

2-20-2008

A Coming Distraction—Rana Mitter's Modern China: A Very Short Introduction

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

"A Coming Distraction—Rana Mitter's Modern China: A Very Short Introduction" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 116.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/116>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Coming Distraction—Rana Mitter’s Modern China: A Very Short Introduction

February 20, 2008 in [Coming Distractions](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [5 comments](#)

If I rode the subway to and from work, I’d be seriously addicted by now to the Oxford University Press “[Very Short Introductions](#)” series in which Rana Mitter’s next book is about to appear (it’s due out late in February in Britain, soon after that in the U.S.). This is because these slim volumes seem custom-made to be read over the course of a day-or-two’s worth of hour-there and hour-back train rides.

The best way to sum up the series is that it’s made up of little books on big topics. They are all short (100 to 150 pages of text). They all have the same subtitle—as in [Architecture: A Very Short Introduction](#) (a work I’ve come to rely on in my research on Shanghai, whenever I’m trying to keep straight which treaty-port era landmarks should be called “neo-classical,” which “art deco”) and [Globalization: A Very Short Introduction](#) (a book I [wrote about](#) for *Newsweek International*—fittingly enough, given the brevity of the book, in a mini-review that was only about 100 words long). And each VSI (easy to remember, rhymes with CSI: I’m not sure whether the publisher or the TV producers got there first with the abbreviation) is issued in the same attractive, shrunk-down format. They are just the right size to slip into the back pocket of your jeans. Unfortunately in one sense (but fortunately for my health and the health of my research account, lest I be tempted to squander too much of it on VSIs), I generally get to and from work by bike, so consuming them en route isn’t an option (though I suppose if they came as podcasts...).

Having grown fond of the series and liking Mitter’s earlier books, [The Manchurian Myth](#) and [A Bitter Revolution](#), I was eager to get my hands on an advance copy of *Modern China*, but then found myself feeling a bit anxious about reading it once it arrived. After all, it seemed possible (maybe even probable) that I’d come away disappointed, less enamored of the series than I had been. I wondered if I would feel, after reading Mitter’s latest, that the VSI were fine when dealing with subjects one knew little about (the case, for me, with architecture) or had just a passing knowledge of (the case, for me, with globalization a few years ago), but not when they were right up your alley. As it turned out, though, I needn’t have worried.

This is because there’s a lot to like about this book, which covers a great deal of ground in a consistently engaging fashion and manages to remain accessible even when tackling complex issues. For example, the varied things that being “modern” has meant to Chinese actors of different generations—and the ways that the second word in the book’s title, “China,” can also turn out to have a far from simple and stable meaning.

One of the book’s many strengths is its catchy opening. Mitter begins with a quotation from a book called *New China*, which reads in part: “It is impossible to do other than assent to the unanimous verdict that China has at length come to the hour of her destiny...Even in the remote places we have found a new spirit—its evidence, strangely enough, the almost universal desire to learn English” (1). Mitter knows that his readers will find these lines familiar, as they come across ones like them in newspapers and magazines all the time in stories about the current phase of China’s history.

But, he stresses, the Westerners who wrote *New China* “did not pen their observations having landed back at Kennedy or Heathrow airports on one of the many Air China 747s that ferry thousands of travellers daily between China and the West. They wrote their book a full century ago” (2). *New China*, you see, may have been subtitled “a story of modern travel,” but it was published in 1910, while the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) still clung to power and the most “modern” routes from West to East and back again were by railway or steamship.

Don’t get me wrong: much as I like this opening (the rhetorical device is a familiar one, but the source was new to me and seemed particularly well chosen) and other sections as well, there is a lot in Mitter’s account with which a specialist can quibble. Each of us—and I’m no exception—can find plenty of nits to pick. For example, especially if I were thinking of using this in the classroom, I would have liked to see it peppered by more quotations from Chinese sources.

In addition, though he is hardly alone in this, Mitter falls prey to the somewhat misleading tendency with both the May 4th protests of 1919 and the Tiananmen ones of 1989 of placing these upheavals into too intensely Beijing-centric a framework. Yes, actions by students in the capital were crucial in 1919. But the May 4th Movement peaked with a general strike in Shanghai. It is remembered now largely as a Beijing and student story, but without workers joining in (and merchants, too) and other cities being affected, it seems doubtful that it would have had the same impact. Would, for example, the three officials that Beijing students targeted for criticism have been dismissed from office if the movement hadn't spread like wildfire across geographical and class lines?

Similarly, there is good reason to concentrate on Beijing when talking about 1989, but there is more to the story than just what was done by locals (again of many different classes, though students were key). It is worth remembering, for example, that the groundwork for the Tiananmen protests was laid partly by the 1986 campus demonstrations in Anhui and other cities. And that one thing that kept the struggle going through May was the steady influx into the capital of students from other provinces.

These kinds of quibbles aside (and I have no doubt that had I written the book instead, some would have felt that Shanghai showed up too often in its pages), it would be wrong to end this review (or perhaps I should say "preview," given the "Coming Distractions" title of this feature) on a critical note. Instead, I'll close by drawing attention to something I find appealing: the stress Mitter puts on continuities as well as ruptures between the periods of Nationalist Party rule (when Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek held power) and of Communist Party control of the country.

While well aware of the differences between the Nationalists and Communists that need flagging, one of his chapters does a nice job of showing how appropriate it can be to treat Chinese "politics since 1928 as a changing of the baton" between two parties that shared many fundamental beliefs, including a conviction that China's best shot at becoming strong and modern lay with top-down rule by a tightly disciplined Leninist organization (73). He is not the first to make this argument, but he puts it forward very nicely indeed.

For example, while many people ([myself included](#)) have played with the idea of pondering what Mao would make of twenty-first-century China, with its many capitalist dimensions, Mitter puts a novel twist on the notion by bringing the Generalissimo as well as the Chairman into the picture. After pointing out that "the Communist Party of today has essentially created the state sought by the progressive wing of the Nationalists in the 1930s rather than the dominant, radical Communists of the 1960s," Mitter leaves us with this compelling image (particularly apt at a time when there is talk of [transporting the Generalissimo's body from Taiwan](#) to the mainland): "One can imagine Chiang Kaishek's ghost wandering around China today nodding in approval, while Mao's ghost follows behind him, moaning at the destruction of his vision" (73).