



## BOOKSHELF

## Barbara Demick's China Bookshelf

*The award-winning journalist and author recommends five titles, from Tibetan memoirs to environmental histories — and offers a life hack for New Yorkers with limited shelf space.*

BARBARA DEMICK — JANUARY 9, 2024

MISC.



Barbara Demick is a journalist focused on Asia, and author of [Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea](#) (2010), [Logavina Street: Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighborhood](#) (2012) and [Eat the Buddha: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town](#) (2020). She was bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times* in Beijing and Seoul, and previously reported from the Middle East and Balkans for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Her work has won multiple awards, including the Samuel Johnson prize, the Overseas Press Club's human rights reporting award, and she was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Demick grew up in New Jersey and graduated from Yale College. She lives in New York City.



*In the new installment of this [column](#), we caught up with Demick to ask about her scattered and various collection of China-related books — and for a selection of five interesting titles from her shelf.*

### When did you start collecting books on China, and how did the shelf expand?

As an undergraduate at Yale, I took a Chinese history class taught by the scholar Jonathan Spence. But I spent the early part of my career as a foreign correspondent covering Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and didn't focus on Asia until 2001 when I moved to Seoul for the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2007, when I went to the Beijing bureau, the collection expanded exponentially to the point where books tumbled off the shelves.

### Where is the collection now, and how do you organize it?

Organize? I keep meaning to organize my books. I'll do it right after I get around to alphabetizing my spices. For now, my China books are scattered about. My college books are mostly at my mother's apartment. There are other books that I keep at the New York Public Library's [Allen Room](#), which is a wonderful space where authors can read and order books. At home, I keep the books I'm using for my current book project on Chinese adoptees in my bedroom, which (this being New York) doubles as my office. Others are strewn in the living room.



The library at home in New York (*Esther Frederick*)

### What else lives on your bookshelf?

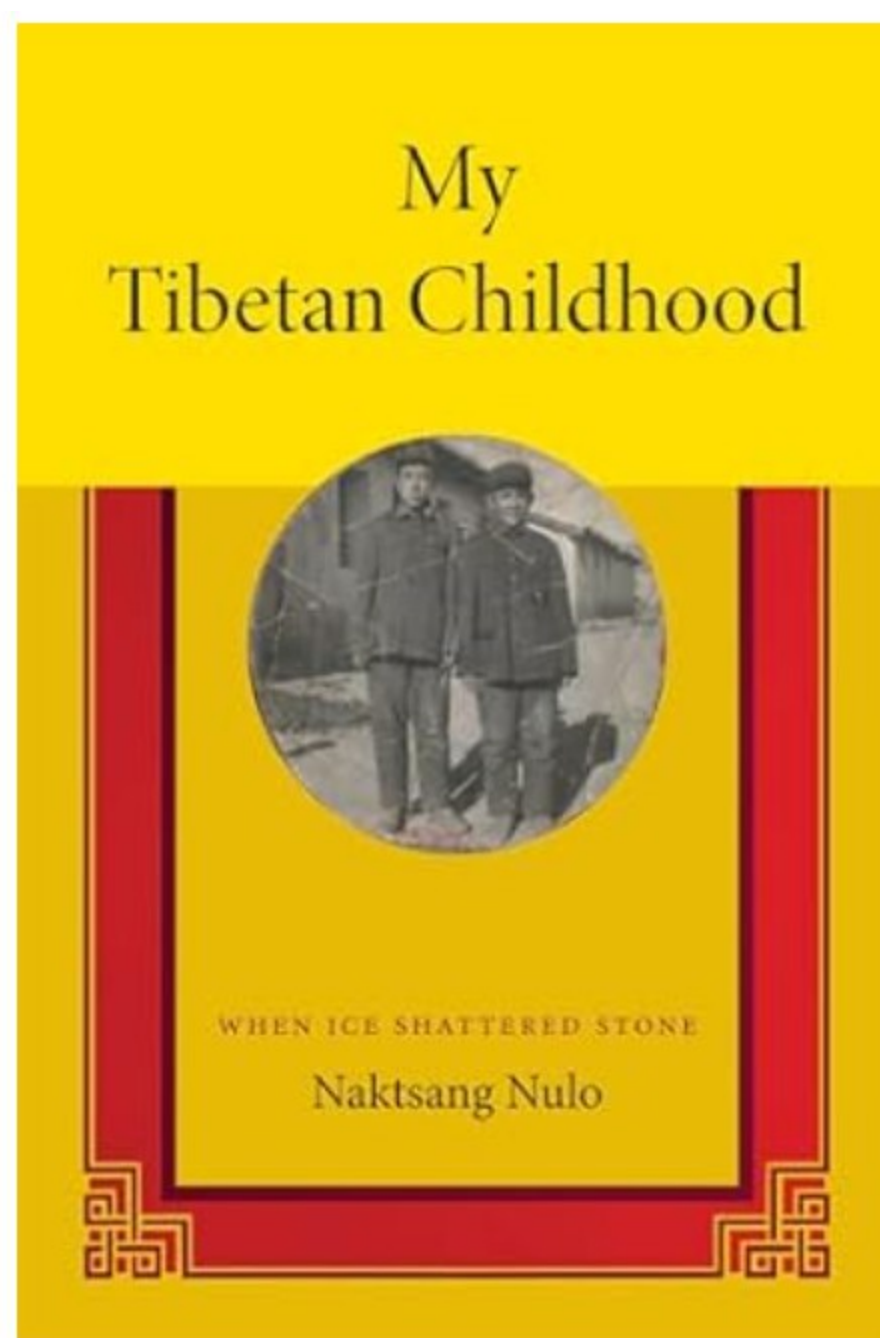
I have many titles about North Korea and Bosnia, which were the subjects of my earlier books, [Nothing to Envy](#) and [Logavina Street](#). I read an enormous amount of fiction, especially when I'm in the throes of writing. By the end of a writing day, I often feel I have depleted the stockpile of words in my brain, and novels help me replenish. I'm not exactly a collector, but I prize my old guidebooks. They are frozen snapshots of places as they were, listing restaurants, cafes and neighborhoods that might no longer exist. Or entire countries. I have several guides to Yugoslavia, and German-language Baedekers for the German Democratic Republic.

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I also have some unusual memoirs and autobiographies. They are invaluable for my work, being as close to primary sources as are accessible on a topic. I especially like books by missionaries: they often travel to places seen by no other foreigner, and their heartfelt and uncensored observations can be useful. When I was writing about Tibet, I came across a vivid [account](#) by the American missionary Robert Ekvall of traveling to Ngaba county, Sichuan province, in the 1920s. He met with the Tibetan queen Palchen Dhondup, a powerful matriarch whose troops later fought the Red Army. And the title of my book [Eat the Buddha](#) comes from a [memoir](#) by Wu Faxian, a Red Army officer who wrote about eating votive statues made of flour and butter during the Long March.

### Barbara Demick's bookshelf picks:

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## My Tibetan Childhood

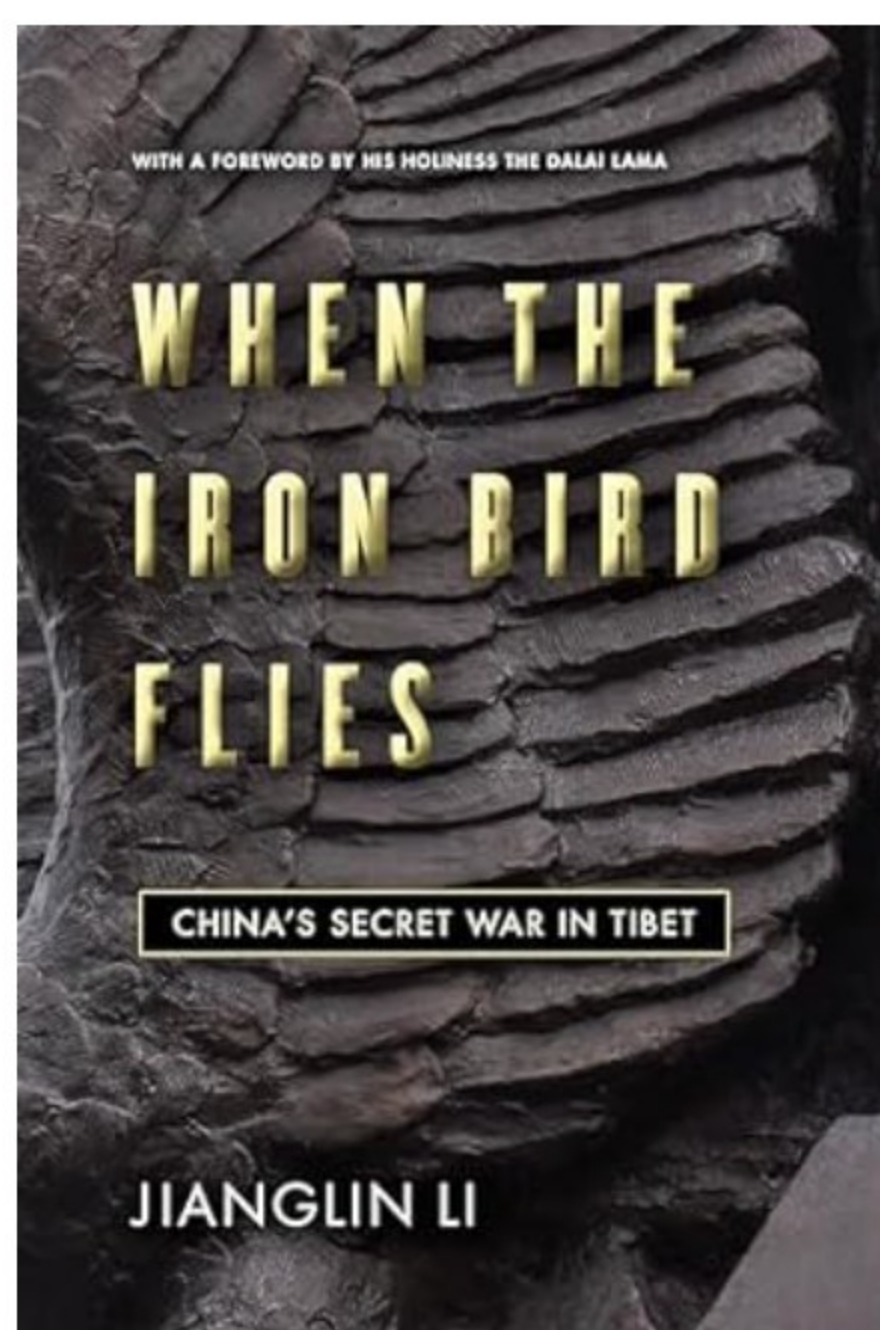
*When Ice Shattered Stone*

NAKTSANG NULO (TR. ANGUS CARGILL,  
SONAM LHAMO)

NOVEMBER 5,  
2014

DUKE UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

This book is one of the few accounts available in English of the harrowing and underreported experiences of ordinary Tibetans in the eastern reaches of the plateau during the 1950s, before the Dalai Lama fled to India. The author describes how entire villages who resisted the Chinese were dumped into makeshift prisons that were little more than pits filled with excrement. Naksang Nulo lived in Gansu province and belonged to the Chukama clan, which was constantly fighting with the Mei dynasty, which then ruled Ngaba county. Almost all other accounts of the period were written by elite Tibetans from Lhasa and usually published in exile. It is almost a miracle that this book managed to get written and published in China.



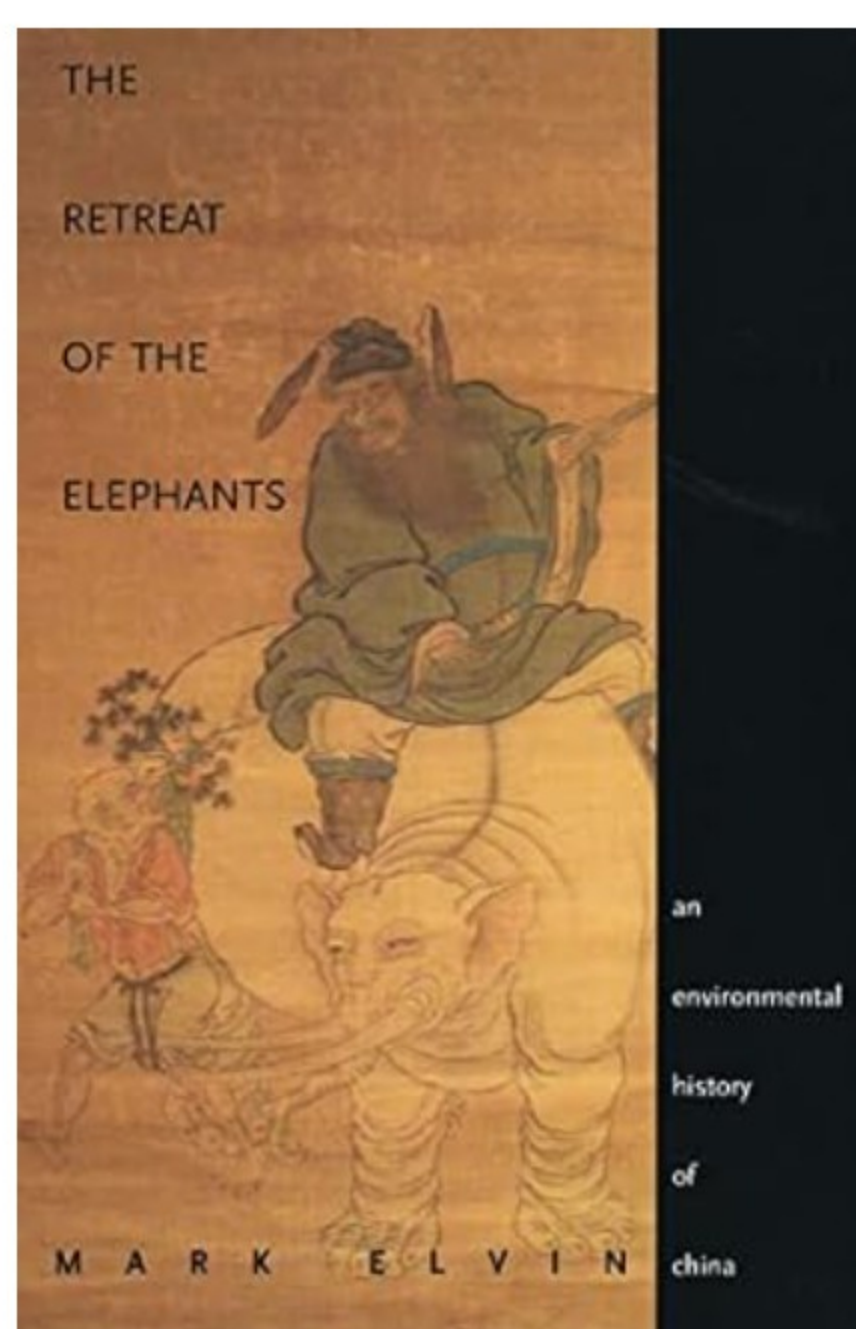
[Buy the book >](#)

## When the Iron Bird Flies

*China's Secret War in Tibet*

JIANGLIN LI | JANUARY 18, 2022 | STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Again, a treasure. So much writing about Tibet is skewed to what happened within the Tibet Autonomous Region. The violent struggles in Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces (Amdo and Kham in Tibetan) in the 1950s have been swept aside and forgotten even by many Tibetans. Chinese-born author Jianglin Li is a dogged researcher. She managed to track down Chinese military documents in Hong Kong, and trekked into a remote gully in Qinghai province where Tibetans had been chased and then wiped by aircraft ("iron birds," Tibetans called them) dropping 100kg bombs. Her book goes a long way to explaining why this part of eastern Tibet has mounted some of the strongest resistance to Chinese rule, including the wave of self-immolations.



## The Retreat of the Elephants

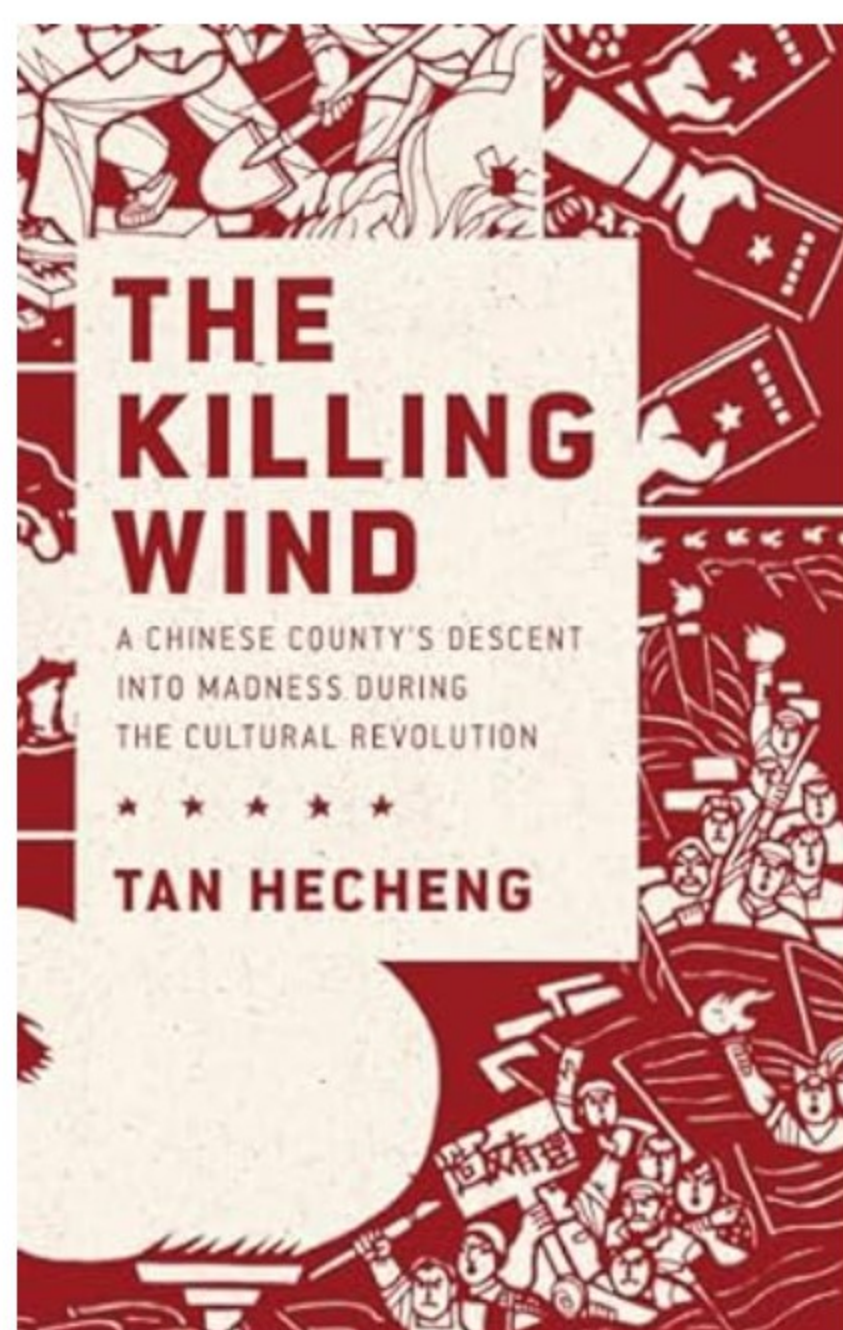
*An Environmental History of China*

MARK ELVIN | SEPTEMBER 21, 2004 | YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Long before Mao Zedong decreed that man must conquer nature, Chinese were doing just that. In this study, Elvin uses classical sources to show that the environmental destruction of China dates back thousands of years, when people razed forests, dammed and diverted rivers and lopped off mountaintops for agriculture. Especially during the early

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Zhou dynasty, Han Chinese had a confrontational relationship with nature, waging what amounted to a war against tiger, leopards, rhinoceroses and elephants in the name of civilization. This is a quirky, very interesting book. Who knew that elephants once ranged as far north as the site of present-day Beijing?



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## The Killing Wind

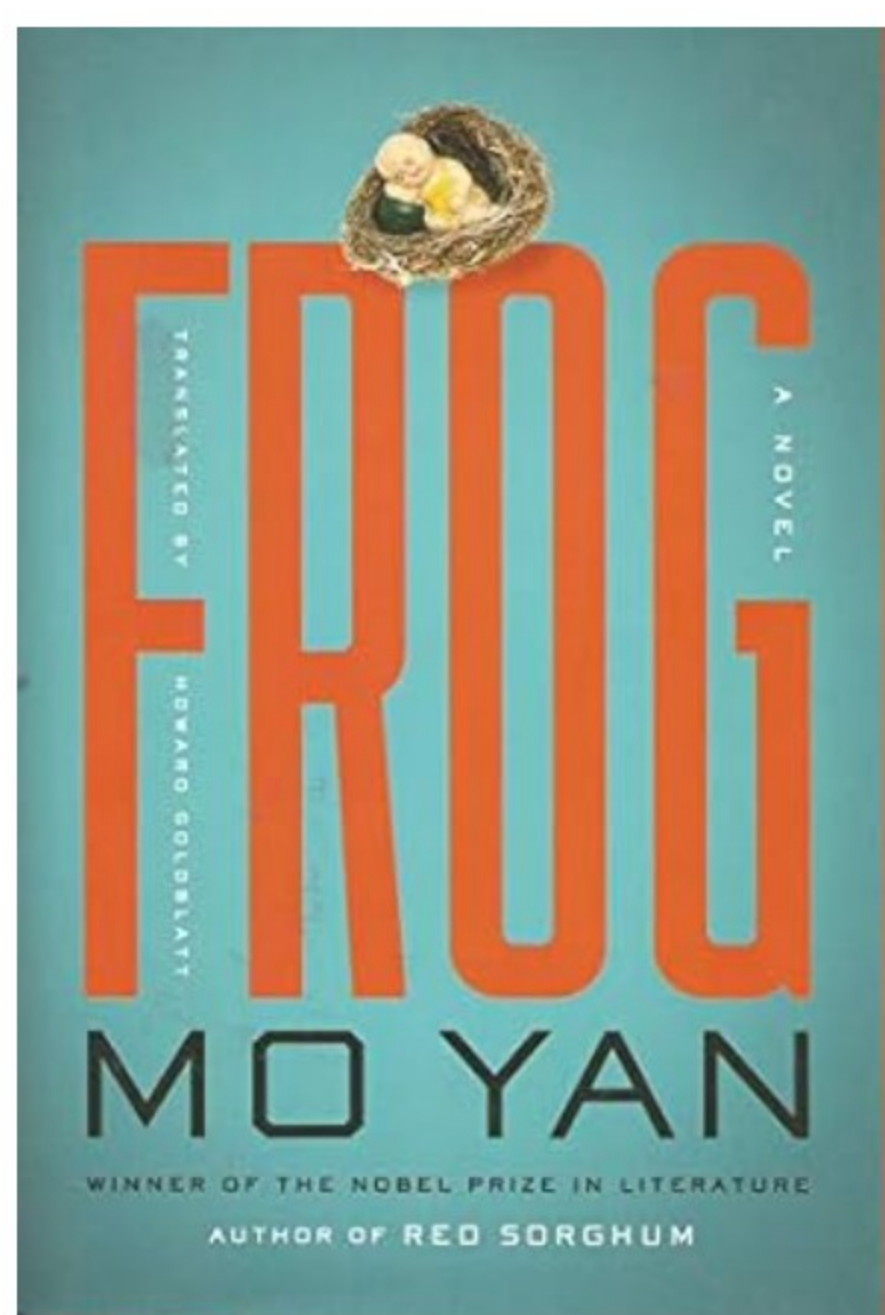
*A Chinese County's Descent into Madness During the Cultural Revolution*

TAN HECHENG (TR. STACY MOSHER)

JANUARY 11, 2017

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The massacres that took place in Hunan province in 1966, at the outset of the Cultural Revolution, defy our imagination with their savagery. Tan Hecheng, a journalist for Chinese state media, managed to explain the inexplicable in this book, with eye-witness accounts from survivors and documents from a subsequent government investigation. During one of those windows of openness in the mid-1980s, Tan was given access to the archives of the investigation, but as happens, the winds shifted, and he didn't manage to publish the book until 2010 and then only in Hong Kong. I read this book (I must admit, not cover-to-cover) while writing about a nearby part of Hunan. It makes for a revealing companion to Tania Branigan's *Red Memory*, about how the [psychic wounds](#) of the Cultural Revolution endure to this day.



[Buy the book >](#)

## Frog

*A Novel*

MO YAN (TR. HOWARD GOLDBLATT) | JANUARY 22, 2015 | PENGUIN BOOKS

Not the best-known of Mo Yan's novels, but a personal favorite. *Frog* is as insightful as any work of non-fiction about the one-child policy. The heroine of the book is a midwife trying to prove her loyalty to the Communist Party by tormenting her pregnant neighbors. It's tragic and laugh-aloud funny at the same time. Mo Yan is excellent in his depiction of the petty squabbles and resentments of China village life. The English translation was published in 2015, three years after Mo Yan (the pen name for Guan Moye) won the Nobel Prize for literature. ■

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