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Jeffrey Wasserstrom. China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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Readers looking to increase their foundational knowledge of China, its history, and culture will find Wasserstrom's text a valuable resource. Wasserstrom uses everyday language reminiscent of travel guide writing to define the complexities of China's imperialist past, the country's transition from the leadership of Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, and the events surrounding the Tiananmen Square uprising. As a novice reader of Chinese history, this reviewer found Wasserstrom's text a welcomed alternative to the more challenging academic texts available on the topic.

Chapter One opens with an explanation of Confucian ideology, and a reference to the Olympic Games of 2008, during which millions of viewers, many for the first time, gained insight into the foundation of Asian thought. Wasserstrom reminds the reader that while Confucius' writings may no longer be contemporary, they continue to remain relevant to Chinese philosophy and culture. Indeed, China's Olympic event and its highlighting of Confucian themes provided an opportunity for China to showcase its culture and history while sending a clear message to the international viewing audience that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was looking to connect with other countries. The Olympic Games also provided China with an opportunity to reveal their respect for their own traditions. Many Chinese traditions and beliefs, particularly the belief in the importance of education, can be traced to Confucius' strong emphasis on education; Wasserstrom references Confucius' philosophy that as we grow, we become individual beings through the experience of learning.

Wasserstrom devotes a considerable amount of his text to an exploration of China's dynastic past, taking the reader on a historical journey beginning with the dynasties of Xia, Shong, and Zhou and moving on to the Han Dynasty, which as noted by the author, encouraged China to transform itself through the widening of its geographical boundaries and the incorporation of Confucius ideology. The Dynasties of Qing, Song, and Ming are also discussed and noted for the rate at which China expanded during those dynastic periods. This section of the book also provides for the reader a clear description of the complexities and struggles faced by individuals living under authoritarian rule in China.

Chapter Three, "Revolutions and Revolutionaries," provides a description of the political leaders and movements that shaped China during the period under Sun Yat-sen, whom Wasserstrom describes as the founding father of the PRC. In addition, this chapter also examines the May 4th Movement, seen by many as an important moment of Chinese reform and restructuring; the Russian Revolution; the First United Front; and the Long March, which Wasserstrom notes as another critically important event in China's development. Most notable is Wasserstrom's descriptions of Chiang Kai-shek as a larger than life, charismatic leader and Mao Zedong as perhaps China's most well-known figure. The author's comparison of Mao Zedong to one of America's early presidents, Andrew Jackson, was bold and surprising. Wasserstrom admits that this comparison is imperfect but goes on to outline the two men's similarities. He explains that although both men were involved with events that were harmful to their political tenures, they remain revered as historical leaders and are used as national symbols (i.e. Jackson appears on U.S. currency). Additionally, both men are remembered as individuals who never lost sight of their roots. However, despite the detailed nature of the author's examination of these individuals and events, as a relative new-comer to the Chinese historical context, I found myself

looking for more from this portion of the text. Missing from this chapter are more contemporary analyses. Indeed, the reader would benefit from further analysis of the major movements that are currently shaping China's philosophy and government.

As sparse as Wasserstrom's description was of the "Revolutions and Revolutionaries" discussed in Chapter Three, his next chapter, "From Mao to Now," is extensive and offers a detailed examination of not only Mao Zedong but also of Deng Xiaoping, the Tiananmen Uprising, and reasons why Communist rule has survived for so long in China. The author cites four specific reasons for the longevity of the CCP: (1) the ability of the government to limit the number of public protests against the ideas of communism, (2) the government's continued emphasis on saving China from external forces of imperialism, (3) the government's work to raise the standard of living among its citizens, and (4) the political wherewithal to consider inviting the collaboration of individuals or groups that might otherwise have been an enemy of the state, like the Chinese entrepreneurs who were invited into the Communist party.

In this chapter's analysis of Chinese leaders, Wasserstrom's explains that the leadership styles of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping are noticeably different: Mao was a charismatic leader with an almost cult-like following, while Deng Xiaoping was a more tempered and unassuming a character who sought to be seen as an equal to those over whom he had authority; he wanted no notoriety. Indeed, says Wasserstrom, Deng Xiaoping was very different than other communist leaders. The author credits Deng Xiaoping with being remembered for his introduction of some daring political reforms that, some believe, made possible China's many consecutive years of prosperous economic growth.

As someone who teaches a course in 21st Century Issues, I found the final two chapters, "U.S.-China Misunderstandings" and "The Future," the most valuable for gaining insight into current U.S.-China relations and understanding the degree to which we, as nations, are more alike than different. Wasserstrom also discusses at length Americans' perceptions and misperceptions of China. He asserts that the most common misconception Americans have of the Chinese is that there is no diversity among them. He says, most Americans perceive all Chinese citizens as either (1) pro-communist minions of the state or (2) political dissidents. In truth, Wasserstrom explains, China is a country, like the U.S., filled with individuals who fall somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum. Wasserstrom offers a possible explanation for Americans' limited understanding of China as a nation of vast socio-economic, political, and cultural diversity. He notes that perhaps our image of a militaristic Japan after the Cold War led to an unfortunate grouping, in the minds of many Americans, of all Asian nations into some perceived cohort. Additionally, he posits, Americans' limited access to anything other than mediated images of the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution perpetuated the Western notion of the Chinese people as a single, monolithic entity. Images appearing before Western eyes seemed to confirm that China was populated by millions of mini-Maos, robotic replicas of "Mao in the blue uniform." This notion of every Chinese citizen as a carbon copy of Mao, created by decades of culturally mediated misrepresentation, has unfortunately fogged our vision regarding the true nature of the peoples and the cultures of China. For example, although the majority of individuals living within China's borders are Han, there are smaller groups who live within the larger Han population who exhibit a diverse language and culture. Wasserstrom also observes that Americans often incorrectly view China as an atheist state, when, in truth, there are large populations of Muslims living within China, along with Christians, Chinese Catholics, and Tibetan Buddhists.

As Wasserstrom considers the future of China, he claims that while the current predominant worldview is one in which China is perceived as a military threat, such fears are unsubstantiated. He reassures the reader that although the Chinese government is currently increasing its military budget, there is no plan for China to “take over the world.” There is no grand plan for Chinese world-domination, says Wasserstrom, and those living outside China would benefit from a change in perspective. He encourages Westerners to view China’s current attempts to fortify its military as efforts to protect itself against the possibility of an international invasion. Wasserstrom reminds the reader that it would be wise for both the U.S. and China to increase their understanding of each other. In many ways, China is forging a path much like the one the United States forged during its very own history, and this author believes that understanding our own past might improve our understanding of China, its objectives, and its people and decrease the possibility of negative interactions and misunderstanding.

Overall, Wasserstrom’s latest book provides a framework for those seeking a foundation of understanding of Chinese history and culture. For those who are serious students of the region, this text would be a relatively quick read and would provide a big picture on China’s imperialist past, previous leaders, military movements, and China’s future.

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