

Understanding China – A Christmas Reading List

China is often portrayed as a hopelessly complex country that is nearly impossible to understand - unless, of course, you're a true insider, meaning born and bred in Mainland China or perhaps a long-time foreign resident who has effectively gone native. While it is certainly true that relatively few people have a good understanding of China's recent history, political system, business environment, and geopolitical motivations, China is not nearly as incomprehensible as those with a vested interest in perpetuating that myth, such as the CPC and management consultants, would have you believe; the basic laws of nature and economics actually do apply in China, just as they do everywhere else in the known universe.

In fact, it is possible to learn quite a lot about China in a relatively short period of time, if you know where to look. So, with Christmas just around the corner, here is a personal selection of some of the best books I have come across. Of course, they won't make you a true expert, but they'll go a long way towards making China seem a great deal less inscrutable.

1. *The Fall and Rise of China*. By Richard Baum. The Teaching Company, 2011 (video).

Baum was one of the leading Western scholars on Chinese politics. This 48-lecture course from The Teaching Company is well worth the time and money as it provides an excellent introduction to China's modern history from the fall of the Qing empire to the present (*note: this course is quite expensive, but fortunately frequently on sale*).

2. *On China*. By Henry Kissinger. Penguin Group (USA), 2011.

Although a little light on events preceding his own arrival on the scene in the late sixties, this is still a terrific book with numerous fascinating personal anecdotes and details from someone who was actually there for much of it.

3. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. By Ezra Vogel. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Widely considered the best biography of one of the most important political leaders of the twentieth century, in- and outside of China.

4. *Mao's Last Revolution*. By Roderick MacFarquar and Michael Schoenhals. Harvard University Press, 2008.

The definitive single-volume account of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which almost plunged China into civil war. Still highly relevant almost four decades later.

5. *Managing The China Challenge: How to Achieve Corporate Success in the People's Republic*. By Kenneth Lieberthal. Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

Insightful and concise, this is an excellent introduction to China's business environment by one of the West's leading experts.

6. *China CEO: Voices of Experience from 20 International Business Leaders*. By Juan Antonio Fernandez and Laurie Underwood. Wiley, 2006.

Don't be misled by the somewhat simplistic title; this is a very useful book with lots of practical advice from twenty well-known MNC business leaders in China. Fernandez has since published an equally valuable companion book of case studies (*China CEO: A Case Guide for Business Leaders in China*).

7. *The China Strategy: Harnessing the Power of the World's Fastest-Growing Economy*. By Edward Tse. Basic Books, 2010.

Thoughtful analysis of China's increasing importance in the world and the implications for MNCs from developed countries by Booz & Company's long-time Chairman in Greater China.

8. *China's Regulatory State: A New Strategy for Globalization*. By Rosalyn Hsueh. Cornell University Press, 2011.

China's opening up to the world is usually described as a unidirectional process with different industries at various stages of regulatory liberalization. However, this interesting, but little-known, study of the Chinese telecommunications and textile industries suggests that, in reality, the Chinese government has adopted a bifurcated strategy to meet its twin goals of complying with WTO commitments and retaining some control by complementing liberalization at the aggregate (macro) level with reregulation at the sectorial (micro) level.

9. *China Airborne: the Test of China's Future*. By James Fallows. Knopf Doubleday, 2012.

Fallows is one of the most astute journalists covering China. In his latest book, he uses China's efforts to modernize its domestic aerospace industry as an example of the challenges the country will face over the next few years as it tries to navigate through the feared middle income trap.

10. *In the Shadow of the Dragon: the Global Expansion of Chinese Companies and How it Will Change Business Forever*. By Winter Nie and William Dowell. AMACOM, 2012.

Useful profiles of emerging Chinese companies that many people likely haven't even heard of (yet).

Finally, new editions of two excellent books on China will be published early next year: Susan Shirk's *China, Fragile Superpower* and Jeff Wasserstrom's *China in the twentieth century - What Everyone Should Know*. Both are highly recommended.