

## ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

## Understanding Contemporary China

EDITED BY ROBERT E. GAMER  
BOULDER, COLORADO, LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS, 1999  
416 PAGES, ISBN 1-55587-686-2 PAPERBACK

**U**nderstanding Contemporary China is an anthology of essays on contemporary China, edited by Robert E. Gamer. Consisting of 14 chapters, authored by various experts in different fields, it presents a varied and well-rounded introduction to modern China. Beginning with the geographic and historical basics ("Geographic Preface" by Stanley W. Toops and "The Historical Context" by Rhoads Murphey), it includes essays on Chinese politics, international relations, and "China Beyond the Heartland" by Robert E. Gamer; population growth and urbanization are discussed by Ma Rong, and environmental problems by Richard Louis Edmonds. A fascinating and cutting-edge examination of "Family, Kinship, Marriage, and Sexuality" is presented by Zang Xiaowei, as well as a discussion of women's status and problems in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Laurel Bossen; articles on religion by Chan Hoiman and Ambrose Y. C. King, and literature/popular culture by Charles A. Laughlin, conclude the perspectives. The anthology ends with a look at future "Trends and Prospects" by Robert E. Gamer. Authors are introduced in an all-too-brief Contributors page at the end of the book. I would have appreciated a little more information on each one; one sentence is too brief.

Leading readers almost painlessly through an extensive tour of modern China's events and issues, this anthology is well planned and, with its extensive bibliographies at the end of each chapter, a useful guide to deeper study as well as a rich resource for acquainting readers with China. The volume is well indexed, with a comprehensive final index; also, cross-references from article to article help readers to pursue a subject. This intra-sectional indexing is impressive; authors consistently guide readers to other sections of the book for in-depth treatment of topics in a manner that is informative and interesting as well as helpful. This well-integrated volume makes it a pleasure to follow a thread

from one chapter to a later treatment from a different perspective. The final effect is a well-woven and brightly colored tapestry creating a kaleidoscopic and vibrant picture of China for readers.

The beginning chapters on China's geography and historical settlement patterns and world views reach back into time to create the context for the other sections. Stanley Toops examines Chinese attitudes about both the Middle Kingdom itself and foreign barbarians. He also discusses regional attitudes, climate, soil, vegetation and resources. Rhoads Murphey has

a difficult task cut out for him, to discuss the entire history of China from its first inhabitants through the twentieth century in approximately 30 pages. He is amazingly successful in doing so. He outlines patterns of contrast and development: northern attitudes and issues against southern, centralized government vs. times of chaos and rebellion, from Qin through Song, Tang, Ming and Qing dynasties, illustrating how, throughout all the change, China became more the same. "A new group coming to power (again with the exception of the Mongols) would rarely attempt to change the system, only its management. Culture was continuous, even during interdynastic periods of chaos. By Tang times, most of the elements of modern Chinese culture were present," he points out (p. 49).

In "China Beyond the Heartland," Robert Gamer discusses the special cases of Chinese living outside of the middle kingdom, not only those living overseas, but also the Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet. He points out that two-thirds of foreign investment comes through Taiwan and Hong Kong. These two regions are essential to the continued economic growth and development of mainland China. Hong Kong, even attached to China as it is, may be difficult for China to assimilate, though the country obviously benefits economically from Hong Kong's development. However, it must be careful of how Hong Kong's political activities might affect China's citizens. Gamer discusses also how Taiwan is both an important and sensitive area in China's future. China is encouraging Taiwan

to become an autonomous region; at the very least, its business community, with its ever growing indirect investment in China, has begun dialogue with China to open more trade. Tibet, on the other hand, differs from both Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is without cultural or economic ties to China, and it is one of the poorest of China's regions. Gamer briefly outlines Tibet's history and special circumstances, focusing on the religious and social issues of



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Chinese occupation of Tibet. The discussion examines both sides of the issue fairly, although perhaps the devastation wreaked in Tibet could be more fully described. The bibliography to this section is particularly well developed, covering the Pacific Rim and overseas Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet quite extensively, which left me wondering why the Dalai Lama's works were not included in the Tibetan bibliography.

I am now going to indulge myself by jumping to my favorite chapters, chapter 12 on religion, and chapter 13 on literature and popular culture. (In truth, I found leap-frogging chapters an excellent way to read this book, as one topic often leads seamlessly and naturally to a much later one; for example, chapter 5, China's Economy, segues right into chapter 10 on Family, Kinship, Marriage and Sexuality.) While I would have preferred several chapters on the development of literature, the theater, the arts, religion, and philosophy in China, I can see that would have unbalanced the book as well as greatly lengthening it. However, it leaves a lot of territory to cover in these two short chapters.

Faced with the impossible task of explaining 4,000 years of complex religious development in one brief chapter, Chan Hoiman and Ambrose Y. C. King rise to the challenge with a concise and original look at four "configurations" of religion. Developing from the earliest ancient cults, the religious development of China moves through "axial diversification" of

Confucianism, Daoism, Yin-Yang school, and "Han syncretism" (second configuration), to the "foreign impetus" of Buddhism and neo-Confucianism, into the influence of nineteenth through twentieth-century Christianity and Marxism-Maoism. The authors then speculate on the possibility of a new syncretism of religion to meet the evolving social and spiritual needs of modern China. The discussion of each phase is, of necessity, brief but is clearly explained. Why the Yin-Yang School was separated out from Daoism puzzled me somewhat. The polarity of Yin-Yang, with its emphasis on opposing poles of light-darkness, male-female, dry-moist, active-passive, heaven-earth opposites, seems to me to be basic to Daoist understanding of change, through evolution of contraries, as the basic element of life. The discussion of the influence of nineteenth-century Christianity on Chinese religion is, I suppose necessarily, too brief. The White Lotus sect, the Boxer Rebellion and the Taiping Rebellion are briefly explained, but there is so much more that could be said, given words, time, and space. The religious implications of Maoism are discussed for only two pages; I wish Drs. Chan and King could have had more space to fully develop this fascinating topic.

Charles A. Laughlin has similar challenges in his chapter on literature and popular culture, and his treatment of them is thought provoking, as he dips our toes in a very warm and welcoming pool

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of talent. He begins by describing the origin of the Chinese language, tracing it to the use of oracle bones and later yarrow stalks for divination, pointing out how the Yijing, Classic of Changes, relying on a standard set of interpretations, provided contexts in which to interpret the individual situation before it. "In it, language provides indirect access to truth and cosmic forces through the ambiguity of literary images," he tells us (357). Language, then, in its ambiguity, mirrored the ambiguity of social relations and of the solitary human heart. Chinese, in its inherent pictorial and associative richness of allusion, is perhaps the language most ambiguous and most suited to this task. He quotes Liu Xie's understanding of the "pattern of humanity" in a world of natural pattern and variety, "Dragon and phoenix show auspicious events in the brilliance of their design; the tiger by his brightness, the leopard by the tended lushness of his spots ever indicate a magnificence of manner. . . . If such things, unaware, possess the radiance of many colors swelling within, how can this human vessel of mind lack its own aesthetic pattern [*wen*]?" (*ibid.*) Writing, with its symbolism and ambiguity, can make this

connection between *wen* and nature, between man and the cosmos. This is fascinating stuff, but we don't get to explore it fully, though it points out important functions of language and literature that we explore in this chapter: poetry, song, storytelling, birth of the novel, development of the theater, and the particular problems of literature in Maoist and post-Maoist China. Though this is an unfortunately brief survey, it is a fascinating sketch, leaving the reader with a list of writers and works to turn to for details and a fuller picture.

I enjoyed this book thoroughly and learned much from it. Topics that I am unfamiliar with, such as the economics and environmental issues of China, were explained clearly; I could understand their significance and their implications. Chapters on subjects that I was more knowledgeable about were also well worth reading, because of the thoughtfulness and originality of their necessarily brief presentation. I recommend it to anyone who wants to understand the contemporary issues facing the land of the dragon and the phoenix, those supreme adapters to change. ■

**MARY KAREN SOLOMON** is a full-time faculty member at Colorado Northwestern Community College, in Colorado's beautiful and rural high plains, teaching humanities, philosophy, literature, and English composition. Her particular interests are the religion, philosophy and literature of both Russia and China, with a particular interest in Confucianism and Daoism. She is currently working on an anthology of essays and poetry on topics from Daoism, Zoroastrianism and Sufism.

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