

Reviews

Bodo Wiethoff, Grundzüge der älteren chinesischen Geschichte. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971. 227 pages, DM 34. - for members of the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft DM 19, 50

Bodo Wiethoff, Grundzüge der neueren chinesischen Geschichte. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977. 231 pages, DM 38. 50, for members of the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft DM 25, 50

Knowledge of classical China, of traditional rules of conduct as well as patterns of political behaviour is a great help to anyone wishing to obtain greater understanding of the People's Republic of China. It goes without saying that China is not only the People's Republic and that Chinese history does not only deserve our interest from October 1949 onwards.

Generally speaking China's historical development reveals a perpetual conflict with her own history both in the sense of radical estrangement and partial continuation.

In the German language there is plenty of literature on the Chinese Communist movement and the People's Republic, even if these publications differ considerably as far as seriousness and quality are concerned. Presentations of Chinese history prior to these events are however not so easy to come by.

Bodo Wiethoff has written two substantial books to bridge this gap. In these two volumes, the author, Professor of Sinology in Bochum, refrains from the mere narration of historical events. Wiethoff endeavours to shed light on typical structures. The changing socio-political formation of China is placed in the centre of his research.

Both volumes are evidence of Wiethoff's main concern. He explains correlations and shows different dimensions. Of central importance is the question how Chinese history is regarded by the non-Chinese, especially the academic community in America and Europe. Much space is devoted to the problems of trans-social transfer. This is followed by a presentation of the main historiographic-geographic, demographic and historio-political features of Chinese development. The reader gets a distinct idea of the tension present within Chinese society in a given historical setting: centre-periphery, rulers-subjects, China-external world.

All this is described and analysed in a way which enables us to understand perspectives, relationships and directions of development.

Because of lack of space there are no footnotes. When Wiethoff quotes others we learn only the name of the author and gain no information about the specific publication. This is not really a deficiency because both volumes have a well structured bibliography. In the main text Wiethoff informs us about divergent assessments and attempts at explaining Chinese reality. This will certainly be appreciated by the readers.

Reviews

The significant merit of the two books is their arrangement which enables us to survey the abundance of events and the impressive length of Chinese history. Of additional help are comprehensive chronologies (esp. in the second volume) and maps. We are not confused with countless dates and names but get acquainted with structures and relationships. The whole is a presentation which does not deny political commitment. Wiethoff does not mince matters, he calls imperialism imperialism and exploitation exploitation. This is fair and helpful to the reader and certainly better than a boneless, pale and neutral text. Wiethoff's presentation is however not one-sided, it is a lively analysis of Chinese history which takes into consideration, the motives of the observers of this history.

After the refreshing and inspiring reading of these two books one might ask whether they can be recommended as an introduction to the layman. In the text some foreign and highly academic words do not seem to be necessary. Sometimes we are fully aware of the fact that it was a German professor who wrote this text. Those who already have some knowledge of Chinese history and politics will doubtless read both books with delight and will find them a cornucopia, full of information and stimulation.

Werner Pffennig