

## Book Reviews

*The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power (1850–2008)*

JONATHAN FENBY

London: Allen Lane, 2008

xlvii + 763 pp. £30.00

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China's extraordinary transformation during the past 30 years has broken the near monopoly that Sinologists once had over the generation of insight and understanding of the country. Beijing's global engagement in just about every sphere of life and the coincident revolution in communications have produced a torrent of public information, personal experience, analysis and commentary about the country. Much of this comes from those outside the traditional world of Chinese studies. It is the work instead of gifted writers, sharp observers and intelligent laypersons for whom the great drama of China's development provides rich material for journalism, novels, travelogues, works of popular history of the kind under review here, and much else.

In his *Penguin History of Modern China* Jonathan Fenby, a senior British journalist, has taken a long look at the plentiful English language scholarship on the last 150 years of Chinese history, combined it with a degree of personal experience, and drawn upon both to produce an engaging narrative of the "fall and rise of a great power." A former editor of Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*, he adopted a similar approach in his biography of Chiang Kai-shek, *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the China He Lost* (Free Press, 2003), exploiting to good effect the lack of any recent study of the former Chinese leader in English.

Surveys of China's modern history tend to be more plentiful, raising the question of what new angles, insights and judgments Fenby is able to muster. The answer, as might be expected of a work of synthesis, lies more in the author's approach than in any revelations of the kind that will make the specialist sit up. He infuses the book with a fondness for human personalities (and especially their foibles) and an eye for detail that enlivens the narrative and will (perhaps) help sustain the interest of the general reader over 700 pages of text.

Yet he skilfully places the principal characters at the centre of the story – the Qing reformers and their opponents, Ci Xi, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping – in the context of the broad forces at work in China's history, most of them dating from far earlier than the period at the centre of this book. Fenby is sober about the human costs of China's pursuit of modernization during the past 150 years. He rightfully wonders whether the happier circumstances (relatively speaking) of the past 30 years mark a departure or merely an interlude for a country beset by "contradictions" (a favourite Fenby phrase) and still a prisoner of its past.

For the most part, it is difficult to take exception with the broad judgments found here. Fenby is on top of the overwhelmingly English-language sources on which he draws. His technique is to extract snippets of the primary sources on which they draw and then go on to make his point. He has clearly read widely and intelligently, turning to contemporary newspaper reports (again in English) where available to supplement his story. The result is an engaging, convincing account of an extraordinary period that students as well as the general public will find of value.

There are, however, some errors and irritations as well as omissions. The last are unavoidable in what is already a weighty tome. However, more might have been said about skilful late Qing diplomacy of the kind that, for example, saw the Court

open “treaty” ports of its own volition to control the foreign presence on the ground. There is no adequate discussion of language and literacy, and no proper explanation of why India and China went to war in 1962.

Among the irritations are the author’s repeated reference to Sun Yat-sen as “the doctor,” (whom, in common with Chiang Kai-shek, Fenby has a tendency to mock), and his fondness for attaching physical descriptions to the characters he describes. Thus, Kang Youwei is “square headed”; Liang Qichao is “sharp-faced”; Yuan Shikai is “bullet-headed,” a feature the strongman of north China apparently shared with Deng Xiaoping.

More problematic are the occasional errors. For example, Fenby appears to have overlooked Russia when asserting that “China is the last great colonial empire on earth, hanging on to ethnically separate Tibet and the vast Muslim lands of Xinjiang.” On a smaller scale, he incorrectly identifies Huang Xuchu as the third member of the Guangxi Clique in the 1920s (it was Huang Shaohong) and says, twice, that Nanning was the war-time capital of Guangxi when it was in fact Guilin. Moreover, it was (nominally) UN-led troops that engaged North Korean and Chinese troops in Korea, not “NATO allies.” There are abundant and generally helpful footnotes throughout the text, though a quick survey of the end notes suggests that a few are missing or otherwise inadequate.

These issues aside, Fenby has produced a well-written, authoritative account of China’s modern transformation. Its chief merit is that it melds together the activities of extraordinary personalities with more impersonal forces, without overlooking the awful costs for many millions of ordinary people of a century and half of upheaval.

GRAHAM HUTCHINGS

*China’s Expansion into the Western Hemisphere*

Edited by RIORDAN ROETT AND GUADALUPE PAZ

Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007

vii + 276 pp. £15.99

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The basic theme of this book focuses on China’s recent expanding engagement in the Western hemisphere and its impact on the political economy of Latin American nations as well as on the dominance of the USA in this region. In the opening chapters, Jiang Shixue and Xiang Lanxin analyse this theme from two categorically different perspectives: the former argues that following a “Going Global” strategy, China would like to co-operate with Latin American nations for mutual benefit on an equal basis; the latter stresses China’s geopolitical thinking and insists that its activities in the region have been for the purpose of its own national economic interests and at the expense of the Latin America. Following the logic they present, the role of China in this region has been described as either that of a benign economic power or that of a malevolent one.

Is China a benign power in the Western hemisphere? All other six contributors agree that Chinese engagement in Latin America has been beneficial to nations there without challenging the dominance of, or taking provocative actions against, the US. In “A South-South Perspective,” Monica Hirst reveals that China promotes its engagement with Latin American nations through the participation of the multi-lateral forums advocating the causes of South–South co-operation for a new world order.