

Mountain of Fame Portraits of Chinese History

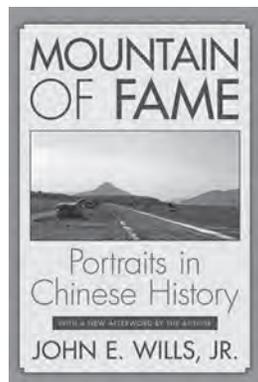
By JOHN E. WILLS JR.

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Reviewed by Aaron Pickering



For high school teachers and university lecturers hoping to improve their content knowledge and approach to China in world history survey courses, *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* by John Wills Jr. offers a tremendous introduction to the broad swath of Chinese history in a manageable and enjoyable volume. While the full volume is not appropriate for most high school general survey-level classes, there are countless passages where Wills's biographical narrative outlines concepts in a far more accessible fashion than any textbook. For

instructors with a cursory background in China, *Mountain of Fame* will provide a more meaningful personal portrait of the history and numerous excerpts that can humanize and make Chinese history more relevant as they address it with their students. A previous review in *Education About Asia* addressed the first edition of the work in a university East Asia survey course (by Robert LaFleur in volume 3, number 3), but I will focus on the perspective of a general world history survey teacher.

Establishing the ideological legacy of the earliest Chinese dynasties and thinkers is one of the most difficult tasks in a world history survey. This is where *Mountain of Fame* shines at its brightest for student use.

World history in American secondary schools is still a relatively young course of study. Although many universities have transitioned to broad world history survey courses, even high school curricula that have been called “world history” for some time often more closely resemble Western civilization courses. The “West and the rest” approach taken by many secondary teachers is often a result of their own limited educational backgrounds rather than an ideological resistance to teaching a world course. Teaching a world history course to high school students and doing so well is a daunting task.

China's history, perhaps more so than any other civilization's history, must be a constant presence throughout a world history course. For teachers without solid content backgrounds in Chinese history, it is easy to fall into the trap of having students memorize dynasties and technological achievements. Even with a fairly solid background elsewhere in East Asia, I have found addressing China in my world courses appropriately to be an overwhelming endeavor. Wills manages to walk the fine line between of-

fering a broad survey of Chinese history and making meaningful scholarship accessible to an audience with limited expertise. He fully acknowledges the difficulty of this task in his introduction and is transparent regarding it throughout the book.

Wills organizes *Mountain of Fame* into twenty chapters focusing on an individual (or a few individuals, in the case of his late chapters on the “Kuomintang Legacy” and “Names in the News”), representing the chronology of Chinese history from its legendary founding to the present day. Reading the book from start to finish in a few sessions will overwhelm survey teachers without specialized knowledge of Chinese history. Since world history teachers will integrate China throughout their courses, the most beneficial way to read the book may be to read each chapter as you approach that material in your course. I found myself frequently referring back to my textbook and other reference materials for relevant background in order to appreciate Wills's narrative. As I read each chapter, I found numerous excerpts that would be more beneficial for my students than straight textbook readings. Wills's account provides stories that contextualize and humanize otherwise-confusing primary sources.

Establishing the ideological legacy of the earliest Chinese dynasties and thinkers is one of the most difficult tasks in a world history survey. This is where *Mountain of Fame* shines at its brightest for student use. Wills's coverage of Yu characterizes the legendary founding of the civilization in eight pages. Even so, these pages manage to explain the period well and address the historiographical difficulties of studying these legends. But this material is most useful as a foundation for Wills's masterful characterization of Confucius. Here the legendary master is described as a human, with human motivations and faults, in a way that no other survey text has achieved. The failures of the sage to achieve his own goals in his lifetime are contrasted with the legacy that grew from his followers and their students. Wills's characterizations of Daoism's and Buddhism's various manifestations elsewhere in the book also make the evolution of belief systems a theme throughout the volume. He frequently previews their impact on later figures, all the way to Mao Zedong. Intellectual history and the history of religion are as central to the content of *Mountain of Fame* as they are to understanding Chinese political history.

Wills's coverage of dynastic politics ranges from esoteric details that only a specialist would appreciate to accessible and interesting material for survey teachers and students. The court dynamics of the Han and Tang frequently venture into the first category. The most interesting examples of the latter, however, are biographies of often-reviled figures such as The First Emperor of Qin, Wang Mang, and the Empress Wu. The unification of China under the Qin and the ensuing ideological battle between legalist and Confucian perspectives is an important piece of survey coverage, and *Mountain of Fame* addresses it well. For students that might otherwise be baffled by the context of important primary source readings such as Haun Kaun's “Discourses on Salt and Iron,” Wills's comments on these documents present a coherent description of the controversies. The competition between outside relatives, courtiers, regents, dowager empresses, and eunuchs for influence within the Imperial court is also especially clear in these chapters.

Religion's role in *Mountain of Fame* ranges from the confusing to the clear and contextually relevant. The unenviable task of making *Chan* (Zen, Jpn) Buddhism comprehensible is addressed in a chapter on Hui Neng. Although the biographical aspects of the coverage are reasonably clear, the explanation of the Sixth Patriarch's thought and Chan principles is daunting for the uninitiated. In sharp contrast, the chapter on Qiu Chuji, the Daoist, is a clear explanation of the religious concepts within the context of the Mongol conquests of China. The description of Chinggis Kahn's

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interactions with Qui Chuji and his ideas are a fascinating look into the Mongol regard for Chinese culture and ideas. As it must, some of the coverage of Daoism does venture into sexuality issues that may be too mature for some high school settings. The selective adoption of Chinese culture by the Mongols, however, is a concept that is strong and carries through to the coverage of early Qing rule as well.

Literature and the arts are woven into the political history with loving care. Wills's deep appreciation for these authors and their works is evident. At times, this results in a loose narrative that is difficult to appreciate for the uninitiated, as it does in his chapter on Zhuge Liang and *Studies of the Three Kingdoms*. On the other hand, even without any background, I became absolutely enthralled with the biography and works of Su Dongpo as a result of reading the author's chapter. Perhaps *Mountain of Fame's* greatest achievement is helping me, and I am sure many other readers, relate to Chinese history from the Chinese perspective rather than viewing and presenting it through the lens of a teacher educated predominantly in Western content and in the Western model.

The biographical portrait format of *Mountain of Fame* addresses the introduction of Westerners to the imperium with a distinctively Chinese perspective and voice. The chapter on Hong Xiuquan, "The Heavenly King," revealed a complex picture of the internal machinations of the Taiping Rebellion that I had never previously seen. Wills's account of the confluence of traditional Chinese values, Christianity, and social status to produce this unique movement is eloquent and elegant. The expansive chapter on Liang Qichao describes the transition among elites from viewing China as the center of all under heaven to one nation-state among many. This portrait of progressive elites around the turn of the twentieth century is contrasted well with the leaders of the Kuomintang and their emergence outside the old educational structures. Wills's characterization of Sun Yat-sen's movement reveals his role as an outsider particularly well.

Wills, in his coverage of Dr. Sun's Three Principles, as he does throughout the book, makes the complexities of translating concepts from Chinese into Western languages especially clear. Wills points out that the third principle, *Min sheng*, or "people's livelihood," is not socialism, and he provides a clear intellectual context. As with a number of other loaded translations into English, this often prejudices and confuses students, and *Mountain of Fame* will help instructors recognize the limitations of this and other translations that are presented without comment in their textbooks.

More important even than the relations with Western powers, *Mountain of Fame* explains extensive relationships between reformers and Japan more clearly and powerfully than any textbook I have used. The complexity of this relationship heightens the intensity of Japan's invasion of both Manchuria and mainland China. The comparison of Japan's modernization under the Meiji leaders and China's resistance to change portrays the extent to which Japan had changed as well as any volume on the subject.

The conflict between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communists plays out in the biographies of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong. The development of nationalist rule on Taiwan paints a picture of progress without glossing over the abuses of the regime. In his chapter on Mao, Wills does a particularly effective job of contrasting the later Mao's cult of personality and diminishing political power against the party establish-

ment. The Cultural Revolution takes on a new importance and desperation in this context that are usually lacking. Wills's coverage of Deng Xiaoping moves beyond a typical portrait of the man as an economic reformer and addresses his less flattering role opposing the democracy movements of the late 1980s.

For teachers of survey courses in world history, *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* is the next step in your understanding of Chinese history. An episodic reading of the book in the context of your course's narrative will give you a manageable way to take your knowledge of the content beyond a textbook understanding. This appreciation will doubtlessly enhance your coverage of the topic for your students. With careful design, excerpts from the book can also be used directly with high school and undergraduate survey students to provide them with more interesting reading than the textbook or primary sources without context. *Mountain of Fame* should be on the reading list of anyone tasked with teaching a survey of Chinese or world history. ■

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