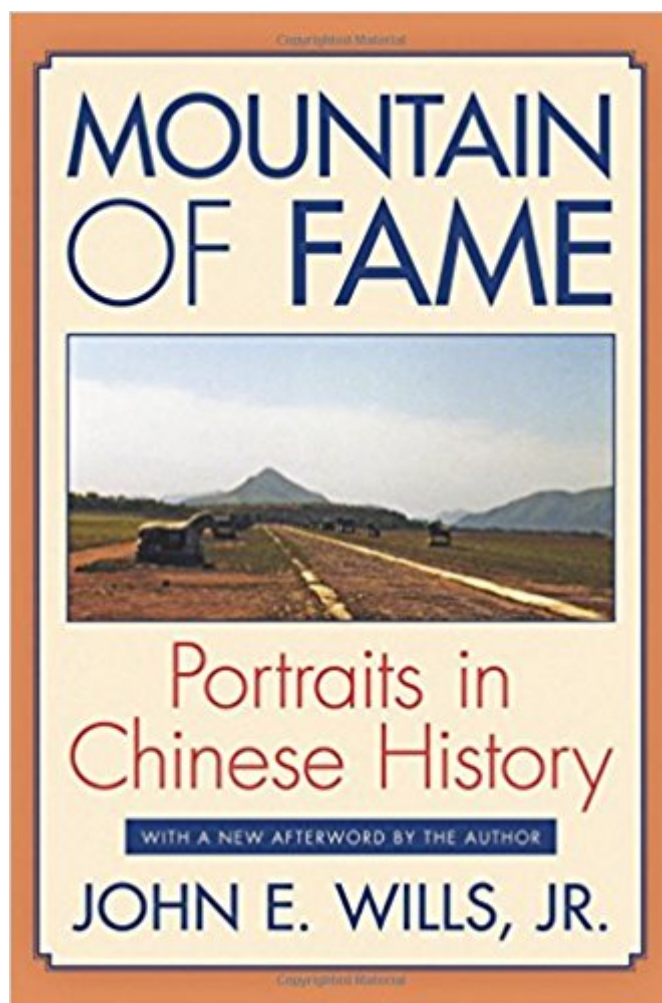


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Mountain Of Fame: Portraits In Chinese History



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--biographies of China's most colorful and famous personalities--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. This new edition highlights important figures that have emerged in China since the book's initial publication and provides updated suggestions for further reading.

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Customer Reviews

"[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"[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"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"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"Tremendous."--Aaron Pickering, Education About Asia

"Wills is very perceptive to take the 'lives and times' approach to Chinese history. Not only does this enliven the material for a beginner, but it is true, as he says, that the Chinese, perhaps more than other people, love to personalize their history."--Perry Link, Princeton University
"It is a great achievement to make the historical figures so accessible, with vivid details that seem to have escaped the attention of earlier historians. In scope, method, and quality, ... This book is unique."--Kwang-Ching Liu, University of California, Davis

Great survey of Chinese History. I just wish I had more time to followup with all of his cited sources.

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