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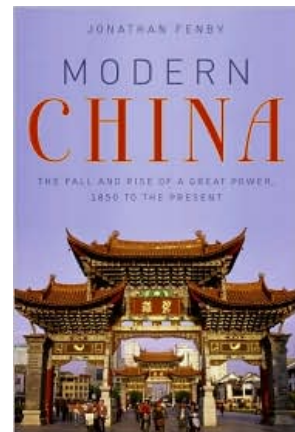
In Time for the Olympics — Understanding China

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The 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing will put the nation of China on the world stage as never before in modern times. The government of the People's Republic of China is intent on making these games a great publicity gain for the nation. Beijing itself has undergone a great architectural transformation, even as the entire nation is in a process of great change.

But China, more clearly than most nations, is captive to its history — and there is no way to understand the China we will see on television in coming days without understanding China's more recent history. The challenge lies in finding an adequate one-volume history.

Just in time for the Olympic Games, Jonathan Fenby has written *Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present* (Ecco/HarperCollins). Fenby's work is the best one-volume work on modern China I have yet found, and it is must reading for anyone who wants to understand China at this crucial moment. Fenby, who writes and explains well, traces China's history from the Qing dynasty, through decades of war and revolution, to Mao and the rise of Communist China, to the great shifts in Chinese life and culture as China enters a global age.



An excerpt:

This book has argued that, for all the manifestations of modernity, China's history is not another country. Now, the cumulative effects of the process launched by Deng Xiaoping are leading to a phase that could be plucked right out of imperial dynasties or from the republic. If Mao was the strong, willful dynastic founder and Deng the consolidator who saw a way of renewing the mandate, Hu Jintao can be taken as a successor who holds the keys to power but cannot turn them as his predecessors did. True, there is no organized opposition to confront the Communist dynasty, no Red Army lurking in the backwoods, no political movement marshalling resistance in the countryside. But the regime faces a different kind of risk, which again has its roots in China's early history. Since the First Emperor in AD 221, rulers have feared losing control of major forces in society, whether they take the form of questioning officials and scholars, military commanders, or, in the last decades of empire, the modernizing gentry. Today, those impelled by the rush to the market and material self-improvement march increasingly to their own drum. Interest groups, individuals and competing power centres proliferate within the overall supposedly unified structure. State-owned enterprises join private firms in playing the stock exchange and using their positions to maximize profits. The result is an authoritarian state which increasingly lacks authority, an empire without an emperor.

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