

FOREWORD BY JANET YELLEN

WEIJIAN SHAN

OUT

OF THE

GOBI

MY STORY OF CHINA AND AMERICA



BONUS
CONTENT:
IN PURSUIT OF
LEARNING

Out of the Gobi



Source: WorldAtlas.com

Note: China, with a landmass of approximately 9.6 million square kilometers (3.7 million square miles), is about the same size as the United States (with its landmass of 9.8 million square kilometers, or 3.8 million square miles). China's population of about 1.4 billion (in 2016) is more than four times that of the United States (325 million). The shape of the country reminds one of a rooster. The Gobi Desert is located on the back of the rooster, in the north. The Great Wall, shown as a dotted line, stretches from the throat of the rooster near Beijing all the way to the west, roughly parallel to the rest of the Gobi Desert for 6,259 kilometers (3,889 miles), but its total length, including all its branches, is 21,196 kilometers (13,171 miles). The Yellow River, part of which flows close to the southern edge of the Gobi Desert, is the second-longest river in China and the sixth-longest in the world, with an estimated length of 5,464 kilometers (3,395 miles).

Out of the Gobi

*My Story of China
and America*

Weijian Shan

WILEY

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*To my wife, Bin Shi, and to our son,
Bo, and daughter, LeeAnn*

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Preface

In Pursuit of Learning

On January 17, 2019, the day that *Out of the Gobi* was first published, I appeared on stage at the Asia Society auditorium in New York City. I was joining Tom Friedman, the world-renowned Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author, for a fireside chat to launch my new book. It was a full house, with standing room only.

I opened the evening by thanking the audience. “I’m very honored and humbled by your presence.” I paused, before continuing, “Although I know all of you are here for Tom Friedman.”

That line drew much laughter.

Before the laughter died down, I added, “Me too.”

The audience roared with more laughter.

I am immensely grateful to Tom for traveling with his son all the way from Washington, D.C., to join me on stage. I owe my book’s

successful launch to him. His generosity and graciousness deeply humbled me.

Much of this book is devoted to my own experiences and those of my peers during China's Cultural Revolution, a decade of turmoil launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 that ended with his death in 1976. At one point in our conversation, Tom asked me: "Do the young people in China know much about the Cultural Revolution?"

"Let me tell you a story," I said in response.

In 2012, the chairman of a Chinese bank persuaded me to become an independent director of his company. Subsequently, the bank made a public announcement of my candidacy. Such a position required the approval of banking regulators.

After reviewing my documents and biographical information, the regulator sent me a request: Please provide the name of your secondary school. I replied that I had never attended secondary school. Then another question came: "Why did you not attend secondary school?"

I suppose the official in charge there was too young to know that during the Cultural Revolution, all schools in China were shut down for as long as 10 years. I was surprised—had his parents or teachers never told him? I couldn't resist being mischievous: "For this question," I wrote back, "please ask the Great Leader Chairman Mao."

Apparently, the regulator didn't appreciate my humor. My directorship was never approved.

The audience laughed again. But to me, it is sad and quite alarming that some in the younger generation—although I have no idea what percentage—don't know about this chapter of China's history.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," warned the Spanish philosopher George Santaya. Winston Churchill said something similar.

Indeed, history often repeats itself, remarked Hegel, the German philosopher. "The first time as tragedy, the second time as farce," added Karl Marx, ridiculing Napoleon III's ascension to the throne. Neither Hegel nor Marx insisted that history *must* repeat itself. But it is always possible, when people fail to learn from it. History itself is full of such examples—just think of how invading Russia was the beginning of the end for both Napoleon and Hitler.

That is why I wrote this book—to hopefully provide lessons from the history that my peers and I lived through. That history reads like a Greek tragicomedy with two parts: the Mao Zedong era and the Deng Xiaoping era.

The Mao era was an unmitigated calamity, marked by frequent political purges, a man-made famine that killed millions, social tumult, violence, and extreme poverty. Mao adopted a Soviet-style political and economic system that even the Soviets thought was too radical. He created an egalitarian society in which everyone was equally poor. His China was diplomatically isolated and economically closed. He left the country in utter ruins when he finally exited the stage.

The Deng era was what the Mao era was not. Mao was for a centrally planned economy modeled after the Soviet Union. Deng was for a market economy. Mao kept China closed. Deng opened up the country. A survivor of Mao's purges, Deng learned a lesson from the disasters of his predecessor's rule. He reined in government excesses and unleashed the "animal spirits" (a term coined by the famous economist John Maynard Keynes) in the population by encouraging private enterprise and entrepreneurship. It was his vision and pragmatism that transformed China from a poverty-stricken backwater to an economic juggernaut and the largest trading nation in the world. And it was his policies that lifted more than a billion Chinese out of poverty. Deng saved China.

Extraordinary lessons can be learned from this history.

Ernest Hemingway popularized the concept of "the Lost Generation," the cohort of Europeans and Americans who reached adulthood at the time of the First World War. They were "lost," I suppose, because the Great War had robbed millions of their lives and untold millions more of a normal life. The trauma of war left many bewildered, disoriented, aimless, and often jobless.

China also has a Lost Generation, one that came of age during the Cultural Revolution. It is the generation I belong to. We were lost because we were deprived of schooling at a young age, for a decade for some and forever for most.

Mao launched the Cultural Revolution with the stated purpose of purifying the country of capitalist ideologies and ridding the government, at all levels, of hidden "class enemies." Mao called upon

students and “the masses” of ordinary people to rise up and rebel against the establishment. Society was plunged into great turmoil: schools were shut; teachers were beaten up or killed; intellectuals, or anyone perceived as being one, were denigrated and persecuted. Nearly all economic activity ground to a halt. Eventually, the students themselves were exiled, en masse, to the remote countryside to be “re-educated” through farming and hard labor, with no hope of return. They were referred to as the “educated youth,” a comical misnomer as most lacked a basic education.

Around 1969, about 17 million of these “educated youth” were sent off, representing about 10 percent of China’s urban population (not to mention millions more young adults from rural areas, where more than 80 percent of China’s 800 million people resided). It was the most massive de-urbanization movement in human history.

Books were banned or burned. Reading was frowned upon or prohibited. Ignorance was celebrated as the way of the proletariat. Life was so harsh that after a day of backbreaking hard labor, few wanted to read anyhow. Lives were thus wasted as the years went by.

When the Deng era finally dawned, almost all “educated youth” were allowed to return to their home cities. But without a basic education, most of them struggled to find a decent job or a purpose in life. Just like Hemingway’s characters, they were quite lost in a changed world.

I consider myself to be a survivor of the Lost Generation in that I was able to get an education after the ordeal came to an end and to go on to pursue graduate studies in the United States. In the Deng era, such opportunities were open to all. But few were able to seize them.

Deng reinstated the college entrance examination system in 1977, after an 11-year hiatus. All those between the ages of 16 and 36 could apply. That extraordinary 20-year age bracket defines my generation. By my rough and conservative estimate, based on 10 million births per year on average, members of the Lost Generation made up some 200 million people out of China’s total population of about 950 million.

Although the exam was open to all, only 5.7 million took it. Of those, just 273,000 were accepted into college. Half a year later, in 1978, another exam was held for those who had missed the first one, adding a further 402,000 freshmen out of 6.1 million applicants.

All told, only five in a thousand in the age group born between 1947 and 1960 managed to eventually receive a college education. By comparison, the proportion of 18-year-olds in China who went on to attend college in 2018 reached 48 percent (about the same as in the United States).

I went to the United States to study in 1980. Statistics show that in that year, only 1,862 students from all of China received scholarships to study abroad. By comparison, there are about 3,000 to 4,000 lightning victims in China each year. A Chinese person was much more likely to be struck by lightning than to qualify for foreign studies at that time.

How did I beat the odds? Was I lucky or privileged? Neither. To start out with, my lot was the same as my entire generation—and worse than some, who benefited from nepotism to get out of the Gobi and other hardship posts through “back doors.” The only thing I did differently from most of my peers was never to stop reading. During all those years, whatever books I could lay my hands on, under whatever harsh conditions—too cold, too hot, too tired, too late, too dark, or too dangerous—I read. I persisted for no other reason than to satisfy my insatiable curiosity and to cling to the hope that someday the knowledge could be useful.

“Fortune favors the prepared mind,” said Louis Pasteur, the French scientist who discovered the principles of vaccination and pasteurization. Indeed, when the Deng era came and opportunities arose, I was more than ready to seize them, fair and square.

“We cannot choose our external circumstances,” wrote the Greek philosopher Epictetus, who had been born a slave, “but we can always choose how we respond to them.” I believe that if we hope to get anywhere in life, a passion for learning is the only right response to any circumstance, because knowledge opens doors to opportunities when the right moment comes.

When I reflect on my past, there were several moments when I knew nothing would ever be the same again—that time was divided into two halves, before and after, even if I didn’t know what the future would bring. Sometimes I could feel such moments coming; at other times, they came as surprises.

We live in an uncertain world, goes the cliché. But it is true. There are history-changing moments, and there are also moments that only

change your own life. More often than not, history and life changing moments come hand in hand.

I recall a conversation with Martin Wolf, the famed *Financial Times* columnist, on a sunny day in June 2022 in his office by the Thames River in London. He became an economist in 1971, he told me. Economists are in the business of making forecasts. Yet he gave a few examples of world-changing events that took everyone by surprise: Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1972, the 1973 Arab-Israel war, followed by the Oil Embargo that produced "the first oil shock," the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and now the 2022 Ukraine War.

I can add to the list a number of shocks that were consequential to the world history: Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented reforms and open-door policy from 1978, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Wolf's point was that we must think about what is possible, even if it is the unthinkable—nuclear wars, civil wars, terrorist attacks—because of their unimaginable impact on human history and lives. And we must be prepared for them.

Is the world so troubled that we must consider the possibilities of the unimaginable? I am afraid it is. Today, we are at another critical moment in world history when optimism gives way to pessimism, international cooperation to conflict, globalization to decoupling, free trade to protectionism, convergence of values to divergence. Mankind is, at this moment, losing the battle against climate change that has produced devastating floods and droughts around the globe. The world is in a food and energy crisis, and it is also heading into a recession. Suffering is all around with little hope anywhere. The future looks bleak.

Yet, we live in the age of great technological revolution. New innovations constantly transform and improve the ways we live. Generally, life is getting better, and opportunities abound. In my youth, books were a luxury; there were no TVs or other forms of entertainment. Today, young people have unlimited knowledge—and unlimited distractions—at their fingertips.

There is however a paradox: the less you have, the more you appreciate what you have; conversely, the more you have, the less you appreciate it. Unlike members of China's Lost Generation, today's young

people can take schooling for granted. But if they don't appreciate the opportunity to learn as much as we did, they won't get as much out of it as we did either. If they do, the world will be theirs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the world and upended lives. Yet, after almost three years, life is bouncing back, maybe stronger than ever. The world faces grim challenges at this moment, but it has seen worse—world wars, disasters, and crises. At times like this, I remind myself that nothing can be worse than the life in the Gobi, and that even then, there was hope. Was it by chance that the Deng era followed the Mao era, or was it a historical inevitability? In any case, I believe that those who don't give up when circumstances are dire will be winners when the right time comes. It will just be a matter of time.

Weijian Shan
September 29, 2022
Sicily, Italy

Foreword

The manuscript of Weijian Shan's book arrived on my desk at a hectic time: I had commitments for weeks to come. But when I finally picked up the manuscript, I was so gripped by his stories that I could hardly put it down.

I have known Shan for 36 years, since he first showed up in my office on a sunny September day in 1982. He struck me as a charming young man, full of smiles, but in need of a good meal and a new haircut. He had arrived at Berkeley to start his Ph.D. program, and I was his academic advisor. I was stunned to discover that he had no formal math training. All the math he knew he had learned by himself, by candlelight. Over time, I learned a bit about Shan's unique and extraordinary background growing up in China, where he was denied an education for 10 years after elementary school.

Yet I was fascinated to read his detailed account of a China gone mad during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution, of the severe hardship he and his generation had endured, of his relentless pursuit of an education through reading whatever books he could find while serving as a hard laborer in China's Gobi Desert at a time when almost all books were banned, and of how, against all odds, he was able to get out of the Gobi and eventually find his way to America to attend graduate school.

He recounts a contemporary history of China rarely told in the English literature from a personal perspective, a history that paralleled our own tumultuous period in the 1960s and 1970s in America. His keen observation of the United States from the viewpoint of someone with a totally different cultural, political, and economic background is unique, insightful, heartwarming, and often funny. He recounts his stories with vivid clarity, short, punchy sentences, and light and dark humor. They captivate the reader, who feels as if he is watching a movie, anxious to know how the plot will unfold and where it will all end.

After earning his doctoral degree, Shan received offers of professorships from some of the most renowned American universities, including MIT and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. I remember him calling me for advice, asking which school he should choose for his academic career. I told him he couldn't go wrong at any of these top schools. As I remarked to one of my Berkeley colleagues at a celebration party on the occasion of Shan's graduation in 1987, I found it mind-boggling how far he had journeyed—from working as a hard laborer without a secondary education and with no command of English to becoming a professor at one of America's most prestigious universities, all in about ten years.

Shan's story shows the crucial role that education plays in the success of individuals and society as a whole. Moreover, Shan's life provides a demonstration of what is possible when China and the United States come together, even by happenstance. It is not only Shan's personal history that makes this book so interesting but also how the stories of China and America merge in just one moment in time to create an inspired individual so unique and driven, and so representative of the true spirits of both countries.

Particularly now, the people of both nations have much to learn from and teach one another. I hope that Shan's book will serve as a cornerstone in that ongoing conversation.

Janet Yellen
Federal Reserve Chair (2014–2018)
Eugene E. and Catherine
M. Trefethen Professor of Business and
Professor of Economics Emeritus,
University of California, Berkeley

Acknowledgments

This book is a memoir, not an autobiography. The distinction may be blurred at times, but my idea has always been to tell stories that I consider reflective of history as I lived it, both in China and in America.

By coincidence, the release of this book will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the start of my life in the Gobi Desert in China's Inner Mongolia. My generation in China is truly a lost generation, because for 10 long years the vast majority of us were deprived of a formal education and many were unable to make up for the lost years later in life. I dedicate this book to my friends of the Gobi days and to the people of my generation who shared similar ordeals.

I am immensely grateful to Dr. Janet Yellen for providing the foreword for this book.

I began to write this book in 1990, and after a few months I completed about 100 pages, which included my recollections covered in Chapters 5 through 7, 9 through 13, and 15. Dr. Judy Shapiro at the University of Pennsylvania helped me edit those pages. Before I was able to finish them, I became extremely busy, and by good fortune I remained so for the next 26 years. On New Year's Day 2017, at my son's home in California with our family, I decided to pick it back up again.

I wish to thank Bill Falloon, my editor at Wiley, who, in addition to his editing work, made good suggestions from which the book benefited immensely. It is based on his suggestion that I include a prologue for each chapter, to provide historical background and context for the ensuing story. I also thank the Wiley teams in copyediting, design, production, and marketing for an excellent job in turning the book into a beautiful product.

I owe my gratitude to my other editors, Mark Clifford, Jill Baker, and Tim Morrison, for their encouragement and their essential help editing, fact-checking, and suggesting numerous good ideas to improve the quality of the manuscript. I thank my assistant Rachel Kwok for helping me in countless ways related to this project.

The stories in the book are based on recollections of my own experiences, and on rare occasions those of others, woven together into a coherent narrative. I have incorporated materials and data from historical research, but do not otherwise provide sources and citations as you might find in a more formal work of history. I have made an effort to check multiple sources to determine the accuracy and reliability of the data included here. I along with my editors have made our best efforts to fact-check all material information in the book. The responsibility for any errors is mine alone.

My good friend Liu Xiaotong, a self-taught photographer who owned a rare 135mm camera, took many of the photographs of us in the Gobi, including the photograph on the cover showing me running in the Gobi. He would have been an accomplished musician and multi-talented artist if not for the Cultural Revolution.

I am deeply indebted to my wife, Bin Shi, for her support and sacrifice as I devoted almost all my spare time to this project, and to my children, Bo and LeeAnn, whose fascination with the stories of my past strongly motivated me to write and complete this book, and whose critiques helped improve it greatly.

Weijian Shan
October 17, 2018
Hong Kong

Author's Note

Chinese names are written and spoken with the surname or family name first, followed by the given name. Take, for example, the most famous Chinese names of the twentieth century: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chiang Kai-shek—all are written with the family name first.

Western-educated Chinese tend to adopt the European way to write their names in English (i.e., putting the given name first and family name last). My name as presented in Chinese is Shan Weijian. In English, it is Weijian Shan. In mainland China today, a woman does not adopt the family name of her husband, so there is no distinction between a “maiden” and a “married” name as in the United States or Europe. Some Chinese women living outside mainland China, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, adopt their husbands' family names. My wife's given name is Bin and her family name is Shi. In China, it is written as Shi Bin, but in America her name is written as either Bin Shi or Bin Shi Shan, the latter adopting my family name.

In this book, all Chinese names are presented in the order of family name first, followed by the given name, and are indexed in this way as well.

I refer to some characters in the book by their given names and others by their family names, with or without an honorific or professional title (Mr., Mrs., Dr., or Professor). This largely depends on how I would greet them in real life, as such references come naturally to mind when I write. It should be noted that it is common in Chinese culture to greet someone by putting either “lao (Old),” which is a form of respect, or “xiao (Little),” which is a form of endearment, in front of their family name. In this book, I use this in referring to Old Yi, Old Cui, Old Huang, and so on, because this is how they were addressed by the people around them.

China uses a traditional system of measurement as well as the metric system. The Chinese system can be easily translated into the metric system in whole numbers. For example, one kilometer is exactly two Chinese *li*, one meter is exactly 3 Chinese *chi*, one kilogram is exactly two Chinese *jin*, one hectare is exactly 15 *mu*. In the book, I provide the imperial equivalent when a unit of measurement is presented in the metric system or Chinese system, for example, 100 kilometers (~62 miles) or 100 kilograms (~220 pounds).

I make an effort to minimize the use of acronyms, abbreviations, or untranslated Chinese terms to make it easier for the reader to understand. For example, I use the “Nationalist” Party or the “Nationalist” government to refer to Chiang Kai-shek’s organization, instead of “Kuomintang” or “KMT,” which are loanwords based on Chinese phonetics often seen in the English literature of Chinese studies.

Out of the Gobi

Prologue

On September 15, 1950, UN forces commanded by General Douglas MacArthur made an amphibious landing at the port of Incheon, on the west coast of Korea, about 40 kilometers from Seoul. The operation involved more than 260 naval vessels, including 6 aircraft carriers, and 75,000 troops, the largest deployment of firepower since the D-Day landing at Normandy. North Korean forces had squeezed the opposing UN troops to a toehold around Pusan, in the southeastern corner of the Korean Peninsula, and threatened to push them into the Pacific Ocean. For the North Koreans, victory was in sight. The Incheon landing, however, was a complete success: It put MacArthur's troops well behind the North Koreans' front lines and turned the tide of the Korean War. By October, UN forces crossed the 38th parallel dividing North and South Korea. By the end of the month they were within striking distance of the Yalu River, which demarcates the border between North Korea and China. General MacArthur declared that the war would be over by Christmas.

On November 1, advancing US troops were halted at the Battle of Unsan some 200 kilometers from the Chinese border and repelled by Chinese forces, which eventually pushed all the way back across the 38th parallel and recaptured Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

As his troops lost ground, US president Harry Truman declared that he would take whatever steps necessary to win the war in Korea, including the use of nuclear weapons. In April 1951, he sent nine nuclear bombs with fissile cores to Okinawa, along with nuclear-capable B-29 bombers. In October, Operation Hudson Harbor conducted mock nuclear bombing runs across the war zone, preparing to rain fire on a huge swath of northeast Asia, including parts of China and Russia if necessary. Fortunately, they never had to. By that summer the war had largely devolved into skirmishes in a narrow zone around the 38th parallel, and armistice talks were under way.

I was born in October 1953 in China's Shandong Province, one of the two primary target areas for the planned nuclear strike. I was lucky to have been born.

★ ★ ★

My parents' generation, and the generation before theirs, had lived through numerous wars, each more devastating than the last, with almost no respite or peace in between. Tens of millions of people died in China in those wars and in famines during the century before my birth.

The last Chinese dynasty, the Qing, was overthrown in October 1911. Prior to this, the country had been repeatedly ravaged by foreign invasions and peasant uprisings.

In the First Opium War of 1840, Britain invaded and defeated China for refusing to allow British merchants to sell opium to China. The Second Opium War followed, from 1856 to 1860, during which the joint forces of the British and French empires marched all the way to Beijing to force China to legalize the opium trade and open its ports to foreigners. They burned down the magnificent Old Summer Palace, said to be many times larger and grander than its replacement, which itself is still considered one of the greatest imperial palaces in the world.

Between 1851 and 1864, there was a massive peasant uprising known as Taiping Rebellion. About 20 million people perished in the seesaw battles between the peasants and government forces before the rebellion was brutally crushed. The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) led to another invasion of China and the occupation of Beijing by the joint

forces of eight foreign powers, which included European countries, the United States, and Japan. In 1894, Japanese warships obliterated the newly formed Chinese navy off China's northeast coast, clearing the way for Japan's colonial occupation of Korea. The ground battle of the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) was fought in the Chinese port city of Lushun, known at that time as Port Arthur, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilian deaths.

By the beginning of twentieth century, the Qing dynasty was rotten to the core, and the country was on the verge of being torn apart by foreign powers. The 1911 Revolution marked an end to the imperial era and gave birth to the Republic of China. But it did not bring either peace or a stronger nation. The country soon fractured into many different territories, controlled by warlords who relentlessly waged bloody wars against each other, causing numerous deaths and much misery.

In 1927, a Northern Expedition Force led by Chiang Kai-shek marched from the southern city of Guangzhou, fought its way north against the warlords, and eventually brought the country under one flag, albeit extremely tenuously. Along the way, Chiang carried out a purge of Communists, his former allies in the fight against the warlords. Thousands were massacred by Chiang's Nationalist troops, and the rest either went underground or led uprisings against the new regime. In August 1927, Zhou Enlai, who later became the first premier of the People's Republic of China, led an armed uprising in the southern city of Nanchang, which marked the founding of the People's Liberation Army. In autumn 1927, Mao Zedong led what became known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising, establishing the first Communist base in the mountainous areas of Jiangxi Province. This began the first civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists; it would last for the next 10 years.

In 1931, Japanese troops invaded northeast China and captured a territory about twice the size of France, turning it into a puppet state they called Manchukuo. In 1937, Japan launched an all-out war against China and occupied all the coastal cities and some inland provinces. By various estimates, Chinese casualties from the time of Japan's invasion to its surrender in 1945 numbered between 20 and 30 million, the vast majority of which were civilian deaths.

The Nationalists and the Communists cooperated in the war against Japan, but as soon as hostilities were ended, their own conflict

was rekindled. In the ensuing war, Communist forces led by Mao Zedong rapidly grew in strength to rival and eventually overwhelm the Nationalist troops. Between 1947 and 1949, the Communists won three decisive battles, each of which eliminated about half a million Nationalist troops, sealing the fate of Chiang Kai-shek's Old China. Chiang fled to Taiwan with what was left of his troops and his government, taking with him tons of gold and all movable treasures from Beijing's Forbidden City.

Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. This was to be the New China: finally unified, free of the yoke of imperial and colonial aggression, marching forward into a promising future.

★ ★ ★

I was born into this New China, a country that had finally begun a period of sustained nation-building after a hundred years of tragic upheaval and war. It is for this reason my parents named me Weijian. The Chinese character *wei* means "great," and *jian* means "build" or "construct." They certainly had great hopes for nation-building, for peace, and for a better life for their children.

But it was not to be. Not, at least, as they had hoped.