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What I Read on My Summer Vacation (IV)

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I was booked to give a China talk in August, high season in the Hamptons, as part of the summer series at the Rogers Memorial Library in Southampton.

You never know who’s going to show up for these well-attended sessions—Southampton summer residents number everybody from Henry Kissinger to George Soros to Madonna, who made headlines this season when she plunked down $500k to rent a place for just one month. (Well, it was beachfront.)

I decided to title the talk “Five Things Americans Need to Know about China—Now.” And then, since the venue was a library, I tacked on “...and Six Books that Will Deepen Your Knowledge.” My plan was to scour my dusty shelves for a half-dozen China books I had read—whether months ago or years ago didn’t make any difference, but to make the cut the books had to have lingered in my mind, which can be a difficult task for any book. So of course I spent a lot of beach time rereading the lot. Here they are in the order I mentioned them in my talk:

1. **The Search for Modern China** by Jonathan D. Spence, Norton 1990 (Second edition 1999)

   The key here is that Spence is both Sterling Professor of History, emeritus, at Yale, and a 1998 McArthur Fellow. He is not only one of the very best China historians, but he is a highly creative writer and storyteller as well. This magisterial history of modern China was a *New York Times* best seller—all 880 pages of it. And though I like Spence for his hugely imaginative (though not made-up) books like *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* and *The Death of the Woman Wang*, this more closely hewn account is pure history—modern Chinese history at its finest.

2. **Mandate of Heaven** by Orville Schell, Simon & Schuster 1994

   Schell, now the Director of the China program at the Asia Society in New York City, and formerly Dean of the Journalism School at the University of California, Berkeley, is a longtime master of the here-and-now of the world’s largest country. The subject in this book is the first inspiring and then awful events in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the Chinese leaders who came before and after them. Though Schell writes with the on-scene verve of a journalist, the analysis and background underscore his long and deep scholarship of China.

In my remarks, I called this “the hot book right now” on China. But that was last month. Despite the apocalyptic title, Jacques's argument here is sweeping, cogent and even a bit scary. The *Guardian* columnist conjures a world where China is back on top, once again controlling “tributary states” in the rest of East Asia. Joseph Kahn, writing on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, called the book “a work of considerable erudition...provocative and often counterintuitive.” Kahn should know. Now Deputy Foreign Editor of the *New York Times*, he was Beijing bureau chief for the *Times*, and before that a very savvy Beijing-based correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Yet, for all its admitted erudition, *When China Rules the World* fails to seriously consider history's great constant: change. What happens when China’s incredible streak of economic growth stops, or even slows as growth rates in developing countries tend to do? What happens then is another book.

4. *Looking at the Sun* by James Fallows, Pantheon 1994

What provoked this book was the fast rise of Japan in the 1980s, but his thesis is about far more than that overhyped moment. It's about the rise of nearly *all* of East Asia, where, unlike our system, which often sets business and government at odds, business is often viewed as a way to national and international power (See also “mercantilism,” Britain). Fallows's analysis is potent, and it remains timely. He is a longtime correspondent for *The Atlantic*, and he and his family lived in Japan while he was researching this book. Then the whole clan moved to Beijing to cover the continuing Asia saga. Over the years I’ve found that even when I don't necessarily agree with Fallows's conclusions, I greatly enjoy his books, which are always vividly reported and very well researched.

A former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for China relations, Shirk, who now teaches at the University of California, San Diego, contends that China’s internal political fragility, not its growing strength, presents the greatest challenge going forward. With more than 100 million farmers having moved to the cities in the last decade, she notes, “The Party can no longer keep track of the population, much less control it.” She expects economic growth will slow as social tensions increase. Perhaps someone should send a copy of this book to Martin Jacques in London.


This is a savvy China crib sheet, written in a crisp, topic-by-topic fashion by a serious and highly-regarded China historian who also dabbles knowingly and effortlessly in the here and now. More than a few readers of The China Beat have likely heard of him and even heard from him (as he’s a co-founder of the blog and one of its contributing editors), but that is no reason to leave his very relevant and helpful book for Americans trying to figure out China off this list. So I didn’t.

While I was reading and rereading all of the above for my talk this summer I did manage to dip into a few non-China things as well. I’ve always found myself among that vast crowd of former history students who have no idea of the real causes of World War I. The assassination of old Arch Duke Ferdinand never seemed really enough given all the death and destruction that ensued. So this summer I picked up a paperback copy of The Guns of August, Barbara Tuchman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1962 history of the Great War—and found, like many other readers before me, I could barely put it down. Tuchman’s legendary account of the first month of the war lives up to its billing, and now I think I know where David Halberstam came up with his writing strategy for The Best and the Brightest, his chronicle of the Vietnam debacle generations later: It’s the characters, stupid.

While we’re on the subject of memorable characters, consider the cast of Clive James’s Cultural Amnesia (Norton, 2007). Here we have everyone from Albert Einstein to Duke Ellington. We have ancient Greeks and Romans, Spaniards, French, Italians, Russians, Germans and Americans and Latin Americans, too, more than 100 personages in all. For this is consummate man of letters Clive James’s book of who’s who in modern history, politics and the arts, some 40 years in the making (and three years in the reading for me).

The missing pages, though, for China watchers and Asian specialists in this otherwise highly well wrought collection of short- to medium-length essays are the Asian pages. Only two Asian figures make this list—Mao Zedong and Isoroku Yamamoto, Japan’s cursed, versifying navy commander. Gender studies types might be equally disappointed, or at least tempted to send the author (male and of a certain age) a list of their own making.
What is here, though, is writerly sparkle and one man’s passion for a number of characters many of us might have missed, and for books themselves. The essay on Mao, for example, rips right along with all sorts of citations to works by previous authors. James begins with Jung Chang who penned both *Wild Swans* and, with her husband Jon Halliday, a 2005 biography of Mao (Mao: The Unknown Story) that “blew the gaff on the Cultural Revolution;” then moves to a discussion of Philip Short’s important 1999 biography, *Mao: A Life*; then on to *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Zhisui Li, his decidedly unliterary personal physician. Finally, Edgar Snow comes in for a spanking as one of the “useful idiots who endorsed the regime’s official lies.”

Come to think of it, I never did finish *Wild Swans*. But now I have put it on my fall reading list. *After Freedom*, of course, which has got to be better than *The Corrections*, don’t you think?

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