



BOOK LIST

New China Books: High Temperatures

Five recent books on China cover a range of heated topics, from dystopian Hong Kong to the end of Sino-U.S. engagement.

ALEC ASH — JULY 15, 2025

MISC.

✕

f

💬

🕒

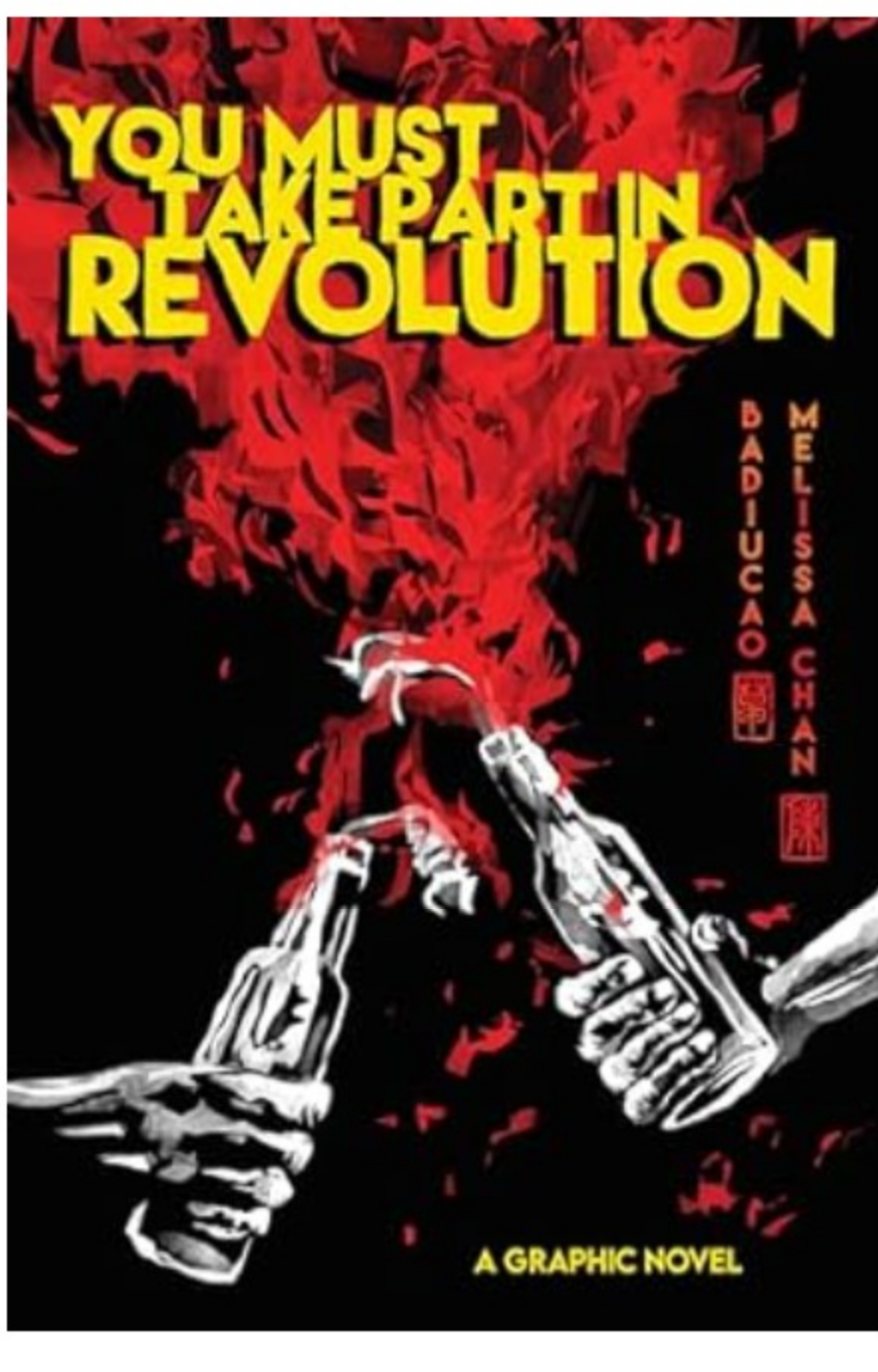
👤

📺

✉

🖨

As we sweat through another summer of [record-topping](#) heat, there are other high temperatures to consider, both political and personal. In this latest round-up of new books about China, broadly conceived, we apply our literary thermometer to five titles from the first half of 2025. A graphic novel depicts a dystopian future of Hong Kong resistance fighters, while a reported volume connects dissident causes across Asia. An overview of Sino-U.S. relations delineates the end of engagement, just as a debut novel humanizes the same trajectory with a little more hope. And an academic take on the different vocabularies of love in modern China reminds us that heated feelings can never be taken out of political or social context. So turn on the air conditioning, and save your fever for a summer of good reads.



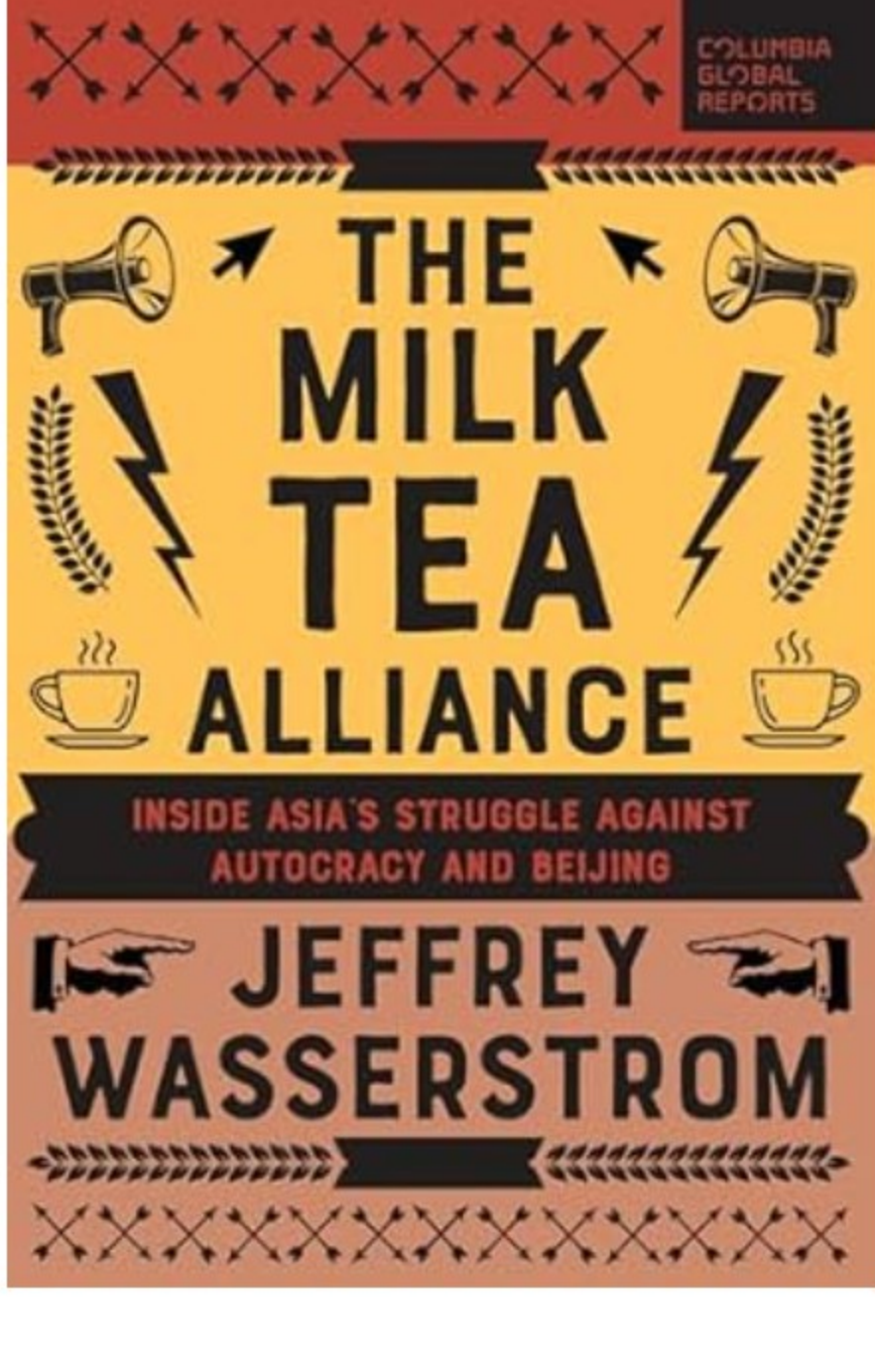
Buy the book >

1. You Must Take Part in Revolution

A Graphic Novel

BADIUCAO, MELISSA CHAN | MARCH 4, 2025 | STREET NOISE BOOKS

The revolution may not be televised, but it will be illustrated. This graphic novel begins with the 2019 anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong, taking us through an alternative 2022 into a dystopian 2030s, where the U.S. and China (both fascist in different ways) are at war, Taiwan is split into two, and three protestors from 2019 find different ways to resist. Written by Chinese-American journalist Melissa Chan, who was expelled from China in 2012, and illustrated by Badiucao, a Chinese-Australian political cartoonist, this high-octane story (its black-and-white drawings punctuated by splashes of red and yellow) pulls no punches. “Look what protesting peacefully got the students at Tiananmen,” says Maggie, a radicalized protestor, as she shows Andy — offspring of one of the Tiananmen generation — a cache of Molotov cocktails. “We can’t afford to adopt the tools of our enemy,” responds Andy. The novel’s title, a quotation from Mao Zedong, suggests that the only foreclosed path is not being involved at all.



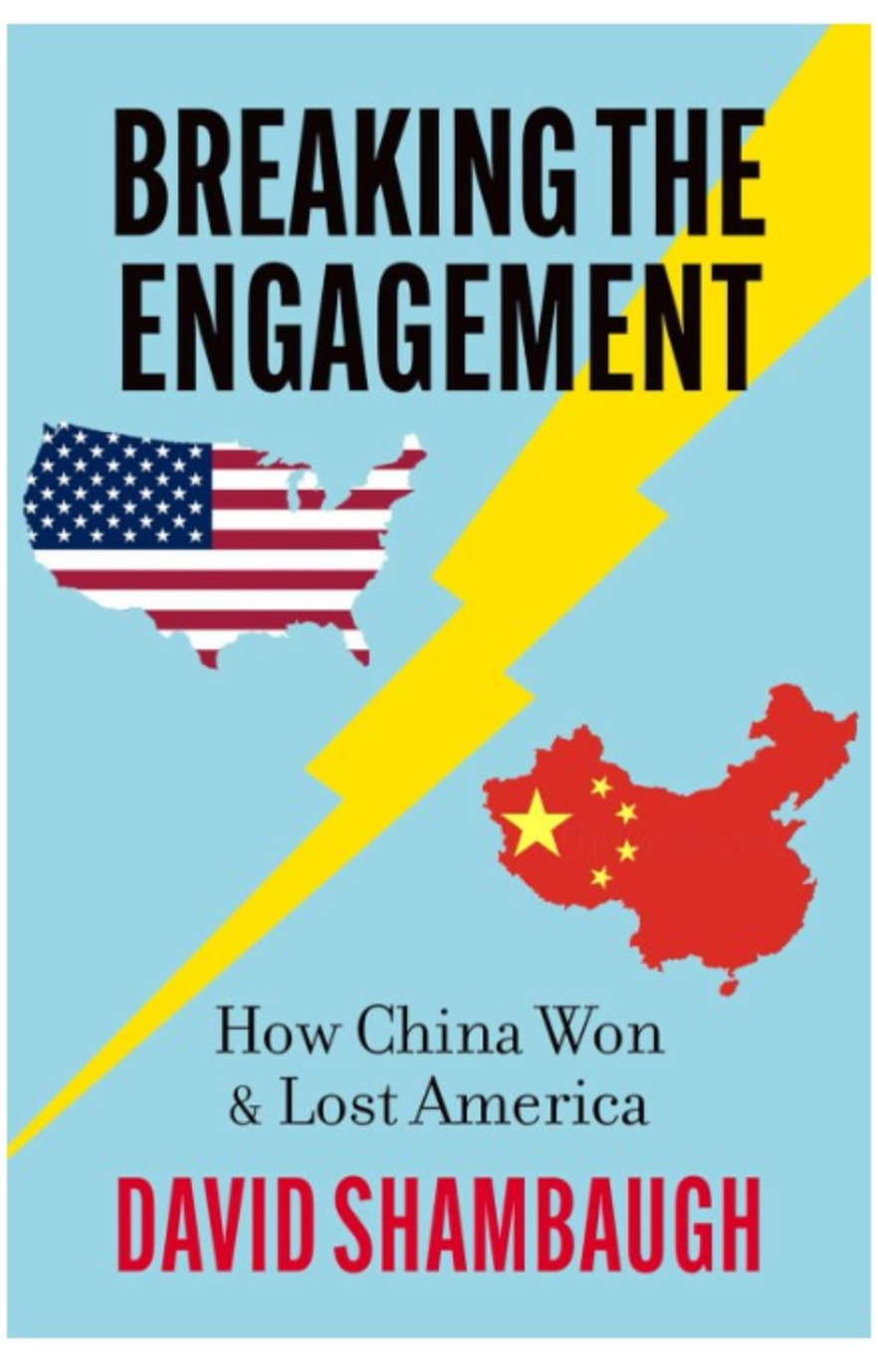
Buy the book >

2. The Milk Tea Alliance

Inside Asia’s Struggle Against Autocracy and Beijing

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM | JUNE 10, 2025 | COLUMBIA GLOBAL REPORTS

From imaginary to real revolutions. In this short paperback, Jeffrey Wasserstrom connects the thread between three loci of political resistance: Hong Kong, Thailand and Burma, with Taiwan also mentioned. Informally dubbed the “milk tea alliance” (as they all drink chai with dairy, in contrast to the unadulterated tea of mainland China), activists from each region have been observing and learning from each other. Wasserstrom interviews several of those dissidents, from Agnes Chow, a pro-democracy activist in Hong Kong who was jailed for her role in the 2019 protests (also covered in the author’s previous book [Ligil](#)), to Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, a Thai demonstrator protesting compulsory military service and lèse-majesté laws. Drawing on pop culture references, such as the Burmese cross-Asian rap “Dictators Must Die,” he sketches out the connections and mutual inspiration between those who “deeply believe in the possibility of a better future even in dark times,” showing that each fight does not exist in a vacuum.



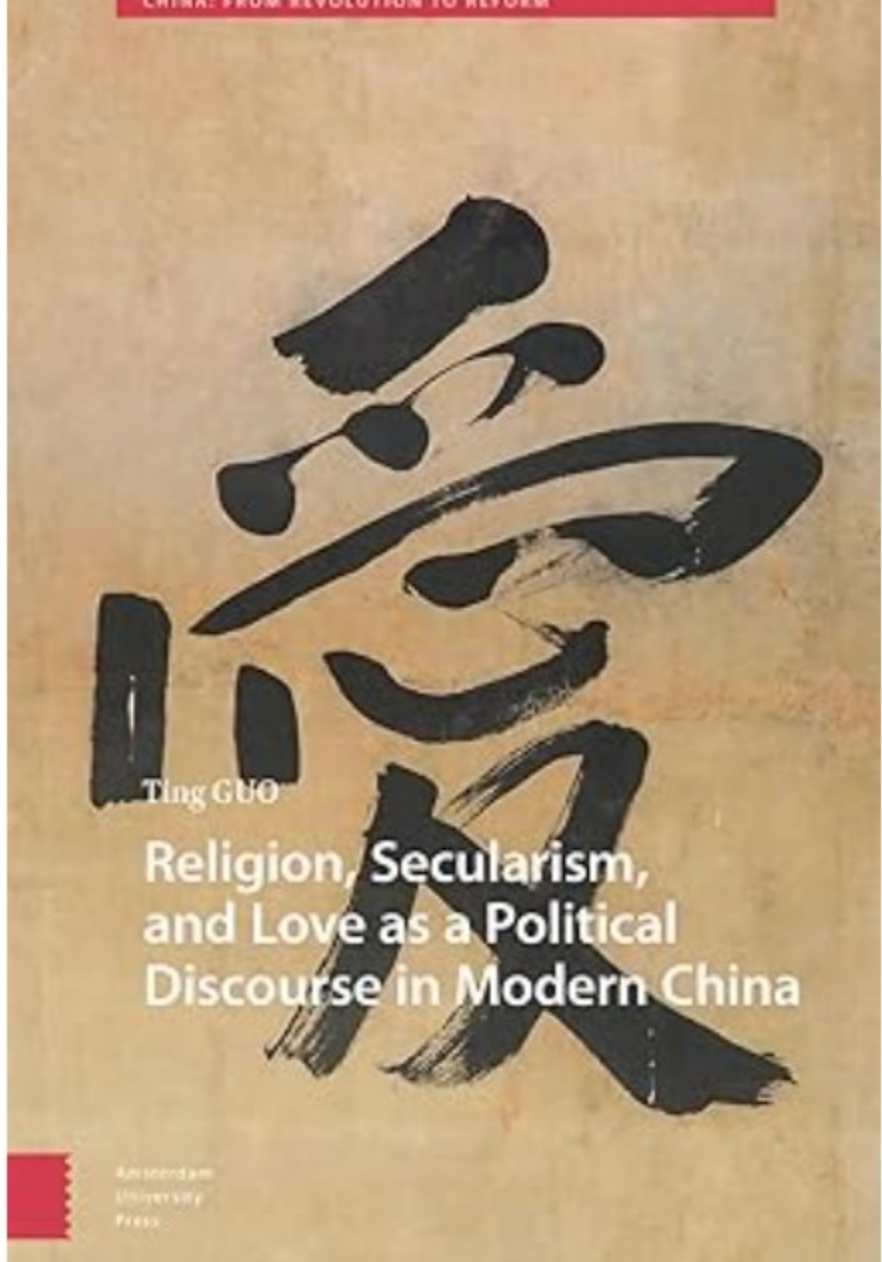
Buy the book >

3. Breaking the Engagement

How China Won & Lost America

DAVID SHAMBAUGH | JUNE 12, 2025 | OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Broken engagement between the U.S. and China — also the title of an [e-book](#) of interviews by Bob Davis — seems to be a new buzzword. In this new work, the prolific academic David Shambaugh (never one to miss a buzzword) takes the temperature of Sino-U.S. relations since their restitution in 1972, through to the recent shift of American policy from engagement to competition. For this, he places the blame both on Xi Jinping’s pugilistic foreign policy but also America’s paternalistic attempts to turn China into an image of itself. The book traces the genesis of the “engagement coalition” and its early advocates, before discussing the China policy of every U.S. president since Nixon, and its calcification under Trump and Biden. It ends with an overview of schools of China policy today inside the beltway, from the “Stealthy Rival School” to the “Strategic Empathy School,” before recommending a middle path of “competitive coexistence.” Whatever the approach, he warns, “there is no realistic prospect or false nirvana of returning to an amicable and cooperative bilateral relationship.”

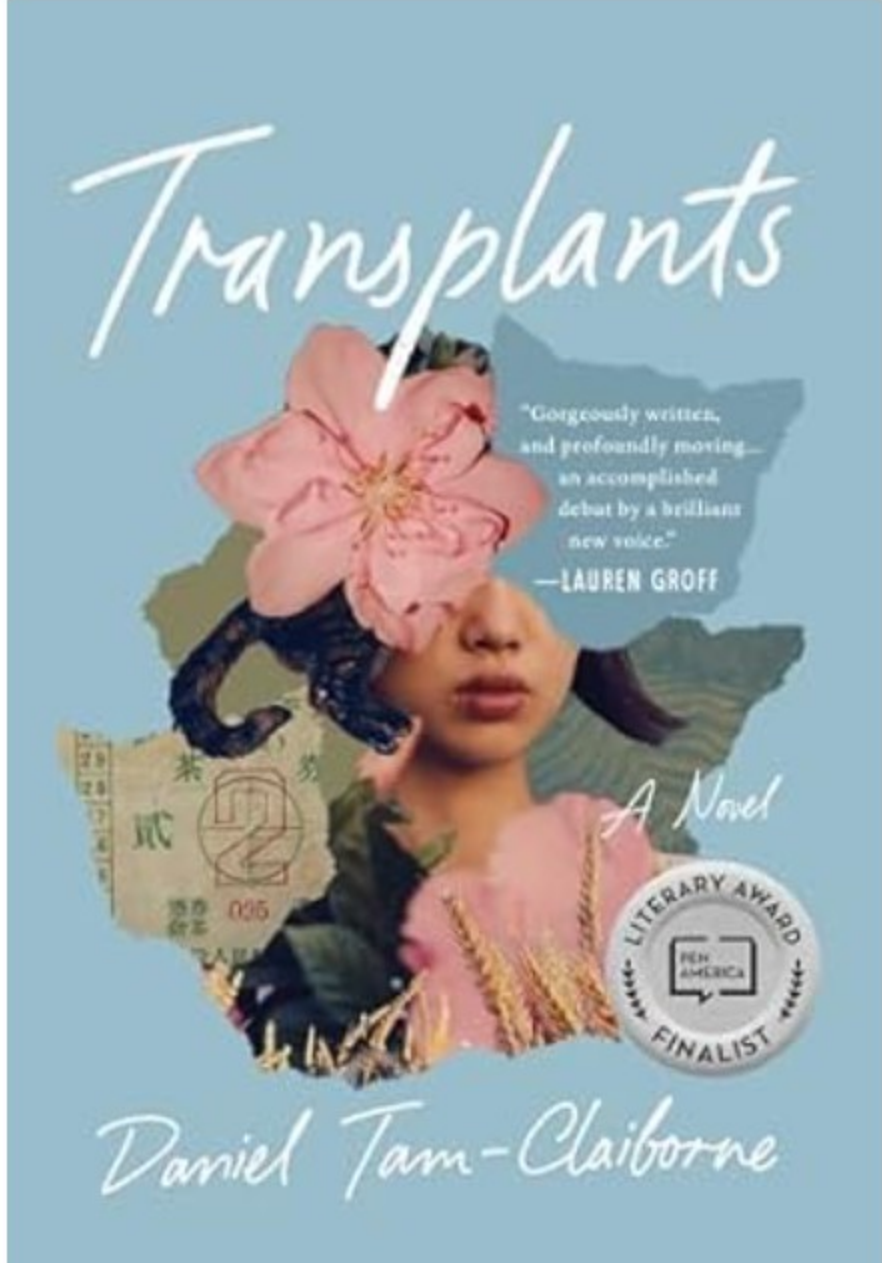


Buy the book >

4. Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China

TING GUO | FEBRUARY 13, 2025 | AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

How do political contexts affect, even manipulate, our very notions of love? In this compelling study, Hong Kong-based scholar Ting Guo demonstrates how emotion has been adapted into political discourse in modern China, all in the name of nation-building. She begins in the early Republic, with Sun Yat-sen’s adoption of the classical idea of “universal love” (博爱), taking us through the “ardent love” (热爱) of the Mao era — when “emotions were shaped into and capitalized by revolutionary forms” — as well as the rise of “romantic love” (爱情) and the “patriotic love” (爱国) of today. There is also a lengthy aside on Hong Kong’s push-and-pull between filial piety and local loyalty. Guo points out the religious and Confucian undertones at play throughout, despite China’s supposed secularism, to depict an “affective regime that replaces old religious affects with new political-religious ones.” The book is academic but accessible, packed with lively historical details, such as the adaptation of folklore into revolutionary opera, to show these “emotional mobilization techniques.”



Buy the book >

5. Transplants

DANIEL TAM-CLAIBORNE | MAY 13, 2025 | REGALO PRESS

Tailing the list, a summer novel recommendation to cool temperatures. Daniel Tam-Clairborne’s debut novel, like his earlier short story collection [What Never Leaves](#) (2012), is all about culture shock and mixed identities. A Chinese-American woman, Liz, teaches English at a rural university in Shanxi province, where she befriends a local student, Lin, who gets involved with another foreign teacher, Travis. When things fall apart, Lin leaves China, ending up at an American community college near Liz’s Ohio hometown. Meanwhile, Liz stays in China to uncover her family roots as a different kind of migrant. The pandemic, and increasingly fractured relations between America and China, pull the two characters further apart. It is this double helix of the twin protagonists which provides the narrative tension of the book’s second half, as well as the thematic challenge of whether individual connections can transcend national circumstance. ■



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.