



SUBJECT OF INTEREST

BOOKS ON CHINA HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE POPULAR, BUT ARE THEY TEACHING US ANYTHING?

By DAVID BARTRAM

Few books have polarized opinion in recent years as much as *When China Rules the World*, but when it was published in 2009, author Martin Jacques was thinking less about kick-starting an international debate than he was simply relieved to have completed a 10-year project marred by personal tragedy.

"I'd moved to Hong Kong in 1998 with my wife Hari and our 9-week-old son Ravi. We were going to be there for three years and I had ambitious plans for the book as well as a television series lined up," Jacques says.

"But after we'd been there for 14 months, my wife died in terrible circumstances and the book went out of my mind. I was just struggling to survive and I didn't touch the book for five years. I wasn't sure I'd ever be capable of writing it, but it must have somehow stayed in the back of my mind because by 2005 I started to work on it again."

What happened next caught just about everyone off guard, not least Jacques himself. Despite a limited initial run, the book soon became one of the most talked about non-fiction titles of the year.

"I was quite ambushed by the reception the book got," Jacques says. "I remember being told that only 5,000 copies would be printed initially and my heart sank. I was thinking, all that work and hardly anyone is even going to read it."

"But then very quickly things started to change. It was getting extensively reviewed and on the day of publication my editor wrote to me saying that they would be reprinting. By the next Monday they were reprinting again."

When China Rules the World went on to become an international publishing sensation, selling over a quarter of a million copies and being translated into 11 languages. It also proved the culmination of a decade-long shift for China titles from generally academic fields into the mainstream.

But while the reception for Jacques' book was broadly positive, it was not unanimous. Commentator Will Hutton, reviewing it for *The Guardian*, opened his review with the line: "The first problem with this book is the title."

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PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

From left: Marysia Juszcakiewicz, founder of Peony Literary Agency; Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University; and Martin Jacques, author of *When China Rules the World*.

Books: Challenge of understanding a vast country

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Yet Jacques remains undeterred by any criticism.

"The book was bound to be controversial as it goes against the conventional wisdom in the West. Inevitably a lot of people are going to come in collision with the book as I'm challenging their mindset. But I want there to be an argument, not for the sake of it, but to try to shift the way people look at China."

Books on China have been growing in popularity since the early 2000s. One of the most famous, or infamous, Gordon Chang's 2001 title *The Coming Collapse of China*, sold well despite it soon becoming clear that the book's central assertion was deeply flawed.

Chang has remained bullish, republishing the book earlier this year arguing that his initial claim was not incorrect, but that he had the timing slightly wrong. He declined to comment for this article.

There is a sense that such "all or nothing" claims about China are often the result of pressure from publishers to produce provocative titles that will sell. There is a danger that this process might skew the debate.

"In general, I think that too much of the writing about China is shaped by what have been termed Sinomania and Sinophobia," says

Jonathan Fenby, an author and journalist who has written a number of books on China.

"On the one hand we have writers predicting the coming collapse of China and on the other foreseeing the inevitability of China ruling the world. Such predictions are beguiling, especially if they are pitched in headline-grabbing terms."

Jonathan Holslag, from the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies, agrees that popular books on China tend to sensationalize the issue.

"Across the board publishers that aim at large audiences require manuscripts to be counterintuitive or sensational," Holslag says. "If you want to get into the big bookshops there's no way around it."

"There is a wide range of very sophisticated pieces of research on China, but unfortunately they do not make it as best-sellers."

Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing and author of *Ancient Thought, Chinese Modern Power*, says books about China written by Westerners can often lack substance and be misleading.

"Most foreigners try to understand China from their knowledge of their own country. I am not saying this is necessarily wrong since it is quite normal. Chinese scholars,

in fact, try to understand the United States from their Chinese perspective. It can lead to a lot of misunderstandings, however," he says.

"With China, however, you have a vast country with a special culture and with a history and problems not experienced by any other foreign country. There is a strong argument therefore that only the Chinese understand these problems and how to solve them. That is the essential difficulty between someone like me and Western experts."

Blockbusters

Xie Tao, professor and assistant dean at the School of English and International Studies of Beijing Foreign Studies University, explains the rising popularity of China books, and the vastly divergent views of the authors.

"The sheer number of books on China, fiction or non-fiction, speaks to the fact that China has become probably the most popular topic for the international community. This is perhaps unprecedented since 1949.

"The reason is simple: because China has developed into an economic power and is fast becoming a military power.

"Of course, these authors do not speak in a single voice. So you have books that sound alarms about China's threat to international

peace (such as Chang's), and you have books that portray China in a much more favorable light (such as Jacques'). Then you have fiction about China that brings readers into past and present China."

The recent blockbuster China titles have been a mixed bag, says Fenby, whose latest book *Tiger Head, Snake Tails: China Today, How it Got There and Where it is Heading* has been met by positive reviews.

"I found Henry Kissinger's book *On China* disappointing. In his awe of Chinese statecraft, he seems to me to overrate its practical outcome," he says. "I also found that his account of his meetings with Mao added nothing to the story as already told by Margaret MacMillan in her book, *Seize the Hour*. His final prescription for Sino-US relations was vague if well-meaning."

Fenby is more favorable in his evaluation of Ezra Vogel's recent biography of Deng Xiaoping, which he describes as a milestone and by far the most exhaustive work on the former paramount leader. He hopes his own book resists the urge to sacrifice balance for headlines.

"The reality of the People's Republic defies simplification. Too many judgments are based on one part or another of the China story; one has to try to take them all into account to form a realistic judgment.

"There are as many minuses as

pluses and sheer uncertainties in a vastly varied nation where society is evolving at a very rapid pace and old certainties that easily beguile foreign observers are becoming outdated by the onward rush."

But Cheng Xiaohe, associate professor at the School of International Studies of Renmin University of China, believes foreign authors play an important role in depicting China.

"Certainly, most of the best-selling books concerning China are written by Western scholars and for Western readers, (so) they cannot escape the age-old trap of West-centric orientation. Nonetheless, as many authors come to China frequently and have increasing contacts with their Chinese counterparts, compared with their predecessors from the 1950s to 1970s, they know China much better, and their works — to various degrees — reveal some telling facet of the real China. These authors' ideological bias still plays some kind of role in their writing, but this is becoming less so.

"The books present a benign or malicious image of China to readers and help to shape a popular opinion toward China, which can influence their respective governments' policies toward China. As to Chinese readers, they may disagree with the messages that these book tend to deliver, but through

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reading these books written from Western perspectives, we Chinese can learn how China and its people are perceived and analyzed by foreigners, and in turn, we can figure out how to redress our weaknesses pinpointed by outsiders.”

Troy Parfitt, author of *Why China Will Never Rule the World*, argues that all too often the good China books are overshadowed by those that make sensational, over-generalized assertions.

“There are still plenty of good China books being published, but it’s the mediocre and bad ones that seem to grab all the attention. Good books are often cerebral, critical, and topically specific. They appeal to a small, discriminating audience of China watchers.

“One such title is Richard McGregor’s *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*. It’s as revealing as it can be and allows readers to get a sense of how China’s government is structured and how it functions. The tone is not toadying, nor is it alarmist. It’s an honest, well-researched, thoughtful account penned by a journalist with a couple decades of China experience.

“To capture a bigger audience and capitalize on the China trend, publishers have become fond of books that are topically broad, outstandingly uncritical, and plainly written.”

New chapters

China’s emergence as a darling of the publishing industry was confirmed when it was invited to be present as the “Market Focus” at the London Book Fair last month.

As publishers were busy discussing ways to forge Anglo-Chinese publishing partnerships and extend operations into new markets, many delegates preferred to browse the remarkable range of China-related titles on offer, attending book readings and panels hosted by a series of high-profile writers.

In many respects events such as these are evidence of the breadth of opportunity publishers are now presented with when it comes to China titles. If *When China Rules the World* proved the zenith of popular economic and geopolitical writing on the country, last year’s parenting guide *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua showed that there is a market for broader cultural titles related to China.

The book caused mild media



WANG JING / CHINA DAILY

Jonathan Fenby, author of many books on China including the latest one *Tiger Head, Snake Tails*.

frenzy upon release for Chua’s controversial approach to parenting, and has reportedly sold over a million copies worldwide. It was also indicative of this wider range of China-related titles enjoying mainstream success.

One such title is Julia Lovell’s *The Opium War*, a work of history that reappraises the impact of the opium wars on attitudes in China today. It is the sort of the book that even 10 years ago might have struggled to achieve a popular readership, but today enjoys a wide circulation.

Lovell presented a panel at the London Book Fair in her role as a champion of Chinese literature. She has translated a series of works, including Lu Xun’s short stories, and is finding that interest in Chinese literature is catching up with the longer-standing interest in China’s economic rise.

“In the UK now we have quite a lot of access to economic and political stories about China, and they generally focus on the big headlines and the big trends in the country,” Lovell says.

“I think that reading literature is a very useful companion source on China. These big stories we hear about tend to not be about individuals. They tend to be about the country as a whole.

“Literature by its very essence is a human, individual endeavor. It is one person’s individual response to their set of circumstances. So by reading literature you are by definition grounding yourself in very individual stories.”

It is the job of Marysia Juszczakiewicz, founder of the Hong Kong-based Peony Literary Agency, to seek out the stories from China that might appeal to a Western market.

“The main focus of what I do is try to find a diversity of voices from China in stories,” says Juszczakiewicz. “I am looking for good stories that can cross cultural boundaries. Something that is universal in its emotional appeal and in the way the characters are formulated.”

Chinese novelists are enjoying a wider audience than ever before. Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem*, perhaps the most famous, enjoyed popular success globally. Penguin Books paid \$100,000 for the worldwide English-language rights, a record at the time for a Chinese novel.

Juszczakiewicz, however, wants to move away from the grand historical narratives that have tended to define Chinese novels that have won an overseas following. *Wolf Totem*, like many, is set during the “cultural revolution” (1966-76), but Juszczakiewicz argues that it is important to show the world more of modern China through literature.

“There have been a lot of stories about these big historical sagas centered on the ‘cultural revolution.’ I don’t think people realize quite how diverse the voices are. Of course not everything can be translated, but I try to translate as much as I can.

“For example my next author who is coming through is Han Han, who has a tremendous amount of publicity in China. It will be interesting to see how he’s received in the English language. I think he will do very well and it will be really interesting for the West to read about how someone in the late 20s perceives modern China.”

Juszczakiewicz’s efforts in promoting Chinese literature abroad have not gone unnoticed. One of her writers, Su Tong, won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2009 for

his avant garde novel, *The Boat to Redemption*.

David Parker, chair director of the Man Asian Literary Prize, says: “As Asia — and China, especially — have become the world’s primary engine of economic growth, the West has become naturally fascinated by the region and feels a need to understand it better.

“Part of the fascination is sheer curiosity and I think fascination with the country often leads to fascination with the writing. People in the West can often have superficial media-created images of China and Asia that often just recycle stereotypes. Nothing undermines these stereotypes more effectively than the best novels when they promote real understanding.”

Big business

Another type of China book that has proliferated in recent years promotes a different type of understanding: business. Books promising access to untold fortunes in Chinese markets have been commonplace on bookshelves for the past decade, and there is no sign of a slowdown.

“Before I began to write *The China Executive* in 1999, there had been no books published on the topic of ‘China business’ as such,” says author Wei Wang. “But by the time my book was published in 2006, a large number of books on China business began to appear on the market.”

Many of these titles performed well. Books such as Tim Clissold’s *Mr. China* and James McGregor’s *One Billion Customers* sold particularly well and garnered much mainstream attention. But Wei Wang suggests caution when

approaching books that promise easy solutions to the challenges of doing business in China.

“While these titles as a whole represent a development in the field of China business thinking, there has sometimes been too much of a disconnect between what people read about China and what they find when they arrive because of the authors’ backgrounds”.

Edward Tse, author of *The China Strategy*, reiterates the point, and argues that it can often be counterproductive to take advice from people who may not have first-hand experience of doing business on the ground in China.

“Often authors don’t live and work in China and visit only occasionally. They write about China from long distances and some rely mostly on third-hand sources of information. China changes so fast and is such a large and complex country, it is rather hard for authors to fully capture China. By the time a book comes out, some of its contents may be somewhat outdated already.”

The issue of timing is important, according to Wei Wang. While China is moving so far and publishers are putting pressure on authors to produce work quickly, he argues that the best books are often the result of a little more contemplation.

“An important ingredient is time, sufficient time to reflect on one’s experience, to digest others’ ideas, and to develop a meaningful structure. Yet, when one writes under the pressure of the deadline set by a publisher, it is difficult to do these things properly.”

Whether his advice is heard among the clamor to produce more and more titles on China is another issue. Either way, there can be no denying that readers have unprecedented access to books on the country.

“The more books there are about China, whether that’s literature or secondary responses to China by Anglophone speakers, the better,” says Lovell. “Certainly over the time I’ve been working on China I’ve seen the number of books available multiply quite dramatically.

“I’m sure that the trend will continue. I think the story of the rise of China is one of the most interesting and complex stories in the world today, and the more sources and responses we have on it the better our understanding will be.”

Li Ao-xue contributed to this story.