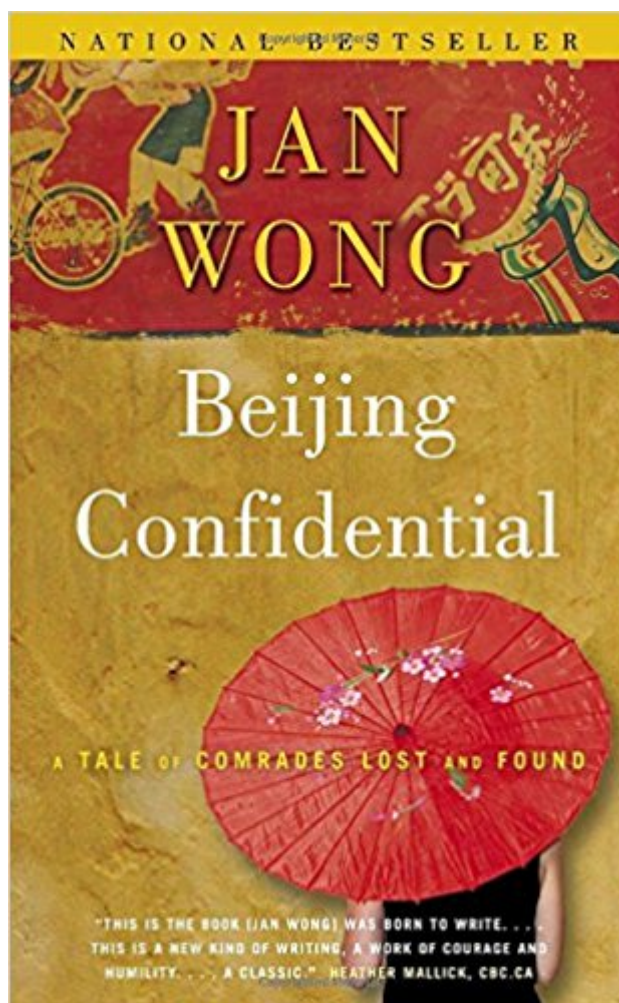


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Beijing Confidential: A Tale Of Comrades Lost And Found



Synopsis

Jan Wong has returned to Beijing. Her quest: to find someone she encountered briefly in 1973, and whose life she was certain she had ruined forever. In the early 70s, Jan Wong travelled from Canada to become one of only two Westerners permitted to study at Beijing University. One day a young stranger, Yin Luoyi, asked for help in getting to the United States. Wong, then a starry-eyed Maoist, immediately reported Yin to the authorities. Thirty-three years on, and more than a decade after the publication of her bestselling *Red China Blues*, Jan Wong revisits the Chinese capital to begin her search for the person who has haunted her conscience. She wants to apologize, to somehow make amends. At the very least, she wants to discover whether Yin survived. As Jan Wong hunts through the city, she finds herself travelling back through the decades, back to her experiences in the Cultural Revolution, to places that were once of huge importance to her. She has changed, of course, but not as much as Beijing. One of the world's most ancient cities is now one of its most modern. The neon signs no longer say "Long Live Chairman Mao" but instead tout Mary Kay cosmetics and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Places she once knew have vanished, bulldozed into oblivion and replaced by avant-garde architecture, trendy bars, and sleek condos. The people she once knew have changed, too, for better or for worse. Memories are everywhere. By searching out old friends and acquaintances, Jan Wong uncovers tantalizing clues about the woman she wronged. She realizes her deepest fears and regrets were justified. But Yin herself remains elusive until the day she phones Jan Wong. Emotionally powerful and rich with detail, *Beijing Confidential* weaves together three distinct stories: Wong's journey from remorse to redemption, Yin's journey from disgrace to respectability, and Beijing's stunning journey from communism to capitalism. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for *Red China Blues*:
• "A marvellous book by one of Canada's best foreign correspondents at the top of her form."
• *The Gazette (Montreal)* "Totally captivating. A wonderful memoir."
• *The Globe and Mail* "With her unique perspective, Wong has given us front row seats at Mao's theater of the absurd. It is hard not to laugh and cry . . . this book will become a classic, a must-read for anyone interested in China."
• *The New York Times* "This superb memoir is like no other account of life in China under both Mao and Deng. . . . Unique, powerful and moving."
• *Publishers Weekly* From the Hardcover edition.

Jan Wong was the much-acclaimed Beijing correspondent for *The Globe and Mail* from 1988 to 1994. She is a graduate of McGill University, Beijing University and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She is the recipient of a (US) George Polk Award, the New England Women's Press Association Newswoman of the Year Award, the (Canadian) National Newspaper Award and a Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Silver Medal, among other honours for her reporting. Wong has also written for *The New York Times*, *The Gazette in Montreal*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Her first book, *Red China Blues: My Long March From Mao to Now*, was named one of *Time* magazine's top ten books of 1996 and remains banned in China. It has been translated into Swedish, Finnish, Dutch and Japanese, and optioned for a feature film. Jan Wong is a third-generation Canadian, born and raised in Montreal. She first went to China in 1972 at the height of the Cultural Revolution as one of only two Westerners permitted to enrol at Beijing University. There, she renounced rock music, wielded a pneumatic drill at a factory and hauled pig manure in the paddy fields. She also met and married the only American draft dodger from the Vietnam War in China. During those six years in China, she learned fluent Mandarin and earned a degree in Chinese history. From 1988 to 1994, Jan Wong returned as China correspondent for the *Globe and Mail*. In reporting on the tumultuous new era of capitalist reforms under Deng Xiaoping, she reacquainted herself with old friends and enemies from her radical past. In 1989, she dodged bullets in Tiananmen Square, fought off a kidnapping attempt and caught the Chinese police red-handed driving her stolen Toyota as a squad car. (They gave it back.) She returned to China in 1999 to make a documentary and to research her second book, *Jan Wong's*

China: Reports from a Not-So-Foreign Correspondent. It tells the story of China's headlong rush to capitalism and offers fresh insight into a country that is forever changing. Jan Wong lives with her husband and two sons in Toronto where she is a reporter at The Globe and Mail. The best of her weekly celebrity-interview columns, "Lunch With," which ran for five years, have been published in a book of the same name. From the Hardcover edition.

Beijing Confidential is framed as Jan Wong's personal quest for forgiveness for a mistake of youthful idealism that effectively betrayed a fellow student to the Maoist thought police in early 1970s China. But inside this frame is simply one of the best books out there about contemporary China. (As a former journalist who has traveled in and written about China, I've read a slew of such books. I must add that I'm also a former colleague and friend of this book's author.) Many terrific reporters have covered China since it was opened to the West. But JW is uniquely well-equipped to act as China's edgy, sharp-eyed institutional memory. (She lived in China during its infamous Cultural Revolution, studying at Beijing University while doing requisite stints of factory work, digging ditches, and hauling pig manure. Later, she served as the Toronto Globe and Mail's China correspondent for six years, covering, among other things, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of student-led democracy activists.) China is justly proud of its Great Miracle: the dizzyingly fast economic growth that has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. But in many ways China seems like Wizard of Oz, desperately keeping a huge smoke-and-mirrors show going by pulling levers ever more furiously behind a curtain—the miracle, for one thing, looks increasingly hollow as its monstrous environmental costs have become pressingly manifest. And Jan Wong is its child-blunt Dorothy, pulling aside the curtain to reveal the phoniness, as well as the residual charm of what's behind it. One of her characteristically revealing observations: In years past, Beijing was full of cicadas whose buzz lulled the entire city to sleep during summer afternoon siestas. Now the insects are gone, their habitats destroyed as trees were axed to widen roads. And the traditional siesta "is no more as everyone scrambles to get rich." If you want to know what has happened, and is happening, in modern urban China, you can't do better than to read this book.

Jan Wong was a third-generation Canadian of Chinese descent at Beijing University studying Mandarin and Chinese history during the early 1970s. In the midst of the Cultural Revolution she was one of only two westerners there at the time, and considered herself an enthusiastic Maoist. A

fellow student (Yin Luoyi) asked Wong for help getting to the U.S. Wong, who would later marry an American living in Beijing while evading Vietnam-era draft boards, promptly turned Yin in to the department's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) representative, and Yin disappeared. Wong mostly forget about the incident for some 33-years while working in Beijing and Canada as correspondent for the Toronto-based 'Globe and Mail,' and purportedly losing her initial infatuation with Communism - along with most of China. In 2006 she returned to Beijing for month, along with her husband and two teenage sons. Her mission - find Yin Luoyi, learn what had happened, and apologize. Jan claims that when she snitched on Yin, she didn't realize that there were labor camps for dissidents, and had assumed Yin would merely get a tongue-lashing. On the other hand, it seems incredible that she was not aware of the enormous turmoil enveloping the nation during the Cultural Revolution. Further, the disruptions had actually begun at Beijing University, education there largely ceased from 1966-1970, and even Deng Xiaoping's (very high ranking leader who later led China's economic revolution) son had been reportedly thrown out a fourth-floor campus window in 1968, causing permanent paralysis. Nationwide, an estimated 100 million were killed, imprisoned, and/or sent to labor. Undoubtedly this was well-known within the global Chinese community at the time. And both Jan and her American husband had participated in state-sponsored labor projects during the Cultural Revolution. Regardless, finding Yin was not going to be easy. Beijing's population had risen to 16 million, there were then 400 million cellphone users (now 710 million) - all unlisted, about 40% of the population shares ten surnames, and Beijing residents had moved an average of three times during the past ten years. (In Mao's time most people remained in the same work unit for life - moving required permission, enforced by the issuance of food-stamp coupons.) Other possibilities included Yin Luoyi having died, moved somewhere else within China (1.3 billion total population), left the country entirely, and/or changed her name - either because of marriage or personal preference. Still another possibility - Jan had misspelled Yin Luoyi's name. Inexplicably, Jan did no preparatory work prior to arriving in Beijing - making the task even more daunting. Early search forays included contacting the local journalists' group, and inquiries at Beijing University - both for Yin, and Jan's former classmates. Several former classmates were found, and ultimately they led Jan to Yin. During the interregnum, Jan and her family toured the rapidly changing city of Beijing. Readers learn that Chinese capitalists are not infallible - their six million square-foot 'Golden Resources Mall' (world's largest until 2006) in Beijing was completed in 2004 after only 20 months of construction (only four days late), opened to only 20 shoppers/hour instead of the anticipated 50,000/day. Problems included inaccessibility to both high-income Chinese and foreigners, most stores not taking credit cards, and downtown competition. Worse yet, the even larger (7.1 million

square-feet) 2005 South China Mall is reported to be 99% vacant. While visiting a detective agency Jan learns there are 30,000 Internet police that quickly delete critical comments (if you're lucky). (The 'good news' is that Internet-users have much wider access to formerly forbidden topics - eg. 'tank man,' 'Cultural Revolution,' etc. compared to Jan's last visit in 1999.) Probably most surprising is that China, envisioned by Mao as a paradise of equality, has income inequality that slightly exceeds that in the U.S.! The really 'bad news' - the air pollution in Beijing. In the middle of Jan's month-long stay her cell-phone rings - it's Yin Luoyi, now Lu Yi - after three name changes, two due to marriages, the other to avoid blackening her father's name. Jan is relieved that Lu believes her graduation-day expulsion from Beijing University was not due to Jan 'ratting her out.' Instead, it was the cumulative impact of thirty charges presented in a long department meeting. (Yin had assumed that Jan had been forced to testify against her, and was a bit taken aback though to learn that it was voluntary.) Lu was then sent home in disgrace to her parents in Mongolia, put under the watch of local CCP cadre there, and consigned to what appeared to be a lifetime of farm labor. However, after Mao's death, the Gang of Four's arrest, and three attempts, Lu was able to have her record expunged and given her diploma. Lu then studied to become an attorney, worked for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and legally returned to live in and work at her new workplace in Beijing. In 2001 Lu left her secure PLA position, started her own business, and went to New York City to visit her brother. Returning to Beijing before 9/11, Lu then met and married a Beijing University physics professor. Between the two they have five residence properties. At least two are very nice by Chinese (and most American) standards, and one is near her former classmate tormentors. (Not surprisingly, no love lost there. One had also blocked Lu's first two efforts to clear her record.) Bottom Line: Reading Jan Wong's journey to redemption was interesting and informative. Unfortunately, her integrity remains in question. First, there is the previously referenced question of whether she knew reporting Yin would likely cause problems. Second, she reports having renounced Maoism. Yet, at the end of her "Red China Blues" (1997) Jan describes being at a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Mao's birth, singing the 'Internationale' in Chinese while wearing a Mao badge and others looked strangely at her. It was "still one of (her) favorite songs" after witnessing the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, interviewing numerous people who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and wondering what she had brought to Yin's life.

What an engaging memoir of Beijing Ms Wong has written! "Beijing Confidential" is Jan Wong's highly readable account of her return to Beijing in 2006 on a burning mission to right a wrong she did to a fellow student back in 1972, when Ms Wong was one of the first foreign students accepted

to study at Beijing University. Fast forward 34 years, and Beijing is now a capitalist's dream and the city is undergoing a major facelift in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games. I really enjoyed Ms Wong's reminiscences about what Beijing was like in 1972, in the closing years of the Cultural Revolution, and how it has evolved into a sophisticated, wealthy city, although China itself remains a totalitarian police state. The back story of how Ms Wong tracked down the friend who she informed on is surprisingly suspenseful and full of twists and turns before reaching its conclusion. The description of Beijing now compared to 1972 is highly engaging and downright fascinating. After finishing the book, I feel like planning to go there for my next annual vacation! Five stars for this one- the best memoir I've read in quite some time.

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