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What I Read on My Summer Vacation (Part II)

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What I Read on My Summer Vacation (Part II)

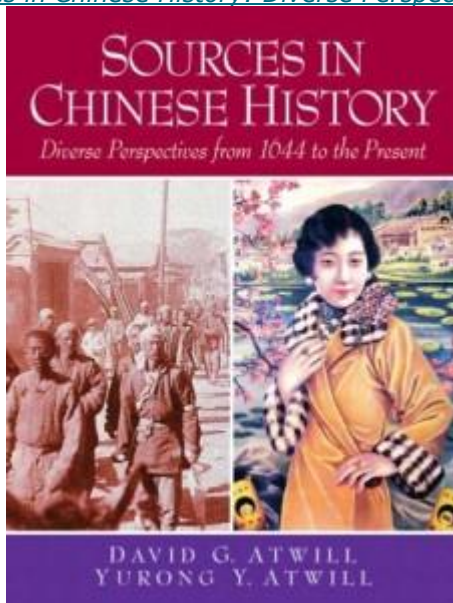
September 9, 2010 in [Books](#) by [kmerkelhess](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Kate Merkel-Hess

Moving across the country (from Irvine, California to [State College, Pennsylvania](#)) meant that most of my books—even the new ones—spent the summer packed in boxes. But alongside a rapid inhalation of all three Stieg Larsson novels, I still did a little China reading. Here, a few recommendations.

- [Mao's Last Dancer](#), by Li Cunxin.

This is a 2003 book that has been re-released (I found it on a “summer paperbacks” table at a Barnes & Noble in Richmond, Virginia) because of a 2009 movie based on it. The autobiography (though the subtitle is “based on a true story,” it is presented throughout as an autobiography with photos, etc. to document Li’s life) tells the story of Li Cunxin from birth through his early 80s defection in Texas. One of seven boys from a peasant family in Shandong, Li was plucked out of his elementary school and sent to study ballet at the Beijing Dance Academy. With Jiang Qing as patron to the academy, politics is an important theme in Li’s account, but unlike the “scar literature” that has characterized our first-person accounts of the 1960s and 1970s, Li’s story is notable for its emphasis on everyday emotion and life. The most affecting part of the book are the early chapters, most of which take place at the height of the Cultural Revolution, but which focus on Li’s rough-and-tumble life in a peasant household filled with brothers, aunts, uncles, and a beloved grandmother. Li’s memories of the warmth and humor of living in the heart of a big extended family is tinged by the nostalgia of someone forced to leave it—as Li did, first to study in Beijing and then when, as a visiting artist in Houston, he refused to return to China. Li emphasizes in his choice his desire for artistic freedom, but he also chafed at the ideological purity that the Communist Party insisted on. Like so many others of his generation (only a few years older than the college students who took to the streets in 1989), it was not grand politics that corrupted Li’s faith in the Party, but its continual meddling in romance, intellectual passions, and personal expression. Though I couldn’t get my hands on the film (it hasn’t been released on DVD yet), there are trailers available at YouTube:

- [Sources in Chinese History: Diverse Perspectives from 1644 to the](#)

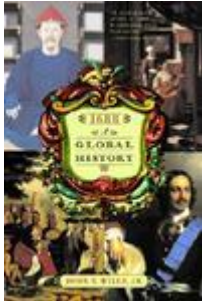


[Present](#), by [David Atwill](#) and [Yurong Atwill](#).

I have been considering course readings for my spring courses, and for my course on modern China this new volume (by two of my colleagues at [Penn State](#)) went to the top of the list. The reader covers the Qing dynasty to the present, but the majority of the documents come from the 19th and 20th centuries (in fact, fully two-thirds of the book is made up of documents from post-Qing China).

These documents include both requisite stand-bys (Lin Zexu's Opium War edict, Qiu Jin's address to the women of China) and a few illuminating choices that update the primary document repertoire for modern China courses, such as the script for a popular comedy sketch about the one-child policy, a report on Fudan University changing its policies on student sexual activity, and a short selection from Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (see a full table of contents [here](#)).

- [1688: A Global History](#), by [John E. Wills, Jr.](#)



This is neither a new book (published in 2001) nor an explicitly China-focused one, but as written by the eminent China historian Jack Wills naturally includes a great deal of China stories. Perhaps even more important, as other world history books by China scholars have done ([Great Divergence](#), [China Transformed](#)), *1688* de-centers Europe without in turn privileging another part of the world. *1688* is enormously readable, moving across a variety of themes that Wills identifies as crucial to this year and the broader period, from silver and the trade networks it inspired to utopian dreams on various frontiers. Like #2 above, this is a book I will be assigning for a course in the spring (World History 1500-present), and one of the things I thought serendipitous was *1688*'s short section on William Penn—a nice hook for my majority Pennsylvanian students.

[What I Read on My Summer Vacation \(Part I\)](#)

September 6, 2010 in [Books](#), [The Five-List Plan](#) by [mcunningham](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

As the end of summer vacation quickly draws near, we at *The China Beat* have been talking about what we read during our break from the academic grind. The summer provides an opportunity to catch up on books we missed, check out some more eclectic choices, and even read ahead when publishers are nice enough to share advance copies of forthcoming titles. Rather than just keep these conversations in-house, we decided to write up short “book reports” on some of the China-related works, both new and old, we’ve been enjoying during these summer months.

Here are quick introductions to five of the books that I’ve read this summer; stay tuned for similar posts from other China Beatniks in the coming weeks.

- [Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea](#) by Barbara Demick

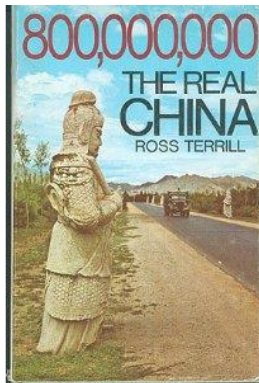
While Demick’s book isn’t exactly about China, I’m including it on this list — and placing it at the top — because it’s one of the best books I’ve read this year. China is actually a major actor in *Nothing to Envy*, as several of the North Korean refugees Demick interviewed for the book were inspired to escape when they realized the standard of living was far higher in market-socialist China than in communist North Korea.

What I found most appealing about Demick’s book was the “ordinary lives” aspect of her work; I was fascinated by her descriptions of activities like shopping, dressing, and using public transportation, none of which is anything close to easy in the grim gray world of North Korea. She structures her narrative around the oral histories of six North Korean defectors (interviewed while Demick was stationed in Seoul with the *Los Angeles Times*), and each of their stories contributes to constructing a broader portrait of daily life in a police state. *Nothing to Envy* is a sometimes wrenching read, particularly in chapters dealing with the North Korean famine of the 1990s, but it’s also a well-written

and accessible introduction to what may be the world's least-understood country. Far from depicting North Koreans as faceless masses marching in lockstep, Demick's work sheds light on the lived experiences of individuals who suffer heartbreak, disillusionment, and self-doubt as they struggle with the decision to defect.

For another look inside North Korea, check out [A State of Mind](#), a 2004 British documentary that follows two girls as they train as gymnasts for the Mass Games.

- [800,000,000: The Real China](#) by Ross Terrill



I found this out-of-print title in a thrift shop and happily took it home with me for a trip back in time. In 1971, Ross Terrill traveled to China as a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, spending six weeks on a tour that extended 7000 miles. The book is an expanded version of Terrill's *Atlantic* articles about the trip, and details not only his meetings with high-level officials such as Zhou Enlai, but also chronicles his observations of daily life across the country. Published on the eve of Richard Nixon's February 1972 trip to China, *800,000,000* is a brief but evocative look at "what China is like" for an audience that was largely unlikely to travel there.

Excerpt:

In my imagination, the train was history's conveyor belt, rolling, not ninety miles to Canton, but from one universe to another. In fact, the train was its usual workaday self. It was loaded with housewives, workmen heading for the New Territories, vendors with beer and cigarettes, youths going out to Shatin for a swim. For these people the train was a "local," boring as a subway ride in Manhattan. For a few others — politicians from the Komeito (Clean Government party) of Japan, an Indian diplomat, myself — it was an international train, bound for a land which even today exudes mystery. These bored and worldly carriages also contained a certain excitement. . . .

There really *are* "two Chinas." Not "Taiwan" and the "Mainland," but rather the *image* we have of China in the United States, and the *reality* of China. Our press talks of China as power struggles and bombs and numbers. But here is China as rice and heat, glue and vaccinations, babies crying, old men playing chess. Last week, China was for me a matter of embassies and letters and magazines arriving by post. This morning, it has become a matter of trains and tea, Chinese beds, telephone numbers, weariness. There is a purging, utterly simple wonder about actually chugging mile by mile into China. The cardboard figures of a frozen scenario start to breathe and sweat and make a noise. From San Francisco to Singapore and beyond, you find pockets of Chinese society. But only in China do you see this civilization in its present power and in its ancient and beautiful cradle, and begin to sense how much the Chinese people and nation may mean in the pattern of future decades (1-2).

- [The Wild Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China](#) by Barbara Pollack

Barbara Pollack's book examines the Chinese contemporary art scene, which she has covered for a variety of publications since the late 1990s. The book is part memoir and part exposé, propelled by Pollack's accounts of scheming artists, corrupt dealers, and questionable museum practices. I emerged from *The Wild Wild East* feeling as if the art market in China is a prime example of the

emperor's new clothes, as collectors drive prices higher and higher simply for the caché of being able to afford exorbitantly priced art.

To understand more about how that works, perhaps I should pick up one of the books Amazon suggests will pair well with Pollack's: [The \\$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art](#) by Don Thompson.

- [Beverly Gray mysteries](#) by Clair Blank

The most famous of the 1930s "girl detectives" is still undoubtedly Nancy Drew, but Nancy never made it to China on her travels. However, her far less renowned counterpart, Beverly Gray, did, and I secured two books in the series to see what images of China young readers in the mid-1930s might have absorbed. Well, it seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same:

Shanghai was but another surprise on top of all they had had so far. Heretofore, when they had spoken of China, while at home in America, it had been with various flights of fancy. Certainly they had not expected such an Americanized scene.

They gazed in surprise at the tall, foreign buildings, mostly offices and hotels; at the well-policed streets; and, in the business sections, at red and green traffic lights! (*Beverly Gray in the Orient*, 190).

- *Haibao and Sanmao Idle Talk About Shanghai* «海宝&三毛话上海» by Le Cheng Yan 乐澄

