

Telling Chinese History, A Selection of Essays Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr., Selected and Edited by Lea H. Wakeman, Berkley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2009, xix+453 pp.

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Such a collection of essays by one of the leading historians of China's past and modern history, who died a few years ago, is a real treat for readers. Not only the specialists, but also any one interested in China, and even in history as an intellectual, enlightening discipline.

Many reviews have already appeared celebrating this publication. Jonathan Spence, in *The China Quarterly* (200, Dec. 2009) recalls the formidable stature of Wakeman as historian; in *The China Journal* (62, July 2009), Colin Mackerras writes "What I find most remarkable about Wakeman's work is his ability to describe a period, even a brief one, in extraordinary details, but also to link the period to a broader analysis of Chinese history in general."

Instead of presenting, let alone discussing, the complete content of the essays, we would like to cite a few sentences by Wakeman that may be gleaned in these pages, often at the end of a study. Of course, they arrive after scholarly analysis in the preceding pages, but as such they give much thought for thinking, when reflecting on history anywhere and at anytime.

At the end of *The Chinese Mirrors* (Ch.2), one reads "China and its observers see much of themselves in each other"...so "to preserve the integrity of both subject and object...the projections have to be tested constantly at both sources" (p.54) A caveat worth repeating again and again, says the author. Especially when one touches the issue of "universal values and particular societies", which is the sub-title of the essay.

With all the caution necessary when making comparisons between societies, or periods of time, Wakeman does offer some light for the present when he writes at the end of the essay *The Price of Autonomy*" (Ch.5), which is an analysis of intellectuals' positions during the Ming and the Qing dynasties: "The ultimate quest for intellectual autonomy was political estrangement"...and to some extent this applies to Communist intellectuals (p.170). This is not a quick generalization, but it may help to understand what happens here and there today.

To continue citing inspiring quotations, there is this one, concluding the detailed narrative of Jiangyin city's resistance against the conquering Manchus: though "historical myth is not merely fiction... men who act for posterity can never be certain that their animating values will survive the historical future...Conviction, after all, is the least –and noblest- of human certainties. (pp.207-208)

The essays on Ming and Qing societies were mainly published in the 1970s. In part three of the book, two papers on Shanghai date from the 1900s and 2000s. The first one notes that the nationalist government failed to mobilize popular support when trying to clean up the city and aroused expectations that only a better organized mass-based movement only could do the job...The communist did it, although “spontaneous civic culture, needless to say, was yet to come” (p.241)

Even more disturbing, but, after all, not so strange, is the conclusion of the chapter “Shanghai Smuggling”: people were aware the “Japanese had brought a fair degree of law and order to Shanghai” (p.274) Why and how this was achieved is narrated in the essay; facts are there, and teach without philosophical pretension.

Historian in the making, or even confirmed, will derive great profit from chapter (9) “The Use and Abuse of Ideology in the Study of Contemporary China”. It consists of reviews of two books, published in 1968 and 1973; the essay dates from 1974. On p. 303, Wakeman writes, “few of us have not been deeply influenced by Schurmann’s classic distinction between pure and practical ideology”...Yet he invites us to question the accepted or dominant view of Schurmann. It is never very productive to repeat others, or to use theories uncritically.

The severe critics contained in chapter eleven confirm the danger. “I find poignant”, writes Wakeman, “the effort to apply Habermas’ concepts (of civil society)” to China (p.353). That does not in itself deny that sometime somewhere in this country a kind of civil society emerged. But, as other scholars have demonstrated, it was not along the blue-print drawn by Habermas.

Concept and theories are there to help understanding, not to constrain facts. In the last chapter (14), “Reflection, Telling Chinese History”, the author shares much of his conception of what a historian’s work should be. He agrees with Marc Bloch that an historian is not a philosopher, although he was inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s book *Time and Narrative*. He defends the historian’s craft and the importance of narrative. As can be judged from the essays, well selected by Lea Wakeman, these attitude and method are really fruitful for us today.