

Illustration by Valentina Verc

BOOKS

Rewriting China's History

The best new books on China.

BY ALEC ASH — DECEMBER 19, 2021

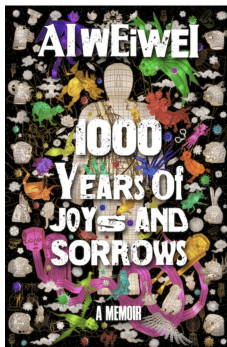
Plenums of the Communist Party's Central Committee are normally dull affairs that slip by largely unnoticed. Yet the sixth plenum of this National Congress, held in Beijing last month, was notable for the historical resolution it passed, only the third in the Party's history. The document cemented Xi Jinping's position as Party 'core', and Xi Thought as "the essence of the Chinese culture and China's spirit." As such, China's leader has prematurely closed the history books, placing the Xi era in the pantheon alongside those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

A ream of recent books shed new light on the history that is being made (and rewritten) apace in China. Topping our list is Ai Weiwei's long-awaited memoir, previously [excerpted](#) by *The Wire*, followed by books on Hong Kong's fight, China's 1970s, and views of the nation's present and past all the way through to sci-fi visions of its future.

As an Amazon Associate, The Wire earns from qualifying purchases of books featured here.

The One to Read

1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir by Ai Weiwei

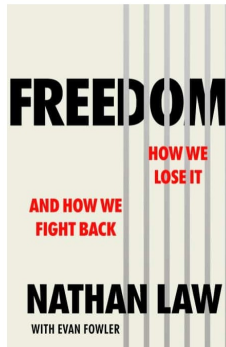


"Don't count on the earth to preserve memory," reads the epigraph of Ai Weiwei's memoirs, a line from one of his father's poems (from where the title also derives). In a China where history is being retold as Party hagiography, Ai's efforts to chronicle the past are invaluable. The story begins with his birth in 1957, when his father Ai Qing (then 47), a poet and early revolutionary who met Mao in Yan'an, was targeted in the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to "reform by labour," accompanied by his young son. Reaching the 1980s, the second half of the book shifts focus to Ai Weiwei's own creative development, at first in New York and then in Beijing, including his detention for 81 days in 2011 for ruffling the feathers of the powers-

that-be. Scintillating and revealing, this is a swift read that shows how remembrance of the past can repudiate a nation's collective amnesia.

The Shortlist

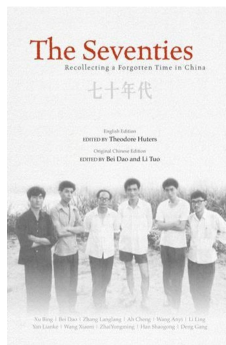
Freedom: How We Lose It and How We Fight Back by Nathan Law



What is freedom, and who gets to define or set laws around it? This is the question that has plagued [Nathan Law](#) since he first started calling for more of it in Hong Kong. In 2016, the 23-year-old democracy activist was elected to Hong Kong's legislative council. By the next summer, he had been booted out for protesting during his oath-taking ceremony, and later imprisoned. Last year, he moved to London, fleeing the reach of the National Security law and an arrest warrant in his name. Law's book is a reflection on the nature of freedom and how to preserve it, interwoven with his personal story and laced with apt quotes from Václav Havel: "We never decided to become dissidents."

December 7, 2021 | The Experiment. \$16. | [Buy.](#)

The Seventies: Recollecting a Forgotten Time in China by Theodore Hutters

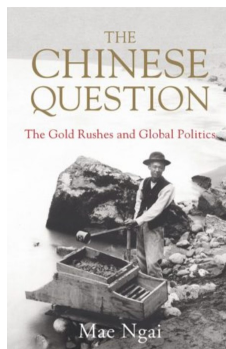


With all of the ink spilt on China's chaotic 60s, transformative 80s and booming 90s, the 70s often get lost in the cracks — seen as an interregnum between Mao and Deng's reigns. Yet, as argued in this collection of translated essays by intellectuals and artists who lived through it, the 70s were the formative years of a 'new' China as it cautiously cast off the Maoist path and allowed new possibilities, such as the critical Beijing Spring and Democracy Wall movement of 1978. Many of the writers were 'educated youth' sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and include familiar names such as Bei Dao and Yan Lianke. A valuable missing link in the China story.

December 6, 2021 | The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. \$50.

| [Buy.](#)

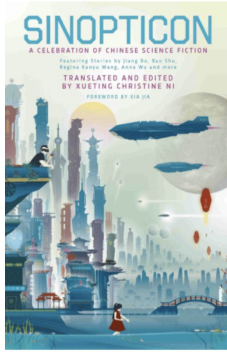
The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics by Mae Ngai



As a fresh incarnation of the "Chinese question" fills the corridors of Washington and the websites of politicians up for re-election, it would behoove us to remember the last time the question was posed: during the gold rushes of the latter 19th century, when the migration of Chinese labor to America's west coast (and Australia and South Africa) fueled a 'Yellow Peril' fear that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Historian Ngai narrates the stories of these workers, and argues that the sentiment against them was part of a broader global trend as the world economy began to globalize — a parallel to today's situation that is elucidatory for its differences as much as its resonances.

August 24, 2021 | W. W. Norton & Company. \$25. | [Buy.](#)

Sinopticon: A Celebration of Chinese Science Fiction ed. Xueting Christine Ni



Your books editor has always held a solar-powered candle for Chinese science fiction, which illuminates the issues of contemporary China through a prism of its imagined future. This new collection of 13 stories, in fluid translation by Ni, further illustrates the value of the genre. Stories such as ‘The Great Migration’ by Ma Boyong are clear satire (in this case of China’s annual new year migration, transposed between Mars and Earth), with others taking their cue from Chinese history or folklore. The rest are more elliptical, or tackle universal topics such as AI and social media. Most of the stories are relatively recent, with a few ‘oldies’ from the 90s thrown in, and would be well paired with Ken Liu’s collections [*Invisible Planets*](#) and [*Broken Stars*](#).

November 9, 2021 | Solaris. \$12. | [Buy.](#)

AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future by Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan

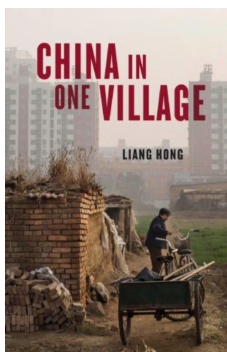


Some sci-fi premises are already reality, and China has made it clear that it wishes to lead the way. This is particularly the case for AI, whose revolutionary potential promises huge rewards for any nation that dominates the field. In this book, Kai-Fu Lee, former president of Google China (and author of [*AI Superpowers*](#), on U.S.-Sino AI competition) teams up with science-fiction author Chen Qiufan to explore those possibilities. Ten short stories by Chen grapple with the effects of AI — from job displacement to autonomous vehicles, dating algorithms to ‘deep learning.’ Each story is paired with analysis and notes from Lee, putting the fiction in real context, with a wary eye to attendant risks.

September 14, 2021 | Currency. \$24. | [Buy.](#)

In Case You Missed It

China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World by Liang Hong, trans. Emily Goedde



Part family memoir, part social critique, literary scholar Liang Hong’s indictment of China’s neglected countryside (through the prism of her own ancestral village) became a bestseller in China in 2010. Now an English translation, it brings fresh attention to an old issue: how the nation’s breakneck shift to modernity has left its villages polluted, deforested, devoid of opportunity, and depopulated of working-age adults who have all left for the cities, including the author. Hong places this in context of historic tragedies and atrocities that befell the countryside in the Mao years, and allows local officials to say their piece alongside farmers. A treasure trove of insight and empathy; one wonders if it would be possible for such a work to be published in the Xi era.

June 22, 2021 | Verso. \$20. | [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*. [@aleccash](#)

COVER STORY



Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMAN

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 PEAPLE

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.



Visit News
Products Store

News Products

Our best open-source research on Chinese companies, as well as industry guides to 100 of the most influential people in a China-focused industry.

The Wire China Archives

[Read More Articles >](#)

The Wire *China*

[Your account](#)

[About Us](#) [Archives](#) [Contact Us](#)



[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | ©2022 The Wire