

[Core textbook for undergraduate modern China course](#)

Discussion published by Robert Cliver on Tuesday, June 5, 2018

Dear Colleagues,

I will be teaching my course in modern Chinese history again this fall. I think this will be the fourth or fifth time I have taught this course. I assign several books, most of them personal memoirs or biographies like *A Daughter of Han*, *Born Red*, *Blood Road*, *The Spiral Road*, and others. This time I am adding *The Man Awakened from Dreams*, which I finally read and loved. I like to assign a core textbook on modern Chinese history so that the students have some background and I don't feel I have to cover the whole narrative in detail in class, which allows us to focus on the primary documents and memoirs.

I have never been completely satisfied with the texts I have used in the past. I started with Spence's *Search for Modern China*, which is a marvelous read, but not well-organized for twenty-first-century undergrads and too long and detailed. I used Michael Dillon's *China: A Modern History*, which is also very good, but also too long and insufficiently focused on the twentieth century. Last time I used Charles Desnoyers' *Patterns of Modern Chinese History*. This is also very good. (I participated in the pre-publication review of the project and found it very exciting.) However, like Fairbank's text, it devotes too much space to pre-modern Chinese history, and did not devote enough attention to topics that are important to me such as gender, labor, and economics. This is also true of Immanuel Hsu's great work, which is far too long for me to use in this course. I might use Desnoyers' book again, as it worked fairly well, but I would like to make the course more focused on the twentieth century this time and I am having trouble finding just the right text.

I would like to ask my colleagues' opinions and choices for textbooks for a modern Chinese history class other than Spence, Fairbank, Dillon, and Desnoyers. I have looked at J. A. G. Roberts and Harold Tanner's texts, both of which are good but not sufficiently focused on the modern period (although Roberts gets into the late Qing about halfway through the book). There are some very good books that focus on post-1949 China, such as Linda Benson's *China since 1949*, Craig Deitrich's *People's China: A Brief History*, and Maurice Meisner's *Mao's China and After*, but these do not cover the period from the 1890s through 1949 as well as I would like. David Kenley's *Modern Chinese History* is good, very focused and readable, but it is very short and does not provide the detail I am looking for, especially on the military conflicts of the 1930s and 40s.

The two texts that are most appealing to me at this point are Pamela Crossley's *The Wobbling Pivot: China since 1800* and R. Keith Schoppa's *Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History*. They are both great books, but Crossley does not cover the PRC period as much as I would like. I need to read both of these more carefully, but while I am doing that I thought I would ask for the advice and opinions of other modern Chinese historians to learn what you think of these books, and what you have used in your own courses successfully. Thank you for reading this long post and for your advice. I look forward to hearing from you either in this form or at my institutional email address: rc61@humboldt.edu.

Robert Cliver

Professor and Chair of History

Humboldt State University