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Chinese Communist Studies of Modern Chinese History

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Book Reviews

CHINESE COMMUNIST STUDIES OF MODERN CHINESE HISTORY. By Albert Feuerwerker and S. Cheng. Harvard University Press, 1961, xxv 287 pp. (electrotyped).

The authors list and briefly describe nearly 500 books on modern Chinese history published in Communist China between 1949 and 1959. Dr. Feuerwerker, now a professor of history at the University of Michigan, did most of his work on this book while a Research Fellow at the East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, from 1958 to 1960. His principal studies were on imperialism in nineteenth-century China. Miss Cheng, a researcher and Chinese language instructor at the Center, helped substantially to review and summarize the books in the survey.

An introductory essay on the circumstances under which historians now write and teach in mainland China assists one to understand and evaluate the works which they produce.

The Chinese are a history-conscious people with the world's longest and richest continual historical tradition. From history they have learned much about the strength and weakness of human nature and about the rise and fall of political regimes.

China was unified about the year 250 B.C. by the strong, arrogant and ruthless Ch'in emperor, Shih Huang Ti. To consolidate his power and policies, he ordered under the threat of death the seizure and burning of all historical records or literature to which non-conformist scholars might appeal against his views. By this step he intended to establish a monopoly of education, to silence the voice of earlier scholars and to create the impression that human progress began when he mounted the imperial throne. While raising this intellectual barrier against the past and the best of human thought, the Emperor also sacrificed the lives of countless subjects in building the 1600-mile "Great Wall" of China, to protect his domain against physical influence from the north. His "burning of the books" and his wanton burning away of human lives earned for this emperor the opprobrium of generations in China down to the present day.

The actual rulers of mainland China are determined, no less than Shih Huang Ti, that history will belong to the victors. But, not content that truth be suppressed, they insist that their historians enthrone untruth in its place. They have no qualms in applying multiple pressure, even of labor-camps on the frontiers, to render historians compliant.

A people's confidence in government is shattered, its hopes of justice are demoralized, when judges become subservient to the dictates of the politicians in power. Historians are judges of the past. Thomas Jefferson at one time maintained that, between a free press and a ballot box as safeguards of democracy, he would choose the free press. Yet a reader of the daily press in a communist country finds that he can predict both the news and editorial content of next month's newspaper columns. Facts must fit into a rigid pattern and be described in Marxist terms or else be screened out, rejected or denied. Historians, like journalists, are chroniclers of fact.

A certain view of history is one of the two doctrinal pillars on which Marxism rests. The Marxist concept of history is that all great social changes have been effected by war between classes of society, waged for motives that are primarily and basically economic. An "historical materialism" which affirms economic determinism is alleged to be logically and necessarily interlocked with Marx' theory on the dialectic of matter and mind. The two stand or fall together and therefore are propounded and defended tenaciously.

Major events are not shaped, the Marxist historian says, by personal intrigues, jealousy in love, thirst for power, thwarted ambition, injured pride, accidents of dynastic succession, party strife, altruistic pursuit of the public good, the exceptional gifts of great personalities. Yet China's rich and human 5000-year history shows all of these forces operative and sometimes decisive.

In large measure China-mainland historians of the past decade have had to re-write history according to Marxist specifications. Dr. Feuerwerker in his essay quotes policy statements which have plainly influenced the books which he later reviews. Kuo Mo-jo, president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, told historians in 1951 that the old, idealistic view of history must be replaced by a materialistic view; research must be collective rather than individual; detached studies which do not "serve the people" are to be condemned; emphasis on early history and light treatment of the recent past must cease.

Persons who have lived under the Peking regime will understand the import of these phrases. History "in the service of the people" is such as foments opportune hatreds, encourages class conflict and justifies Communist Party total control of life in China.

A 1958 statement of the Department of History at Nankai University in Tientsin proclaims that "historical science must be in the service of the political struggles and in the service of (industrial and farm) production. Historical scientific workers must heed the word of the Party and combine with the workers and peasants, combine with reality. Only then can they demonstrate their usefulness in the socialist revolution and in the construction of a socialist society."

A History Department report from the East China Normal College (Shanghai) in November, 1958, lays down a typical norm: that historians, in selecting, judging and presenting materials, must above all be guided by "the thought of Mao Tse-tung". There is no better way to deal with an academic opponent, it is noted, than to accuse him of contradicting some dictum of Chairman Mao.

Liu Ta-nien, an editor of Peking's *Historical Studies* (in Chinese), claims that the "Spring and Autumn Annals" of Confucius were a tool of parents and feudal rulers, and H.B. Morse's *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE CHINESE EMPIRE* was a classic expression of the bourgeois viewpoint. Hence he urges on Chinese historians an increased "politicalization" of their work so as "thoroughly to expose the hypocritical viewpoint of the bourgeoisie and establish the Marxist viewpoint instead."

In the communist context, the sources and promulgation of these declarations are so authoritative as to constitute an official repudiation of objectivity and detachment in recording events and movements of the past.

In this review we can only sample a few sections of the bibliography. The Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) saw unruly armies sweep across east and central China for years, literally with fire and sword. It is now represented by mainland historians as an anti-feudal class war and a popular struggle against Western foreign aggression. Yet its leader, Hung Hsiu-Ch'üan, was a scholar. Launching the revolt, first on a local and then on a national scale, he was motivated by a curious blend of religious Messianism and by bitter resentment of the Manchus. He was sustained in the revolt by ambition to be emperor and found a dynasty. Effective foreign involvement in the war came late, after moral deterioration and administrative weakness in the Taiping court at Nanking made it plain that the movement could not succeed and had become merely destructive. Facts have to be forced violently to fit such a revolt well into the Marxist straitjacket and to establish the Taiping Kingdom as a direct ancestor of the Chinese communist revolution. The new historians play down the people's losses in life, property, and cultural values in this war, but living traditions, strong along the Yangtse River and in north China until recently, support the classic estimates of an enormous toll taken.

The Boxer Uprising has likewise been repainted and glorified by Party-guided historians. It is now portrayed as a protest of the peasantry against the exploiting feudal class and a popular movement against the imperialists who shortly before had taken Korea and Formosa, opened up the treaty ports, and extorted heavy indemnities from the imperial court. Of course economic disorders existed. They were as much a symptom as a cause of decadence in the Ch'ing dynasty's rule. But the Boxer movement had its roots in the Ming-loyalist soil of the Pai Lien Hui (White Lotus Society). It drew strength from superstitions about the marvelous powers the Boxers claimed; anti-Manchu sentiment gave it momentum. The Dowager Empress, Tzu Hsi, was threatened by the Boxers in north China, by dissension in the imperial family at Peking and by foreign powers outside. She diverted the malevolence of the Boxers from the throne and turned it against the foreigners. Her personal intrigues radically changed the nature and history of the movement and doomed it to a more spectacular failure than otherwise awaited it. The dominantly economic interpretation of the uprising which Marxist historians must give does not honestly face its religious origin and the decisive influence of Tzu Hsi's twisted, frenetic personality.

The bibliography, I think, shows that many of China's older, reputable historians have done no more than they were forced to do towards distorting history and satisfying the Party. Their productivity has been low and slow. Younger men, of lesser critical sense or integrity, propagandize more readily.

Scholars outside China will be pleased to note that new documentation from archives and first-hand sources has been published, sometimes in serious and valuable form, sometimes within "highly selective" limits.

Summarizing the contents of these 500 books, most of which are still very difficult to obtain outside China, the authors leave us with regret that so little detail is given. A firmer critical evaluation, scoring views which are out of focus and materials that are too selective, would be justified and desirable in many instances, I believe. However, the authors give us a good picture of what historians in Communist China have been saying and doing in the past decade. For this the authors deserve praise and appreciation.