



Modern China: A Very Short Introduction

Rana Mitter

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China today is never out of the news: from human rights controversies and the continued legacy of Tiananmen Square, to global coverage of the Beijing Olympics, and the Chinese "economic miracle." It is a country of contradictions and transitions: a peasant society with some of the world's most futuristic cities, an ancient civilization that is modernizing as rapidly as possible, a walled-off nation that is increasingly at the center of world trade. This Very Short Introduction offers an indispensable starting point for anyone who needs to quickly know the themes and controversies that have shaped modern China. Prize-winning author and scholar Rana Mitter examines the modern history, politics, economy, and thriving cultural scene of contemporary China, and its relations with the wider world. This lively guide covers a range of social issues from the decline of footbinding and the position of women in society, to the influence of television and film, and the role of the overseas Chinese diaspora. It covers many prominent figures as well, such as the Communist leaders, the last emperors, and prominent writers and artists throughout China's history. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam

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Kiah says

A great, short, concise trip through modern Chinese history, with great observations on modern Chinese culture and politics.

kagami says

"Modern China: A Very Short Introduction" does what it says on the tin: it is a very short introduction. I'm sure it was written for people like me who are not specialists in China but nevertheless have a general interest in it, and it would be a nice launching platform for further reading.

I do like the book for its clear writing and the amount of concentrated general information the author has managed to pack into it, but it was first published in 2008, before the Beijing Olympics and before the global financial crisis. A lot of things have changed since then, and unfortunately the lack of this slice of latest world history in the book already makes it sound out of date. I hope professor Rana Mitter may consider writing a revised edition.

Gemma says

A nice introduction to modern China. Bringing together history, culture, social and economic factors and how these are interconnected to the political decisions made. Some interesting considerations of the origin of disparities within China.

Daniel Wright says

What actually is modernity? Is it something cultural, social, economic, political, or a mixture of these things? What is China? How comes this area the size of a continent to have such a distinctive and homogeneous identity? And what happens when you throw that first, essentially Western idea into such a foreign context? Has China really 'modernized'? Is that even a Good Thing?

Rana Mitter does not, of course, attempt to give definitive answers to any of these questions, but he does draw on a comprehensive wealth of knowledge to inform an attempt at coming to terms with China's importance, which is a worthwhile endeavour indeed.

Chapter 1: What is modern China?

Chapter 2: The old order and the new

Chapter 3: Making China modern

Chapter 4: Is Chinese society modern?

Chapter 5: Is China's economy modern?

Chapter 6: Is Chinese culture modern?

Ian McHugh says

An excellent "short introduction". Too much of the early chapters are taken up defining 'modern' and 'Chinese' which means that the conclusion that China is indeed 'modern' and 'Chinese' at the same time a little obvious.

That said, Mitter's coverage of the recent history of China is succinct and fitting of the title - do not look here for in-depth coverage of 20th Century China. The chapters on society and culture are excellent in giving a 'short introduction' in broad but analytical sweeps. The chapter on economics looks incredibly dated now (the book was published pre-2008 Olympics) and could do with a re-write.

Nevertheless, a very very useful book if you wish to learn about modern China.

Pranjal Bordia says

Good introduction to several aspects of China. Overall a good book. However, several shortcomings remain, along with many "hollow" sentences ('meaningless', so to say).

I have not read a better book.

Radit Panjapiyakul says

A good overview (or introduction) on modern China's history, social, economics and cultures. Of course, it's not an easy task to write about a country as big as china, with 5000 years of history. This book will give you a big picture on China struggling with modernity, although there's only so much lost in the details. The prose is quite interesting and well-written, but sometimes it's just too brief to really grab the points presented.

Tran Lam says

A dense read.

Within 137 pages it tries to compare the 20th and 21st-century China with the traditional imperialistic China. The analysis approach Mitter uses to recount history and describe modernity here is mostly China-centered, which is insufficient to give full intro about China's international relations and their impacts on domestic China during 20th century. But overall, I'm surprised by how much info he put into these pages.

Francisco says

The book gives you a broad but very complete view of what China is today and I think it does it well. You'll end up knowing quite a bit about China.

My complaint about this book is that it's a little boring and its only concerned with China's high level politics and history, and not very much with it's people and culture.

Rajeev says

Very well done, especially the beginning of the book.

Ben Lind says

I read this book for a political comparison class, and I found it generally vague and unhelpful. At almost every point, it would state the "commonly accepted view" and then immediately contradict that view, but not to the point where you could draw any solid conclusions. I have a somewhat broader understanding of modern China as a result, but I do not feel prepared to offer any solid opinion on the state of the country.

Stephen Wong says

It is easy to misunderstand the China of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the China that our grandparents, parents and our own generation know to exist either at the peripheries or at the cores of our imagination or of our day-to-day existence. This is not the China to which attributes of longest enduring civilization and ancientness apply, but rather the China that for a long time was in turmoil and at the mercy of historical forces violent and unappeasing, but that today manufactures all sorts of goods for the supply chain and product-markets, staunchly communist and a one-party state, increasingly prosperous, if also revanchist and starting to throw its weight around in various international fora, with depth of renminbi and yuan pockets, and challenging a supremacy of a system of democracy in the West that is demonstrably for the moment in havoc and militaristic.

What this little volume, recently updated, helps the reader to contend with is the China that has become more open in our time, still beset with unique problems of demographics and environment, but finding ways to reach beyond the embrace of its own ways, its hands full alright, but with a growing if slow capacity to sprinkle influence far beyond its shores. The book investigates China's modernity on at least the three dimensions of society, economy and culture, a work of comparative method that could be applied to another country like Saudi Arabia or Bolivia, but which in China's case yields some other dimensions and heft that try to offset the indeed quite long and continuing span of Chinese civilization. Indeed, a modern China was a distinct project of both the Nationalists and Communists fully in the shadow of Japan's own Meiji Restoration (this year also marking 150 years) and also underfoot of its empire, which briefly unites the ideological differences in the common goal of decolonisation and restoring a nation from foreign invasion and atrocity.

The analytic approach is generally descriptive and non-prescriptive of what China's modernity and postmodernity should look like. That kind of discussion is for a different kind of book perhaps, and about this there is little stake that the author places in the Chinese diaspora all over the world about how this lack of say in Chinese affairs should turn out. That could very well be as it should be because in the Möbius strip of this relationship of the outward-looking and inward-looking peoples of Chinese heritage, the concern becomes indeed one of mutual catching up with relations in the narrowest sense and in the widest sense.

Alice says

This quick read may teach you just how vast your ignorance is about "modern" China (the quotes make sense in the context of the text); at least, that was my experience. That said, I'm glad to have a better framework in which to understand my ignorance, and I appreciate having some suggestions for Chinese literature to read as discussed in the penultimate chapter. I'm going to keep an eye out for Lao She's 1933 science fiction satirical novella "Cat Country" (Maocheng) in particular.

Bojan Tunguz says

Modern China is a fascinating subject in its own right. China, in general, has been one of the most intriguing countries in the world for most of its history. The most populous nation, China is an heir to an ancient civilization that at one point surpassed all the others in the world in terms of cultural and technological achievement. Yet, over the centuries that civilization had fallen behind others and only in recent decades has China started to approach again its erstwhile status of a great power. This raise has been rather gradual, and with many setbacks has taken the better part of the last hundred years. The Modern China is a work in progress, and this very short introduction provides one of the best overviews of this process. The book covers most of the Chinese twentieth century history, and it's noteworthy in that it doesn't see the arrival of the communists in 1949 so much as a clean break from the past as a continuation of the previous attempts at modernization by the Nationalists and their predecessors. The communist rule is also approached more critically, somewhat downplaying the extent of the most egregious years of the Cultural Revolution, and emphasizing the discontinuities within the Communist regime and its policies. In particular, the author argues that some of the economic advances in the recent years can be traced to the set of reforms that started in the late 70s.

One of the strengths of this book is the attention that it pays to the cultural as well as technological and economic advances. Since most people in the West are at least somewhat familiar with some of the most prominent recent Chinese cinematographic achievements, this provides an accessible connection to the cultural trends in China these days.

The weakness of the book is its lack of any deeper exploration of the human rights abuses and the very serious suppression of dissent that has plagued China for the better part of the past hundred years under different regimes. The abuse has been particularly systematic and ruthless under the Communists, and it is the ugly flip side of the breakneck progress that China has been enjoying in the recent decades.

Overall, this is a very informative and accessible book on Modern China that is well suited for the general readership. It is not a dry scholarly work, and it even indulges in imaginative allegories and analyses on an occasion. It is well worth reading for anyone who is interested in what forces have shaped the Modern China.

Talbot Hook says

A splendid little book, with solid depth (for being, after all, a "Very Short Introduction") and writing. I particularly liked the last mini-chapter, with its comparisons to Huxley's BNW, and its continual questioning of what modernity looks like in the context of China. My one small critique, offered more as a general reader than as a scholar of China (which I am not), is that the organization of the book, for me, would have been better with a more traditional timeline-based structure, instead of organizing each chapter as a mini-history in itself, under the context of culture, media, etc. Overall, very worthwhile reading.
