

Suggested Reading List for China

Books

Wild Swans – Three Daughters of China (June Chang)

One of the first and best accounts of modern Chinese history through the eyes of three women – the author's grandmother, her mother, and herself with each representing a different period of 20th century. Wonderfully evocative and moving, the author is able to bring the tumultuous history of China from the fall of the Qing dynasty through to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and today's China.

Life and Death in Shanghai (Nien Cheng)

A masterful account of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution as seen through the eyes of one woman. The widow of Shell's China operations Nien Cheng was arrested and charged with espionage and then endured imprisonment and torture but never breaking or confessing. After six years of solitary confinement and cruel treatment she won her release only to face the ultimate tragedy, the murder of her only child at the hands of the Red Guard – truly one of the most moving portraits of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

For All the Tea in China (Sarah Rose)

A compelling history of how the British East India Company sent spies into China (who if caught could be sentenced to death) in the mid to late 19th century in order to steal young tea plants that were then shipped to British tea plantations in India. A thrilling and addictive read that is part thriller and part detective story.

River Town (Peter Hessler)

A moving, humourous, and ultimately insightful account of the author's two years spent as a Peace Corps volunteer in a small town along China's Yangzi River. The author went on to write several highly regarded books on China but his first book remains his best and easily transmits his affection China and the Chinese. Winner of the 2000 Pacific Rim Prize for Literature.

To Change China (Jonathan Spence)

Jonathan Spence is a retired professor of Chinese history at Yale University and the western world's greatest authority on China before the 20th century. He is a prolific writer but this series of short profiles of westerners (European and American) who made China their cause ranging from the first Jesuit missionaries to modern political figures is compelling and fascinating reading that reveals just how deep the west's interest in China went.

The Party (Richard McGregor)

One of the only books written in English that examines the complex world of the Chinese Communist Party and its hold on power in China – this is a fascinating examination of a government system that has been responsible for astounding successes in bringing modern China to the fore but which remains among the most secretive in the world.

Factory Girls (Leslie T. Chang)

An insightful examination of the lives of the countless millions of factory workers (almost all women) who have been the foundation for China's remarkable rise to economic power. Wife of Peter Hessler, Leslie T. Chang took a series of pieces she wrote for the Asian Wall Street Journal and turned it into moving story of the life and the struggles of three young country girls who went from the farm to the soulless factories of the Pearl River Delta in southern China – this is the story that is never told but which allows you to peek into the lives of China's working class.

On Gold Mountain (Lisa See)

California based writer, Lisa See ("Shanghai Girls", "China Dolls") departs from her fictional portrayals of China to write an informative and entertaining memoir of her early Chinese ancestors especially that of her great grandfather, Fong See, who came to the U.S. in the late 19th century and defying the traditions of the time became a successful businessman and married a Caucasian American woman. The author spins a highly readable account of the challenges faced by the early Chinese immigrants to "Gold Mountain" (San Francisco).

The Good Earth (Pearl S. Buck)

Raised in China by missionary parents Pearl S. Buck was fluent in Chinese – speaking, reading, and writing – who had a deep knowledge of Chinese culture and literature. Her most famous book, "the Good Earth" (1930) was an instant best seller and has grudgingly been recognized by Chinese literary critics as being among the single best accounts of peasant life ever written in either Chinese or English. The story of the farmer Wang Lung and his long-suffering wife, O Lan, is simple in presentation but deep in meaning. A wonderful look into the traditions and rhythms of rural Chinese life.

Did Marco Polo Go to China? (Frances Wood)

Frances Wood (Head of the China Department at the British Library) is a respected sinologist and keen observer of Chinese history. This entertaining treatise on whether the legendary Italian explorer actually travelled to China caused some controversy due to the author's belief that Marco Polo never ventured beyond the Black Sea – the author uses a series of crucial omissions which are integral to China as a culture and people.

Films

The Last Emperor: directed by Bernardo Bertolucci (1986)

An epic film dealing with the life of Henry Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty – this is beautifully shot and movingly portrayed by John Lone who brings to life the sad and lonely existence of this last of an imperial lineage that survived for nearly 2,000 years.

To Live: directed by Zhang Yimou (1994)

Winner of several prizes at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival this film presents a powerful overview of the trials and tribulations of one Chinese family during the first decades of communist rule. Controversial, this film focuses on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution period (1966 – 1976) – well acted and seemingly real.

Eat, Drink, Man, Woman: directed by Ang Lee (1994)

A warm, humorous and human story on the life of an aging master chef and his three daughters who meet him each Sunday for a family dinner. The story deals with his coming to terms with his daughters and the challenges of their daily lives.

Raise the Red Lantern: directed by Zhang Yimou (1991)

Hailed a masterpiece when it was first released this tragic story revolves around the life of a young concubine brought into the home of a wealthy older merchant and her struggles to accept her lot in life – movingly filmed in the Pingyao region.

The Joy Luck Club: directed by Wayne Wang (1993)

Based on the bestselling novel by Amy Tan this film examines the relationships between mothers and daughter s and their different life experiences both in China and the U.S.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: directed by Ang Li (2000)

An epic set against the breathtaking landscapes of ancient China, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon combines the exhilarating martial arts choreography by Yuen Wo-Ping (The Matrix) with the sensitivity and classical storytelling of an Ang Lee film. The result is something truly unexpected: romantic, emotionally powerful entertainment.