



NEW CHINA BOOKS

BOOK LIST

Summer China Reads

Five new China books for your summer reading list, from an intergenerational family memoir to a children's picture book of the Cultural Revolution.

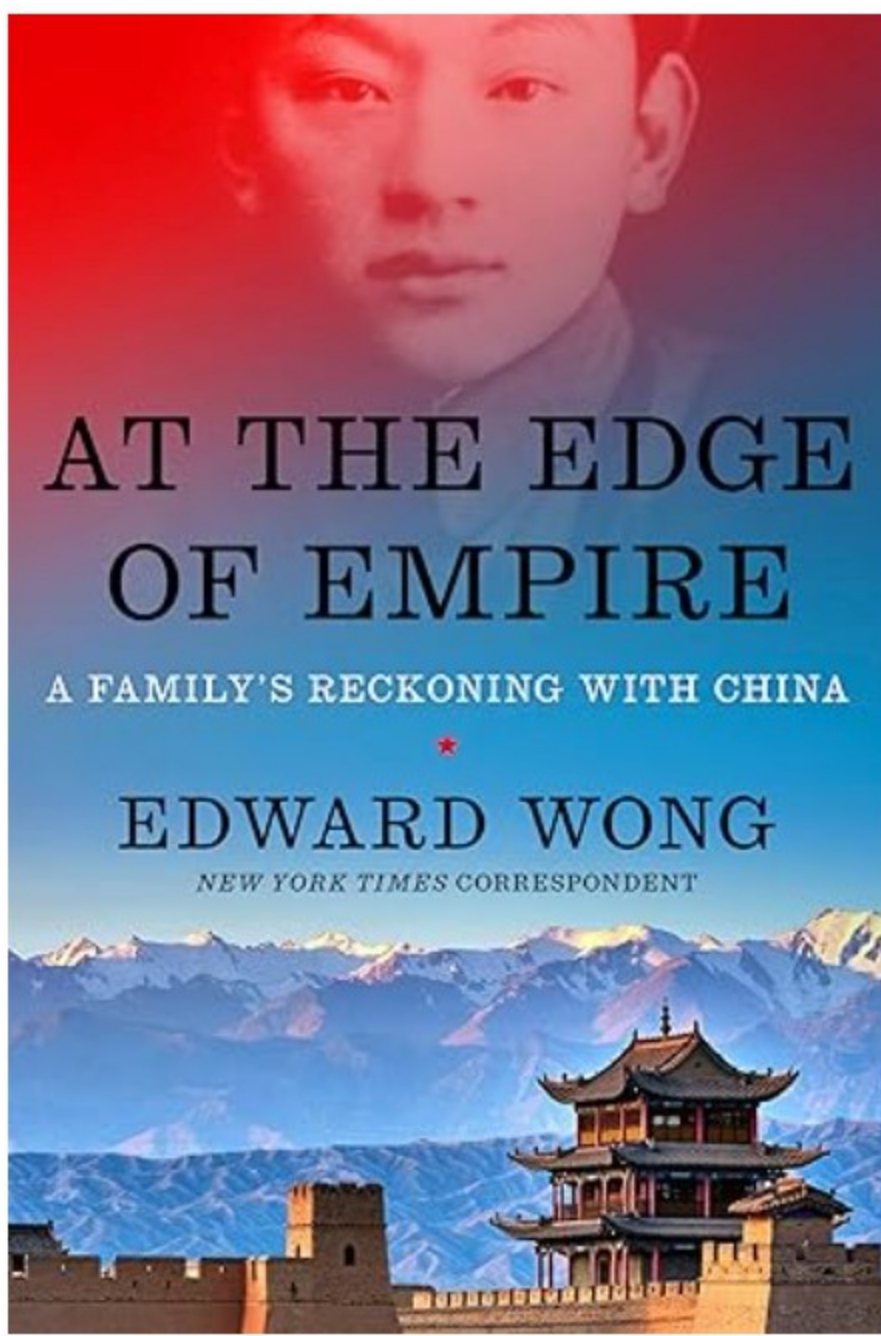
ALEC ASH — JUNE 25, 2024

MISC.



2024 has been a bumper crop for “China books” — that chimeric beast which we define as any English-language book whose topic or setting is China or the greater Sinophone world. Since we [launched](#) *China Books Review* last fall, we’ve been tallying them in our long-list of [recent China books](#), and for the past nine months our count is already at 440. Of course, we can only cover a fraction of those in the 70+ articles we’ve published to date, from new [reviews](#) to [archive picks](#). We hope you’ve enjoyed our fare, and are delighted that our work was recognized last week with an award for “Excellence in Opinion Writing” from the [Society of Publishers in Asia](#) for our very first [essay](#). If you haven’t already, do sign up for our free [newsletter](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#) (X) for more.

As we move into our weekly summer schedule, we’re recommending five non-fiction China books to keep you busy over July and August. There are some thick hardbacks here, weighted with human detail and on-the-ground reporting that illustrate how, despite the [expulsion](#) of many American journalists in 2020, mainland China’s stories are still being told — as well as writings by translated Chinese writers, of which we need more, and varied genres including picture books. We’ll be covering some of these titles with review-essays and excerpts over the summer, but here is what to order now to get ahead of the game:



[Buy the book >](#)

At the Edge of Empire

A Family's Reckoning with China

EDWARD WONG | JUNE 25, 2024 | VIKING

In an artfully wrought amalgam of family memoir and reporting, the former Beijing bureau chief for *The New York Times* plumbs his Chinese father's history, as well as his own years on the ground as a journalist, to tell an intergenerational story that connects China's past to its present. Wong interweaves his father's experiences — growing up in the south, becoming a soldier in Mao's army, and eventually escaping to Hong Kong — with how the nation has changed since, for example juxtaposing the frontier garrisons of Xinjiang in the 1950s with its culture and politics in the 2010s. "I am the son of two empires," writes Wong, who grew up in Washington, D.C. and closes the book with a final parallel between the two nations' capitals. Using a compass-point structure, the book's scope stretches from Manchuria in the Civil War to the hills of Taishan County. Yet it is its human-level detail and literary sensibility that brings the wider story of China's past 80 years to life so emotively.



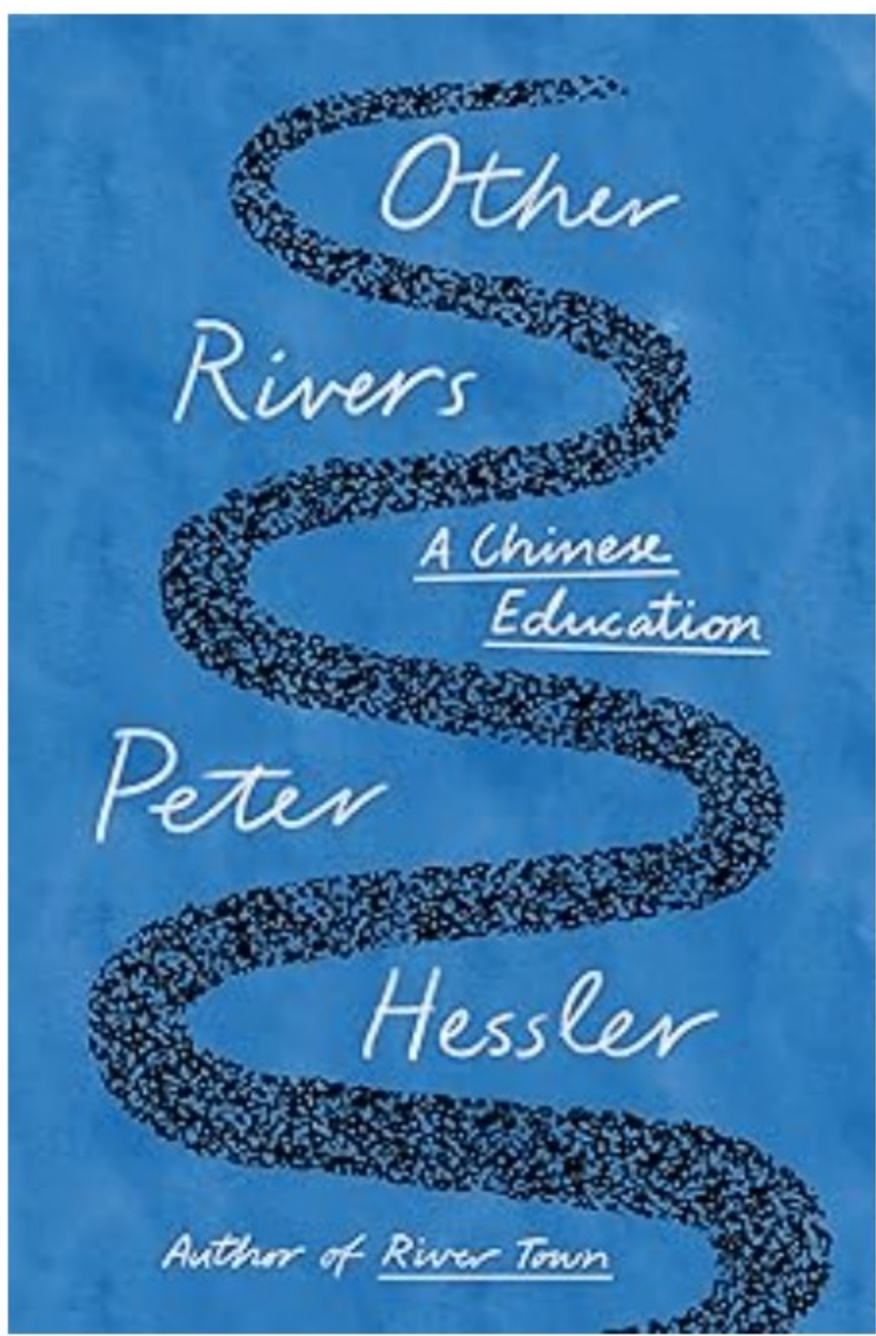
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Private Revolutions

Four Women Face China's New Social Order

YUAN YANG | JULY 2, 2024 | VIKING

Another journalist's book that drinks from personal wells is *Financial Times* reporter Yuan Yang's portrait of four ordinary women in China. A coming-of-age story at heart, Yuan begins with her own tale, born in Sichuan province in 1990 before her parents moved to England when she was four. She then abnegates the first person voice to narrate, in close third person, the strivings of her four characters: Leiya, a factory worker; June, a young professional; Siyue, an educational consultant; and Sam, a workers' rights activist. Their narratives trace "the inconsistent rise — and now stumble — of social mobility in China's capitalist era." The common thread of these lives is how personal aspiration is held back by social and political barriers. Perhaps it is that interest in equity and opportunity that led Yuan to leave journalism behind this year to run as the Labour Party [candidate](#) for her home constituency in the upcoming U.K. elections on July 4. We wish her luck in the world of politics.



Buy the book >

Other Rivers

A Chinese Education

PETER HESSLER | JULY 9, 2024 | PENGUIN PRESS

Peter Hessler is best known for his writings in *The New Yorker*, and a trilogy of reported books from China in the late 1990s and 2000s, until he left in 2011. After a stint in Cairo, he returned to China in 2019 to teach writing at Sichuan University in Chengdu, two decades after his time teaching English in the region. It is that passage of time — a chasm in China years — that drives this spiritual sequel to [River Town](#), in which Hessler reconnects with his old students, placing their lives (and writings) side by side with those of the new generation of university students he teaches, and in further parallel with the education of his young twin daughters in a local public school. His time in Chengdu also coincided with the outset of the Covid pandemic, which he reports with detail and sensitivity. Hessler left China again in 2021 after his contract was not renewed due to political circumstance, which is a loss to both China and writings about it. At least we get to read this final lesson.



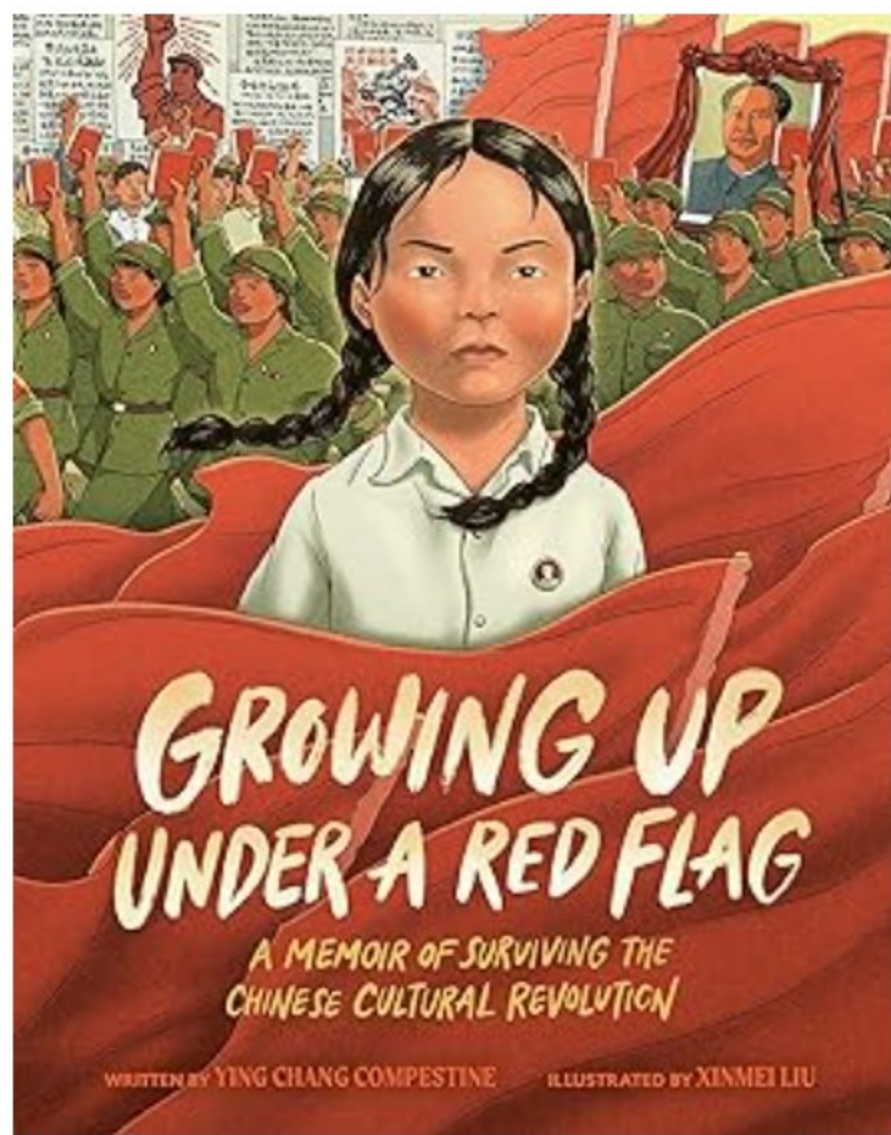
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Sound and Silence

My Experience with China and Literature

YAN LIANKE | APRIL 23, 2024 | DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Yan Lianke, one of China’s pre-eminent novelists and short story writers, is also an incisive essayist and literary critic, as attested in this collection of his non-fiction over the last decade plus. Tackling topics from “China’s darkness” and national amnesia to American literature and the consolations of censorship, Yan is at his strongest when writing personally, such as a powerful essay about his journey from army propagandist to fiction writer (“my fear of real life led me to escape into my fiction”). His voice as an essayist, precisely rendered by Carlos Rojas’ translation, is more direct than his at times surrealist fiction, and carries with it a sense of mission that we could only read between the lines of his novels. “My writing,” runs a line in his acceptance speech for the Kafka Prize in 2014, “is like the blind man with the flashlight who shines his limited light into the darkness to help others see the darkness — and thereby to have a target to avoid.”



Buy the book >

Growing Up under a Red Flag

A Memoir of Surviving the Chinese Cultural Revolution

YING CHANG COMPESTINE | MAY 7, 2024 | ROCKY POND BOOKS

A children's picture book might seem like a lighter final pick for our summer book list, but the topic is heavy — the author's childhood during the Cultural Revolution. Ying Chang Compestine was three years old in 1966, living in Wuhan, when Mao launched the Cultural Revolution and Red Guards swept the nation to suppress non-communist thinking, often violently. The deceptive simplicity of the child's eye perspective through which this familiar story is narrated lends it a new air, as Chang describes being required to dress in uniform and carry the Little Red Book. Foreign reading material was taken away, but her parents educated her in secret, despite her father being jailed twice. Also the author of a novel dealing with the same period (and several cookbooks), Chang retells the tale simply for younger readers. But it is the gorgeous illustrations by Xinmei Liu (who has also contributed to [this site](#)) which bring it to life, through a restrained palette and composition that is both simple and bursting with detail. ■

Upcoming [book talk](#): Listen to Edward Wong talk about [At The Edge of Empire](#) in a *China Books Review* event, this Thursday June 27, 6:30pm at Asia Society in New York, in conversation with *New Yorker* writer Jiayang Fan. Register [here](#) now.



Alec Ash is a writer focused on China, and editor of *China Books Review*. He is the author of [Wish Lanterns](#) (2016), following the lives of young Chinese in Beijing, and [The Mountains Are High](#) (2024) about city escapees in Dali, Yunnan. His articles have appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Born and educated in Oxford, England, he lived in China from 2008-2022, and is now based in New York.