

Illustration by Valentina Verc

## BOOKS

## Books for the New Reality

While 2008 seems a long time ago, these books connect China's two Olympics as part of a broader narrative.

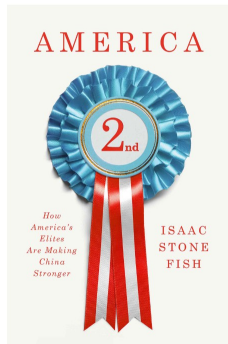
BY ALEC ASH — FEBRUARY 27, 2022

When Beijing hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics, the event was described ad nauseam as being like a debutante's 'coming out party'. In truth, it was more apt to see it as a coming-of-age party, akin to a Bar Mitzvah, as the PRC celebrated its economic and political adulthood. Extending the metaphor further, Beijing's 2022 Winter Olympics, now coming to a close, has seemed more of a truculent teenager's house party — with only preferred friends welcome, like Vladimir Putin, and with the host making it clear he's doing just great and doesn't need anybody else anyway. The contrast between the two sporting occasions could not be more stark.

This month's round-up of new China books uncovers fresh aspects of this new reality — from Chinese influence in America, to Chinese perspectives on a new global order, as well as books on China's relationship with Hollywood, and its sporting ambitions. While 2008 seems a long time ago, through wide reading we can connect China's two Olympics as part of a broader narrative, even as we look warily to the future.

## The One to Read

**America Second: How America's Elites Are Making China Stronger** by Isaac Stone Fish



Just as China has changed since 2008, so too has America's China policy — from economic partnership to strategic competition to an open rivalry that has sounded the death knell of the previous model of engagement. In this account of how we reached this point, Stone Fish focuses on how American business and political leaders, in awe of China's markets, acted as unintentional lobbyists for Beijing. His deeply sourced narrative includes an analysis of Henry Kissinger's work on behalf of Beijing, describes how the Walt Disney company helped crush the Free Tibet movement, and how American academic and cultural institutions self-censor to avoid touching on Beijing's sensitivities. Stone Fish also writes about how to counteract these influences, while safeguarding Asian-

Americans from a wave of hatred that confuses Chinese ethnicity with CCP politics (this

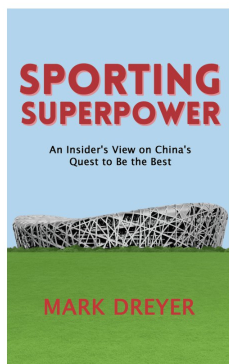
point albeit tagged on as somewhat an afterthought). The author, a former *Newsweek* correspondent in Beijing, describes himself as “pro-China” but “anti-Party”; he amply demonstrates his case in this powerful read, which manages to balance cautious alarm with facts on the ground.

February 15, 2022 | Knopf. \$28. | [Buy.](#)

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## The Shortlist

**Sporting Superpower: An Insider's View on China's Quest to Be the Best** by Mark Dreyer



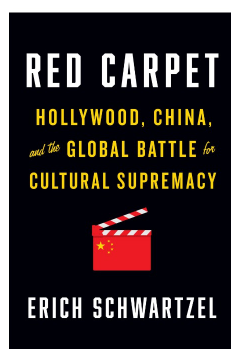
Topping the shortlist, and well timed for the Winter Olympics, is a self-published book by one of the most-respected experts on sports in China. Deftly blending the political and business angles, [Dreyer](#) demonstrates how a burgeoning sports industry is a keystone of China's superpower ambitions. The book's diary-like structure begins with the 2008 Olympics, taking in the rise of tennis player Li Na, right up to the growth of China's domestic winter sports market. It also covers China's dream of becoming a soccer superpower (plagued by corruption and failure), and how its nationalism rubs up against foreign sports leagues (that NBA tweet), all while domestic sportswear brands have begun to dominate at home. This is a swift and fluid read — albeit hampered at times by a blog-like style — crammed with context, facts and big-picture

insights.

January 15, 2022 | China Sports Insider. \$6. | [Buy.](#)

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**Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy** by Erich Schwartzel



The relationship between Hollywood and China's movie industry has soured remarkably quickly, becoming a new battleground in the Sino-U.S. rivalry, particularly since 2016 (the same year that the disastrous co-production *The Great Wall* came out). In this excellent work, *Wall Street Journal* journalist Schwartzel walks us through how Hollywood initially bent over backwards to please the Chinese cinema market, even as China limits the number of foreign films that can be screened, while churning out patriotic blockbusters to promote its national culture (as Hollywood has often done itself). Featuring star-studded tales such as Brad Pitt and Matt Damon's run-ins with China, as well as the story of abruptly cancelled Chinese A-lister Fan Bingbing, this is as entertaining a read as

it is eye-opening.

February 8, 2022 | Penguin Press. \$25. | [Buy.](#)

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**The World According to China** by Elizabeth Economy

The  
**World**  
According to  
**China**

Arguably more important than how we see and understand China is how China — or the Xi administration at least — sees the world. [Elizabeth Economy](#)'s new book provides a convincing argument (if a little dry in its academic style) that Beijing today sees the global order as ripe for a reshaping in its own image. Topics discussed include the CCP's handling



Elizabeth C. Economy

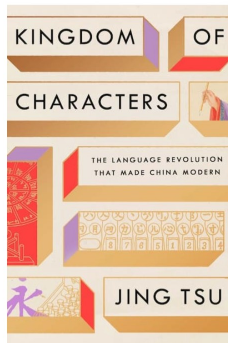
of the Covid pandemic; its revanchist aspirations in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea; the political and economic clout it has extended through the Belt and Road Initiative; and its attempts to reform global governance systems from the inside, as part of a broader strategy that Economy calls the “China reset”. The end result is a well-evidenced thesis that Beijing seeks hegemony.

January 4, 2022 | Polity. \$24. | [Buy.](#)

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### Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern

by Jing Tsu



“If the Chinese script does not go, China will certainly perish!” So predicted author Lu Xun in 1936, in words quoted as an epigraph to this commendable study. Yet over a century after the first calls to scrap Chinese characters, they are going strong as ever. In elegant prose of her own, Jing Tsu tells the story of modern Chinese, from early 20th century phonetic notation systems and the first Chinese typewriters (quite a challenge for a language with tens of thousands of distinct ideograms); through the rise of Mandarin as the national language; to Chairman Mao’s attempt to modernize Chinese with simplified characters; and finally the challenge of coding characters into computer scripts. Jing’s character-driven approach helps humanize the topic, showing that the

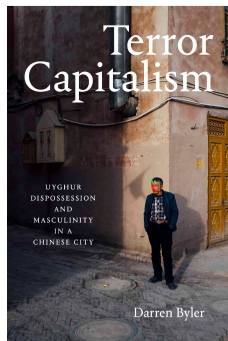
story of China’s language is essential to understanding it as a nation.

January 18, 2022 | Riverhead Books. \$25. | [Buy.](#)

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### Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City by

Darren Byler



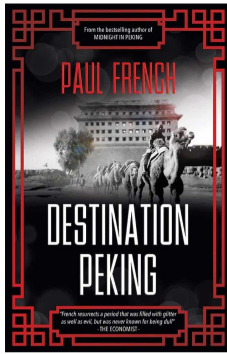
While China is in the Olympic spotlight again it is worth remembering that its government’s policies have led to the internment of over a million ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang’s “reeducation camps” over the last few years, and suppressed their culture in a thousand smaller ways. Byler, one of the foremost experts on the issue, here argues that this cultural genocide is part of a broader policy of resource extraction and “settler colonialism” that treats Xinjiang as an internal colony to be exploited in a distinctly capitalist way, on top of ethno-nationalist motives to dispossess the Uyghurs’ homeland. Also out this and last month are two collections of essays on the Xinjiang crisis: *Xinjiang Year Zero*, co-edited by the prolific Byler, and *The Xinjiang Emergency* edited by Michael Clarke – so

there is no excuse not to remain informed.

February 9, 2022 | Duke University Press. \$27. | [Buy.](#)

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## In Case You Missed It



## Destination Peking by Paul French

Beijing has become a major international tourist destination again – albeit one difficult to travel to these days. With this book, we can travel back in time to the city's more glamorous and chaotic pre-communist days. In this companion to *Destination Shanghai*, French tells the stories of eighteen foreign residents of old Peking, whose lives were as colorful as they were entertaining. Among the roster is a Woolworths heiress, an American escort girl, the socialite Wallis Simpson (future wife of the former King Edward VIII), travel writer Robert Byron, a spy novelist, a Hollywood screenwriter, the journalist couple of Edgar and Helen Foster Snow, and the inimitable sinologist and chancer Edmund Trelawny

Backhouse. Dotted with delicious details and brimming with black-and-white photographs, this diverting collection of yarns is a welcome transport back to a different era.

Aug 20, 2021 | Blacksmith Books. \$16. | [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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### 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.



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