

## Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History

*Mountain of fame: portraits of Chinese history* is an ambitious overview of Chinese history that dedicates its different chapters to delicately narrating the lives of outstanding individuals whose roles in and commitments to the formation of Chinese history and alterations in its culture and ideologies are undeniable. As mentioned in the preface, the author regards the stories of *Ming ren* (i.e. famous people) as crucial parts of expressing Chinese traditional and cultural values: The tales of influential historical figures that were shared and praised between commoners. The heroes, the emperors, and the legendary officials who were posthumously reminisced as superior beings and even gods, were in fact considered as mortal and vulnerable human beings in their lifetime (i.e. life on earth). This allowed people to realize the mistakes and shortcomings of these individuals, which he believes is the reason why Chinese culture is “so rich and varied in its moral imagination. Hence, in this book, based on his mentioned beliefs, the author aimed to utilize “Chinese Fascination” with such individuals to present an introduction to those who want a quick and comprehensible overview of the main themes in Chinese history.

The author, John E. Wills Jr., was a longtime professor and teacher of China studies and history in the University of Southern California (USC). His interest in Chinese history began by reading Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China* and escalated after reading the tales of Chinese Communist revolution. He dedicated much of his life to conducting research as well as teaching and creating new courses about different aspects of Chinese history, publishing his work along the way, ultimately leading to the release of *Mountain of fame: portraits of Chinese history*. Wills’ emphasis on the utilization of biographies was not only the spice of his work, praised by many as a clear representation of “Chinese history” or “Chinese memory”, but an inspiration to his succeeding scholars. Hence, by acknowledging his accomplished background in studying Chinese history, his competent knowledge and expertise regarding this field are indisputable.

The book includes twenty chapters, with each chapter providing a clever overview of a distinguished historical figure. The chapters are mostly continuous and follow the similar structure: each chapter starts off with a short background of the period in which the individual resided, followed by a summary of the individual’s contribution and a keen explanation of the political, social, ideological and cultural situation at the time, and ending by telling the tales and defining events of the individual’s life. For instance, in chapter 4, the author begins the chapter by describing the overall situation of the Han Dynasty, which undoubtedly provided one of the most influential periods of Chinese history, if not the most, as it was the stage for an abundance of historical events. The author emphasizes on the importance of this period by mentioning “Han nationality” and explaining its role in the identification of today’s Chinese citizens. Accordingly, Sima Qian is introduced as a grand historian who considered himself as “the heir of a great family tradition of record-keeping” when approaching history. The author then gives an overview of the Han emperors, starting with Emperor Gao and

ending with Emperor Wu, with brief mentions of their victories, failures, and other defining figures of their time, such as Dowager Empress Dou as an authoritative figure after the death of Emperor Gao and Sima Qian's father as a grand historian in the court of Emperor Wu; this is believed to be a clever attempt to make the reader acknowledge the background of the individual being introduced in the chapter: Sima Qian. Consequently, the death of Sima Qian's father, his tale of becoming a grand historian, being imprisoned and castrated, and his final attempts to fulfill his father's dying wish is described in an articulate and expressive manner, which allows readers of any background to empathize with the figure and recognize his hardships and efforts in making a change to the future.

Throughout the book, the author's admiration of Sima Qian is rather evident: the book shares is inspired by a quote from Sima Qian, stating "When I have completed this book, I shall deposit it in the Mountain of Fame...". In chapter 4, the author argues about the uniqueness of Sima Qian's work as he states "No one part of the book gives all the most important points about a major development"; that is, in order to fully analyze and grasp a given historical event in Sima Qian's book, the reader must cross-reference different sections of the book such as annals, hereditary houses, memoirs, etc., which provides them with an opportunity to experience different perspectives of the same event. The author highly values this point and as the structure of the book shows, utilizes it in his own work: the tales and events are told and revisited from different situations and perspectives to give the reader an overall view of these historical occurrences. As an example, early in chapter 4, the author explores Sima Qian's beliefs on people committing suicide upon being imprisoned and mentions how he considered this act not to be due to their bravery but because "they know that their plans and hopes will never again have a chance of coming true." Later on in the chapter when Sima Qian himself is imprisoned and is faced with the same situation, the author revisits his beliefs in order to highlight the level of commitment that Sima Qian had to his ideology and convey a lesson in morality.

However, unlike Sima Qian, who did not include any explicit judgments and criticism in his work due to his fear of the emperor's wrath, John Wills' words tend to utilize existing records to critically analyze various characters in a way that clearly demonstrate his beliefs, stance, and perspective on the situation. For instance, chapter 5 tells the story of Wang Mang, a man who rose to power as a far relative to the royal family and spent most of his lifetime trying to restore China to a Utopian state; justice and equality for all men. On the surface, Wang Mang is portrayed as a humble, caring being whose values and ideology coincided with the betterment of humanity. However, in reality, Wang Mang was shown to be a ruthless, pretentious, and manipulative figure. Hence, the author initially describes the public side of his life as "full of demonstrations of his humility and selflessness, and also ambition" and further goes on to consider him as a "power-hungry hypocrite". Accordingly, the author provides the tales of Wang Mang's sub rosa manipulation of young emperors while keeping his public status as a humble seeker of a Utopian world, and occasionally presents his stance as well as evidence based on the words of Ban Gu, a grand historian of the time. For instance, the author mentions numerous instances

where during Wang Mang's time as a minister, various signs encouraging him to take over the reign were found; yet, he would deny this request, which in the author's words was due to being "calculated to make the best possible impression". However, upon the finding a metal box in which Emperor Gao transmits the reign to the "Yellow Emperor", Wang Mang accepts the throne in an attempt to follow "Heaven's command". The author would then reference Ban Gu's record to demonstrate Wang Mang's immorality and pretentiousness by stating the the box was faked.

*Mountain of fame: portraits of Chinese history* is by no means the first nor the last overview of Chinese history; however, it is a unique approach to tackling history that leaves out details such as dates and explanations on different ideologies to provide an approachable and engaging introduction of the key characters, ideas, and times. The aim of this book, as stated by the author, was to provide a brief and comprehensible introduction of Chinese history's main themes to address several limitations of the traditional biographical approach, and allow readers to explore these themes, find and acknowledge the content that was not included, and reflect upon whether they should have been included. For instance, in Chapter 4, the author mentions that upon the call for scholars and testing their suitability for being appointed as officials in Emperor Wu's court, many were rejected for their Legalist answers as Empress Dowager Dou practiced Daoist Teachings. A more detailed explanation of this situation, similar to Li Feng's early China, would provide a description of the Naturalism and Huang-Lao ideologies while mentioning that both Empress Dowager Dou and Sima Qian's father had studied Huang-Lao practices. Hence, as seen from the book, it is believed that the author was able to successfully meet this end as each chapter provides a clear background of the times, introduces the key characters, attributes, and factors while describing the life of an outstanding individual.

## **Bibliography**

John Wills, *The Mountain of Fame*, Chapters 4-6, pp. 51-99.

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