

# BOOKS

## Learning Chinese – Without Speaking Mandarin

An author read Chinese fiction so she could ‘appreciate just how much culture and place shape the very content of our thoughts and feelings and ways we relate to one another.’

*Hao Jiang Tian is the first Chinese-born opera singer to become a world-recognized performer. Since he debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in 1991, he has appeared there every season and he sings the major bass opera roles at major opera houses throughout the world. He has become an American citizen. In collaborating with Tian on “Along the Roaring River,” a book about his adventurous life, Lois B. Morris realized that to convey his story about growing up in China, she would need to understand deeply what it means to be Chinese. In this article, she shares with us how she went about gaining a new appreciation for the relationship between place and time and the psychological connections people have with one another.*

By Lois B. Morris

Hao Jiang Tian and I do a little show to promote our book. He’s an opera singer who was born and raised in Mao’s China and moved to the West in the mid-1980s to study voice. I collaborated on his memoir, which is titled “Along the Roaring River: My Wild Ride from Mao to the Met.” During our performance, Tian sings songs of his childhood and I talk briefly about what it was like to write his book—in *his* voice, from *his* perspective, yet written entirely by me. I make jokes about being a “Nice Jewish Girl” from Chicago who somehow managed to channel a Mandarin-speaking man from Beijing. What I don’t say is that to do this, I had to learn Chinese. I don’t mean the language, which I never mastered at all, despite four trips to China researching Tian’s life. I mean his Chinese-ness, and the Chinese-ness of China!

I know many first-generation American Chinese (including my brother-in-law and his family), and young adults who were born in China and adopted into American families, so I thought I knew a lot about the Chinese. I was so wrong. I understood what people of Chinese heritage experience in the West. What I didn’t understand – at first – was that I was filtering Tian’s adventures and misadventures and his loving and hating relationships through the filter of my own Western psychology and intellect.

My problems telling his story began at the very beginning—with his parents and his relationships with them. Tian’s father had been a very loyal, severe, uncompromising revolutionary, who rose high in the People’s Liberation Army as a conductor of a celebrated

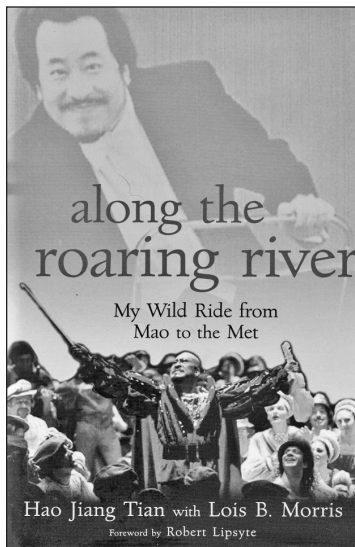
military orchestra. His mother, an equally committed Communist, was a composer of revolutionary music and achieved a high military rank herself. After Tian’s reluctance to take piano lessons as a boy, his father never supported his later desire to become a performer.

So why was Tian never openly angry at his father? And why did he never seem to give sufficient credit to his mother, who unfailingly helped him, pulling what strings she could from afar, since she and her husband were sent away from Tian for the entire Cultural Revolution? And his attitudes toward women generally seemed to follow: loving and comfortable but not tinged with the level of awe he had for men.

I know something about human relationships not only from personal experience, but because in much of my work I have specialized in psychology and mental health. So the question I faced initially was this: How could I write his stories using all my psychological awareness but doing so from his psychologically unaware point of view – or so I saw it?

Well, of course, as things turned out, I lacked awareness of how a culture that was utterly foreign to me could shape the people within it and their psychology. I did not yet appreciate that in order to pull off this project, I would have to abandon my own certainties of the way the world is. I would have to view relationships and events through lenses that alter their shape and color and texture – and make the world that much more beautiful, as I would soon discover.

Reading Chinese fiction was what finally freed me to appreciate just how much culture and place shape the very content of our



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thoughts and feelings and ways we relate to one another. Quickly I learned that what I saw as troubled relationships, from a Western point of view, were characteristic of a time and place within a different culture.

Among the first of the books I picked up were ones by modern authors born and raised in China who wrote in English, including the wonderful novels of Anchee Min and Ha Jin. I found a copy of the classic, English-language prerevolutionary novel by Lin Yutang, "Moment in Peking," in Beijing; it was a bestseller in the United States when it was published in 1939. Even now I'm devouring Chinese literature in translation, including a collection of short stories titled "Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused."

That's how I learned Chinese and, as I did, Hao Jiang Tian began to come alive to me as a character in his own *true* novel. I

started to be able to look around his life through his eyes and, as him, what an interesting – and decidedly different – world I began to see.

After a recent book-promotion performance, in Boston, one of Tian's cousins came up to talk to me. "You really captured his voice," he said.

High praise. Now if I could only sing. ■

*Lois B. Morris, who collaborated with Hao Jiang Tian in writing "Along the Roaring River: My Wild Ride from Mao to the Met," writes about mental health and psychology, including a long-running column in Allure. She also has written about classical music and opera for The New York Times, and she has written or co-written eight books.*

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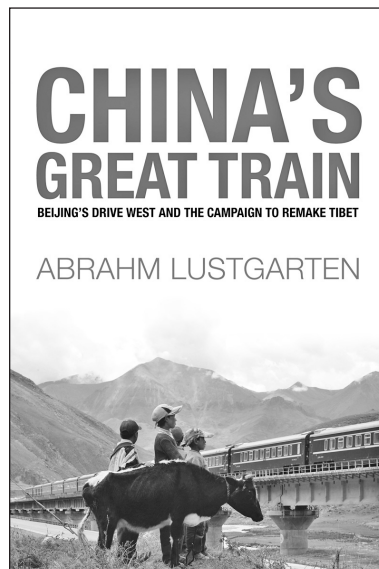
## China's Bold Project: To Connect With Tibet Via Railway

**A journalist set out to explore China's plans to build a railroad to Tibet and tells the complex story through the experiences of those directly affected by its construction.**

**By Abrahm Lustgarten**

I was working as a writer in San Francisco in early 2001 when I came across a short Reuters wire story about China's plans to build a railroad to Tibet. I had a long-standing fascination with Tibet that began when I was six years old, in 1979, and was introduced to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, during one of his earliest visits to the United States.

My parents were closely involved in Tibetan issues and so this event was the first of many for me. Over time, on a very personal level, my experience with Tibetans shaped a larger interest in Asian cultures, foreign affairs, and human rights. So when the news of the railway was announced I immediately recognized that it was a monumental story – and one that I wanted to work on. Instinctively, I was sympathetic to the Tibetans' story. I anticipated that this train would eventually affect Tibetans much



like the American railroad impacted the American Indians – overcoming them, and eventually leading to their obsolescence. But reporting and lots of research would have to bear that out.

I began to document the early stages of the construction in Tibet. In 2004, hoping to devote more time to reporting in China, I received a research grant from the MacArthur Foundation to document this rail expansion in the context of its affect on ethnic migration patterns and global security issues. I took a leave from *Fortune*, where I was a reporter, and went to China. Only then, on my third visit, did I begin to comprehend the enormity and importance of this railway project. As I delved into the scientific and engineering obstacles to making the railway work, it was clear that on a technological level this railway would be a remarkable accomplishment, and that,

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especially with the specter of global warming, its construction over miles of permafrost might not work.

As I started to interview Chinese officials and engineers who were piloting the project, a new element of the story unfolded that was as important as my preliminary Tibetan focus. Not only had this project been conceived in the 1950s – four decades earlier than most people thought – but an entire generation of Chinese scientists had devoted their careers to making it a reality. And their own stories were more about how they were finding their way in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and in the nation’s tumultuous transition to a modern industrial state than they were about Tibet.

What I was hearing from them was compelling, and the experiences they shared with me helped me to see that the fates of two separate groups of people were intertwined in this unlikely and harrowing effort to build the world’s highest railway. Through their life stories, these people were telling the tale of China’s meteoric rise in economic and global strength.

Today, China and Tibet are changing faster than words can be put on the page. Each year that I worked on my book, China’s gross domestic product grew at a furious 10 percent pace. China’s industries are gulping down resources from around the globe, and they need more from Tibet to ensure future growth. Lhasa, Tibet’s largest city, has more than doubled in size during this same period. A recent study revealed that Tibet is the most resource-rich of China’s provinces, and new international mining and trade and industrial ventures in Tibet are announced with increasing frequency. China regards Tibet as a key to its on-going emergence in the global market and in its dominance over rival India and the rest of the countries in South Asia.

All of this, however, hinges on the railway, which was rushed to completion with a near-frantic sense of urgency and desperation.

My book, “China’s Great Train: Beijing’s Drive West and the Campaign to Remake Tibet,” is told through reporting I did on my trips to Tibet and through the lives and experiences of people involved with this project whom I interviewed. What follows are brief descriptions of some of the book’s extraordinary characters.

- Zhang Luxin is an aging engineer who in the 1970s staked everything on the success of the railway project. At that time, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, the project faltered in bankruptcy, given concerns about whether the tracks could be engineered on the high altitude permafrost plateau. Later, in the twilight of his career, he got a second chance, and Zhang worked hard to sell his hyper-optimistic view that the railway could be built successfully on permafrost. It was his way of trying to redeem himself and curry favor with the new Communist Party leadership.
- Kalden is a young Tibetan man whose family land

was taken by the railway company through its execution of eminent domain. He was then forced to borrow money from the government in order to rebuild a home less than a half a mile away. In the years of construction he has lost his parents to illness, failed to find work despite the employment of 700 Chinese railway laborers in his village, and found himself struggling to compete in a new Tibet where natives are at a disadvantage.

- Zhao Shiyun is a middle-aged Chinese engineer, cocky and bold, who shrugged off decades of research and made radical design changes to the railway at the last minute in order to get the project finished on time.
- Rinzen is a warm-hearted Tibetan businessman who was eager for the benefits of modernization but has since found himself muscled out by an influx of Han Chinese businesses and a rash of new laws favoring them.

Their stories, and dozens more like them, including those of railway workers and doctors and Tibetan monks, make personal the bigger and very complicated story of what is happening in contemporary China. ■

*Abrahm Lustgarten, a reporter with ProPublica, an investigative news organization based in New York, is the author of “China’s Great Train: Beijing’s Drive West and the Campaign to Remake Tibet.”*

### **A Reminder: FCC-NE Has Videos and DVDs to Borrow**

The FCC-NE Video and DVD Lending Library is now being overseen by Jackie Robbins, who lives in Londonberry, New Hampshire. Please contact her if you’d like to borrow any of the many films (on videotape and DVD) that are in the FCC-NE Lending Library. For a list of available films, go to the FCC-NE Web site at [www.fccne.org/video](http://www.fccne.org/video) where an order form and instructions on how orders are made can be found. Contact Jackie Robbins by e-mail at [pjrobbins5@comcast.net](mailto:pjrobbins5@comcast.net). Many of the library’s films – about China and about adoption – are suitable for parents to watch with their children. Or they can be borrowed to share with groups of friends at a small gathering.

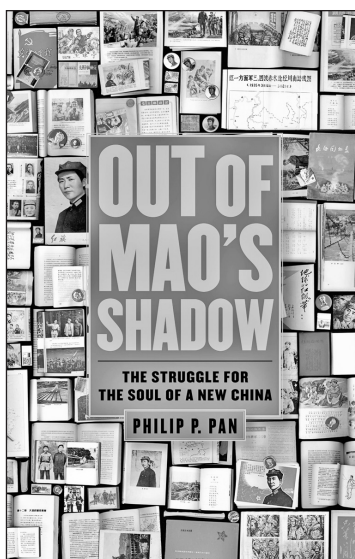
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## Exploring China's Path From 1989 to 2008

**A China-based reporter searched for answers about why China's economic embrace of capitalism has not resulted in democratic change.**

*Philip P. Pan, author of "Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle For The Soul of a New China," arrived in Beijing, China as a correspondent for The Washington Post in 2001. He'd studied Mandarin in Beijing in the early 1990s, a time when the memory was fresh of what had happened during the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Twelve years later, as Pan observes in the introduction to his book, "people seemed to have forgotten the party's violent suppression of the democracy movement, and the crowds in Tiananmen were cheering the government [after the announcement that China would host the 2008 Olympic Games]." Witnessing this transformation, Pan set out to ask three questions – "What had happened to the demands for political change? How had the party regained its footing? And how long could it hold on to power?" What he learned, he shares with readers in his book, and in his introduction to it, Pan describes how he went about reporting this story. An excerpt follows:*

“Over the next seven years, I searched for answers to these questions, a quest that took me to cities, towns and villages across China. What I found was a government engaged in the largest and perhaps most successful experiment in authoritarianism in the world. The West has assumed that capitalism must lead to democracy, that free markets inevitably result in free societies. But by embracing market reforms while continuing to restrict political freedom, China's Communist leaders have presided over an economic revolution without surrendering power. Prosperity allowed the government to reinvent itself, to win friends and buy allies, and to forestall demands for democratic change. It was a remarkable feat, all the more so because the regime had inflicted so much misery on the nation over the past half century. But as I examined the party's success, I also saw something else extraordinary – a people recovering from the trauma of Communist rule, asserting themselves against the state and demanding greater control of their lives. They are survivors, whose families endured one of the world's deadliest famines during the Great Leap Forward, whose idealism was exploited during the madness of the Cultural Revolution, and whose values have been tested by the booming economy and the rush to get rich. The young men and women who filled Tiananmen Square in the spring



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*Prosperity allowed the government to reinvent itself, to win friends and buy allies, and to forestall demands for democratic change.*

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of 1989 saw their hopes for a democratic China crushed in a massacre, but as older, more pragmatic adults, many continue to pursue political change in different ways...

“The outcome of this struggle is important not only because half of the planet's population without basic political freedoms lives in China, or because other governments around the world are already copying the Chinese model to curb demands for democratic change by their own peoples. It is also important because what kind of country China becomes – democracy, dictatorship, or something in between – will help answer one of the pressing questions of our time: How will the rise of China affect the rest of the world?...”

“Many people who care about China tell themselves that democratization is inevitable, that the people will eventually prevail and the one-party state will fail. I certainly hope so. But I have seen that there is nothing automatic about political change. It is a difficult, messy, and often heartbreaking process, and it happens – when it happens at all – because of imperfect individuals who fight, take risks, and sacrifice for it. They can be noble, courageous, selfless, stubborn, vain, naïve, calculating, and reckless, and I was fortunate to meet so many of them during my time in China.”

## Want To Know China Better? Read About Its Provinces.

'Each book is written from the perspective of a young person travelling in that province...'

By Sui Hong

Explore-A-Province in China Book Series is setting out to provide valuable information and insight about China by focusing attention on each of China's provinces and its major municipalities. In writing about provincial history, cultural heritage—its architecture, fine arts, literature, philosophy and religion – and the lifestyle of the local people, these books provide readers a comprehensive text that most travel books are not able to provide. Each book is written from the perspective of a young person travelling in that province, and its 64 pages are filled with a crisp, easy-to-read layout of text, photos, and illustrations that tell the story of this province or city.

The team that creates these books is comprised of researchers, writers, and editors, who work closely with photographers, illustrators, book designers, and printers. To begin each book, bilingual researchers in China do a lot of investigative work to come up with the detailed content for each section of the book. These researchers then pass their translated information—outlines, key points, data, references and other research – to a native English-speaking writer. When that writer completes a chapter, the researcher reviews it carefully to make sure all the major areas are covered and presented accurately. Editors then check for style, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

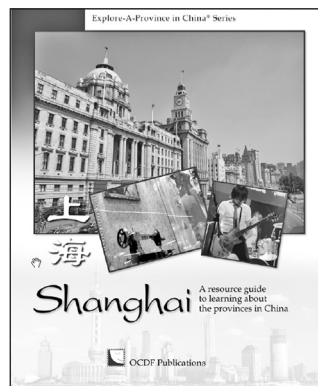
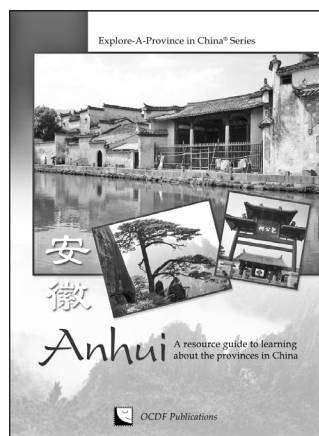
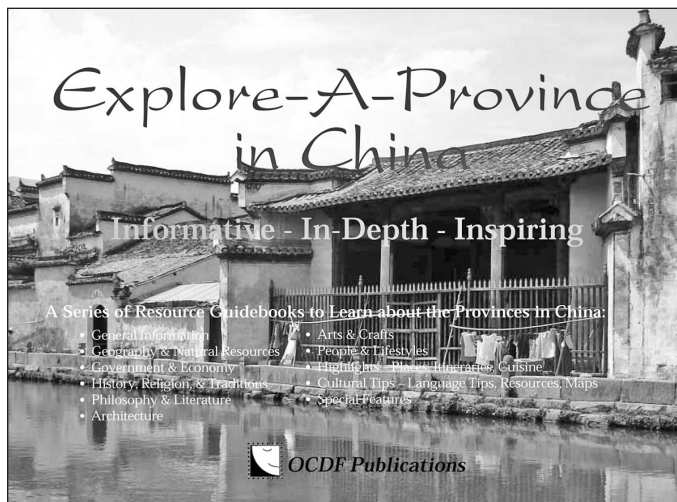
Using an outline, the photo editor works simultaneously with the writer to eventually end up with about 200 photos and images that accompany the book's words. To reach this goal, the photo editor must, of course gather many more images so the best ones we can find will be chosen. We rely on individual photographers, photo

agencies, and stock photos for the books' visual images. In some cases, adoptive families have contributed photos. For historic images, we work closely with museums, private collectors, and other publishers.

After the writing and image selection is complete, a designer creates the layout. Before that can be done, however, an assistant puts titles in pinyin (with an indication of tones), and sometimes Chinese characters, so the names, places, events, idioms and phrases are available to readers in Mandarin. The fully designed book is sent back for many rounds of proofreading before the book is published. (At this stage, almost everyone on the team is asked to proofread a copy of the book.) Involving everyone in this part of the

process ensures there will be fewer errors on the book's pages.

Publishing this series of books is challenging and rewarding. We know that through creating this series of books we will help people broaden their understanding of China by unveiling its diversified cultures. ■



Sui Hong is the project manager of the Explore-A-Province in China book series, printed by OCDF, a nonprofit organization based in Bloomington, Illinois and Beijing, China. The first province to have a book completed as part of the Explore-a-Province Book Series was Anhui; the first city, Shanghai. Coming soon will be books about Jiangsu, Fujian and Shandong provinces. Books from this series can be

ordered at [www.ocdf.org/publications/eap.html](http://www.ocdf.org/publications/eap.html). Information about this entire series can be found at <http://www.ocdf.org/pdf/Explore-A-Province%20Brochure.pdf>

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## A Novel Leads Its Young Readers to Moments of Self-Discovery

'...this book would be appealing to anyone interested in the experiences of the Chinese-American youngsters who straddle two cultures.'

By Libby Benson

I'd like to recommend a book, "Intrigue in the House of Wong," by Amy S. Kwei. This is the story of a family-owned Chinese restaurant which moves from Chinatown New York to the posh Upper East Side. Wendy Wong befriends the neighbors and helps integrate her family into the community. She and her boyfriend are kidnapped. They escape and rescue the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations.

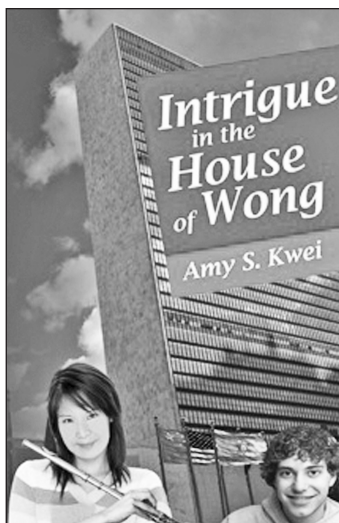
This book is well written and enjoyable to read. Its plot is engaging and its characters are easy to relate to and well-etched. The teenage language deftly and authentically portrays the adolescent experience and its perspective is contemporary enough to capture any young reader's interest.

The book's sub-plot is rich with cultural variations and the shared experiences of those who live in the Chinese-American community. Without overpowering the book's main storyline, the sub-plot explores various relationships among generations in one family and among various ethnic groups set against the backdrop of today's New York City.

Its target audience is youngsters who are in 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, though some advanced 5th grade readers might enjoy it as

well. In fact, this book would be appealing to anyone interested in the experiences of the Chinese-American youngsters who straddle two cultures. Included in the book is a useful Reading Group Guide, which makes it easy to use in book clubs and schools.

The author, Amy S. Kwei, who is a retired college professor, is willing to come to schools, libraries and bookstores to talk about "Intrigue in the House of Wong." (She can appear in person or through video and/or telephone conferencing.) As she has spoken with youngsters about this book, Kwei has discovered that these conversations give them "a chance to talk about what it feels like to be an 'outsider.'" Some children have felt that "it is important to know how another culture deals with 'those old folks,'" and as Kwei explains, "living with the grandparents seemed to have drawn lots of discussion." ■



*Libby Benson lives with her husband and their 11 year-old China-born daughter in the Greater Boston area. She is a member of OCA*

*(Organization of Chinese Americans) and FCC-NE. The book is available through [www.Tatpublishing.com](http://www.Tatpublishing.com).*

### FCC-NE WEB ADDRESS

To see the latest in FCC-New England's news, activities and information just go to:

**[www.fccne.org](http://www.fccne.org)**

Log on and learn!



### FCC-NE's Vision

We are a pioneering organization that celebrates families with children adopted from China. We are committed to giving our children the richest view of their heritage, to influencing change here and in China, and to creating a world in which adoptive families flourish on their lifelong journey.