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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.

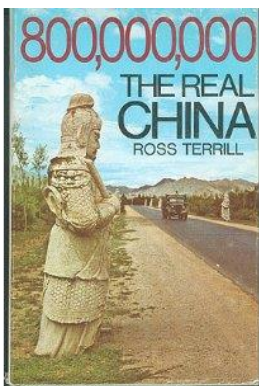
- [Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea](#) by Barbara Demick

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 乐澄彦

I'll conclude with one of the strangest books I've read — ever. The 1930s cartoon character Sanmao has been one of my main research obsessions for the past couple of years, and Jeff Wasserstrom brought this book back from the Expo for me because Sanmao is one of its two leading characters.

The premise of the book is that Expo mascot Haibao and longtime Shanghai resident Sanmao join together to introduce Shanghai to Expo visitors. Sanmao (being 74 years old) is in charge of topics dealing with old Shanghai, while young Haibao discusses new Shanghai, mainly Pudong. The content of the book is somewhat . . . eclectic (I learned a lot about wetlands and river dredging), but what I found most interesting is actually the presence of Sanmao himself. In old cartoons Sanmao isn't exactly fond of the foreigners living in Shanghai, but now he happily welcomes visitors to the Expo. And Haibao, his hyper younger brother, can't wait to greet them all.



If You Can Read Chinese, Read This E-Journal

September 2, 2010 in [missives from academia](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Xujun Eberlein

The new issue of *Remembrance* (<记忆>) continues to review *Mao's Last Revolution* (by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals; Chinese translation can be found [here](#)). The four articles in issues 55 and 56 discuss the book from different angles, with thoughtful comments and legitimate questions. All are well worth reading.

Coincidentally, nearly two years ago, it was Michael Schoenhals who had this to say about the journal ([阅读中文](#)):

Remembrance (记忆, jiyi) is an electronic journal edited by Cultural Revolution historians in China in the May 4th tradition of the joint intellectual venture that does not so much put a premium on uniformity of opinion — and even less on common party political affiliation — as on a shared desire to explore a subject without prejudice in the pursuit of historical truth. ... The journal is a Chinese venture, but in the 21st century that no longer prevents it from being a globalized one.

Schoenhals nailed the main characteristic of the e-journal precisely: it is non-partisan and it is without prejudice. One can often find opposite opinions in feature articles and readers' letters to the editor. Meanwhile, the journal consistently provides high-quality research and well-written memoirs. For anyone who is interested in learning about the true history of China's Cultural Revolution, or contributing to the research, *Remembrance* is the one reliable place to go.

Another book discussed in the current issue is *Fighting for Mao – Chongqing's Large Armed-Fights* (《为毛主席而战—文革重庆大武斗实录》) by He Shu, newly published (in Chinese) by [Joint Publishing \(H.](#)

K.). I've read He Shu's articles on this topic before, and I believe his new book is a significant contribution to the CR research. It is a valuable book to possess and I certainly am going to [buy it](#).

Remembrance is published every two weeks. To manage in the reality of China's internet censorship, the journal maintains a low-key, high-quality policy, and it does not have an official website in the mainland. As such I volunteered (with the editors' permission) to host the journal on [my website](#). I will update every two weeks as soon as the e-journal arrives in my inbox.

My only regret is that I don't have the time to translate all the articles into English. Hopefully, as the journal content gets compiled into books, professional translations will also become available. For now, those of you who can read Chinese have the clear advantage of "a waterside pavilion getting the moonlight first."

This post was first published at [Inside-Out China](#). It is reposted here with the author's permission.

Tags: [Cultural Revolution](#), [Remembrance](#), [Xujun Eberlein](#)