

China Reading List – China

History | Biographies & Memoirs | Guidebooks | Language | Religions & philosophy | Arts | Fiction | Movies | Travelogues

**HISTORY**

The Search for Modern China

By Jonathan D. Spence

Beautifully written by a leading scholar in the field, this book has become one of the standard texts on the last several hundred years of Chinese history, starting with the fall of the Ming. You will come away with a good working knowledge of recent Chinese history before your trip to China.

The Cambridge Illustrated History of China

By Patricia Buckley Ebrey

If you are looking for a basic overview that compresses 8,000 years of a civilization into a single volume, this richly illustrated book would be a perfect choice.

The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds

By Jonathan D. Spence

Written by one of the greatest Sinologists of our time, this book examines the influence China has exercised on the Western imagination. Using literary, historical and travel writings from the 14th century to the present, Spence discloses the various ways China has been perceived. Like his other works, this book is both authoritative and highly readable.

Mao: The Unknown Story

by Jung Chang & Jon Halliday

from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)

This book is not as well received by the readers as Chang's first book *Wild Swans*. Some dislike it for containing too many dry details that are too hard for non-Chinese to digest while some others question the objectiveness of the authors. The book may be suitable more for historians than the average reader.

**BIOGRAPHIES & MEMOIRS**

Wild Swans : Three Daughters of China

By Jung Chang

Chinese history of the past one hundred years comes to life through the story of three women, the author, her mother and grandmother. We consider this book a rare gem and highly recommend it to our customers.

Grace: An American Woman's Forty Years in China, 1934-1974

By Eleanor McCallie Cooper & William Liu

Authored by Grace's cousin and son, this book was first recommended to us by a customer who works at Simon Fraser University, where William Liu teaches. We read it and highly recommend it. It is a touching real love story between an American woman and a Chinese engineer. Based on a collection of letters, autobiographical fragments, and narrations from Grace's children and relatives, the book provides the reader with an insightful look into the tumultuous years of modern China.

Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now

By Jan Wong

The author is a former columnist with Canada's national newspaper The Globe and Mail. A third-generation Chinese Canadian born in Montreal, Jan Wong went to China in 1972 as one of the first foreign undergraduate students permitted to study at Beijing University since 1949. As a devoted Maoist, she lived through her Cultural Revolution years the typical way any Mao's Red Guard lived. The book includes her observations of the Chinese pro-democracy movement of 1989, which occurred on her watch as The Globe and Mail's correspondent in Beijing.

The Soong Dynasty

By Sterling Seagrave

Mei Ling (Madame Chiang), wife of Chiang Kai-shek and the youngest of the three Soong sisters, died in New York in October 2003. Her death rekindled people's interest in the story of the Soong family, whose wealth and power dominated China and U.S.-Asia policy for decades in the last century. Read the book and you'll understand why people in China often say that Mei Ling loves power, Ai Ling loves money, and Ching Ling, wife of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, loves her country.

Dragon Lady : The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China

By Sterling Seagrave

Dowager Cixi ruled China from behind the curtain during the last decades of China's last imperial dynasty. There are numerous and conflicting accounts of Cixi's life. The author tries to provide a new point of view different from those held by Communist China and many scholars in the West.

The Private Life of Chairman Mao

Dr. Li Zhisui

Unlike the biography Mao Zedong written by Jonathan D. Spence, this book offers a personal and detailed account of the Chinese dictator's private life - Dr. Li was Mao's personal physician for 23 years. The book is banned in China because the Chinese government views it as nothing but a bunch of defamatory lies. You be the judge.

Emperor of China : Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi

By Jonathan D. Spence

K'ang-Hsi (also spelled Kangxi) was one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history widely admired by the Chinese regardless of ideology. Literary renditions of his life are abundant. Glorification of him through cinematic efforts and TV series is the rage of the day in China. Jonathan Spence made an ambitious attempt to recreate the diary of the great man.

Falling Leaves

By Adeline Yen Mah

The story of a little Chinese girl who grew up in a wealthy family yet her life was full of fear, isolation and pain. Thought to be bad luck that her mother died while giving birth to her, Adeline was scorned and rejected by her millionaire father and siblings. She was further tormented by her French-Chinese step-mother. The account of Adeline's survival of such a painful and destructive upbringing, especially her fruitless efforts trying to win her parents' love, is heart-rending. Despite all the suffering she had endured, the gifted girl eventually made her way to the U.S. and built a successful life there.

Mr. China: A Memoir

by Tim Clissold

A British business consultant trained in physics at Cambridge University, Clissold joined up with a Wall Street banker-turned entrepreneur in the early 1990s and together they embarked on a decade-long adventure in China investing in a wide range of Chinese businesses scattered across the country. The narrations of his intense conflicts with the managers of the Chinese businesses his firm invested in are so vivid that they beat fiction! Clissold could easily turn his rivalry with Old Shi into a movie. Tim studied Chinese in Beijing for two years before meeting the American banker in Hong Kong and is very fluent in this acquired language. His narrations sometime go off track, which may be annoying to readers who already have a good understanding of China. But those off-topic observations show the depth of his knowledge of China, which may be the reason that his editor did not ask him to cut them. This book chronicles so well China's chaotic but rapid economic expansion in the decade post-Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" in 1992 that anyone interested in China's explosive economic growth should read it.

China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture

By Jianying Zha

Amazon editors wrote: "China Pop is a highly original and lively look at the ways that contemporary China is changing. Jianying Zha, hailed by The Nation as "incisive, witty and eloquent all at once," examines a wide range of developments largely unknown to Western readers: the careful planning of television soap operas to placate popular unrest after Tiananmen, the growth of the sex tabloid and pornography industries, and the politics of censorship and commercial

success of the film directors Chen Kaige (Farewell My Concubine) and Zhang Yimou (Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern)." Another book by the same author, [Tide Players: The Movers and Shakers of a Rising China](#), is also highly recommended.

## GUIDEBOOKS

### [Frommer's China](#)

One of the best China guidebooks around, Frommer's China covers the country's top attractions plus no-so-well-known places that Westerners may find interesting. The book is well researched with authoritative introductions to the various attractions. The editors and contributors all have long experience living in China making them sound like locals, not the typical travel writer. Unlike Lonely Planet and Rough Guide, Frommer's China is more geared towards middle class consumers, which is why the latest edition no longer talks about cheap hotels for backpackers.

[The China Travel Companion: A compact guide filled with the most useful tips and phrases need before Touring, Living & Doing Business in China](#)

## LANGUAGE

<http://www.laurustravel.com/chinese-phrases.htm>

You'll find many books on Amazon teaching you basic Chinese. But before buying any, try your local library first. You may also find free Mandarin lessons on Youtube if you can stand the advertising.

## RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY

### [Chinese Religions](#)

By Julia Ching

According to Book News Inc., the book is "a survey organized in three parts: the indigenous traditions (including the religion of antiquity, Confucianism, and Taoism); the religions of foreign origin (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), with Neo-Confucianism considered as China's response to Buddhist influences; and the legacy of syncretism representing the fruits of union between the native and the non-native.

### [Short History of Chinese Philosophy](#)

By Yu-Lan Fung & Derk Bedde (Translator)

The book has introduced generations of readers to Chinese philosophy and is justly considered a classic. Although viewed a bit outdated by some readers, this book remains an excellent and influential survey of Chinese philosophy. Author Fung Yu-Lan was one of China's most important philosophers and historians of philosophy of the 20th century.

### [Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China](#)

By A. C. Graham

An excellent introduction to Pre-Qin philosophical argumentation, this classic book is especially profound in its coverage of Taoism and Mohism.

### [Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy](#)

By Philip J. Ivanhoe (Editor), Bryan W. Van Norden (Editor)

The book translates selections from a variety of early Chinese philosophers, including Confucius and his later followers Mencius and Xunzi, the "Taoists" Laozi and Zhuangzi, Mohists, and others.

### [The Confucian Analects](#)

By James Legge (Editor), Confucius (Author)

Confucianism played and continues to play a vital role in the evolution of the Chinese civilization. The Confucian Analects form the doctrine that influenced the political, social and philosophical history of China. For serious readers, this

book cannot be ignored. However, beginners might want to start with introductory books such as H. G. Creel's 'Confucius and the Chinese Way (out of print) and 'Confucius and the Analects: New Essays'.

### Tao Te Ching

By Lao Tsu, Gia-Fu Feng (Translator), Jane English (Translator)

The Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu is the cornerstone of Taoism. Among the more than a dozen popular versions available, this one is loved by many readers for its clarity in translation as well as beautiful accompanying calligraphy and photographs.

### Chuang Tzu (Also known as Zhuangzi)

By Burton Watson (Translator)

You may find Chuang Tzu is more fun and more rewarding to read than Lao Tzu. Chuang Tzu is famous for his story of how he dreamed that he was a butterfly, and then woke up, but was not sure whether he was Chuang Tzu who had been dreaming that he was a butterfly, or was a butterfly, who was now dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu. Besides Burton Watson's version, A.C. Graham's 'The Inner Chapters' and Victor Mair's 'Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu' are also reliable translations.

## ART

### Chinese Art (World of Art)

By Mary Tregear

A more current overview of Chinese art. The author is the Keeper of the Department of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. She offers a chronologically organized work that covers topics in brief survey form, using representative examples of bronzes, painting, lacquer ware, ceramics, jade, and stone carving.

### The Arts of China, 5th Revised & enlarged Edition

By Michael Sullivan

One of the most comprehensive introduction to Chinese art history, this book is easily accessible to general readers, allowing them to not only grasp the distinct characteristics of each period of art and but also understand the change of the Chinese history in relation to arts. It will certainly help travelers to navigate the various museums they are going to visit in China.

Another solid reference is The Art and Architecture of China by Sickmann and Soper.

## FICTION

### Three Kingdoms

By Luo Guanzhong (Author), Moss Roberts (Translator)

Editors at Amazon.com wrote:

"Three Kingdoms tells the story of the fateful last reign of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 200 A.D.) when the Chinese empire was divided into three warring kingdoms. Writing some twelve hundred years later, the Ming author Luo Guanzhong drew on histories, dramas, and poems portraying the crisis to fashion a sophisticated, compelling narrative that has become the Chinese national epic. This abridged edition captures the novel's intimate and unsparing view of how power is wielded."

### Dream of the Red Chamber

by Tsao Hsueh-Chin (Author)

An abridged version of the most famous Chinese classical novel "The Story of Stone", a Chinese Romeo-and-Juliet love story and a portrait of one of the world's great civilizations. Translated and adapted by Chi-chen Wang.

### The Journey to the West, Revised Edition

By Wu Cheng'en, translated by Anthony C. Yu

Anthony C. Yu's translation of *The Journey to the West*, initially published in 1983, introduced English-speaking audiences to the classic Chinese novel in its entirety for the first time. Written in the sixteenth century, *The Journey to the West* tells the story of the fourteen-year pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang, one of China's most famous religious heroes, and his three supernatural disciples, in search of Buddhist scriptures. One of the great works of Chinese literature, *The Journey to the West* is not only invaluable to scholars of Eastern religion and literature, but, in Yu's elegant rendering, also a delight for any reader. (by Amazon editors)

[The Joy Luck Club](#), [The Bonesetter's Daughter](#) and [The Hundred Secret Senses](#)

By Amy Tan

We read them all and love them all!

[A thousand Years of Good Prayers: Stories](#)

By Yiyun Li

Brilliant and original, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* introduces a remarkable new writer whose breathtaking stories are set in China and among Chinese Americans in the United States. In this rich, astonishing collection, Yiyun Li illuminates how mythology, politics, history, and culture intersect with personality to create fate. From the bustling heart of Beijing, to a fast-food restaurant in Chicago, to the barren expanse of Inner Mongolia, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* reveals worlds both foreign and familiar, with heartbreaking honesty and in beautiful prose. (by Amazon editors)

[Becoming Madam Mao](#)

By Anchee Min

From the best-selling author of *RED AZALEA*, this extraordinary novel tells the stirring, erotically charged story of Madame Mao Zedong, the woman almost universally known as the 'white-boned demon,' whom many hold directly responsible for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Bringing her lush psychological insight to bear on the facts of history (by Amazon editor). Other books of Min include: *Red Azalea*, *Empress Orchid*, *The Last Empress: A Novel*, *Pear of China: A Novel*, *The Cooked Seed: A Memoir*.

[Waiting: A Novel](#)

By Ha Jin

A national award winning book, *Waiting* is more than a love story. It allows you to peek into the Chinese society and understand why China is said to be a land of complexities and contradictions. Other books by Ha Jin include: *War Trash*, *A Free Life*, *In the Pond*, *A Free Fall* etc. The author, who grew up in China and was educated in China and the United States, is a full professor teaching creative writing at Boston University.

## MOVIES

[To live](#)

A movie directed by Zhang Yimou, the foremost director from China's influential "fifth generation" of filmmakers, casting China's best-known actress Gong Li and actor Ge You. This is a masterpiece that follows the sweep of Chinese history from the mid-1940's onwards through the hardships of one ordinary family living through chaos and extraordinary events. It will make you cry and laugh and want to watch it again and again. We strongly recommend it.

[The Last Emperor](#)

This masterpiece of the 1980's inspired many Westerners to travel to China to enjoy the rich history and culture that is so beautifully captured in the visually stunning and very emotional true story of Pu Yi, the last emperor of China.

[Farewell My Concubine](#)

Directed by Chen Kaige, casting Leslie Cheung, Gong Li and Zhang Fengyi, it is a romantic tragedy about two noted Peking Opera actors and their struggle living through the historical vicissitudes between 1924 and 1977.

[Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon](#)

Editors at Amazon.com wrote: "An epic set against the breathtaking landscapes of ancient China, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, combines the exhilarating martial arts choreography by Yuen Wo-Ping (*The Matrix*) with the sensitivity and classical storytelling of an Ang Lee film. The result is something truly unexpected: romantic, emotionally powerful entertainment".

#### Mao's Last Dancer

Based on true story of ballet dancer Li Cunxin and his best-selling biography, this inspirational movie was directed by two-time Academy Award-nominated director Bruce Beresford. As part of culture exchange, 18-year-old Li leaves behind a life of poverty and oppression in Communist China to embark on a transformative journey to the West and meets the love of his life. But he soon learns that his quest for freedom must come at a price.

#### Blue Kite

Directed by multi-talented and yet rebellious Tian Zhuangzhuang, this is the most acclaimed and controversial of all of the films coming out of the new Chinese cinema. Told from the perspective of a young boy, it traces the fate of an ordinary Beijing family as they experience the political and social upheavals in 1950's and 60's. After seeing it, you'll realize why the Chinese government is afraid of it and until this day still bans it.

### TRAVELOGUES

#### Riding the Iron Rooster

By Paul Theroux

Theroux tried to capture the flavor and collective psyche of mainland China during the last quarter of the 20th Century. Many readers like his witty style and vivid description. But some readers find his overall negative view of the characters he encountered through the trip annoying. Also bear in mind that China has changed tremendously since Theroux's travel.

#### The City of Light

by Jacob D'Ancona, David Selbourne (Translator)

Translated from Italian, this book is a diary of an Italian Jewish merchant who arrived in Fujian, China four years before Marco Polo's claimed arrival in 1275. It provides accounts and comments of Chinese society and manners during the Southern Song dynasty, through the eyes of a Western man. Authentic or not, it makes an interesting read.

#### The Desert Road to Turkestan (Kodansha Globe)

by Owen Lattimore

This is an account of a journey across the Gobi Desert by camel in the early part of the 20th century. The author was an American who was later persecuted in the anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 60s for his knowledge of China.

#### Seven Years in Tibet

by Heinrich Harrer

The book was originally published in 1953. This adventure classic recounts Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer's 1943 escape from a British internment camp in India, his daring trek across the Himalayas, and his happy sojourn in Tibet. He eventually became tutor to the young Dalai Lama. *You can buy from Amazon.com the movie version of the story starring Brad Pitt.*

#### River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze

by Peter Hessler

"In 1996, 26-year-old Peter Hessler arrived in Fuling, a town on China's Yangtze River, to begin a two-year Peace Corps stint as a teacher at the local college... In *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, Hessler tells of his experience with the citizens of Fuling, the political and historical climate, and the feel of the city itself".

Other books by Peter Hessler are also recommended:

#### Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present

Updated September 16, 2015