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# Reading About China

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# Reading About China

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Where do you begin to read about China? Perhaps one could start by reading the fundamental text underlying much of Chinese philosophy and religion, *The Analects of Confucius*. However, for individuals looking for a readable volume that provides an overview of China's thousands of years of history, an excellent place to start would be John King Fairbank's *China: A New History*. This classic volume in its second edition, updated by Merle Goldman, begins with the Paleozoic period and continues through the post-Mao reform era. Fairbank was a highly respected historian, scholar, and career diplomat. He was one of the "China Hands", a group of Asian experts in the U.S. Foreign Service who were hounded out of the service after Mao's victory in 1949. An interesting, long out-of-print, book describing this episode during which the U.S. government was fueled by McCarthyism and looking for scapegoats after losing China to the Communists is E. J. Kahn's history *The China Hands*. To learn about one powerful family's impact on twentieth century Chinese and Taiwanese history, Sterling Seagrave's *The Soong Dynasty* is a controversial and readable study of the family that produced Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, Madame Sun Yat-Sen, and several powerful bankers who financed the Kuomintang.

After the Cultural Revolution a genre of literature emerged that has been called "scar literature." In these works authors describe the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and how their lives were destroyed. One of the most popular titles in the United States was *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Cheng Nien, a narrative which chronicled the imprisonment of the author and her daughter's murder by the Red Guard. For a gentler read, a recent title, *Confessions: an Innocent Life in Communist China* by Kang Zhengguo is a good humored descrip-

tion of the author's tribulations as a non-conformist in a rigid regime.

Over the years there have been a number of excellent travel memoirs written by Westerners who have spent time in the People's Republic. Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster* chronicles his adventures riding trains throughout China during the 1980's. In *Coming Home Crazy*, Bill Holm writes about a year he spent teaching English in Xi'an; and Mark Salzman's *Iron and Silk* is the story of his year teaching martial arts in Changsha, Hunan Province.

China's phenomenal economic development in the last two decades has been analyzed in numerous volumes. Orville Schell's prescient 1985 examination of economics and politics in China, *To Get Rich Is Glorious*, sets the stage for the economic miracle that occurred. Recent studies include the World Bank's study *Dancing with Giants: China, India and the Global Economy*; *China's Rise and the Balance of Influence in Asia*, a collection of essays by policy experts; and *China Shakes the World: a Titan's Rise and Troubled Future and the Challenge for America* by James Kynge who was Bureau Chief for the *Financial Times* in Beijing.

Finally there is fiction, which often paints a truer picture of a place and time than all the ponderous historical, political, and economic analysis available. Novels by authors like Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Li Yilun, Wei Hui, Gao Xingjian, Yu Ha, and Dai Sijie will fascinate, entertain and educate at the same time.

## A Bibliography of the Books in this Essay

### Non Fiction

(These titles are listed in order of their mention)

- Confucius. *The Analects: a Philosophical Translation* [Translated with an introduction by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr.], Ballantine Books, 1999
- Fairbanks, John King and Merle Goldman. *China: a Brief History* [Second Enlarged Edition], Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006
- Kahn, E. J. *The Old China Hands*, Viking Press, 1975
- Seagrave, Sterling. *The Soong Dy-*

*nasty*, Harper and Row, 1985

- Cheng, Nien. *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Grove Press, 1987
- Kang, Zhengguo. *Confessions: an Innocent Life in Communist China*, Norton, 2007
- Theroux, Paul. *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train Through China*, Putnam's, 1988
- Holm, Bill. *Coming Home Crazy*, Milkweed, 1990
- Salzman, Mark. *Iron and Silk*, Random House, 1986
- Schell, Orville. *To Get Rich Is Glorious: China in the Eighties*, Pantheon Books, 1984
- World Bank. *Dancing with Giants: China, India and the Global Economy*, World Bank, 2007
- Keller, William and Thomas G. Rawaski, eds. University of Pittsburgh, 2007
- Kynge, James. *China Shakes the World: a Titan's Rise and troubled Future and the Challenge for America*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006

### Fiction

(listed alphabetically by author)

- Dai Sijie. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, Knopf, 2001
- This example of "scar literature" tells about two teenage boys, the sons of disgraced intellectuals, who are sent to the countryside for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. Discovering a cache of nineteenth century French novels translated into Chinese, they are intellectually liberated by the power of imagination and love.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Soul Mountain*, Perennial, 2001

This novel by China's only Nobel Laureate describes the journey of an author through Southwest China in search of the metaphorical soul mountain "Ling Shan." Wandering almost randomly in search of his spiritual goal, the author writes of the people he meets, the history of the regions through which he passes, and his spiritual experiences along the way.

- Han, Shaogong. *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, Columbia University Press, 2003

Written in the form of a dictionary, this novel tells about life in a small peasant village to which the author/lexicographer has been sent to be "re-educated" during the Cultural Revolution. As he examines the



linguistic quirks of his neighbors, he demonstrates what a powerful tool language can be for good or evil and also describes how brutal life could be for a Chinese peasant in the 20th century.

• Li, Yilun, *The Vagrants*, Random House, 2009

The execution of a twenty-eight-year-old woman for counterrevolutionary activities causes ripples throughout the small town where she lived. From a disabled twelve-year-old girl to a twisted bachelor hired by the girl's parents to properly dispose of the body, from a couple of beggars turned street-sweepers to an honest journalist, every life in Muddy River town changes in unsettling ways.

• Mo, Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Arcade Pub, 2008

A kind landlord, who was executed during the first throes of the Communist revolution in China, returns to his village reincarnated as a donkey, then as an ox, followed by reincarnations as a pig, a dog, a monkey, and eventually as a big-headed boy. In the various reincarnations, he is able to experience the tumultuous history of the second half of the twentieth century. This book is an amazing tour-de-force for one of China's most accomplished novelists.

• Wang, Anyi, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Columbia University Press, 2008

This epic novel follows the life and difficulties of a young woman who grows up in post war Shanghai, experiences first small-time celebrity as a beauty queen and then lives through Communism and the Cultural Revolution, defying the government in small ways. In the new China, living with a resilient spirit, she meets a tragic end.

• Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, Pocket Books, 2001

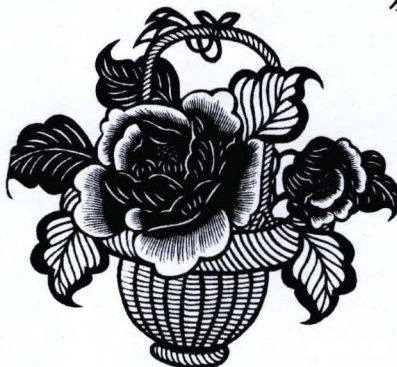
A young woman novelist, who is a member of a wild young group of intellectuals in Shanghai in the '90s, careens from one unsatisfying affair to another with little purpose in life. This is a semi-autobiographical novel that was banned in China.

• Yu, Hua, *To Live*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003

This novel follows the life of a ne'er-do-well rich young man who, before the Communist takeover, gambles away his family fortune. It

demonstrates his experiences surviving the political upheavals of the twentieth century as he becomes a representative of everyman.

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September 16-19, 2011

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