

Illustration by Valentina Verc

BOOKS

Books for the WeChat Era

Topping the books list this month are two titles focused on the ‘super app,’ used by 1.3 billion people.

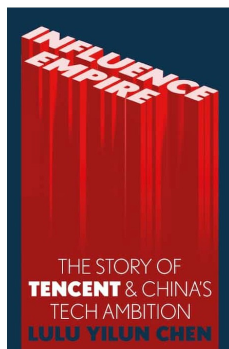
BY ALEC ASH — SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

With the aid of today’s technologies, autocratic governments have never before been able to exert so much control over their populations: Covid and the associated contact tracing have been a further boon in this respect. In China, the nexus of control and tracking is found in one ubiquitous app: WeChat. This was amply illustrated in Henan Province recently, when QR health codes within the app turned [red](#) without explanation for those protesting a bank fraud, hindering their action. That is just one example of how technological infrastructure can be abused, and obscurities around WeChat’s back-end only add to the questions around it.

Topping our books list this month are two titles focused on the ‘super app,’ used by 1.3 billion people. It is impossible to overestimate WeChat’s ubiquity in China, or how essential it is for daily life here. One book tells the story of the company that created it, Tencent; another lifts the lid on its operations, by a former executive. Also on the list, we look at another intersection of technology and technology in the race for electric vehicle dominance; a second look back at recent history; and a formative novel of China’s modern era given a fresh translation.

The One to Read

Influence Empire: The Story of Tencent & China’s Ambition by Lulu Chen



Most Anglophone readers may not know the name Tencent, even though it’s one of the world’s five largest companies – but they likely will have heard of its flagship app, WeChat. And while many will have heard of Jack Ma, the eccentric founder of Alibaba, few will know of Pony Ma, Tencent’s reclusive founder worth \$44 billion. A book that tells Tencent’s story has been long overdue, and Lulu Chen’s account is not only comprehensive, but also a gripping business narrative. Beginning with Ma’s origins as a programmer, she relates his story and that of his company, which began in text messages, transitioned to gaming, and eventually struck gold with WeChat. Chronicling setbacks, the emergence of rivals (notably Alibaba), critical deals or stakes (such as in

Meituan) and regulation challenges, the book features interviews with Tencent executives, including Pony Ma himself (“slight and bespectacled ... with a hard-part comb-over”). With detail on Tencent’s gaming and e-sports wing, and speculation as to its future directions (including the metaverse), the globally influential company finally has the account it deserves.

July 14, 2022 | Hodder & Stoughton. \$28.99. | [Buy.](#)

The Shortlist

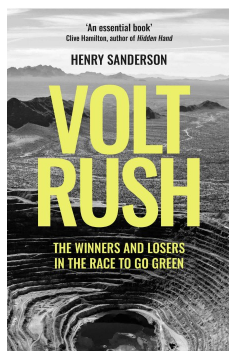
The First Superapp: Inside China’s WeChat and the New Digital Revolution by Kevin Shimota



Recommended as a pairing for *Influence Empire* is this shorter volume focusing on WeChat itself. Often described as a “Swiss Army knife app,” merging messaging, payments, social, ride-hailing, ticket buying and microblogging into one toolkit, this metaphor gives the book its cover. Shimota, who was an executive at WeChat and is steeped in the industry, breaks the app’s success down into digestible chunks. First laying ground with context on the Chinese internet, he describes the creation, growth and functions of Wechat, with a focus on mobile payments, its “closed-loop system” and what defines it as a super app. A clear primer for anyone who wants more than a passing understanding of the most popular app of all time.

July 5, 2022 | Earnshaw Books. \$16.99. | [Buy.](#)

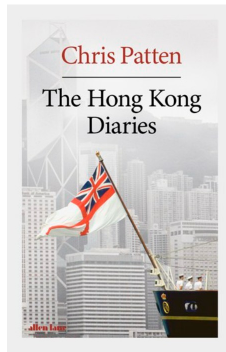
Volt Rush: The Winners and Losers in the Race to Go Green by Henry Sanderson



Just as the oil barons of a century ago dominated the business world of the twentieth century, so too will those who control the resources of a post-carbon world: the metals and rare earths that power our phones, computers, and increasingly our vehicles and homes too. Veteran journalist Sanderson unpacks the supply chains, companies and characters behind these finite global supplies of lithium, cobalt, nickel and more in the “battery age”. Chinese interests are just one player in this story – as [excerpted](#) in the *Wire* – which also encompasses mines from Chile to Cornwall to the deep sea. As electric vehicles and battery production become the battle-front for control of technologies of the future, it is ever more essential to know the players in the game.

July 28, 2022 | Oneworld Publications. \$27.95. | [Buy.](#)

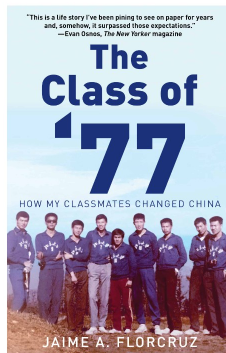
The Hong Kong Diaries by Chris Patten



Only 25 years late (or “published on the 25th anniversary of the handover,” if you will) we finally have in hand the Hong Kong memoirs of Chris Patten, Britain’s last colonial governor of the territory before it was returned to China in 1997. In narrative diary form, presumably massaged, we get a front-row seat on the last five years of British rule, as Patten scrambled to shore up democratic institutions and set Hong Kong up for self-government under One Country, Two Systems. Most telling are the obstacles in his way, not just from Chinese officials but business interests. He bemoans the failure to implement an arbitration mechanism that would enforce the Joint Declaration of 1984, and ends with an impassioned take on recent events in Hong Kong that ensued.

June 21, 2022 | Allen Lane. \$46.21. | [Buy.](#)

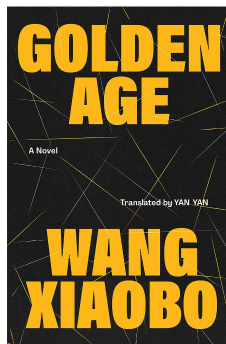
The Class of ‘77: How My Classmates Changed China by Jaime FlorCruz



Of all the qualities that a China watcher needs, perspective is arguably the most valuable. Few have a longer perspective on the nation than Jaime FlorCruz, who landed in 1971 as part of a student tour from the Philippines – only to be stranded when his home country declared martial law. Graduating from the famous class of 1977 in Peking University, the first after the Cultural Revolution ended, he tells not just his story of China back then, but those of his classmates – who included Bo Xilai and Li Keqiang. Putting the changes that China (and those classmates) have been through since in due perspective, his account is not only valuable but entertaining.

July 12, 2022 | Earnshaw Books. \$17.99. | [Buy.](#)

Golden Age: A Novel by Wang Xiaobo, translated by Yan Yan

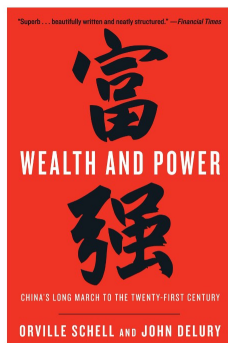


Written in 1982 and published in Chinese a decade later, this novel is a cult classic in China but almost unknown outside — its author, Wang Xiaobo, was one of modern China’s sharpest satirists. In this new translation, we follow the dissolute Wang Er (protagonist of most of Wang’s novellas) as he navigates post-Cultural Revolution China, a conservative society and controlling government, through the course of a sexual affair that shocked readers at the time, and which remains a literary figure of the individual’s lust for personal freedoms just as China began to slowly open up to them. A bedrock of contemporary Chinese literature that deserves a second life.

July 26, 2022 | Astra House. \$23.49. | [Buy.](#)

In Case You Missed It

Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-first Century by Orville Schell and John Delury



Just as contemporary China is shaped by the individuals who comprise it, so too has the history of the nation been forged by great people (for better or worse). To understand China's story we must know theirs too, and this book is the best place to start. Schell and Delury profile eleven historical figures who formed modern China, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. The range covers reformist officials such as Feng Guifen and Liang Qichao, revolutionaries including Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong, all the way up to the democracy activist Liu Xiaobo. A must read of history that is just as relevant today.

July 16, 2013 | Pantheon. \$15.29. | [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



Insuring Engagement

BY BRENT CRANE

At age 97, Maurice "Hank" Greenberg, the former CEO of AIG, has advocated for deeper U.S. engagement with China for longer than perhaps any living American businessman. While his positioning as a private sector statesman seems out of touch given the current state of U.S.-China relations, his son, Evan Greenberg, who is CEO of Chubb, is updating the Greenberg engagement slogan for the current moment.

THE BIG PICTURE



Big Spender

BY ELIOT CHEN

A look at China's industrial policy: how much it spends, how it stands out, and what lessons the U.S. should learn.

Q & A



Louisa Lim on the Erosion of Democracy in Hong Kong

BY JORDYN HAIME

The journalist and author talks about the uncertainty of Hong Kong's political red lines; what it's like to report there now; the lack of possibility for resistance; and the 'King of Kowloon.'



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