Review Of "Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937" By F. Wakeman, Jr

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Review

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Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s was China’s most important city—its commercial and industrial center, the major stronghold of Western imperialism in China, the birthplace of modern Chinese culture, a hotbed of gambling, prostitution, and narcotics—and the biggest political prize for the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai-shek, the Communist Party, and the Japanese imperialists. Wakeman’s book explores the complex underside of this cosmopolis by focusing on the activities of the Public Security Bureau set up by the Nationalists after they assumed power in 1927. Chiang Kai-shek saw the police not only as a means of controlling the city, but as emblematic of the Guomindang’s ability to rule China as a whole. If Shanghai “cannot be regulated, then China’s military, economic and communications [systems] will be in a hopeless tangle,” he said (43, 288). Moreover, if the Nationalists could govern the Chinese section of Shanghai effectively and improve its social conditions, they would strengthen the case for regaining Chinese sovereignty over the foreign-ruled International Settlement and French Concession.

It is well known that in taking over Shanghai in 1927 and crushing the Communists and their labor movement, Chiang was dependent on Du Yuesheng, the Green Gang’s boss, but Wakeman details how deeply Du Yuesheng was involved in Shanghai’s rule and misrule throughout the next decade. His control of the opium trade in Shanghai was the key to his political muscle and one reason why the municipal authorities needed him. Du’s appointment to the Chinese Municipal Council in 1932, and subsequently as head of the Opium Suppression Bureau, was the ultimate example of what Wakeman calls “criminalizing the government” (260–275).

Chiang’s continued preoccupation with eliminating the Communists resulted in ruthless deals and compromises that were effective in the short run but may have lost him the moral and political advantage in the long run. Wakeman recounts the bizarre story of Tan Shaoliang—the top detective in the Shanghai Municipal Police—who was discovered to be a Japanese spy but nevertheless retained because he was instrumental in the local surveillance of Communists.

Emphasis on fighting “Reds” also necessitated greater cooperation with the police of the foreign concessions, thus weakening the nationalist mission of the Public Security Bureau (135). Chiang’s fight with the Communists also made him continually dependent on the opium trade and its purveyors. The opium monopoly established by the Nanking government under T. V. Soong yielded a substantial income—as much as Ch. $30 million a month in 1933— which Chiang Kai-shek needed to cover the cost of his military operations against the Communists in Jiangxi province (262–263).
The intensity of the Communist–Nationalist rivalry in purely individual terms is illustrated most dramatically in the case of Gu Shunzhang, notorious head of the Communist secret service, who defected to the Guomindang after being arrested, became a prize informant, and was later murdered. Wakeman’s research confirms the long-held suspicion that Gu had been assassinated, not by the Communists, but by the Guomindang when his plans to redefect were exposed.

Wakeman’s use of recently available police records from the Shanghai Municipal Archives has enabled him to solve such mysteries. With keen historical vision, he has woven together this source and a wide range of others to present an immensely complex view of this critical place in a critical time. Although the basic picture had already been formed or suspected, the depth and the details—the inexhaustible layers of evidence—are astonishing and convincing.

The stories are fascinating and often lurid, but Wakeman does not sensationalize or moralize. He lets the facts speak for themselves. Readers will find the story of modern China told from the perspective of policing Shanghai disheartening, showing the irrelevance of political ideology, personal morality, and social idealism in the face of brutal realpolitik.

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Hiroshima in History and Memory. Edited by Michael J. Hogan (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996) 238 pp. $54.95 cloth $17.95 paper

The year 1995 has come and gone, and with it the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the renewed controversy about those events, and an appalling non-debate about what sort of history our museums should present. In the aftermath, happily, remain a few good books like this one. In a book of modest length, Hogan and six other historians—five American and one Japanese—have combined to produce one of the most nuanced, intelligent discussions yet of how the bombs were dropped, suffered, and perceived thereafter on both sides of the Pacific.

To be sure, the book is marred by sloppy editing, and it lacks a bibliography, which is a shame for a work so handy to non-specialists as this one. Furthermore, though it skillfully blends history and historiography, it will disappoint those looking for an interdisciplinary approach. The authors write several types of history—political, military, social, cultural, intellectual, and contemporary—but all of it is history. Moreover, the title suggests that the book promises to explore “memory” as well, but it falls short. Memory is neither clearly defined nor consistently discussed, and the terms “myth” or “popular history” could have been substituted at many points.