



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)

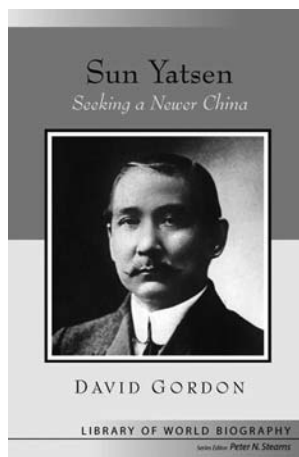
He addresses other misunderstandings in this chapter and concerns in the one that follows—"Is China bent on world domination?" (116)—before

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. ■

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Sun Yatsen Seeking a Newer China

BY DAVID B. GORDON

NEW YORK: PRENTICE HALL, 2010

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

Gordon, this text reaches across arbitrary geographical, cultural, and intellectual borders, making it appealing to a wide reading public. In it, Gordon skillfully synthesizes the existing scholarship on Sun Yatsen while offering novel insights of his own. Whereas the orthodox Chinese historical interpretation portrays Sun as a man of tremendous foresight and leadership ability, the orthodox Western interpretation depicts him as a desperate, intellectually shallow, and ultimately tragic political failure. “My interest in Sun,” Gordon writes, “lies less in judging him—stamping him as a hero or a villain—than in utilizing his life story to explore the fascinating, complicated world he faced” (Gordon, xiv). Sun, he argues, is a product of global trends that characterized the early twentieth century, including industrialization, long-distance communication, and a degree of cultural homogenization. Born in China and raised in Hawai‘i, Sun spent large portions of his life in North America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Japan. Indeed, some of his greatest social and political successes occurred within overseas Chinese communities. On a personal level, Sun was fluent in Chinese and English and even spoke some Japanese. He converted to Christianity, yet he freely interacted with the secret societies of China, many of which espoused traditional Chinese religious beliefs. For all of these reasons, *Sun Yatsen* is excellent reading material for either the high school or college world history seminar.

Because of its short length—just 117 pages of text—teachers will be able to assign the work in its entirety. Conversely, educators can choose chapters to highlight certain themes. For instance, chapters 3 and 4 (“Kidnapped in London” and “Sun in Meiji Japan”) illustrate the cross-cultural influences on Sun and his ideas. Chapters 9 and 11 (“The Dream Goes Awry” and “The South Secedes”) discuss the role of imperialism in China’s revolution, whereas chapters 6 and 13 (“Planning China’s Future” and “Sun’s Death and Beatification”) analyze the powerful appeal of nationalism for Sun and his followers. With minimal student preparation, a teacher could use any of these chapters independently to emphasize these essential world history themes.

As such, the biography is extremely useful to China historians as well as scholars of imperialism, nationalism, diaspora studies, and global capitalism. Not surprisingly, the eminent world historian Peter N. Stearns included the work in his *Library of World Biography* series, published by Pearson Prentice Hall. World history teachers could use it in conjunction with a biography of one of Sun’s contemporaries, such as *Benito Mussolini: The First Fascist*, whereas Asia history teachers could combine Gordon’s work with *Fukuzawa Yukichi: From Samurai to Capitalist* or *Kato Shidzue: A Japanese Feminist*. Because of the many titles in this series, and because of the brevity of each, there are numerous combinations available for many different types of classes.

Sun Yatsen: Seeking a Newer China demonstrates Gordon’s remarkable ability to interpret history through new paradigms and present his work to larger audiences. Together with the other biographies in the series, it will be a trusted source for years to come. ■

DAVID KENLEY (PhD, University of Hawai‘i) is an Associate Professor of History at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore* (Routledge Press, 2003) and other works dealing with Chinese intellectual history and diasporas in world history. He is a frequent contributor to *Education About Asia* and works extensively with the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA).

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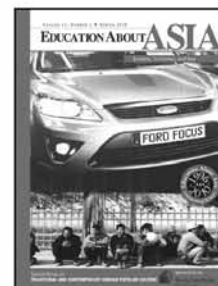
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