

How to understand China: which books to read?

By **Jocelyn Chey**

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New books on China are flooding the market but their scope and quality are variable. Publishers have recognised that the public is keen to understand more about our major trading partner and the strategic challenges of the new world order. Readers would be well advised however to read the reviews before placing their orders. One book in particular should be avoided as it is likely to be tendentious and lacking factual information.

The past month has seen the publication of *Crisis: China Story Yearbook*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin, published by ANU Press; *Antipodean China*, edited by Nicholas Jose and Benjamin Madden, published by Giramondo; *The Beijing Bureau*, edited by Trevor Watson and Melissa Roberts, published by Hardie Grant; *The Last Correspondent*, by Michael Smith, published by Hardie Grant; and *The Shortest History of China*, by Linda Jaivin, published by Black Inc.

The subtitle of Michael Smith's book *The Last Correspondent* is *Dispatches from Xi's New China*. Michael covers China for the *Australian Financial Review* and was based in Shanghai until September 2020 when he was evacuated by the Australian government. He describes life in China during the start of the pandemic as well as travel within China and Hong Kong, and tries to describe the enormous social changes in China in recent decades and how these have affected people's everyday lives. This is a fascinating firsthand account from an experienced journalist.

Twenty-five Australian correspondents who have been based in China contributed to *The Beijing Bureau*, from Paul Raffaele (1973-75) to Sue-Lin Wong and Stephen McDonnell who are still there although reporting not for Australia but for the *London Financial Times*, *The Economist* and the *BBC*. Their stories offer insights into the heart of China like glimpses through one of those Chinese carved ivory spheres nestled one inside the other.

Antipodean China is different. It is a collection of essays by Chinese and Australian writers, many of them speaking about the way their contacts with the other country has influenced their thinking and writing over the last decade.

This is a bitter-sweet reflection on the positive power of cultural encounters in these days of restrictions due to the coronavirus and deteriorating relations between Australia and China.

Linda Jaivin's *Shortest History* is a romp through several thousand years of Chinese history. It provides valuable factual information on emperors, dynasties and intellectual milestones. China's openness to the flow of ideas and movement of peoples across the Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty contrasts powerfully with the present closed door policies of the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping. Linda has decades of experience of living, working and writing in China and is a fluent Chinese speaker.

The China in the World Centre at the Australian National University has been publishing an annual China Year Book since 2012. The latest, titled *Crisis*, is probably the most powerful and relevant with chapters by acknowledged academic experts on recent developments in politics and the economy and some selected papers on international and domestic developments. Wuna Reilly's chapter alone, on how the Corona virus was stopped in its tracks, would justify downloading the book. The last two chapters cover aspects of the current impasse in Sino-Australian relations.

All of these books are written and edited by competent and knowledgeable academics and journalists. All shed light on aspects of China, its culture and international relations. We have to ask therefore why someone with no language qualifications or professional experience would dare to add to these resources. Yet this is apparently what celebrity journalist Sharri Markson of *The Daily Telegraph* plans to do.

Her book, *What Really Happened in Wuhan*, is already available for pre-order with a predicted HarperCollins publication date of September. Markson was personally presented with the Sir Keith Murdoch Award for Excellence in Journalism by Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch in 2018. In May 2020 she reported in *The Daily Telegraph* that Covid-19 had originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and implied that it had been deliberately spread from there.

She based her story on a leaked dossier from an unnamed Five Eyes intelligence source. Australian intelligence later stated that no such intelligence existed and according to the ABC on 26 May 2021, the dossier was a State Department background document containing publicly available news and journal papers and contained no evidence linking the Institute with the spread of the virus. It was however quoted extensively particularly by interests supporting the Trump administration's efforts to blame China for the virus.

With this track record, why would Markson plan to add to the growing list of books about China.

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