

Illustration by Valentina Verc

BOOKS

## Books for the ‘Red New Deal’

The most essential China books from the last two months that add much-needed depth to the headlines.

BY ALEC ASH — OCTOBER 24, 2021

China’s regulatory crackdown on a range of sectors — big tech, real estate, the online education and gaming industries — has provided a sobering reminder that business cannot be separated from politics in the PRC. Dubbed the ‘[Red New Deal](#)’ in some Anglophone media, this re-tightening of the reins is evidence both of the influence that Xi Jinping’s government exerts over the private sector and also its belief that it needs to bring it further under control in order to maintain stability and power.

This round-up of the most essential China books from the last two months covers a reading list that adds much-needed depth to the headlines. Topping the list is the book everyone has been talking about: Desmond Shum’s *Red Roulette*, which chronicles the corrupt intersection of China’s business and political elites, as [excerpted](#) at *The Wire* (whose editor David Barboza originally reported the scandal it centers on for *The New York Times*). Further down, political realities in China rub up against geopolitics, ethnic dissent, and the pandemic’s origins as well as some of the historical and geographical contexts that make the nation’s complexities so difficult to grasp — and so worthy of a bookworm’s burrowing.

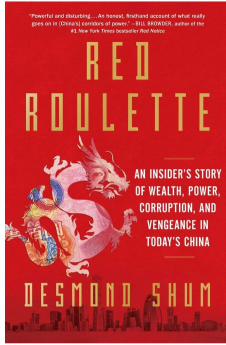
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### The One to Read

**Red Roulette: An Insider’s Story of Wealth, Power, Corruption, and Vengeance in Today’s China** by Desmond Shum



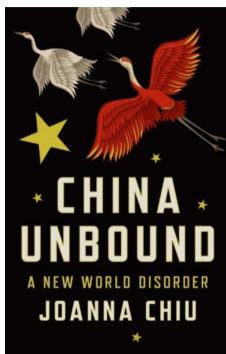
One litmus test of a book's worth is when the authorities don't want you to read it. So when Desmond Shum got two scripted calls from his ex-wife, who is in detention in China, pressuring him to not go ahead with publication of this memoir, readers knew he had hit a nerve in Zhongnanhai. This tell-all (or "tell-much") account of Shum's business dealings with his partner and ex-wife Whitney Duan exposes just how crucial her connections to China's 'red aristocracy' — specifically Wen Jiabao's wife — were at the nexus of politics and business. Shum's narrative, which begins with his humble origins and takes in major events such as the fall of Bo Xilai, hones in on a large and highly lucrative stake, facilitated by Duan, that the Wen family took in Ping An Insurance ahead of its 2004 IPO. It's important not to take all Shum relates at face-value, but this is a valuable insider's account of how high-level corruption works in China, opening the red curtain behind which its leaders and business elites cross swords.

September 7, 2021 | Scribner. \$18. | [Buy.](#)

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## The Shortlist

**China Unbound: A New World Disorder** by Joanna Chiu



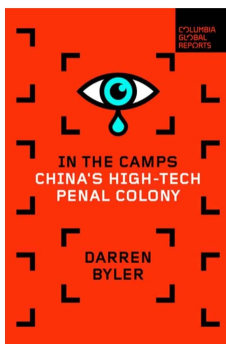
With so much of China seen through the eyes of the U.S., this book offers a new prism from a Canadian journalist, born in Hong Kong. The terrain Chiu covers is familiar for a reporter's China book: crackdowns on civil society in Beijing, Hong Kong's democracy movement, the new Silk Road, the Uyghur issue and Xinjiang's exile communities, police surveillance, and the case of the 'two Michaels' — the Canadians who were held in China in retaliation for Canada's arrest of a high-level Huawei executive. Yet Chiu skillfully weaves her strands together into a cohesive whole, and brings new material to the table, such as the tale of a Chinese student in Canada harassed by authorities back home for posting anti-China content online. It's a well-crafted, narrative take on superpower competition from the particular perspective of 'middle

powers.'

September 28, 2021 | House of Anansi Press. \$25. | [Buy.](#)

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**In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony** by Darren Byler

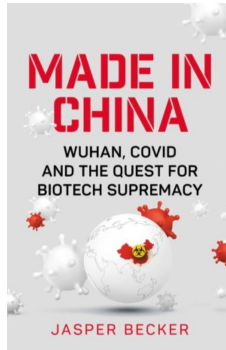


The internment of as many as one million Muslims in China's 're-education' camps remains one of the great atrocities of our age. In this essential work Byler, an expert on Uyghur culture whose research has been instrumental in exposing the Xinjiang camps, lays out the case with a particular focus on the use of technology — facial and voice recognition, smartphones as tracking and surveillance devices — as a tool of control. Drawing on original research, government documents and interviews with former detainees, he fills in unsettling details such as the concept of "pre-crimes" (e.g., installing a particular app) and how Uyghurs are blacklisted for religious or cultural practices. Tough, but vital, reading.

October 12, 2021 | Columbia Global Reports. \$16. | [Buy.](#)

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**Made in China: Wuhan, Covid and the Quest for Biotech Supremacy** by Jasper  
Becker

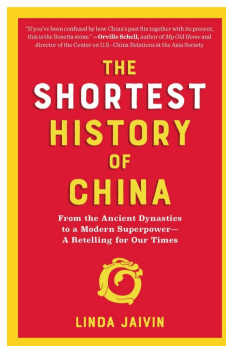


The fact that Covid-19 originated in Wuhan, the city that hosts a laboratory that experiments with novel coronaviruses, has raised many eyebrows. And while scientists (and Occam's razor) suggest Covid's origins are most likely zoonotic, it is still crucial to investigate all possibilities. In this thorough account, a veteran China journalist lays out the case for the lab leak theory, without being overly polemical. Along the way, he also takes in China's track record as the origin of previous pandemics, its interests in biological technology, including gene-warfare and gene-editing, and its propensity toward secrets. Worth reading without pre-formed opinions on either side, as is Australian journalist Sharri Markson's comparable new release [What Really Happened In Wuhuan](#).

September 1, 2021 | Hurst. \$30. | [Buy](#).

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**The Shortest History of China: From the Ancient Dynasties to a Modern Superpower** by Linda Jaivin

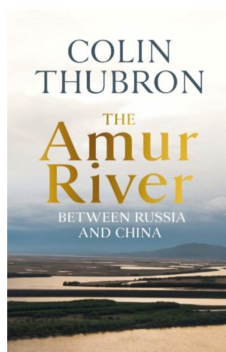


In an era when everyone has strong opinions on China, it is still surprising how many lack rudimentary knowledge of its history. One explanation might be the length of history books, but this slight volume is the solution we've been looking for. In lively prose and with infectious enthusiasm, Jaivin runs us through the length and breadth of Chinese myth and history in less than 250 (short) pages, from Pangu hatching out of the cosmic egg all the way up to Xi Jinping. Each major dynasty and period gets 10-20 pages, with clear maps throughout. It even has tone marks at the first occurrences of Chinese words. My new go-to recommendation for an open sesame to Chinese history.

September 28, 2021 | The Experiment. \$16. | [Buy](#).

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**The Amur River: Between Russia and China** by Colin Thubron



The Amur or Heilongjiang ('black dragon river') is the tenth longest river in the world and traces the border of Russia and China for thousands of kilometers. Renowned travel writer Thubron — at 80 years old — has traversed the length of the river, from Mongolian source to Siberian mouth, with his trademark close observation and conversations with locals along the way. A reminder that the natural and human geography of China — especially at its borders — is just as important as its history or politics. And for Chinese river enthusiasts, it pairs well with Ruth Mostern's more academic work *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History*, published the same month.

September 21, 2021 | HarperCollins. \$28. | [Buy](#).

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## In Case You Missed It

**Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise** by Scott  
Rozelle and Natalie Hell



In their important thesis, the authors identify a chink in China's armor: the shrinking of a low-cost labor force that once propelled the nation's economic miracle. Laying out how China's strategy for growth paired labor-intensive industries with foreign investment, they explain how, as the unskilled workforce dries up, China needs urgently to redress the rural-urban education imbalance if it hopes to transition its economy to services and innovation. Taking in the middle income trap and the Lewis turning point along the way, Rozelle and Hell warn that this is a much greater crisis than anyone is prepared for — and a global issue as Chinese economic decline would affect us all.

October 12, 2020 | University of Chicago Press. \$28. | [Buy.](#)



Alec Ash is the books editor for *The Wire*. He is the author of *Wish Lanterns*. His work has also appeared in *The Economist*, *BBC*, *SupChina*, and *Foreign Policy*. [@alecash](#)

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## Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMANN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

● THE BIG PICTURE



## Transsion's Triumph

BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

A look at Transsion's monumental growth, unique marketing strategies and future growth potential.

● Q & A



## Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEOPLE

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China president talks about China's self-inflicted problems; how he gets away with being so outspoken; and why he believes in China's comeback gene.



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