

CURRENT BOOKS

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THE GREAT CHINESE REVOLUTION:

1800-1985

by John King Fairbank
Harper, 1986
396 pp. \$20.95

John King Fairbank's contributions to China studies can hardly be overestimated. In this latest offering, however, the celebrated Harvard historian seems less concerned with adding to his already refulgent scholarly reputation than with popularizing the study of China's past.

The colloquial style is one clue to Fairbank's intent: Readers are apt to see political notables "playing footsie" or learn that Mao Zedong's wife was a "two-bit movie actress." To be sure, the book draws on the author's wide learning and academic patronage, but there are few notes and no bibliography. In place of the latter, Fairbank simply appends the table of contents of the six volumes of the *Cambridge History of China* that he recently edited. Similar in chronology and level of presentation to his multiedition best seller, *The United States and China* (1948), *The Great Chinese Revolution* contains new findings and insights, new materials to support familiar Fairbankian themes.

The focus, of course, is "revolution," broadly defined to embrace not only politics, society, and economics but also "the entire historical process of modern times in China." Fairbank is particularly concerned with showing how the economic and cultural revolutions—what Marxists call the "base" and the "superstructure"—seldom proceeded at the same pace. In fact, they often undermined each other, in not altogether predictable ways. One learns, for instance, that the scholars of the New Culture Movement (1916-28) postulated that "new ideas to create a new China could come only from hard study and thought, which must precede political action." But if many intellectuals embraced progress, a goodly number of prominent scholar-officials remained preoccupied with more arcane matters such as "national essence" or the compatibility of Confucianism with modern science. And it was the latter who were heard by an essentially conservative political leadership.

Fairbank locates a pattern: Attempts by elites to bring about modernization through a reshaping of culture have repeatedly led to a hiatus between theory and practice, and to economic disaster—as in Mao's notorious Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Even the well-considered efforts between 1914 and 1937 to introduce modern Western educational ideas and practices (such as those of John Dewey) seem to have had relatively superficial impact, profiting mainly "city-bred children of the better-off."

Somewhat new is Fairbank's determination to examine China on its own terms. "China is China," says the author, and its modern form, he

believes, should be understood as an outgrowth of its historical legacy, rather than as a reaction to the outside world. He asserts that "European comparisons offer little help in understanding China's revolution."

Favoring "vertical" analogies, he compares the administrative skill of China's current leader, Deng Xiaoping, to that of Yuan Shikai, the frustrated nation-builder who served as president of the young Republic from 1912 to 1916. Elsewhere, he compares Mao's adaptation of Marxism to Chinese conditions to Hung Shiquan's adaptation of Christianity to the populist yearnings of the Taiping Rebellion (1853-64). True, Fairbank does measure provincial governor and diplomat Li Hong zhang (1823-1901) against his German contemporary Otto von Bismarck, but only to underscore the contrast: The former failed to shore up the moribund Qing dynasty (even though he helped to crush the Taiping Rebellion), while the latter "engineered and won three wars to create the German empire. . . ."

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Fairbank's tendency to play down the relevance of the West sometimes leads to understatement of its impact. His view of the effect of Western imperialism, for instance, reads almost like an apology: Imperialism "might be truly exploitative in some situations but in others more like a crude form of development." Fairbank even minimizes the impact of Communism on modern China. Sometimes, this aversion to non-Chinese comparisons and international influences is so indefensible that not even Fairbank can adhere to it—as in his long and illuminating discussion of Western missionaries and educators during the pre-Communist period.

But generally the author's judgments and insights are sound. China's failure to modernize its economy on its own during the early part of the 19th century he attributes to an untimely population boom: A glutted labor market made mechanical innovation uneconomical. Fairbank is particularly good at making us see Western intrusion as the Chinese must have seen it: the meddling of an uncouth, uncivilized people. Such a perspective makes more comprehensible the Chinese techniques of "barbarian handling," which had proved so successful against Mongols and Turks but turned out to be catastrophically inadequate in dealing with the West.

Some verdicts may occasion controversy. Fairbank's thesis that the Kuomintang was influenced by the Nazis has already been attacked. Suffice it to say that the author here might have more wisely adhered to his policy of focusing on indigenous antecedents. And to attribute China's move into the Soviet camp during the immediate post-World War II era purely to American error—"our understanding was completely wrong, in fact stupid and not well based"—ignores the domestic and international repercussions that a shift in U.S. policy (from pro-Kuomintang to pro-Communist) would have entailed. It also neglects the point that, ultimately, responsibility for China's choice must rest with those who made it.

All things considered, this is a lively and fascinating *tour de force*. Not everyone will agree with all of Fairbank's conclusions, but they are expressed with spunk and forthrightness.

—Lowell Dittmer '86