

CHINA 中国 TODAY

# CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

JUDITH SHAPIRO



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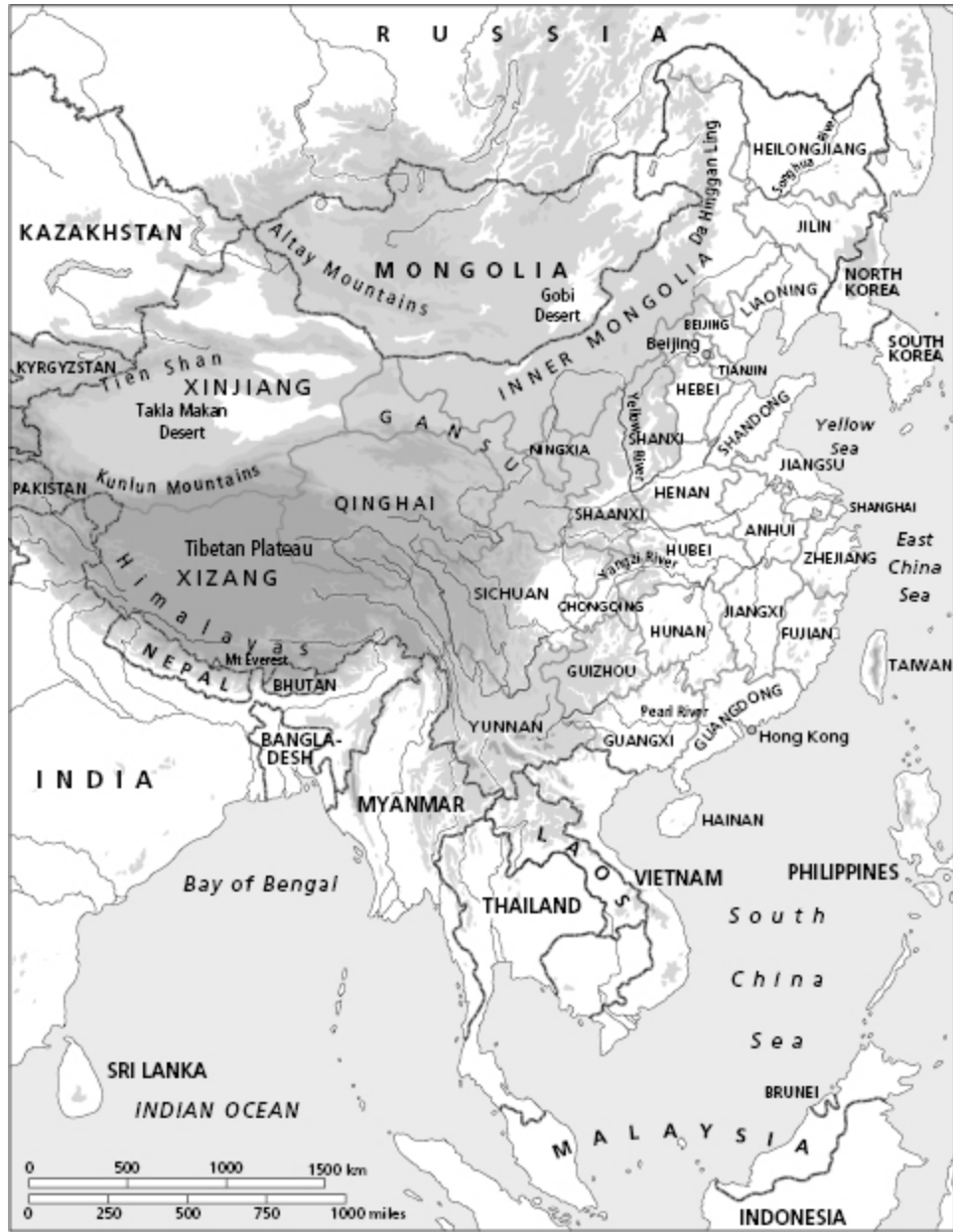
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# Chronology

1894–95	First Sino-Japanese War
1911	Fall of the Qing dynasty
1912	Republic of China established under Sun Yat-sen
1927	Split between Nationalists (KMT) and Communists (CCP); civil war begins
1931	Central China floods kill millions
1934–1935	CCP under Mao Zedong evades KMT in Long March
December 1937	Nanjing Massacre
1937–1945	Second Sino-Japanese War
1945–1949	Civil war between KMT and CCP resumes
October 1949	KMT retreats to Taiwan; Mao founds People's Republic of China (PRC)
1950–1953	Korean War
1953–1957	First Five-Year Plan; PRC adopts Soviet-style economic planning
1954	First constitution of the PRC and first meeting of the National People's Congress
1956–1957	Hundred Flowers Movement, a brief period of open political debate
1957	Anti-Rightist Movement, a period of repression
1958–1960	Great Leap Forward, an effort to transform China through rapid industrialization and collectivization
March 1959	Tibetan uprising in Lhasa; Dalai Lama flees to India
1959–1961	Three Hard Years, widespread famine with tens of millions of deaths
Early 1960s	Sino-Soviet split
1962	Sino-Indian War
October 1964	First PRC atomic bomb detonation
1966–1976	Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution; Mao reasserts power
February 1972	President Richard Nixon visits China; 'Shanghai Communiqué' pledges to normalize U.S.-China relations
June 1972	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm
July 1976	Tangshan earthquake kills hundreds of thousands
September	Death of Mao Zedong

1976

October 1976 Ultra-Leftist Gang of Four arrested and sentenced

December 1978 Deng Xiaoping assumes power; launches Four Modernizations and economic reforms

1978 One-child family planning policy introduced

1979 U.S. and China establish formal diplomatic ties

1979 PRC invades Vietnam

January 1981 PRC ratifies 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

1982 Census reports PRC population at more than one billion

December 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration agrees to return Hong Kong to China in 1997

1989 Tiananmen Square protests culminate in June 4 military crackdown

June 1991 PRC ratifies 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer

December 1991 PRC ratifies 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal

April 1992 National People's Congress formally approves Three Gorges Dam

June 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio

1992 Deng Xiaoping's Southern Inspection Tour re-energizes economic reforms

1993-2002 Jiang Zemin is president of PRC, continues economic growth agenda

1998 Yangzi River floods kill thousands, leave millions homeless, prompt logging ban

March 1998 State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) created

November 2001 WTO accepts China as member

August 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg; PRC ratifies 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

2003-2013 Hu Jintao is president of PRC

2002-2003 SARS outbreak

2006 PRC supplants U.S. as largest gross CO<sub>2</sub> emitter; Three Gorges Dam mostly complete

March 2008 State Environmental Protection Administration upgraded to Ministry of Environmental Protection

May 2008 Sichuan earthquake kills tens of thousands  
August 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing

# Preface

I first visited the People's Republic of China in the summer of 1977. United States-China relations had not yet been normalized, Mao Zedong had been dead less than a year, and political posters plastered everywhere showed the Chairman lying on his sickbed with his chosen successor Hua Guofeng at his side, saying "With You in Charge, I am at Ease." Hua would only hold power until December 1978. A reformist government followed under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who returned from political exile and persecution to revolutionize China as profoundly as Mao did in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party's army defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and drove it and its followers to Taiwan. Little did I know then, at the age of 24, that the parades and celebrations I witnessed in Shanghai marked the beginning of Deng's political rehabilitation. Nor did I understand that this political "opening" was about to transform China, the world, and also my own life, providing me with the opportunity to be among the first 40 Americans to teach English there, along with a few resident foreign Maoists who had managed to survive the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.

China had been profoundly shut away from most of the outside world since the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s. What the West knew about the Mao years was limited largely to interviews with refugees conducted by scholars and government officials in Hong Kong, and glowing reports from leftwing "friends of China." When I was at university and graduate school in the 1970s, the United States was reeling from the unpopular Vietnam War. Many American young people were highly critical of the U.S. government and skeptical of its claims that our traditional enemies,

China among them, could possibly be as bad as claimed. We knew vaguely about “people’s communes,” which sounded fascinating at a time when our domestic counter-culture movement was also experimenting with collective living. We also knew that in China it was said that “Women Hold up Half the Sky,” a compelling slogan for Western feminists who were expanding their intellectual, political, and personal influence and becoming a truly popular women’s movement. Through “ping-pong diplomacy,” or friendly sports matches intended to break down political barriers, and the limited cultural exchanges that followed the famous 1972 Nixon and Kissinger visit, we caught televised performances by the fantastic Shanghai acrobats, whose back-bending female contortionists could stack bowls on their heads with their feet while standing on their forearms, and whose male gymnasts could create tableaux of 20 figures balanced on a single circling bicycle. We admired naïve and charming peasant paintings that showed nets full of golden carp and fields of abundant harvests, with red-cheeked girls portrayed as members of the “Worker, Peasant, Soldier” proletariat. In retrospect, our romanticism was at best untutored and at worst dangerous. Nonetheless, it was the reason for my determination to learn Chinese, which I began studying in my sophomore year at Princeton, and to go to China to live.

I might have been more sensitive to signs that not everything was as rosy as I hoped, during my first visit in the summer of 1977. My organized group tour consisted of members of the U.S.-China People’s Friendship Association, a populist organization intended to build people-to-people ties at a time our governments were at loggerheads. At one point, we were traveling by overnight train from Beijing to Xi’an when the guide assigned to spend two weeks with us, a kindly middle-aged lady, returned from the train platform after a ten minute stop, weeping profoundly. She was

sharing a sleeping compartment with me and I asked what was wrong. She told the story of her beloved son who had been “sent down” from his home to the rural countryside to “learn from” the peasants. She had just seen him for the first time since he left home ten years earlier. She explained that the residence card system, which included everyone in China, kept him in exile. His residence card, or *hukou*, had been transferred to the countryside, keeping him trapped there; he would be unable to obtain ration coupons to buy rice, cooking oil, vegetables, clothing, and other life necessities anywhere else. She missed him terribly.

Also on that trip, an overseas Chinese woman in our group made every effort to contact her relatives and was finally allowed to glimpse them for a few moments. In the company of Party handlers, they were unable to speak freely and she was unable to discover what had happened to them during the Cultural Revolution. Their gaunt appearance and fearful demeanor made her profoundly worried.

However, instead of paying attention to these warning signals, I became more enamored than ever of a country whose people appeared strong and slim, warmly hospitable, and eager for our help. The women wore the same clothing as the men: blue or green pants and simple white shirts. They wore their hair in long braids or short bobs; they used no makeup, and indeed, there was none for sale. The men had brushy haircuts, bad teeth, and wonderfully winning smiles. The entire country seemed to rely on bicycles for transportation; automobiles were few, and reserved for “distinguished guests” like ourselves or for high-ranking Party officials. The Chinese were clearly thrilled we were visiting - everywhere we drew huge, curious, friendly crowds. Foreigners unlucky enough to be tall or to have blond or red hair were mobbed. The Chinese begged us to

come back and help them to develop. Profoundly moved, I was determined to try to make a contribution.

When in early 1979 the phone call came from the Chinese Embassy telling me I had been selected to teach English in Hunan Province, I was a Masters degree student in Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. With almost six years of Chinese language training and blessed with short stature and dark hair to help me blend into local crowds, I was as well-equipped as any American might have been for the experiences that lay ahead. In retrospect, I was totally unprepared for the shocking stories I heard once I arrived and the moving events I experienced. In the course of those early two-and-a-half years of life in China, I made deep and often dangerous friendships (foreigners were still widely viewed as spies), traveled to numerous places where no foreigner had been, witnessed the struggles of a country recovering from a prolonged nightmare, and found my own writer's voice as someone who could bear witness to the suffering of a people who had no other court of appeal.

Hunan Province was Chairman Mao's home province. As a result, Maoism ran deep. Ultra-leftist military men were entrenched in power at my university, Hunan Teachers' College, and they were not at all pleased to be sent a Western foreign teacher, even if (or perhaps especially since) her English was considered an essential tool of the modernization policy of the new government. The "foreign expert" was given a large apartment, by Chinese standards, and fitted with the only air conditioner on the campus. When I turned it on, the electricity in the whole college went out - I refrained from using it. I was assigned a Party handler, a charming young woman teacher whose only duty was to spend every possible moment monitoring my activities. I fought back against her smothering attention vigorously, with eventual success. After several months she was allowed to return to her teaching assignments and

instead I was placed under the charge of a genial retired army officer with a second-grade education (the military was still controlling the universities), who let me do as I pleased. I fought also for the right to ride a bicycle instead of being chauffeured in one of the only three cars in the campus garage (what if the foreigner had an accident or went somewhere off limits?) and to practice my passionate hobby, ballet, with the local song and dance troupe, who spoke of their affection for the Russian teachers who had been forced home after relations collapsed with the 1960 Sino-Soviet Split. I also fought for the right to attend the required weekly political study sessions for faculty, only to feel confused by the ill-concealed hatred that the professors displayed for the leaders, who sat in front of the room reading Party directives aloud from the official newspapers. The professors whispered loudly, knitted, spat, and showed their disdain; this was hardly what I expected.

But my political education began in earnest when I was at last permitted to teach the students. In my first months, I was considered too precious a commodity to share with anyone but the professors, many of whom were elderly former Russian teachers attempting to retool for the country's modernization drive. However, in 1977 the first examinations for university entrance had been held since before the ultra-leftist Cultural Revolution began in 1966. The students were brilliant; no professor was qualified to teach them because most English instructors had built their careers on obscure points of grammar or laborious translations of the classics (one had even achieved professorship for his translations of the poems of Chairman Mao), and at last the top students were put under my tutelage. Many of them were my age, in their mid-twenties, and had studied English in secret, often while in the countryside where they had been sent, like my former tour guide's son, to "learn from" the peasants. Such studying



was highly dangerous; during the Cultural Revolution you could lose your life for listening to the Voice of America or the BBC. Yet these students, confused and embittered by the sacrifices they had made seemingly for naught, risked everything to ask questions about the outside world and about the regime under which they grew up and by which they felt misled, tricked, and exploited. They gradually started to share their stories with me, through class essays and friendships. Ironically, they often trusted me, an outsider, far more than they trusted each other, for every class had its student spies who would report what was said in order to gain their own political advancement.

From my students, I began to learn the grass roots perspective on the history of China after Mao came to power. They recalled how they were told that they were the luckiest people in the world to be born after 1949 into China's new socialist paradise. They told of the 1956-1957 Hundred Flowers Movement, a brief few months when people were encouraged to criticize the regime so as to improve it, and of the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement which followed immediately after, when many of China's most brilliant and outspoken intellectuals, scientists, and political leaders were labeled as Rightists, silenced, imprisoned, exiled, and even executed. Although my students were children at the time, some had lost parents to politically induced divorce or persecution, and they themselves had been viewed as politically suspect as a result. They also knew about famous intellectuals, writers, and artists who were denounced as Rightists, silenced, and sent into exile in the countryside, never again to publish or resume their professional duties. They told me about the 1958-1960 Great Leap Forward, when China tried to catch up with industrialized nations through a great burst of social mobilization. Every "work unit," whether school, factory, hospital, or government institution, was organized to smelt

steel in “backyard furnaces” in an effort to move China past its domineering “elder brother,” the Soviet Union, and compete directly with developed Western countries in industrial output and modernization. Children and adults alike killed rats, lice, sparrows, and mosquitoes, the so-called Four Pests; farmers were induced to conduct agricultural experiments in deep plowing and close planting intended to yield one bumper harvest after the next. The “Three Hard Years” arrived immediately, from 1959 to 1961, after officials neglected the harvest, natural disasters arrived, and grain rotted in the fields. This was one of the most severe human-created famines in history, with somewhere around 30 million deaths that would not otherwise have occurred. My students told me about eating bark and gathering bitter weeds, about grandparents who starved while giving food to their children and grandchildren. Even those from big cities remembered terrible shortages. At the time, I was not attuned to the story of the deforestation that fueled the backyard furnaces, or to thinking of the great famine as a great ecological collapse, but, of course, that is what it was. Both were expressions of Mao’s attempt to conquer nature.

I also heard from my students about the turmoil of the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. Many of them had been swept into the competitive frenzy to protect Mao against his purported enemies and joined the Red Guards, only to be manipulated into violent factional struggle against each other and against rival Red Guard groups from other universities and work units. They told of verbally and physically attacking and humiliating teachers and Party leaders, of putting up Big Character Posters drawn in large brushstrokes that enumerated the counter-revolutionary, reactionary, and revisionist crimes of the accused, of riding trains for free around the country to spread the revolution, of ritually recreating the 1934–1935 Long March by hiking

arduously from one Red Army historical site to another, of humiliating religious leaders, writers, and artists for their so-called reactionary attachment to the Four Olds: old customs, culture, habits, and beliefs. They told me, too, of denouncing their own parents and siblings in an effort to be more “Red” and revolutionary than anyone else. What they did not then understand was that they were pawns in a power struggle at elite levels of political life. The protagonists included Mao’s ultra-leftist radical wife Jiang Qing and her three close associates (later denounced as the Gang of Four), Mao himself, and a large cast of other central-level leaders who disagreed sharply on the political direction of the country. They also did not know that at provincial and local levels, the Cultural Revolution provided an opportunity for old rivals to settle scores. Even less were they able to reflect on their own role and responsibility for a culture of obedience, through which patronage and fealty could easily be manipulated into violent factionalism. Their impulse toward free expression, to travel throughout the country and spread revolution, and to challenge a repressive and authoritarian educational and political system, had been abused and manipulated by forces they did not understand.

Almost all of my students had been made to “volunteer” to resettle in the countryside after those few months of chaos and gratuitous violence. In early 1967, Mao sent the army into universities, middle schools, factories, and government offices in an effort to regain control, and there was nowhere to send young people when so many schools and factories were closed. Many of these “educated youth” were organized into military-style encampments and set to manual labor on China’s frontiers, filling in wetlands and cutting down forests, attacking nature as they had attacked Mao’s purported enemies in the Party.

During the early post-Mao years of university life, I also worked with professors who too had returned from the countryside, having been subjected to so many self-criticism sessions that they were terrified of speaking and often shielded their mouths with their hands. I met students whose only exposure to literature was from the Marxist left, whose only intellectual life had been political study in which they were made to memorize Party texts and repeat slogans. Their wicked sense of humor included using such slogans ironically in daily speech. I felt a great responsibility to provide a bridge to the world of ideas and culture. My students had never heard of Freud or the notion of the unconscious; the Beatles and Rolling Stones were unknown; the Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown was not mentioned in their newspapers when it occurred soon after my arrival in March 1979. Romantic love was still considered dangerous, if not counterrevolutionary - if a boy wrote a letter to a girl and they went for a walk together, it was tantamount to engagement and marriage. My library of foreign books, some sent ahead, some provided by the U.S. Embassy, and many cadged from generous foreign tourists, was treated as a treasure trove.

In this atmosphere, I met and eventually married a young Chinese literature student, Liang Heng. To get permission for the marriage we had to appeal to "paramount leader" Deng Xiaoping himself. As we were courting, Liang Heng narrated his life story to me systematically in Chinese and I wrote it down in English before translating it back to him orally in Chinese; this process helped him come to terms with the political upheaval that had ripped his family apart even as it helped me to understand, on a visceral level, just how traumatic the Cultural Revolution had been for the Chinese people. We later published this memoir as *Son of the Revolution*. We emigrated to the U.S. after Liang Heng received his university degree and I had been in China for

three years, but we continued to return frequently to China, writing additional books about China's reforms and the changes in intellectual life. Traveling widely, we chronicled China's growing freedoms and ongoing restraints, political repression, and limits on access to information. Our adventures in remote areas closed to foreigners often involved late-night knocks on the doors of fleabag hotels where we were staying; uniformed local Public Security Bureau officials demanded to see our passports and reprimanded us for being in "closed" areas. But we evaded the serious repression experienced by democracy activists, who were sometimes sent to prison or labor camps merely for their ideas or publications, because Liang Heng was by then a U.S. citizen. China was opening up and it was often enough to apologize for being in the wrong place and continue on our way the next day. Despite such constraints, the changes under Deng Xiaoping were astounding, and by comparison to life under Mao, Chinese society under the reforms was markedly better as people's standard of living began to improve and their intense fear to abate.

Economic freedoms far outpaced political ones. In the countryside, the people's communes were disbanded and *de facto* private plots created. Systems of leasing land allowed specialized production and unleashed enterprise and innovation. In the cities, the "iron rice bowl," which guaranteed basic food and shelter for everyone in Chinese society no matter what the contribution of their labor, was "smashed." Efficiency became the order of the day as enterprises had to show they could be profitable or they were closed down. Large state-owned enterprises such as the big iron and steel mills were often exceptions, but even they were expected to create sideline businesses to stay afloat. Individual entrepreneurs began to flourish, especially among the children of high-ranking officials who often had access to commodities that were supposed to be under

state control. A gray area, neither socialist nor capitalist, became a significant part of the economy, and success in life depended on connections and access to people who could help you “go through the back door” to obtain regulated or scarce goods and special permissions.

Even during the “golden decade” of increased personal freedoms from 1979 to 1989, educated Chinese spoke of a “crisis of confidence” in the Party and socialism, and some members of the central government tried to reform the political system to keep up with economic reforms. Impatient with the slow pace of change, students and intellectuals in Beijing and other cities famously demonstrated beginning in April 1989, taking over Tiananmen Square for days. It was too much, too fast. Reformist leader and Party Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang begged the students to go home, foreseeing the massacre which arrived on June 4, killing hundreds if not thousands and setting back the reform effort. Zhao ended his days under house arrest for his role in promoting political liberalization and democracy.

In the aftermath, disillusioned with the state, many bright young people turned away from politics and focused on getting ahead economically. Business and computer schools flourished, and China came into its own as the world’s manufacturing hub. Getting richer, in any way possible, became a shared national passion. Apparently, the Party would be allowed to stay in power as long as the people’s living standards continued to rise. The dark side of this economic activity was, of course, resource depletion and industrial pollution, the subject of this book.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., my own career turned to the study of global environmental politics. The marriage to Liang Heng had ended and I was looking for a new direction that would bring my China experiences together with my love of nature. Fascinated by the relationship between the

intellectual and personal repressions I had witnessed and the way people were despoiling the planet, I returned to China in 1999 to teach at an agricultural university in Sichuan Province and collect material and interviews for a new book, *Mao's War against Nature*, which told personal stories about how the political repression of ordinary people was mirrored in an attack against nature. State-ordered transformation of human souls was often carried out through political campaigns marshalling collective labor to "Make mountains bow their heads, make rivers flow uphill," as a Mao-era poem expressed it. Mao's uneasiness with intellectuals allowed him to dismiss the most elementary of scientific principles and celebrate his notion, as a military general, that mobilizing the country into a vast army would allow him to defeat all enemies, both human and non-human.

As this book will show, the environmental problems of the post-Mao years have only become worse, with globalized free-market capitalism an equal if not greater driver of environmental degradation than the Stalinist-style state. Perhaps the root problem is not the economic system at all: both during and after Mao, limits on public participation and freedom of information have been great obstacles to the possibility that society collectively can make wise choices. Political repression, rapid change, and the state's willingness to reorder society for its own purposes have remained constant themes which put nature under assault. But as we will discover in our exploration of China's emerging civil society, which provides more "democratic space" for individuals to voice their concerns about the condition of the environment, there are signs that an environmental movement is now emerging to help protect endangered species and clean up the pollution created by socialist and capitalist cultures alike.

I eventually became a professor of global environmental politics at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC, where I teach the subject, using an interdisciplinary approach, to passionate graduate and undergraduate students who wish to find solutions to our environmental crisis. This book draws upon my efforts to clarify the many scholarly and political approaches to global environmental study; it pulls them together to shine a focused light on my primary passion, China. I hope that you, the readers, will enjoy the book and that you will find it helpful, inspiring, and not overly discouraging. We need you.



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