

Book Reviews

Telling Chinese History: A Selection of Essays

FREDERIC E. WAKEMAN JR. (Essays selected and edited by

LEA H. WAKEMAN)

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Frederic Wakeman had a fierce and constantly revitalizing historical energy. He loved the passions of the past, and once he had made the decision to become a historian of China (rather than a novelist or a scholar of literature) he plunged into China's past with a zest unmatched by any others of his generation. Though he tackled a wide range of topics, two major markers stand out especially. One was the two volume master work on the fall of the Ming dynasty and the consolidation of the Qing, "The Great Enterprise," (1985, 1337 pp.). The second was on the travails and violent complexities that marked the Republican period of China's history, from the collapse of the Qing through to the end of the Second World War. This intellectual adventure was presented in a series of powerful studies, most centrally *Policing Shanghai* (1995), *The Shanghai Badlands* (1996), *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (2003), and a forthcoming volume, readied for the press just before his death in 2006, with the projected title *Red Star over Shanghai*. Besides these, there were many other works: on the birth of nationalism and anti-foreign mobilization in the Canton delta region in the early 19th century, on the thought of Mao Zedong, on the Qing dynasty fall, and on the growing richness and availability of Chinese archival and other source materials for the study of Qing and modern China's history.

By her skilful orchestration of a varied selection of Frederic Wakeman's essays, under the title *Telling Chinese History*, Lea Wakeman has now made it possible for a new generation of readers to get a far clearer view of the theoretical underpinnings that lie behind his major books. Frederic Wakeman always enjoyed exploring the shifting norms and patterns of historiographical theory, and he could be a tough antagonist in the give-and-take of academic conflict, as we can see in his discussions of the international trade and bullion flows of late Ming and early Qing society, and even more sharply in his survey of the major arguments for and against the emergence of "civil society" in the waning years of the Qing. Occasionally Wakeman gets so caught up in the clash of views that it is hard to follow every detail of the many points he is making. This may be seen most sharply in his bold attempt (in the essay entitled "The use and abuse of ideology in the study of contemporary China," first published as an integrated essay in *The China Quarterly*, November 1974) to clarify the strongly clashing views of Franz Schurmann and Chalmers Johnson. More of the details of Wakeman's assessments of historical change, structure and cultural interplay are finely combed out for us in the introductory essay – specially written for this volume – by S. N. Eisenstadt, entitled "Frederic Wakeman's oeuvre in the framework of world and comparative history."

Rich though the theoretical approaches – sometimes adopted and sometimes cogently rejected by Frederic Wakeman – may be, it was in the adventuring at the centre of historical research and writing that he found his true joy, and that gives us as readers our greatest pleasure today. Frederic Wakeman was always, to me, a

kind of historical buccaneer, and it took very little imagination to see him perched in the rigging of a three-master, with a cutlass between his teeth and his eyes on the far horizon. It was a grand touch by Lea Wakeman to place Frederic Wakeman's ebullient and original presidential address, presented to the American Historical Association's annual meeting of 1993, under the title of "Navigating History – Voyages," at the beginning of this book of essays. Thus, right after absorbing Eisenstadt's thoughtful appraisal of Frederic Wakeman's theoretical range, the reader is plunged without warning into the watery world of Columbus, as refracted through Wakeman's childhood reading of Samuel Eliot Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," and as acted out in real life by Wakeman's own novelist father, who had moved his whole family to Cuba just after the Second World War, and in 1949 set out with young Wakeman to retrace Columbus' second voyage, in a 56-foot ketch. With their vessel aground on a shoal, and under an "unforgiving" sun, young Frederic tells us he received his first lessons in life's dangers. This address provides a splendid introduction to Wakeman's many moods, and to his enduring sense of life as adventure. It is thus no shock for us too to embark with Wakeman the historian into the 17th-century world of China's "Romantics, stoics and martyrs," (first published in 1984), to the tensions between "Localism and loyalism" (1975), to the mystique of "Licensing leisure" (1995), and the dangers of "Shanghai smuggling" (2004).

In another most effective editorial decision, Lea Wakeman moulded a number of Frederic Wakeman's writings on history into a conclusion for the book, under the title "Reflection: telling Chinese history." In these pieces, Frederic Wakeman spelled out more of his thoughts on historical narrative, and on the joys and pitfalls of trying to probe those evasive borderlines where stylistic innovation may (or may not) impinge on our modes of "telling" history. In one of these reflections, Wakeman quotes from an essay that Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote on history in the 1828 *Edinburgh Review*. In a powerful phrase in that essay from long ago, Macaulay noted that, among other requirements, a true historian had to strive to be "a profound and ingenious reasoner" (p. 415). Among Wakeman's many other strengths, these two qualities surely have a constant resonance in his work as a whole: he was able to be both profound and ingenious, even when probing some of the most difficult materials on China's turbulent history.

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China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy

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The evolution of China's politics and political system has attracted much attention from scholars and policy makers. The key concern is whether this former communist regime is making a transition to political democracy, and, if it is, how rapid this transition will be and what outcomes it will have. *China's Changing Political Landscape* is a timely contribution to our search for answers to these urgent questions.