

Books Reviews

John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China: A Guide to China's Economy, History and Political Culture* (1999)

Revised and Expanded,

(NY: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001)

xi+355 pp., 14 Tables, 8 Maps, and Index

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A.

This volume is unusually coherent, informative, and absorbing. Its author, John Bryan Starr, served as president of both the Yale China Association and the China Institute in New York City, and as managing director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in Providence, Rhode Island. He is now Executive Director of the Tri-State Consortium. He also served as Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Education in Brown University.

This is an apt, succinct, and refreshing volume (as with his other works, *Ideology and Culture* and *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao*). This is a delightfully clear, concrete, and comprehensively volume that informatively introduces the reader to China. It does not beat around the bush. With appropriate words, it has an apt observant description of China. It meticulously elucidates China's basic dates and cultural territory, China's historical,

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geographical, demographic, sociopolitical, and economic background; and the overwhelming crises China faces today and tomorrow.

Starr shrewdly attends to the complexities of China's politics since the death of Deng Xiaoping, to revelations about China's influence in American politics, and to China's efforts to acquire advanced technology from foreign powers, among many other factors. Nor does Starr neglect China's relations with Taiwan and Tibet, nor the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese rule (all of which are delicate/complex beyond description) nor China's nuclear weapons program, nor its environmental and human rights records. These are only some of the reasons that show to the non-Chinese readers the urgency of understanding China go far beyond their stereotype dismissals.

B.

This volume grows out of the author's Yale seminar for 17 years since 1978 on "issues in contemporary China." Beginning with Introduction and spattered with 17 Tables and 8 Maps throughout, the volume has 17 Chapters that are judiciously, revealingly, engagingly, and pointedly titled as follows. They are "I. Geographical Inequalities," "II. Patterns from the Past," "III. China's Political System: the Party-State and the Power Grid," "IV. China's Economy: Who Owns What, Who Works Where, and Who Makes the Decision," "V. The Chinese Armed Forces," "VI. Sources of Rural Discontent," "VII. China's Cities: Unemployment, Corruption, and Anomie," "VIII. The Centrifugal Forces of Regionalism," "IX. Han and Non-Han: The Divisive Forces of Ethnicity," "X. The Challenge of Environmental Degradation," "XI. One Billion Plus: Controlling the Population Growth," "XII. Human Rights and the Rule of Law," "XIII. Intellectual Freedom and Chinese Education," "XIV. Artistic Freedom and Chinese Contemporary Culture," "XV. Hong Kong and Macao: The Special Administrative Regions," "XVI. Democratization in Taiwan: Model or Rival?" and "XVII. China's Foreign Relations."

Just to glance at these chapter titles is to be led into the volume's contents, and being informed about these crucial themes one is at once attracted to reading the volume. After all this, Starr has a futuristic "Conclusion: China in the Twenty-first Century" plus a Bibliography (extending to 20 pages long) and an Index.

C.

This volume is intriguing because it does not just objectively inform us about China, much less merely tabulate its historical chronicles, but also offers to lead us to “understand” China, by helping us undergo and experience several outstanding features and issues in modern China. Importantly, it offers all this in the context of China’s history. Here we see two points. First, the volume seems to be underscoring the fact that we must undergo an experience to understand a culture, and this is especially important in understanding China, a country that is radically different from the West. Second, to undergo today’s experience we must experience it in the context of its past history, and what a long glorious history China has! China cannot be understood without looking at its history, both as a weight and a guide.

D.

We have two important points in history. Ancient history puts a stamp of distinctness to a people, and modern history shows how such distinct features fare today. China’s ancient history defines a sociopolitical system of “world family,” whose Head, “Heavenly Son” the “Parent of the People,” single-handedly and continuously ruled all people “within the Four Seas.” This system harvested both people’s untold unspeakable miseries and a surprising glorious culture that is “China.” Such is the contribution of China’s ancient history to China today.

This time-honored autocratic system collapsed under the weight of modernity and the incursion of the West, and its culture has undergone a profound “cultural revolution” since the Opium War and the May Fourth Movement. All these modern historical events have an enormous significance far beyond Mao’s disastrous “Cultural Revolution.” An explanation is in order.

China’s cultural revolution amounts to an unceasing search for an alternative sociopolitical economy system ever since the collapse of its autocratic tradition. Mao’s “Cultural Revolution” adapted from the foreign Marxist ideology continues, and is looking all over for a viable national alternative to centralized autocracy. Mao tried in his private version and vision to demolish Confucianism and failed. The Confucian Renaissance is on the rise in new clothes as New Neo-Confucianism.

The West has undergone a similar revolution in its humanistic Renaissance, but China's is more tragic, poignant, and its impact is felt no less worldwide. Because the ongoing nationwide upheaval China still waits to rise from the ashes of the past. And, to think of it, why did people all over the world have to begin with autocracy? China in particular is an enigma, for it has no one-God religion to set up theocracy, as the West did. So, China is a strategic place to ponder why people rallied to the one-God of an autocratic ruler at all. Further, after beginning with autocracy, why did people all over the world subsequently change it?

Starr does not answer our last puzzle. He offers instead much about the turmoil in China today in the context of its history. His information may furnish suggestions on where to go and how to go about understandings the future of this enormous China.

E.

The importance of the past is underscored by Starr's perceptive observation that, in China, what has passed away—the past—is expressed as “a long way in front of me 很久以前” (p. 40).¹ After all, we would have thought that what has gone is now behind us, not “in front of us.”

To be sure, this linguistic convention regarding the past is ubiquitous, not confined to China. The English language has “forefathers,” not “hind-fathers,” and “what has gone before,” not “gone behind.” English has, however, “it is now behind us” that is not Chinese; the Chinese language would say, “what is gone, days gone by, what is passed and gone (已往, 往日, 過去).” This linguistic contrast shows a Chinese penchant to use “before” for the past, as we all are apt to do.

However, it takes Starr a Westerner to discern this fact while studying a foreign culture, China. Interculturalism is quite necessary to alert us to our universal human conditions, and Starr's volume is an excellent instance of such

¹ Starr quoted, “henduo yiqian,” and said it “suggests a very different sense of the direction one faces to look at the past from the one we are accustomed to. It calls to mind the image of a Chinese historian seated beside the stream of events looking toward its source, while behind him the stream runs on into the future” (40). This description, together with that of Chinese “myth” of their history and their view of it as “cyclical” (49), are themselves woven with fact and fiction, and appear rather foreign to the Chinese people. His linguistic observation still remains perceptive, however.

world interculturalism. Sadly, after noting this “past” as “before,” Starr incoherently mumbles through this important observation, and so we must go our own way to discern its significance.

A Chinese expression on the past, “the mirror of the cart in-front 前車之鑑” may furnish us a clue. Perhaps the past is in front of us now because it keeps alerting us about the successes and failures (前車之覆!) of the projects our forefathers went through, the projects similar to the ones we are now contemplating to undertake. Their itinerary serves as our realistic mirror before us; it is an important reference map to chart our way.

At the same time, however, the past has already gone and disappeared from present actuality, so we have nothing to obstruct our free decision. No map or mirror obstructs our view; the past just shows and points to guide us. We are free to ignore it, even at our own risk. However, the past can and does become our present weight, and this possibility seems to have been realized in China today. To notice this fact is itself important in understanding China, which is understandable only in the context of its history, even in this negative sense.

In short, the past is in front yet nowhere, as the best teacher is a dead one (Kierkegaard). This again stresses how important it is to go back to the past in order to understand the present and chart the future. All this underscores the vital validity of Starr’s approach, to understand China in the context of its history.

F.

It is time to take stock. We began with praise of Starr. Most history books tend to be so long, loose, and tortuous as to exhaust the reader’s patience. Starr’s volume, in contrast, is unusually concise and precise, clear and straight to the point, never lost in details. “Seeing is believing,” they say; many eye-catching maps and skillfully designed charts clinch at a glance the points explained in the text. His slender volume covers the same contents as do massive works, e.g. Jonathan Spence’s. Starr’s is a stark, shrewd, and often surprising guide to understanding China and China today in its historical context, as it ominously confronts the world.

Starr’s Introduction (3-18) is a gem, deserving of close reading. Just read this.

“Indeed, there are those who predict that at its current rate of growth, China will be the world’s largest economy by 2040, surpassing Japan’s and the

United States'... Economic success has made the Chinese government...much less malleable and easy to deal with than it once was...It demands full membership in the world economy but balks at playing by the rules[, evidencing] a new dangerous military expansionism. (3-4) The purpose of this book is to look beyond the immediate situation and to explore three questions: What are the principal problems confronting China today? What is the capacity of the Chinese political system to deal with these problems successfully? And, how might the political system play itself out in the near term? My answers [that] I will elaborate on in the chapters that follows, are, first, that [China's many serious] problems would tax the capability of the strongest and most able of governments. But, second, the capacity of the Chinese government is severely diminished and... is weak. Hence, third, China's near-term future looks rather dark." (3-7)

Then follows a succinct and penetrating description of 14 grave problems, both domestic and international, that face China today. The 14 problems are as follows. The state-owned enterprises are in serious financial strait. The banking system is collapsing. Unemployment and underemployment are severe. Workers floating from rural to urban areas live in ex-urban shantytowns; they are needed yet tend to commit violent crimes. The gap in urban and rural incomes is great. Excessive rural taxation simply supplies local officials with their ostentatious expenditures. There is no cash flow to the farmers. The lack of autonomy incites border region ethnic tensions. It is difficult to control population growth. It is impossible to increase any more grain production. The environment in China is extensively polluted. Administrative problems in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan stay to gnaw China at the root. Problems continue to linger on in relations with USA and with neighboring nations. Saddled with these grave issues, the Chinese government is itself thoroughly corrupt, and lacks the desiderata for efficiency, grand vision and popular credibility. Its future is bleak indeed.

Now, this scenario raises at once the following twofold puzzle. First, in the face of these well-nigh insurmountable challenges, why and how is China managing a spectacular growth in economy? What are the factors responsible for the growth? Can these factors be channeled to solve the problems mentioned here?

Second, China has a long glorious culture of several millennia. It boasts many brilliant ideas to solve problems, persuasive arguments for great humane governance, and effective measures for national prosperity. Besides, China today has an unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, including nuclear industry and space programs. Can't China utilize its vast cultural resources

to resolve its problems?

Starr is almost silent on all this. He on the whole stresses China's socio-politics and economy, not its scientific and humanistic achievements, such as Kao Hsing-chien (高行健) the Nobel laureate. Our puzzlement is this. Why is China still cumbered with these 14 problems, all too familiar in Chinese history? Why/how is it that so high and powerful a culture as China's is so powerless before these problems, historically so familiar?

In any case, one thing is certain. These daunting challenges China faces today as it confronts modernity have deep historical roots. Starr does describe but not adequately elucidate the today-past relation that engenders these critical problems. Besides, the geo-politically strategic island of Taiwan is tacitly and simply assumed as part of China ("nominally a province of China" [275]), not just culturally but politically as well.² Starr's astute external observation, especially his long description on Lee Teng-hui's achievements (279-294), is an eye-opener in many respects. Sadly, Starr did not pay an equal amount of sympathetic attention to both sides (Taiwan, the mainland) of the controversies surrounding the issue of "One China" that is perpetually a potential explosive in world politics. Nor did his totally sociopolitical and economic description attend to Taiwan's complex cultural mix that is more than simple Chinese culture or Japanese; it can only be called "Taiwanese" that is behind all bold political moves he approvingly described. Similar complaints can be registered on Tibet. China's critical role in international geopolitics is also unsatisfactorily analyzed.

Importantly, the volume on the whole gives an impression of looking into China as in a mirror. Although much more intimate and experiential than most volumes of history or journalistic reportage, this volume still feels as if it were a view of China in a mirror, somewhat incredible to the Chinese person looking into it. "Is this my China I know in my bones?"

Besides, "history" is one of the problems in China. Its history is at once a weight that ties it down and a guide toward the future. The dynamics of history as weight in contrast to guide is not obvious in the volume, but it is a central is-

² Starr did say, "Only during the decade 1885-1895 and in the three years immediately after the end of World War II was Taiwan governed as a province of China. At all other times, Taiwan has been largely independent of the control of a mainland Chinese government" (276). Then he rightly rehearsed the history of it being "'discovered'... by Portuguese explorers, who named it Formosa." And so on.

sue in China today.³ Thus, Starr's future prognostication of China is buried in a benign exhortation to the West to pay close attention to China.

He does dream of "Taiwanization" of China in the long run, however, in the sense of a gradual "democratization" of China as Taiwan has undergone (298-299), although he admits it to be unlikely in China's situation today (320).⁴ That is courageous of Starr among most Sinologists and historians who tend to neglect Taiwan.

In general, the uninitiated can be introduced to a region with an objective explanation of its geography, population, history, socio-politics, and demography. In contrast, the region can also be presented with a personal experiential description of its daily life and its peculiar atmosphere and sentiments redolent all over, with the eye of a sensitive fiction-writer.

We yearn after a joining of the two. It is perhaps an impossible dream, but it is an important and indispensable ideal of a sympathetic historian, and can and should be approximated asymptotically. Being perceptive, proficient, and comprehensive, Starr's volume may well have furnished us with an impressive first step toward fulfilling this ideal of the historian.

³ Starr did report that China sees "history" as both enrichment and imprisonment (53). He did not elaborate on it, much less sympathetically weave these contradictory views of history into his description of China. His description remains a naive external reportage, although better and more intimate than most histories on China.

⁴ Starr envisions a more likely scenario of sudden or gradual collapse of the Chinese government system, for the army to take over, however temporarily (320-323). His vague benign conclusion on the last page is a letdown, but his admonition to learn from history is a wise counsel.