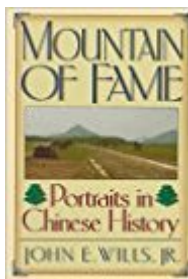


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Mountain Of Fame



Synopsis

Through biographies of China's most colorful and famous personalities, John Wills displays the five-thousand-year sweep of Chinese history from the legendary sage emperors to the tragedy of Tiananmen Square. This unique introduction to Chinese history and culture uses more than twenty exemplary lives, including those of statesmen, philosophers, poets, and rulers, to provide the focus for accounts of key historical trends and periods. What emerges is a provocative rendering of China's moral landscape, featuring characters who have resonated in the historical imagination as examples of villainy, heroism, wisdom, spiritual vision, political guile, and complex combinations of all of these. Investigating both the legends and the facts surrounding these figures, Wills reveals the intense interest of the Chinese in the brilliance and in the frail complexities of their heroes. Included, for instance, is a description of the frustrations and anxieties of Confucius, who emerges as a vulnerable human being trying to restore the world to the virtue and order of the sage kings. Wills recounts and questions the wonderfully shocking stories about the seventh-century Empress Wu, an astute ruler and shaper of an increasingly centralized monarchy, who has since assumed a prominent position in the Chinese tradition's rich gallery of bad examples--because she was a woman meddling in politics. The portrayal of Mao Zedong, which touches upon this leader's earthy personality and his reckless political visions, demonstrates the tendency of the Chinese not to divorce ideology from its human context: Maoism for them is a form of "objective" Marxism, inseparable from one man's life and leadership. Each of the twenty chapters provides a many-sided exploration of a "slice" of Chinese history, engaging the general reader in a deep and personal encounter with China over the centuries and today. The biographies repeatedly mirror the moral earnestness of the Chinese, the great value they place on the ruler-minister relationship, and their struggles with tensions among practicality, moral idealism, and personal authenticity. Culminating in a reflection on China's historical direction in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, the biographies show the modern Chinese still inspired and frustrated by a complex heritage of moral fervor and political habits and preconceptions. As absorbing as it is wide ranging, this history is written for the general public curious about China and for the student beginning to study its rich cultural heritage.

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Customer Reviews

Although intended for the inspired tourist or casual reader who wants a quick introduction to Chinese history, this collection of biographies is in no way superficial. Each of the 20 chapters offers a figure typical of his/her times and an elaboration of the contexts and backgrounds that shaped these individuals to fill in chronological gaps. Wills (history, Univ. of Southern California) starts with Yu, the idealized founder of the Hsia dynasty, and Confucius; proceeds through the seventh-century Empress Wu, who smothered her own infant in order to blame the murder on a rival, and 11th-century poet Su Dongpo; and ends up with the Kuomintang Legacy (Zou Rong, Qiu Jin, and Sun Yat-Sen) and Mao Zedong. The "mountain" of the title seems to be an ancient metaphor for the imperial archives. The philosopher Mencius is lamentably not included among the biographies; nonetheless, this work is recommended for all general collections. Jack Shreve, Allegany Community Coll., Cumberland, Md. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"[A] spirited and highly intelligent book. . . . A splendid reflection on the nature of the Chinese relationship to history, culture, and morality. . . . What gives Wills's [book] its originality and its effectiveness is the artful span of examples he has chosen, examples that not only range across time . . . but are also chosen to illuminate major themes and continuities within the Chinese universe. . . . There is high drama, cruelty, and excess in many of these stories. . . . And there is also wit and charm mixed with the telling of great events."--Jonathan Spence, The New York Times Book Review "A tapestry displaying a vast array of noble dreams and failures, of initial utterances and long-distance echoes, of recurrent patterns and abrupt innovations intended to intrigue and inform educated readers looking for a way into three thousand years of Chinese history."--Jerry Dennerline, The Journal of Asian Studies "This book . . . chronicles 5,000 years of Chinese history in short biographies of its most important figures. . . . Time and again these vignettes of history reflect the moral earnestness of the Chinese and individual struggles between villainy and

idealism."--Asia Week "[T]his remarkable book . . . spans the 3,000 recorded years of Chinese history. . . . We experience the wrenching difficulties faced by . . . each emperor, philosopher, poet, historian, monk, military general, and revolutionary whose life story is told here with such skill and compassion. . . . students of history will find themselves clinging to the edge of their seats, as if the outcome were still to be determined."--Wilson Library Bulletin "Although intended for the inspired tourist or casual reader who wants a quick introduction to Chinese history, this collection of biographies is in no way superficial. Each of the 20 chapters offers a figure typical of his/her times and an elaboration of the contexts and backgrounds that shaped these individuals."--Library Journal

I read this book along with my course text while taking Chinese history at CCSF. It gives a great opportunity to understand the cultural development of China through the eyes of its most colorful and innovative personalities.

'It remains hard to imagine a short-term bearable future for the people of China,' wrote John Willis, who teaches history at Southern Cal, in 1994. He also said that a continuing theme of Chinese society has been 'optimism about what man can be and can accomplish.' It is certainly a portentous question, how a country with a thoughtful and ancient social philosophy of optimism can have attained the sorry state it is in now. Willis attempts to answer the question by looking at the lives of about 20 great Chinese, to understand what they thought they were doing and, also, what later Chinese thought about them. 'This book . . . is intended for people who never have paid much attention to China and now want a quick and graspable introduction to some main themes in its stirring history.' The development of Chinese political theory is far easier to grasp than the equally significant development of Chinese religion. Portraits of famous men (and one woman, the scandalous Empress Wu) are an appropriate way to enter Chinese mentality, says Willis, because the Chinese have been 'more inclined than most peoples to cast their moral and political principles and arguments in terms of individuals who are idolized or reviled.' Whether they really are more inclined to personalize their own history than other people is doubtful, but Willis makes a good case that the Chinese have placed more value on theory than on good practice. 'The drama was heightened, the selflessness more perfect when nothing else was accomplished except to demonstrate one's firmness in principle in the face of futility, humiliation and death,' he writes. Many other societies have preferred to honor leaders who got things changed. Robin Hood, for example. but the great Chinese outlaw story, 'Water Margin,' does not have the happy ending (for the common folk) of the Robin Hood story, or William Tell or many another hero outside China. From

earliest times -- that is, from the third emperor, Yu, the first subject of 'Mountain of Fame' -- the Chinese have systematized government, in sharp contrast to the helter-skelter turmoil of, say, Europe following the German invasions. The result, says Wills, has been paradoxical. 'From Wang Mang to Deng Xiaoping, Chinese policymakers all too often have lacked Su's suspicion of uniformity and have made trouble for themselves and their people by trying to impose on all Chinese policies that make sense for some important part of it.' Su is Su Dongpo, a poet and politician of the 11th century, the earliest hero in 'Mountain of Fame' who is more history than myth. A mass of Su's essays, poems and state papers have survived. This is surprisingly late. For Europe, Sumeria, Egypt and India, we have much earlier famous men that we can think we understand. Whether we can understand the early Chinese luminaries or not, though, Wills believes we can understand what their myths mean today. The reason 'Mountain of Fame' is important is that China has too many people to ignore and, as Wills observes, has been impervious to outside suasion. If China is to be governed, the Chinese will have to do it, and, given their deep consciousness of the past (even Mao the revolutionary was enthralled to it), it will have to happen in the context of the Wus, the Sus and the other towering figures of Chinese history.

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