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On China

Henry Kissinger On China



READ BY NICHOLAS HORMANN
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Synopsis

The eminent historian and strategist reflects on how China's past illuminates its 21st-century trajectory, drawing on 40 years of intimate acquaintance with the country and its leaders. In *On China*, Henry Kissinger turns for the first time at book length to the country he has known intimately for decades and whose modern relations with the West he helped shape. Drawing on historical records as well as on his conversations with Chinese leaders over the past 40 years, Kissinger examines how China has approached diplomacy, strategy, and negotiation throughout its history and reflects on the consequences for the 21st-century world. As Kissinger underscores, the unique conditions under which China developed continue to shape its policies and attitudes toward the outside world. For centuries, China rarely encountered other societies of comparable size and sophistication. China was the "Middle Kingdom", treating the peoples on its periphery as vassal states. At the same time, Chinese statesmen - facing threats of invasion from without and the contests of competing factions within - developed a canon of strategic thought that prized the virtues of subtlety, patience, and indirection over feats of martial prowess. *On China* examines key episodes in Chinese foreign policy, from the earliest days through the 20th century, with a particular emphasis on the modern era. Kissinger illuminates the inner workings of Chinese diplomacy during such events as the initial encounters between China and modern European powers, the formation and breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the Korean War, the opening of relations with the United States, the Tiananmen Square crackdown, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization. With a final chapter on China's 21st-century world role, *On China* provides a sweeping historical perspective on Chinese foreign policy from one of the premier statesmen of the 20th century.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 20 hours and 12 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Penguin Audio

Audible.com Release Date: May 17, 2011

Language: English

ASIN: B00516Y45U

Best Sellers Rank: #13 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > International Relations #14 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Asia #18 in Books >

Customer Reviews

The book is worth reading. And yet, a novice to the subject of China, its history, and especially China's foreign relations, should be advised to take Dr. Kissinger's analysis with great caution and skepticism. Kissinger analysis is at times very interesting, at times pretentious, and, unfortunately, very often naïve. Of course he "was there," he experienced a great deal of what he describes, and certainly he had studied the subject. But instead of helping his analysis, his own experience stands in the way of objectivity. First, Kissinger is in awe of Mao Zedong. Mao can do no wrong for Kissinger. All Mao's decisions are based on meticulous planning; informed by the millenia of China's culture; and with long term considerations. In Kissinger's view, when Stalin maneuvers in some negotiations, he is conniving and conspiring, but when Mao is doing the same, he is planning, he is thinking, and following ancient Chinese strategy. Historical facts do not sustain that picture. Although Mao clearly was very skillful revolutionary, his behavior was also very erratic and often reckless. Kissinger rarely, if ever, admits that. For example The Great Leap Forward that led to famine and estimated 30-40 million deaths and set China back decades in economic development is barely mentioned by the author. The destructive and humiliating Cultural Revolution is actually presented in a positive light by Kissinger. Maybe he didn't intend the portrayal to be that way, but Kissinger writes about Cultural Revolution as it would be a political and philosophical campaign that simply didn't fulfill Mao's expectations. It was a "titanic struggle." The fact that China's society and culture was almost destroyed doesn't seem to be bothering Kissinger that much.

Prior to the publication of this book the definitive resource on China was Jonathan Spence's "In Search of Modern China". Spence the Yale Professor, is still indispensable to a modern understanding of this remarkable country. Now there is a second more up to date source and that is Henry Kissinger. The former Secretary of State who is now 88 years fortunately has taken the time to put together this incredible piece of work that only he could have created. The book demonstrates the necessity of having lived a very long productive life and generating wisdom capable of distilling his understanding of a country down to a 530 page volume of work. It is as good as any of his previous works (13 with this one) and for my money I now put this book in Kissinger's top three, along with WHITE HOUSE YEARS and DIPLOMACY. First the MECHANICS of the Book If you are going to read the hard copy as opposed to digital, you are in for a treat. The font is beautiful, and the paper used to print the volume is delicious. I say this because if you are a heavy reader; you really

appreciate turning the pages of beautifully textured pages. I annotate all of my books, writing in margins, in the back on blank pages and just about everywhere, and I love writing on beautiful page that take the ink nicely. This book was crafted professionally as good as it gets. The ORGANIZATION of On China The Secretary has made 40 trips to China in his lifetime, enough that he should be the Honorary Ambassador to the country. He is thoroughly infused in the history of China, and he certainly does give you the history. There are 18 chapters plus an epilogue spread over 531 pages.

Dr. Kissinger has had personal experience with four generations of Chinese leaders, as well as building an appreciation of its long history. His "On China" primarily covers China's initial encounters between China and modern European powers, the breakdown of its alliance with Russia, rationale behind and its involvement in the Korean War, and President Nixon's historic trip to Beijing. The book is an attempt to explain differences in how the Chinese both view themselves as an exceptional civilization (cultural; non--applicable to other nations) and think about foreign and military strategy, vs. the U.S. (God-given, with an obligation to spread to others). Most of "On China" consists of a readable, but detailed history of China, along with how those events have shaped its leaders. Kissinger's historical accounting begins with with Confucius, and goes on to also summarize the forced opening of China by Great Britain and other 'barbarians,' Japanese and Russian occupation, Mao's takeover and creation of continual chaos, reclaiming former boundaries (India, Tibet, Inner Mongolia; crises over Taiwan), rationale for Sino-U.S. rapprochement, the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, and China's subsequent healing and economic resurgence initiated and led by Deng Xiaoping. Early China was plagued by internecine conflict that threatened the empire's sustainability. Confucius (551 B.C.- 479 B.C.), an itinerant philosopher largely ignored in his lifetime, provided the 'glue' that has both kept the empire together since, while uniting its people, and providing much of Asia's 'state religion.' Expertise in Confucian thought became the key to advancement after the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) adopted Confucius' thinking.

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