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Obama Recommendations: III

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By Kate Merkel-Hess
We aren’t the only ones with advice in regards to China for President Obama of late. For instance, Rebecca MacKinnon recently recommended to the President that he make sure to communicate with regular Chinese folks, as well as government leaders.

Meanwhile, book recommendations to kick off the new year are cropping up elsewhere as well — Jeff Wasserstrom, for instance, listed some of his favorites at Far Eastern Economic Review.

Here are a few more responses to our question, “What Should Obama Be Reading About China?” If you haven’t been following this feature, check out the first and second installments.

Howard French is an assistant professor of journalism at Columbia University and formerly Shanghai (and Tokyo) bureau chief for The New York Times.

Africa’s World War, by Gerard Prunier
Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil, by Nicholas Shaxson

Why two books that are nominally about Africa for a conversation about China? Because unheralded though it is, Africa will be the great economic and political frontier of the next quarter century, and China, which has understood this far better than the United States and Europe, is building an immense lead in terms of its relations with the continent.

The first book paints a compelling picture of how badly the U.S. has gotten Africa policy since the Clinton Administration, reaping death and destruction through reckless policies in Central Africa, and helping create the big openings China enjoys today.

The second book explains the pitfalls of the African oil sector, which has been America’s principal draw to the continent, and could help reinvent policies in ways that help African countries to use their very real wealth for development.

China: Fragile Superpower, by Susan L. Shirk
China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation, by David Shambaugh

Neither Obama nor any of his top advisors seem to have any deep history of involvement with China. Shirk and Shambaugh’s books are as good a primer on the way the country’s politics work as any I’ve seen recently, and would be a very solid starting point for understanding the country.

Struggling Giant, China in the 21st Century, by Kerry Brown
In the same vein of advice, this slim volume provides a very good feel for the upside potential of China as a fast-rising world power, but also of just how creaky the whole enterprise remains.

*Beijing Coma*, by Ma Jian  
*The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China from the Bottom Up*, by Liao Yiwu

When the "other half" amounts to 650-800 million people, depending on who is doing the counting, it pays to have a sense for how they live. Ma Jian, the novelist, and Liao Yiwu, the New Journalist, will place you firmly in their midst, and give you some real and unforgettable people’s history along the way.

**Dorothy J. Solinger** is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine and author of *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*.

1. David M. Lamptom: *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money and Minds*. This book gives a great assessment of just how much military power, financial capacity and intellectual resources China actually has and gives a very balanced view of things from the Chinese side.

2. Andrew Mertha, *The Politics of Piracy*. Shows how the central government has really attempted to bring intellectual property rights under control and just how complex it is.

3. Kellee Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy*. Explains how basically satisfied the new capitalists are with the Chinese state as it is now and why.


Merle Goldman is professor emerita of history at Boston University and author of numerous books and articles.

John K. Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*. It is a big book, but the last section deals with the post-Mao regime and might be a way for Obama to catch up on what has happened to China since Mao’s death in 1976. This section views the post-Mao period in an historical context.

Sara L.M. Davis is the executive director of Asia Catalyst, and author of *Song and Silence: Ethnic Revival on China’s Southwest Borders*. Asia Catalyst keeps a blog on human rights in China.

President Obama is more than just a sophisticated politician – he’s also an excellent writer. I doubt he’ll have much patience with some of the overhyped books on China currently weighing down the shelves at Borders. Instead, I’d recommend readings that will give the president insight into the people of China while making his long flight to Beijing pass a bit more quickly.

1. It’s hard to accomplish much in China without understanding Chinese tradition. Patricia Ebrey’s *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* is full of excellent, readable snippets from primary sources – everything from the Confucian classics to household handbooks to diaries by pilgrims on the Silk Road. Best of all, each text is only a few pages long, so the president can dip into it in between global crises.

2. If he enjoys Ebrey, the president might be ready to tackle Burton Watson’s translation of the *Tso Chuan*, an ancient collection of anecdotes about wars and allegiances between Chinese warlords. The *Tso Chuan* is a little stodgy, but is frequently enlivened with harrowing acts of violence. And it might give the president some useful ideas about how to conduct trade negotiations.

3. President Obama will want some insight into China’s troubled relations with the Uighurs and Tibetans. I’d suggest starting with Stevan Harrell’s wonderful essay, “Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” from *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, then moving on to Robbie
Barnett’s *The Tibetans*. (In return, Chinese leaders could spend a useful hour listening to Obama’s famous speech on race.)


5. As a former community activist, President Obama may be curious about the view in China from the bottom up. To help him understand the lives of working people, I suggest spending a few hours on the plane with some of the films at which China excels. One of my favorites is *Woman Sesame Oil Maker*, which shows China’s tumultuous economic changes through the tragic lives of two rural women. *Beijing Bicycle* and *Not One Less* are also tremendous. If President Obama just watches these three films, he’ll know almost everything he needs to know about life in China.

Tags: Barack Obama