

Chinese History

As Viewed By Bai Shouyi

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An English translation of the book *Zhongguo Tongshi Gangyao* (中國通史綱要) (Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 1980) edited by Professor Bai Shouyi (白壽彝) has appeared under the English title An Outline History of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982, 563 pages). Handsome and well illustrated, the book enables readers who are unfamiliar with the Chinese language to discover an interpretation of Chinese history which is fairly widespread throughout that country.

Different schools bring different interpretations to the job of historical research and no historian pretends to be perfectly objective. Bai Shouyi and the team of scholars working under his supervision: Yang Zhao, Gong Weiduo, Fang Lingui and Zhu Zhongyu, do not hide their position. They are Marxist-Leninist, and it is with the tools of analysis furnished by this ideology that they trace the several millennia of the history of their country. Such a frame of reference leads them to emphasize certain aspects of that history, the number and intensity of peasant insurrections, the hopes of the masses, and the injustices created by different political regimes. The commonly held notion that Chinese dynasties endure until peasant uprisings cause the mandate of Heaven to pass into other hands (Tian Ming 天命) leading once more to a return to the former situation, does not easily conform to the realities of history. Reading this book helps one to realize this.



However, the limitations of the authors' point of view are easily detected. They are prisoners of an ideology which hinders them from seeing and analyzing those things that fall outside the limits of their frame of reference. Because of this, the rich heritage of Chinese history appears in their hands, impoverished and deformed.

The great Chinese philosophers are handled badly:

"Confucius is properly regarded as having made great contributions in the cultural history of China...however, being politically conservative, he worked against the tide of history". (p.112) "Though all this... [Mozi's philosophy] ... was merely a wish, his opposition to fatalism was nevertheless progressive". (p.113) "The book Lao Zi contained some naive ideas of dialectics... In his view, however, the changes in things did not develop in a forward fashion, instead it went on in an endless cycle". (p.114)

For much the same reasons, various spiritual and religious currents in China are undervalued, even despised, and reduced to purely negative social phenomena. Rather than considering religions in their objective reality, their evolution over the centuries and their impact on society, the authors hasten to apply Marxist critiques, critiques which seem to be raised to the level of dogma. Islam and Taoism are hardly mentioned at all. The authors seem to equate Christianity with Protestantism,¹ and to reduce the experience of the Catholic Church in China to that of the Jesuit missionaries of the 17th century. Matteo Ricci and his companions are given very poor treatment by Bai Shouyi, who is of Hui nationality: "Holding tightly to the key to the Kingdom of God, the Jesuits trampled on the earthly kingdom of man. Their thinking coincided well with the thinking of the colonialists who brought to China gunboats and opium." (p.427) The team of authors likewise blames them for bringing erroneous sciences to China.² Few historians in China today would dare to put forward such a judgment on the contrary, many have explicitly recognized the positive aspects of the scientific contribution of the Jesuits in China, even when they do not approve of their apostolic activities.³

Buddhism also comes in for some harsh criticism: "Buddhism with its tenets of reincarnation and transmigration enabled people to find an escape from their cares by pinning their hopes for happiness on the next life." (p.186) The authors appear to approve of Fu Yi (555-639), an atheist intellectual, who stated:

Buddhist monks and nuns just sit around doing nothing but evading rent-tax payment. They should be ordered to return to the laity, engage in production efforts, get married and bear children to increase the nation's revenue and military strength. (p.220)

One would suspect that the damaging ideas of the Cultural Revolution are at work here. The authors find it difficult to show any appreciation for the policies of the United Front, religious liberty and China's spiritual civilization.

It seems to me that Bai Shouyi's book does a disservice to the Chinese people. It has too narrow an approach to reality and its methods, which can hardly be considered scientific, prevent the reader from seeing the great variety of historical situations, prominent people and the motives which inspired them. Peasant revolts, for example, are of very diverse origins. Some are regional in character, others organized by Triad societies, still others a rejection of foreign power. The social environment and the demands of the rebels differed according to the times. Often it was not a matter of spontaneous peasant uprisings at all, but rather, of organized, well-coordinated, hierarchical movements.

The "Chinese Renaissance" of the 10th to 13th centuries arouses the admiration of many historians because of its cultural renewal, the development of printing, progress in science and philosophy, etc... It was a China well in advance of Europe, as Marco Polo discovered! Bai Shouyi seems not to appreciate the richness of this epoch as much as some other do. Even when he writes about the above mentioned things, he seems more anxious merely to reduce it all to a listing of the various Chinese personalities of the period according to his own philosophical categories: the reformer Wang Anshi "was a philosophical materialist"; Shen Kuo, another reformer, "was also a materialist"; Sima Guang "was a leading conservative and an idealist advocating fatalism". Cheng Hao was a "conservative theoretician", etc. (pp.268-9) In short, the author seems torn between his duty, as a Marxist, to criticize imperial governments and his desire as a patriot to extoll the achievements of the Chinese people.

One final example, the authors acknowledge that the construction of the Grand Canal (2,500 km. long) in the 7th century contributed to the economic development and unification of the country. But there is no word of praise for the engineers and technicians involved in bringing to term this unique accomplishment in the history of humanity, nor do they express admiration for the daring initiative of Emperor Yang Guang, who launched

this great project. Rather, the emperor is reproached for taking pleasure trips on the new waterway," imposing a heavy strain on the nation's manpower and material resources." (pp.206-7)

Mr. Bai Shouyi, who is an experienced historian,⁴ seems to have been influenced, when composing his book, by young scholars formed during the Cultural Revolution. It must have been in such a climate that the initial research was done and, unfortunately, the work was not revised afterwards. This climate, as is now repeatedly stated, did not allow for truly scientific research. The book, therefore, seems hardly beneficial to a China committed to modernization and determined to seek truth from facts. We hope that some future works may make up for the deficiencies of this book, and enable a wider audience to discover China's history in all its fullness and richness.

FOOTNOTES

1. The authors use the term 'Christianity in the reductive sense, as many people do in China, only to designate Nestorianism and Protestantism.'

2. Mr. Bai makes the following statement: "The Jesuits have been praised as the importers of Western science to China, praise they did not deserve. We know that modern science came about as a result of liberating man's mind from theology and that the Roman Catholic Church was a deadly enemy of modern science and a brutal persecutor of scientists. Naturally, the Society of Jesus would stand on the front line against science and scientists, and it is unthinkable that its members would bring modern science to China. In fact, they tried their utmost in preventing Chinese scholars from learning about the latest developments in modern science." (p.427)

3. Even Gu Changsheng, who is not very appreciative of the missionaries writes: "The most important scientific and cultural knowledge brought by the missionaries can be categorized as astronomy, military science, mathematics and geography. Although there are certain shortcomings and reservations, in regard to filling up the gaps in the China of that time, broadening the extent of knowledge and enriching China's science and culture, there was a definite contribution." Cf. (Chuanjiaoshi Yu Jindai Zhongguo Missionaries and Modern China) (Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 1981), p.10.

4. His very first book "History of China's Communications" (Commercial Press Shanghai 1937) is in our library.