

ESSAY REVIEW

Mountain of Fame

Portraits in Chinese History

by John Wills

PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993
XX, 403 PAGES

John Wills's *Mountain of Fame* is a collection of compact biographies of twenty major figures in Chinese history. What makes it engaging is the range of personalities and time periods it covers, as well as prominent themes connecting Chinese history from early periods to the twentieth century. Wills does not merely provide readers with twenty isolated portraits, but rather links them to an account of Chinese history and civilization that reads far more smoothly than any textbook—providing an overview of relatively seamless quality combined with deep pauses to examine the lives and works of his individual subjects.

Wills's account highlights such luminaries as Yu, Confucius, Wang Mang, the Qianlong emperor, and Mao Zedong. Not all of his subjects, however, are major figures in the common sense. Particularly illuminating are Wills's treatment of the Han literary figure Ban Zhao, the Chan Buddhist Hui Neng, Empress Wu of the Tang, and the Ming patriot Zheng Chenggong (Coxinga). Through each portrait he tells a story of China's past and uses his biographies to illuminate whole periods—much like his use of Ban Zhao for the later Han (C.E. 25–220) and Hui Neng for the period of division (C.E. 220–589).

Above all, Wills's book is to be recommended for a sensitivity to primary and secondary scholarship that is pleasing for the advanced reader (or teacher) without sacrificing the core themes and stories needed by the beginner. Wills is quite conscious of this in his introduction, where he notes that his ideal readers are tourists, non-specialist scholars, people of Chinese ancestry seeking to learn more about their heritage, or, perhaps most tellingly, people who like good stories. There is no doubt in my mind that he has achieved his aims for this target audience. That he has far more than occasional insights that scholars might enjoy seems to make it a perfect teaching tool—one which both teacher and student can enjoy on several levels.

It was testing this contention in the classroom that led me to prepare this review of a book I already admired. The question that remained, however, as I prepared for Colby College's East Asian Studies introduction in the spring of 1998, was whether the book would hold up as well under the pressure of a busy semester and ambitious syllabus as it does for the relaxed general reader.

Almost fifty students enrolled for the course, and fifteen of those registered for a supplemental independent study in which they critiqued *Mountain of Fame* chapter-by-chapter. The class as a whole also had the opportunity to provide feedback during class discussions and in weekly "historical abstracts" that summarized the sourcebooks and secondary readings. As part of the experiment, I assigned only minimal textbook readings—brief 3–5 page overviews

of East Asian historical periods in Milton Meyers's *Asia: A Concise History*. The vast majority of class time was spent discussing source materials and Wills's portraits, with continuity and historiographical background provided in lecture segments.

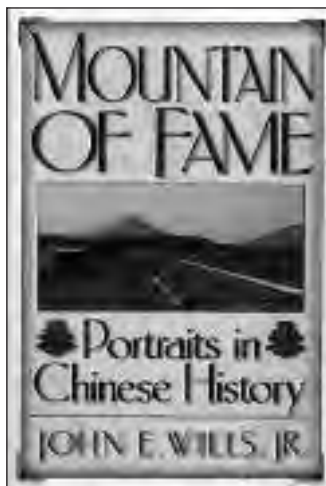
Not surprisingly, students struggled at first with the book's format—not really a biographical collection, not really a textbook, but a witty and often anecdotal book that speaks to beginners and scholars (although occasionally not at the same time). What makes *Mountain of Fame* such a fine general work frustrated students who sought clear, point-by-point treatments of Chinese chronology. This frustration turned out to be short-lived, as most students learned to use Wills's portraits to enrich the more terse materials found in their basic text. By the end of our China segment, I found from reading exams that students had learned to use *Mountain of Fame* and their source readers in quite sophisticated ways—blending translated source materials with Wills's skillful discussion of historiographical issues. The result was a sense of historical argument that I have rarely found at the introductory level.

From the beginning, Wills moves between a chronological account, portraits of historical periods, biographical sketches of individuals, and analysis of themes that lie at the heart of Chinese civilization. It is his treatment of themes that, in many ways, separates his work from more commonly-used texts on China. Wills begins *Mountain of Fame* with a chapter devoted to the legendary emperor Yu. Here we see immediately the tone of the work. Yu isn't mentioned until halfway through the chapter; instead, Wills introduces Chinese ideas about the origins of the cosmos, divination and the *Yijing*, major legendary figures, and finally the three sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu. In

seven pages he introduces themes of complementary opposition, the connection between family and government in Chinese political thought, ideas of heaven and earth, and the principle of remonstrance. He also retells many of the most popular stories surrounding the sage kings—from Yao's selection of Shun from humble beginnings to Yu's toiling to quell vast flooding and his dancing with shields and axes to subdue the unruly Miao people without a fight.

The true worth of Wills's account, however, comes through in his discussion of historiographical principles—something I am delighted to see in a work written for the general reader. Rather than naively retelling the stories at face value, as one might find in a "life and legends" kind of book, or merely discounting them as early idealizations, Wills takes them seriously and engages them with more current perspectives from China and the West. The pattern holds throughout the work. Wills gives serious accounts of traditional perspectives on such topics as peoples beyond China's borders, palace intrigues, "failed" emperors, and so forth, before broadening and deepening the account with contemporary insights. Nowhere is this better shown than in his treatment of Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty—long vilified by traditional Chinese historians.

After a brief introduction that covers the Sui dynasty's (C.E. 581–617) reunification and the first reigns of the Tang (C.E. 618–906), Wills shows the deep distaste for her rule expressed by traditional historians in recounting their stories of her bloody rise to power. It would be hard for a careful reader to merely dismiss them



as old-fashioned critiques. Wills blends this account, however, with other perspectives which compel students to think back through the materials (and their accompanying source readings) in a way that encourages them to broaden and deepen their understanding. As a result of this engagement, and a surprisingly sophisticated level of historical thinking, Wu emerged for most of my students as a complex figure not easily pigeon-holed by ideologues or space-constrained textbook writers.

Wills's other portraits work in a similar fashion, providing a solid sense of historical periods linked with continuities that connect these early periods to contemporary China (and, to his credit, vice versa in his treatment of the twentieth century). Indeed, it is a surprise at times that vast periods, such as those from the Warring States (481–221 B.C.E.) to Qin (221–206 B.C.E.) or the late Song through Yuan (1279–1368) are highlighted by individuals such as the First Emperor or the Daoist Qiu Chuji, respectively. In the former, Wills treats thinkers from Mencius and Xunzi to Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Han Feizi as a prelude to his discussion of the first unification, in all its practical *and* symbolic glory. In the case of Qiu Chuji, Wills pushes his approach to the limit, still successfully blending an account of Mongol influence with the importance of religious Daoism.

Students did find Wills's tendency to backtrack in this fashion somewhat frustrating at times, admitting that it was often masterful, but still somewhat confusing in their preparations. Others noted that it was sometimes unclear for whom he was writing—a wink toward knowing scholars or a discussion of the basics for beginners. In the written comments on *Mountain of Fame* that my students prepared, virtually all of them noted that the enormous strength of Wills's work is just this blend of perspectives. It is also its potential undoing if there is not proper guidance in classroom discussions.

As my students noted, *Mountain of Fame* needs to be thoroughly read—preferably straight through, over several days or weeks—to be fully appreciated. There are, to be sure, some risks associated with using it as the foundation of a Chinese civilization course or segment, but these can be remedied in a number of ways. The most conservative approach might be to use it as a supplement with an accompanying text and sources—an approach certain to deepen students' appreciation of these colorful figures. There are even deeper rewards to be found in fully engaging students with the kind of historical reasoning that Wills shows in every chapter—closely asking questions about the author's reasoning, discussing source materials, and crafting individualized arguments about historical actors and events. That John Wills has created a book capable of such uses is wonderful news to teachers of Chinese civilization. ■

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