

Of fish and fowl

The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China by Colin Mackerras and Amanda Yorke. Cambridge. \$24.95 (PB). Reviewed by Kitty Eggerking

I'll probably never write a book for the simple reason that I'd be so preoccupied with the preliminary processes of devising the perfect way of setting up the computer for the exercise and working out the perfect arrangement of the contents and argument that I'd collapse in a nervous heap before ever beginning the task of writing.

It's not that I spend every waking moment contemplating such horrors or my own neuroses, though I am reminded of them from time to time when a friend or a colleague mentions the intransigence of their computer in failing to recognise the final word of the final chapter of their epic PhD thesis. It's with such instances as these that my worst nightmares are realised.

I'm reminded of such things too when I turn to a book like *The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China*. I find myself staring uncomprehendingly at the contents page, stupefied by the smorgasbord there presented and bewildered by the seemingly random ordering of the chapters. Confusion in profusion, if you will. Indulge me while I try to explain my difficulties.

Chapter 1 presents a chronology. Fair enough, except that it is marred by rigid sub-categories. Followed by a chapter on politics. Again, that's fine. Then Chapters 3 and 4 are, respectively, eminent contemporary figures and a bibliography. Does this strike you as odd? It certainly confounds me. Aren't such things the proper stuff of appendices? Then it's back into the more regular flow of what you'd expect in this sort of book—a chapter on foreign relations, followed by another on China's economy. And then again

chaos: the next three chapters are respectively the population, a gazateer and China's national minorities. Why is it necessary to separate the minorities from the rest of the (presumably, Han) population in the first place, and, why in heaven's name, are they kept apart by an excursion into China's geography? If it's relevant to link the population to place names at all, wouldn't it be better to deal with the geography first so that we can then locate the people? The final two chapters are again in the more normal scheme of things: Chapter 10 is education; Chapter 11, culture and society. I have a niggle here: if the section on society describes the health system and pensions, couldn't education also be addressed here? Do you start to appreciate my problems of order? Part of the problem arises because, as the preface notes, the authors—one sitting in Brisbane, the other a continent away in Perth—only collaborated on two of the 11 chapters.

And away, finally, from the contents page to the more substantive issue of information. There's a great deal of it—some of it good, some so-so, and some plain out of date. I acknowledge the impossibility of being thoroughly up-to-date in things like the latest changes in the Chinese leadership—which happen to be reasonably accurate for the present in the *Handbook*—but I can see no reason why the only film mentioned in the two paragraphs devoted to the cinema is *Yellow Earth*, made in 1984 by Chen Kaige. What about Zhang Yimou's quite prolific output and similar contributions to Chinese film since the mid-1980s. The world has moved on.

To cite another example: the casual reader may take some comfort from the fact that there were 2.03 hospitals beds per 1,000 head of population in 1982, but what about more recent figures so that we can gauge whether health services have improved since the maturation of that economic miracle known as the Open Door Policy? Again, I acknowledge the

huge difficulties in obtaining timely and credible statistics from China.

I acknowledge also the almost impossible task of selecting succinct and relevant information on any country, let alone one so enormous and ancient as China, in a volume of 236 pages (excluding index, abbreviations and notes), but here again a lack of collaboration and a lack of a clear vision on what to present, and more particularly how to present it, is evident.

The information works best when it's presented as lists of unadorned facts. It is useful for researchers to have tables on the timing and location of all the plenary sessions of the CCP central committee, on CCP membership fluctuations, on imports and exports and things of this nature. Other lists have been incorporated into the text, making their detection more difficult. Indeed, I wonder why the *Handbook* goes in for description and narration at all. Perhaps where descriptions of systems or narrative explanations of historical events are felt to be necessary, these would be better presented as bold-headlined boxes, easily identifiable from the myriad of other tables. It would be invaluable if these short textual entries contained cross-references to other sections of the book.

What all this boils down to is that the *Handbook* is neither fish nor fowl. It is neither compendium/almanac nor introductory textbook. The authors may have had an initial vision, and I suspect it was of the grand variety, for the book but somewhere the vision became distorted and the initial mission was abandoned. Perhaps Mackerras and Yorke could have pulled it off if they'd had the time and space allowed Sir Joseph Needham, but they did not have this luxury. However, with a little more planning and collaboration the final product would have been more coherent. But that's the phobic organiser in me talking.

KITTY EGGERKING edited *ALR's China Supplement* (No. 125).

Lost Illusions

Longtime Companion, directed by Norman René, showing independently nationally. Reviewed by Jill Sergeant.

Longtime Companion is a film about transformation. AIDS has been with us ten years now, and it has transformed the lives of everyone affected by it. AIDS has brought fear, grief and multiple deaths of friends, lovers and relatives, and the distress of coping with a hideous disease. If there is any consolation to be derived it must be from the positive responses the crisis has provoked. The first feature film about AIDS, *Longtime Companion* is actually a 'docudrama' which records both the grief and the empowerment that AIDS has brought to one of the communities most affected by it: American gay men.

In a fictional account of the first eight years of the epidemic, the film follows the lives of a group of gay friends and a more closeted gay couple who live next door to the main female character. Starting on 3 July 1981, the day that a new 'gay cancer' was first reported in the *New York Times*, the film observes these characters on just one pivotal—yet ordinary—day each year until 1989. This technique, which condenses a period of dramatic change, is an effective reminder of just how quickly AIDS invaded our lives in the 80s.

In 1981 the news of a 'gay cancer' is greeted with a mixture of derision and concern by the central characters—comfortable, affluent middle class gay men in their New York subculture. But by 1982, one of them, John, is ill in Casualty with pneumonia. His friends fear, but don't dare to name, AIDS. By 1983 John is dead. One of John's friends, David, won't believe that his

own lover Sean may have the disease. But by 1984 Sean is in hospital being pumped with vitamin pills and herbs by a new age friend. We see the painful, humiliating progression of his illness until two years later, he dies. David, at his bedside, urges him to "let go, my baby, let go". As the years go by the illnesses and deaths multiply. Visits to the hospital become routine.

At the same time, the transition from paranoia to compassion and empowerment takes place. The gay community's plentiful prejudices and fears about AIDS dissolve as the years pass and they are forced to deal with the day-to-day realities of the epidemic. Willy, a friend of David and Sean, is the main exemplar of this process. On his first visit to Sean in hospital he arrives armoured in plastic gown and mask. After Sean kisses him he escapes to the bathroom to scrub his cheek—he even uses a paper towel to turn the tap on. But when Sean dies two years later, Willy holds his hand. Still later, he becomes a 'buddy' helping out with household chores for a Hispanic man, Alberto—someone Willy would probably never otherwise have known.

By 1988 all the surviving characters have become actively involved in AIDS work—at the Gay Men's Health Crisis Centre, at benefit concerts for people with AIDS, or by being a 'buddy'. It's become the best way of fighting both the disease and the emotional distress it has caused.

The impression given by *Longtime Companion* is that AIDS took the 'mainstream' gay community into a world that maybe they didn't know existed. Their comfortable lives contrast strongly with the crowded casualty ward, the shared hospital room, the poor neighbourhood where Alberto lives. Poverty, lack of privacy, and discrimination start to press in upon them. One man is out of work—and possibly out of an apartment—because his lover has died as a result

of AIDS, and rumours are going around that he has it too.

Longtime Companion has been criticised for being just about gay white men and, it's true, the stories of Blacks, Hispanics, women or intravenous drug users are not told. But the filmmakers themselves have said that they did not set out to make everybody's story. They focused on the community they know and are part of. *Longtime Companion* is an affirmation of this community's experience of and response to AIDS. Gay activists in Australia and overseas have pointed out that what they have to say about their experience of AIDS is often marginalised or discounted—the media and the public seem to prefer 'innocent victims'. Their voices need to be heard.

The film ends with a scene of hope. Willy, his lover Fuzzy, and a woman friend are walking on the beach talking over their lives of the past eight years. Wishing for it all to be over, they have a vision of a giant party where all their friends who have died of AIDS return to life. This scene, too, has been criticised for being overly sentimental, or a cop-out. Given the mood of the 90s, perhaps a more defiant, political challenge would have been appropriate. But *Longtime Companion* is less about politics than it is about emotions: how AIDS has made people realise how precious their friends and lovers are, how they've gained the strength to live with this epidemic. The bonding that such a crisis produces goes very deep. And schmaltzy though it may be, the final scene represents the deepest, most heartfelt wishes of anyone who has been touched by AIDS: that it could be all over, and that everyone who has died could come back to us.

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