, and offers eight commentaries on Mao by his contemporaries and select academics. As part of the Bedford Series on History and Culture, the book is meant to facilitate discussion of a single topic—Mao—in the college classroom, where the editors project success for the text as "a reasonable one-week assignment" (p. v). More realistically, the text serves as a supplemental reader that eases pedagogical burdens via a chronology of events, annotated bibliography, detailed index, and questions for classroom discussion.

Among the book's chief attractions is its concise and illustrated introduction to twentieth-century China. Cheek also provides excellent prefatory essays to such excerpts as "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan," "On New Democracy," the "Little Red Book," and Mao's October 1966 self-criticism. Jeffery Wasserstrom's lively review essay guides students through the give-and-take of scholarly debates; and excerpts by Edgar Snow and Li Zhisui round out the perspectives on Mao. Amid such good material, it is therefore disappointing to find that the collection suffers from an excessive focus on Mao's sinification of Marxism-Leninism. The preoccupation with Marxist theory not only throws up thickets of impassable jargon, it obscures the man most likely to generate fascination among students: the vulgar Mao, intellectually promiscuous, morally flawed, deeply conscious of his enemies, and addicted to chaos. Nonetheless, for instructors seeking a convenient means to brace their students with galvanizing primary sources, this collection fills the bill. ■

ADAM CATHCART is Assistant Professor of Chinese History at Hiram College. His research explores the early years of the PRC, focusing on anti-Japanese nationalism and on popular mobilization for the Korean War.



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