BOOK REVIEW

China’s Twentieth Century
Revolution, Retreat, and the Road to Equality
BY WANG HUI
NEW YORK: VERSO BOOKS, 2016
368 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1781689066, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Zach Smith

What positive lessons can China take from its tumultuous twentieth century? Given the tragedies of the Mao era and the relentless pace of ongoing economic and social change in China, it may be tempting to simply ignore China’s revolutionary period, as the 2008 Olympic opening ceremonies did in its retelling of Chinese history for a global audience. Yet in his new book, China’s Twentieth Century, leading literary critic and intellectual historian Wang Hui argues that the twentieth century is not only essential for explaining China’s present, but may even provide solutions for its future. As a member of China’s “New Left,” Wang’s intervention into both Chinese- and English-language histories of China is both politically charged and theoretically rich, exploring the possibilities for equality and justice that were created and then suppressed during this period in China’s recent past.

Key Issues in Asian Studies
Revised and expanded second edition
Japan and Imperialism, 1853-1945
James L. Huffman

“This concise and readable introduction to a complex subject—the rise and fall of Japan as an imperialist power—will be a splendid addition to the reading list of any course on modern Japanese history. Teachers will appreciate Huffman’s ability to raise key issues of analysis and interpretation, and students will appreciate his ability to discuss them with clear and lively prose.”

Peter Duus
Stanford University

List Price: $12 (AAS Member Price: $10)

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Though its title may suggest a general survey, Wang’s book does not seek to offer a contiguous narrative of twentieth-century Chinese history. Instead, it offers six critical essays, translated by several scholars and edited by Saul Thomas. These essays seek to define the central terms of China’s twentieth-century politics and suggest applications to twenty-first-century problems. In particular, Wang focuses on the politicization of the state, culture, and the masses during China’s “short twentieth century,” from the 1911 Revolution to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Wang notes at the start that many of the ideas most central to this politicization—class, party, nation-state, mass line, even the idea of a “twentieth century” itself—were yiwu (alien things) whose evolution produced unprecedented new forms of political practice and, ultimately, a new China.

The first three chapters closely examine specific episodes in this era of alien things—the 1911 Revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty, the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s, and the Korean War, or as it is known in China, the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea. These chapters are valuable to the teacher of world history because of the ways they situate China at the forefront of important global trends. For example, Wang asserts in chapter 2 that the 1917 Russian Revolution—long considered a seminal event in world history surveys—actually followed a blueprint of nationalist revolution and socialist nation-building laid out in China’s own antimonarchical revolution six years earlier. Similarly, chapter 4 shows how the concept of “people’s war” developed during the Chinese 1950–1953 campaign to aid North Korea served as a template not only for the Việt Nam War, but for broader anticolonial nationalist movements.

The latter three chapters focus on contemporary challenges: the decline of political representation following China’s market reforms, the growing economic hardships of migrant workers and urban consumers, and the ongoing ethnic tensions in the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Though other scholars place the roots of these problems in Maoist era policies, Wang resists the suggestion that these challenges can be solved by simply abandoning Chinese-style socialism in favor of multiparty liberal democracy.

Wang’s collection of essays is provocative but less accessible than other present-focused accounts of the Chinese past, such as Chinese novelist Yu Hua’s China in Ten Words (Vintage, 2012). As an effort to revise existing historiography, Wang assumes that his readers are already familiar with the major (and some minor) beats of modern Chinese history. Furthermore, his deep theoretical engagement with philosophers such as John Rawls and Amartya Sen may further hamper the book’s suitability as an introductory history text. Nevertheless, when used alongside a more general overview, the book’s latter chapters offer a unique if politically biased perspective on China’s contemporary social problems that students are not likely to find in accounts by British and American scholars.

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