The Republic of China Treated in General History Textbooks: A Case Study of Historically Correct History Versus Politically Correct History

Abstract

Chinese history after 1911 is both eventful and complex. Given the sheer size of available information on the subject, the content of a general history of modern China is usually selective. To decide what information should be included in a general history and what can be left out of it is never easy for any historian. Yet the truth of history should be and can be preserved regardless of what information one chooses to use and how it is used.

Take for instance the coverage on the Republic of China, while some general history textbooks acknowledge the historical significance of the Republic of China, many others have neglected its existence by excluding such information. Using as an example how the Republic of China has been treated in some general history textbooks, this article looks at the impact on historical truth when certain essential historical facts are ignored.

Keywords: 1911 Revolution, modern China, Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan

Chinese history is of long standing and well established, a fact that every Chinese can be proud of. In order to determine the length of it, a couple of criteria have been put forward. For example, counting from the beginning of the legendary Yellow Emperor’s reign as did the revolutionaries in the 1911 Revolution (辛亥革命), Chinese history is 4,702 years old as of 2004. Using the year 841 BCE as a demarcation when the Western Chou (西周) implemented the joint-rule of the imperial government by the ministers on behalf of the monarch (共和), it is 2,844 years old.

For a nation such as China that values its past, one corollary of having a long history is an abundance of historical archives, or source materials. According to the venerable Sinologist Chien Mu (錢穆), the Chinese nation possesses the most comprehensive collection of historical archives in the world.² Dr. Wu Tien-wei (吳天威), Professor Emeritus of History at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, shares Chien’s enthusiasm. Writes Wu: “Chinese civilization is best recorded. In Chinese civilization historians will not be obsessed with the lack of source materials, but rather feel inundated with them.”³

So far as writing history is concerned, having an abundance of source materials may be a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. Although having plenty of source materials allows historians to reconstruct our collective past more accurately, there are limits to how much information history books can hold. This is particularly true in the case of general history. Just as the name indicates, general history is usually brief and concise. Its objective is to guide the readers through the complexities of our past using much less information than full-length history. When Dr. Donald S. Detwiler, chairman of the US-based World War II Studies

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¹ Standing for “before common era,” BCE is adopted in recent years to replace “BC” (before Christ), which has a religious connotation. By the same token, “CE” is used in lieu of “AD” (Anno Domini), meaning, in Latin, “in the year of our Lord.”


Association, writes about his general history of Germany that “the text . . . does not attempt to offer a detailed view of German history. It seeks rather to impart a reasonable familiarity with its general contours. This volume will be especially useful to general readers and students who require a concise introduction to modern Germany,”4 he is speaking for all general history textbooks.

Given the sheer size of available information about, say, Chinese history, pre-modern or modern, the content of a general history textbook is usually highly selective. To determine what should be included in general history and what can be left out of it is never easy for any historian. The Harvard historian Albert M. Craig, when writing of his general history The Heritage of Chinese Civilization, best describes the consideration for selecting the appropriate information:

It provides a chronological framework and a short narrative of China’s long history…. Since brevity was a goal, the author asserts with seeming confidence many things that may be true only in the balance. Proper qualifications would take up many pages. The author has picked many key historical variables for his reconstruction of the past. In doing so, however, he has inevitably left out other variables that merit attention.5

“武昌起義” or “武昌起義”?

Indeed, as Professor Craig confirms, many historical facts that deserve attention have been left out of general history textbooks for the sake of brevity. As brevity is one goal that general history textbooks strive for, historical truth may suffer when certain essential facts are ignored in the name of brevity. Napoleon Bonaparte once cautioned, “Brevity is the enemy of precision.” That being said, the truth of history should not be distorted and its integrity not be compromised regardless of what historical facts one elects to include in or exclude from general history, or any other kind of history for that matter. Still, some general history textbooks have failed to meet this requirement. China After 1911 by Richard T. Phillips, senior history lecturer at New Zealand’s University of Auckland, is one such book.6

China After 1911 starts with the 1911 Wuchang uprising (武昌起義), an incident that led eventually to the downfall of the Ching dynasty (清朝) and the founding of China’s first republic in the following year. Known to virtually all Chinese, this historical event has become more or less a common knowledge in the West as well, thanks in part to the motion picture The Last Emperor. The name of the new Republic of China, however, is not as well known as the history of its birth. In the first two chapters of the book where there is an extensive coverage on the uprising and the early republican era, Phillips makes no mention of the name. It is not until the last chapter that he brings it up when he talks about Nationalist Chinese retreating from the mainland to Taiwan at the end of the civil war. “The government on Taiwan after 1949 claimed to represent the whole of China, using the title ‘The Republic of China’ and was recognized as such by a majority of the world’s nations until the 1970s.”7 The birth of the People’s Republic in 1949 is duly acknowledged in the book.8

The Republic of China, which currently exists on Taiwan, is none other than the one that was founded on the Chinese mainland as a result of the Wuchang uprising. Through Phillips’ oversight, the Republic of China’s birth certificate has been altered and so has history. Its date of birth is changed from 1912 to 1949, and place of birth from the mainland to Taiwan. Though Phillips falls short of saying that the Republic of China was founded in 1949 on Taiwan, one cannot help but feel such a suggestion. In this book, the Republic of China is made thirty-seven years younger than its actual age.

To make the claim that the Republic of China was founded in 1949 on Taiwan is nothing short of tampering with historical facts. Strangely yet interestingly, this seems to have become a common practice for some historians. For example, R. R. Palmer, Professor Emeritus of History at Princeton University and one of America’s finest historians, says almost the same thing in his A History of the Modern World Since 1815, a popular world history textbook first published in 1950 and is now in its ninth edition.

By the autumn of 1949 Nationalist resistance ended on the Chinese mainland and Chiang [Kai-shek] withdrew his shattered forces to the island of Taiwan, where with American help he established a small but soon prosperous Republic of China, which for the next twenty-two years held the permanent seat in the UN assigned to China.9

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7 Phillips, p. 283.
8 Ibid., p. 161.
Although both Phillips and Palmer get the ROC’s date and place of birth wrong, they at least acknowledge its existence, a small comfort. Other historians may not have been so keen on preserving historical truth. When Lloyd E. Eastman (易勞逸), Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, died of brain tumor years ago, the Yale historian Jonathan D. Spence (史景遷) replaces him as a leading authority on modern China. First published in 1990, Spence’s *The Search for Modern China* 10 is a New York Times bestseller and a popular college textbook in Canada and the United States.

In spite of Spence’s reputation in the field, the name of the Republic of China is never brought up in *The Search for Modern China*. The succession to the two-thousand-year-old imperial system by a Western-style Republic of China is such a monumental event that no historian can ignore it. Nevertheless, almost as if Spence has intended to obscure certain facts related to this historical incident, he substitutes the ROC’s unofficial title for the official one by referring to it as the “Chinese republic” in his book. 11 The closest that Spence comes to using the ROC official title is when he mentions “the formation of a republic in China” in early 1912. 12 But a “republic in China” is no “Republic of China.”

Historians who ignore the ROC’s official title do not come singly but in pairs. John K. Fairbank (費正清) in his *East Asia: The Modern Transformation*, originally published in 1960, also prefers “Chinese republic” to “Republic of China.” 13 The practice of ignoring the ROC official title is so prevalent that examples of this are easy to come by. Published in 2001, *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History* is one of the latest world history textbooks available in North America. It, too, refers to the Republic of China as the Chinese republic. 14 In a more recent world history textbook, *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*, the ROC official title is also dropped in favor of the unofficial one. 15 The same thing happens to yet another textbook, *A History of Civilization: Prehistory to the Present*. 16 One of the worst offenders has to be *Western Civilization: A Brief Survey*, in which the unofficial name has been reduced to a mere “republic.” 17

Curiously, Fairbank recently seems to have realized the importance of historical integrity. In *China: A New History*, Fairbank acknowledges both the title and existence of the Republic of China. This particular book’s Part Three heading even reads “The Republic of China, 1912-1949.” 18 However, one historical oversight has been rectified only to give way to another one. While Fairbank’s recognizing the Republic of China after all these years deserves applause, his cutting its life short by claiming that it survived until 1949 does not reflect the reality. Ever since the founding of the People’s Republic, Mainland Chinese historians have been claiming that the Republic of China met its fate in 1949. In this regard, Fairbank is no different from his Mainland Chinese counterparts.

Given what *A History of the Modern World Since 1815, China After 1911*, and *China: A New History* say on the Republic of China, it appears that a pattern of passing false information from one general history textbook to the next has been cast. The claim that the Republic of China lasted only thirty-seven years from 1912 to 1949 gets Fairbank enmeshed in a web of his own spinning, for the title of Chapter Seventeen in *China: A New History* reads “Taiwan as the Republic of China.” 19 The problem of stating that the Republic of China fell in 1949 and that Taiwan is the Republic of China from 1949 onward in a same discussion is obvious: the two statements contradict each other. Because Taiwan is the much larger of the two provinces 20 that still come within the jurisdiction of the Republic of China after 1949, and has since become the seat of the ROC government, it is now synonymous with the Republic of China. Understandably, it has become a common practice to refer to the Republic of China as Taiwan. Be it the Republic of China or the Republic of China on Taiwan, the fact is that it is alive and well.

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11 Ibid., p. 267.
12 Ibid., p. 267.
19 Ibid., p. 339.
20 The other being Fukien province (福建省), albeit not the whole province, only Lien-chiang County (連江縣) and Kinmen County (金門縣).
place also in space, on the planet Earth, so that geography always underlines it.” Palmer’s view is shared by Miao Feng-lin (繆鳳林), one-time history professor at the National Central University, who wrote as early as 1943 that history is “a record of the past, which is created out of human activities that took place in space and time. Human activities are historical facts, things that history records.”

History is therefore composed of three major elements: space, time, and human activities. Of the three, human activities are the most important element because we originate, record, and interpret history. Interpreting history is never easy. Although historians have striven for objectivity and justness in reconstructing the past, this noble goal continues to elude us. For as humans, we were born with emotions. We have likes and dislikes. Furthermore, our perception of things is shaped by our social, cultural, political, economic, ethnic, gender, or religious background. Some or all of these factors come into play when we interpret historical facts. Observes the American historian Robin Winks:

History is a series of arguments to be debated, not a body of data to be recorded or a set of facts to be memorized. Thus controversy in historical interpretation - over what an event actually means, over what really happened at an occurrence called ‘an event,’ over how best to generalize about the event - is at the heart of its value. When a society suppresses portions of its past, as the Soviet Union does today, that society (or its leadership) tells us something about itself. When a society seeks to alter how the record is presented, well-proven facts notwithstanding, we learn how history can be distorted to political ends.

Wink’s comment confirms the fact that there are actually two kinds of history: one that is historically correct (為歷史而歷史) and one that is politically correct (為政治而歷史). How historical facts are interpreted or presented affects our understanding of the past. Although the now defunct Soviet Union is cited as an example of how political motives have influenced historical interpretation, to claim that the former Soviet Union was the sole offender is to see only the tip of the iceberg. The practice of distorting history for political gains is much more common than most people would think.

Take the history of World War I as an example. It is an established fact that the responsibility for World War I was a collective one and cannot be imputed to Germany or any other single belligerent. But France blamed it on Germany anyway. To commemorate its victory over Germany in World War I, the French government after the war erected a granite block in the forest of Compiègne. Engraved in large capital letters, the inscription on the block reads, in French, “HERE ON THE ELEVENTH OF NOVEMBER 1918 SUCCUMBED THE CRIMINAL PRIDE OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE - VANQUISHED BY THE FREE PEOPLES WHO IT TRIED TO ENSLAVE.” France, as one of the victors in the war, decided to write history as it saw fit. But it was a politically correct history, history that has been “distorted to political ends.”

The best, or worst, example of how the victors in World War I had held Germany responsible for the hostilities has to be the Treaty of Versailles. Article 231, the notorious “war guilt” clause in the treaty, states that the “Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associate Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.” Much has been written about Germany’s reaction to Article 231. I have selected an excerpt from Professor Donald Detwiler’s book on German history for it is tersely and forcefully written.

On examining the Versailles treaty, when it was presented to them for comment in May 1919, the Germans immediately singled out Article 231 as its crowning outrage: an extorted confession, to be wrung from them by force, that they and their former allies bore sole guilt for the war. A distinguished committee of internationally recognized authorities in their respective fields, including the military historian Hans Delbrueck and the sociologist Max Weber, drafted a memorandum emphatically rejecting Article 231 as a one-sided moral denunciation lacking archival documentation or intellectual objectivity.

Wrote the Cambridge historian Geoffrey Elton, “whatever else history may be, it must at heart be a story, a story of the changing fortunes of men, and political history therefore comes first because, above all the forms of historical study, it wants to, even needs to, tell a story.”

A story history is indeed, but, more often than not, it is a story told from the viewpoint of the

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21 Palmer, p. xiii.
23 Robin W. Winks et al., p. xxvii.
24 Detwiler, p. 176.
victors. If the Treaty of Versailles were any indication, the victors may not “control” how history is written, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that it has been written in their favor.

Whatever the reasons behind it, when certain facts are brushed aside, we run the risk of undermining historical truth. This is particularly the case with general history. Hardly surprisingly, general history is written for beginners, who usually have no prior knowledge of history. Once exposed to and conditioned by the so-called politically correct history, it would be hard to rid beginners of such misinformation because the first impressions are usually the strongest. So far as modern Chinese history is concerned, this problem has existed for decades.

Examples of Historically Correct History

Up to this point, most of the general history textbooks that have been reviewed in the article belong in the category of politically correct history, politically correct in the sense that most countries in the world do not recognize the Republic of China as a sovereign entity. Although historically correct history textbooks are in a minority, one stands out like a beacon in the dark. The Rise of Modern China by the well-established and much revered historian Immanuel Chung-yüeh Hsu (徐中約), Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is arguably the best general survey of modern Chinese history currently available in the English language. Originally published in 1970, the book has gone through six editions and has sold over several hundred thousand copies for the past thirty years. The Rise of Modern China is so well written and so popular that the Chinese University Press in Hong Kong has recently published a two-volume Chinese edition of it under the title Chung-kuo chin-tai shih (中國近代史). On its website, the Chinese University Press praises Hsu’s book as treating historical events in a just, objective, and sober manner. The translation of Hsu’s book is a collective work of five men: Mao Chia-chi, Chien Cheng-tan, Chi Chiu-feng, and Chu Ching-pao from the University of Nanking in Mainland China, and Cheng Hui-hsin from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

My first reaction to the Chinese edition was why tampering with a classic? But then again, more people will be able to partake of Hsu’s masterpiece because of it. It would be interesting to see if the Chinese edition retains the original’s essence, which can be the theme of a future article. May the historical correctness that Professor Hsu has so brilliantly executed be upheld in the Chinese edition.

Hsu’s work is one of the few that put historical correctness before political correctness. In its “Major Chronological Periods” table, the duration of the Republic of China is listed as from 1912 to the present. This is one example of historical correctness. Unlike many other general history textbooks that dismiss the post-1949 Republic of China as a non-issue, two chapters in The Rise of Modern China are devoted exclusively to the Republic of China on Taiwan after 1949, a feature not found in Spence’s The Search for Modern China. It is no hyperbole that as a general history, The Rise of Modern China has by far the most engaging coverage on the Republic of China as a whole, from 1912 to the present. Hsu’s work goes to show that a general history textbook needs not to become a newspaper bestseller in order to have substance in its content.

Sixteen years ago when I was an undergraduate history major at Southern Illinois University, my dear mentor Professor Wu Tien-wei prescribed The Rise of Modern China as textbook for the Chinese history survey course that he taught. I was and still am fascinated by its conveying “primarily a Chinese view of the evolution of Modern China” so eloquently and vividly. When I started teaching Chinese history at the University of British Columbia as a lecturer and later at Simon Fraser University as an assistant professor, I too used it as textbook. The Rise of Modern China, as an American colloquial puts it, is the real McCoy. It is often imitated, but never duplicated. Other general history textbooks such as China Since 1911 or The Search for Modern China simply pale by the side of it. There are no substitutes for the real thing.

The Rise of Modern China has over one thousand pages. For a general history, it is long. But this is understandable considering how eventful and complex modern Chinese history has
been. On a much smaller scale, *The West and the World: A History of Civilization*, less than half the length of *The Rise of Modern China*, offers a pleasant surprise. In the passages on the Chinese Nationalist Revolution of 1911, the author gives credit to the Republic of China when he writes that Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) “was in Denver when he read the news of the October 10 revolution and left immediately for China. He arrived to be sworn in as first president of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912.” Sun was indeed sworn in that day, but only as provisional president. Yuan Shih-kai (袁世凱), the northern warlord, was first ROC president.

Originally published in 1948, *The Far East: A History of the Impact of the West on Eastern Asia* is the oldest general history textbook reviewed in the paper. In it, the Republic of China has been recognized when the author writes that Yuan Shih-kai was elected “first provisional president of the Republic of China.”

As the paper draws to a close, the question remains: how do we account for the Republic of China historically in a terse, no-nonsense manner? I am a firm believer that, through careful selection of information, brevity and historical truth are compatible with one another. In the spirit of a Chinese saying “may jade be attracted as a result of my casting a brick” (拋磚引玉) I have written the following passages which, I hope, would sum up the highlights in the Republic of China’s history up to the recent past.

Under Ching rule, Taiwan was made a prefecture of Fukien province in 1684. In 1885, Taiwan acquired the status of a province, but was later ceded to Japan in the wake of Ching China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895 (甲午戰爭).

In 1912, the Republic of China was founded, succeeding the Ching Dynasty. During the Eight-Year Resistance War against Japan (八年對日抗戰), Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Republic of China, demanded at the Cairo Conference (開羅會議) that Taiwan be returned to the Republic of China after the war. Chiang’s proposition was supported by both the United States and Great Britain. After fifty-years of Japanese occupation, Taiwan in 1945 was restored to Chinese rule and became a province of the Republic of China.

The Republic of China lost all of its provinces on the mainland to the Communists in the civil war that started as soon as the Resistance War ended. The Republic of China was reduced to one province, namely, Taiwan, and several strategic islands off the mainland coast including Kinmen (金門) and Matsu (馬祖).

In 1949, the Communists on the mainland proclaimed the People’s Republic of China. From this point onward, the Chinese nation is divided into two separate and independent states. Each of the two Chinese governments, one on the island part of China and the other on the mainland part of it, claims to represent the whole of the Chinese nation.

The Republic of China has been referred to as Nationalist China, Island China, Free China, or Taiwan. The People’s Republic of China is referred to as Communist China, Mao’s China, Red China, Mainland China, and most erroneously as well as misleadingly, China.

The Republic of China, one of the founding members of the United Nations and holder of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, was voted out of the organization in 1971. The Chinese seat in the UN went to the PRC. Eight years later, the US severed diplomatic relations with the ROC in favor of a formal recognition of the PRC.

Starting in the 1990s, the ROC and the PRC conducted a series of talks on the prospect of national reunification. As of now, the talks go nowhere, a hardly surprising outcome.

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歐美通史教科書對中華民國之處理
兼論「為歷史而歷史」與「為政治而歷史」

祝少康

摘   要

我國歷史，源遠流長。然數千年之浩瀚史料，非任何史籍所能全數容納。取捨之間，遺珠之憾，在所難免。吾人治史，無論史料選用之標準為何，歷史事實及真相應不受影響。話雖如此，以中國近代史為例，西洋坊間以此為主題之英文書籍多如過江之鯽，然其中絕大多數均捨中華民國而不談，致使諸多歐美學子不知亞洲第一共和國為何物。本文針對多本歐美通史教科書對中華民國部分之處理，做一介紹，並探討史實受到忽略對歷史真相所造成之影響。

關鍵字：辛亥革命、近代中國、中華民國、臺灣