

## A Village with My Name

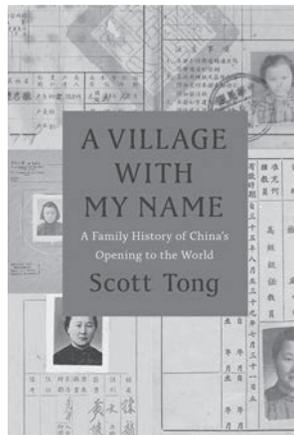
### A Family History of China's Opening to the World

By SCOTT TONG

CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2017

272 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0226338866, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Kristin Stapleton



To plunge readers into the thick of life at some historical period, memoirs and other personal accounts can't be beat. A book such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* presents history in a fully embodied way, combining details of material conditions with an avenue into the consciousness of the writer or subject. The intimacy and immediacy of diaries and memoirs give them a power that can be used to stimulate interest in a very unfamiliar past. In this way, Scott Tong's family history is well-suited to introduce high school and college students to modern Chinese history.

Tong is a reporter for *Marketplace*, a business-orientated news show that airs on public radio in the United States. In 2005, he was assigned to open the program's Shanghai office. While spending the next three years reporting on economic issues in China, he became interested in his family's history—a topic his parents had not dwelled on during his American boyhood. After moving back to the US, where he now covers the environment and sustainability, he devoted his free time to research family history, with trips back to China to meet far-flung relatives and investigate the lives of his grandparents and great-grandparents. A fellowship at the University of Michigan allowed him to study with professional historians.

This book is the result of Tong's research. Organized into fifteen short chapters, it begins with his attempt to understand the experience of his paternal great-grandfather, a resident of a village in northern Jiangsu Province, where all the families share the surname Tong. "Tong village" was difficult to locate, and, once there, Tong learns that the events of the twentieth century have had a topsy-turvy effect on its residents. His own branch of the family, once dominant, suffered after the Communist victory in 1949. His great-grandfather, who studied in Japan in the early years of the twentieth century and brought a Japanese wife home (he already had a Chinese one), had been the pride of the village. In the Mao years, his closest relatives suffered for their association with him and with his descendants who sided with the Nationalists in China's civil war and fled abroad. By the time Scott visited the Tong home, overseas connections were valued again—his great-grandfather was celebrated once more, and the Japanese wife, Scott's great-grandmother, was credited with saving the village during the Japanese occupation of the 1930s and 1940s. But Scott's closest relatives still got the short end of the communal stick.

The middle chapters of the book focus largely on Tong's maternal grandparents, Mildred and Carleton Sun, natives of Hubei Province. Mildred was an ambitious and talented girl; she attended a mission school run by American women and dreamed of studying in the US. Tong tracked down in American archives some of her correspondence with her former

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teachers and even a short recording of an interview she gave to scholars documenting the history of the school she attended. The discovery of the interview, which enabled Tong to hear her voice for the first time, is narrated in a way that conveys how exciting historical research can be. Tong's account of the two very different genealogies created by the families of his maternal grandparents, detailed in another chapter, could be used to launch a discussion of how the writing of family history takes shape differently, depending on why it is done and who is involved.

The Suns set up a private school in Shanghai in the 1930s and did well. When the Japanese invaded China in 1937, however, Carleton returned to Hubei and took a position in the Japanese-supported local government. Via the stories of his grandparents on both sides, Tong effectively conveys the confusion and difficult choices facing Chinese in the period 1937–1949. Carleton survived the Japanese defeat, and he and Mildred revived their Shanghai school. With the impending Communist victory, Mildred relocated to Hong Kong with their children. Carleton chose to stay in Shanghai and try to salvage the school. Arrested in the early 1950s, he disappeared into the Communist government's labor camp in far-off Qinghai Province. Tong's attempt to learn about Carleton's fate yielded very few facts, but his visit to the abandoned camp beautifully evokes the tragedy that so many experienced there. Historians have published on this topic recently, drawing on memoirs of survivors and their families, as well as archival material.<sup>1</sup> It is to be hoped that Tong's brief but poignant account will send readers to this more detailed scholarship.

Unlike the majority of English-language memoirs on China that have appeared in recent decades, the Cultural Revolution is not discussed extensively in Tong's book. His Chinese relatives, of course, lived through it, but, like many of their compatriots, they prefer to draw a veil over those years. Many of the memoirs that do feature the Cultural Revolution, such as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (Simon & Schuster, 1991) and Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters* (University of California Press, 1997), were written by people whose families had occupied privileged positions in the Communist regime and were shocked when their good Communist parents were attacked and ousted from power.<sup>2</sup> Tong's relatives, with their connections to Japanese collaborators and overseas Chinese, never had any illusions that the Communist system would embrace them, so, for them, the Cultural Revolution was just another campaign to endure.

After Deng Xiaoping welcomed greater contact with the outside world, though, life changed dramatically for the Tong family. In discussing the transformation of China in the years of "reform and opening up" since 1978, Tong draws on his own reporting work and his relatives' experience of the new atmosphere of economic development. His paternal grandfather had left a second wife and children on the mainland when in 1949 he escaped to Taiwan, taking his son from his first marriage, Scott's father, with him. Scott's cousin from the abandoned branch of the family now has a good job at General Motors in Shanghai but cannot afford an apartment, which interferes with his hope to marry. This section presents a realistic portrait of the challenges young people in China face today.

The economic entrepreneurship encouraged in China over the last forty years has taken some nasty directions. In the final chapter, Tong narrates

his search for the early life story of the daughter he and his wife adopted in 2004. He never fully answers his questions about how she came to be abandoned, but along the way he encounters a family that made a living supplying babies to orphanages. Tong's interview with these baby sellers—which they agreed to seemingly in the hope that grateful American adoptive parents would send them money—is quite shocking. This part of the book provides the backstory for a report Tong aired on *Marketplace* in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

The personalized history that Tong presents is best-suited to an introductory class at the high school or college level. I assigned the book to my advanced college history seminar, and the students with the least knowledge of China found it the most interesting. Some thought it over-emphasized the “darker sides” of modern Chinese history. All agreed it is well-written. Each chapter of Tong's book could serve as a starting point for research papers on such topics as China's twentieth-century connections with Japan, education for women in the 1920s and '30s, the exodus of elites in 1949, the fate of those sent to labor camps, economic development since 1978, young people in contemporary China, and the connection between family planning policies and international adoption of Chinese girls. The conversational tone Tong adopts enlivens the book, as does the framing—an American reporter takes us with him as he tracks down the stories that shaped his family across 120 years of tumultuous Chinese history. ■

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Ning Wang, *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness: Political Exile and Re-education in Mao's China* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).
2. Among the newest entries to this genre of Cultural Revolution memoirs is one written by the daughter of China's most famous twentieth-century painter, herself a concert pianist. See Xu Fangfang, *Galloping Horses: Artist Xu Beihong and His Family in Mao's China* (St. Louis: Beihong Arts Publishing, 2016).
3. The story Tong reported, “The Dark Side of Chinese Adoptions,” filed May 5, 2010, is available here: <https://tinyurl.com/ydy6575e>.

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## China in the 21st Century

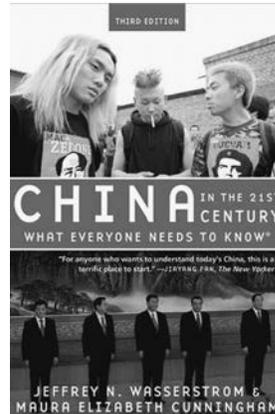
### *What Everyone Needs to Know* (third edition)

BY JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM AND  
MAURA ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM

NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018

240 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0190659080, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Karen Kane



Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine, first published *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* in 2010. In that year, China was still advertising the mascots of the 2008 Olympics and crowds were lining up to be photographed at the Bird's Nest Stadium. Hu Jintao held the positions of Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission and General Secretary of the Communist Party. Under the surface, political factions maneuvered and the state of the Politburo Standing Committee was like “nine dragons taming the

waters.” Wasserstrom's slim volume provided general readers, students, and ambassadors an introduction to China in less time than it takes to fly there from the US. While some reviews by students said it was a tad dry and some scholars said it assumed quite a bit of previous knowledge, it was generally well-regarded as comprehensive and accessible. By the time the second volume was released in 2012, Hu had given up his posts and stepped down to be replaced by a man resembling Winnie the Pooh, who had moved increasingly close to Hu in government photos. On November 15, 2012, Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party. In March 2013, he would become President of the People's Republic of China.

In October 2012, anticipating this once-in-a-decade leadership transition, Wasserstrom was about to sign off on proofs of the second edition of *China in the 21st Century*. He was concerned about the book's final chapter, “The Future.” This edition had managed to capture the sensational scandal of Bo Xilai and his wife in 2012. Wasserstrom (and his colleague Maura Cunningham) was confident that scandal would not derail Xi's rise to power, but wanted to confirm his predictions. The author was granted permission by Oxford University Press to hold off on publication until Xi's ascent was assured. His careful analysis would prove correct. Xi's consolidation of power and ever-expanding list of titles was unprecedented in modern Chinese history.

After the second edition was published in 2013, Wasserstrom gave several joint talks with Cunningham that revealed his evolving thinking about the country's past and present. The fully revised and updated third edition is coauthored by Wasserstrom and Cunningham—currently Social Media Manager at the Association of Asian Studies and Associate at the University of Michigan's Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies—and reflects this changed perspective. The accent color on the cover of this latest edition has gone from red to green as a marker of the importance of environmental issues in China today.

The new edition features an expanded discussion of Xi's reforms, insightful perspectives on Hong Kong's shifting political status, changing