



People Stories of “Old” China: My Favorite Books of 2023

James M Zimmerman*

In the final week of 2023, I need to make room in my ever-expanding library by shelving the many great books I read over the course of this year, as well as to reflect upon them before I dive into my trove of titles forthcoming in 2024. Here, I look back on a year of reading a number of outstanding non-fiction titles, and mostly focused on late 19th and early 20th century China and Asia.

As a forewarning, I am partial to people stories — stories of ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) people who provide the narrative and voice of history. They are the eyewitnesses to history, and even if their roles are on the periphery of tumultuous, watershed events. To many students of history, me included, lessons from the past are oftentimes better told through the eyes of those that lived through, or were shaped by, historical events.

As writers of people stories, the below authors have done an immense service to mainstream readers and historians alike. All of these books are based upon deep dives into archival sources, long-buried family records, and unpublished memoirs and letters. Indeed, much of the research and what has been discovered, is something that has not been fully brought to light before.

Here are my favorite *People Stories of “Old” China* for 2023:



* James M. Zimmerman is the author of *The Peking Express: The Bandits Who Stole a Train, Stunned the West, and Broke the Republic of China*, released in April of this year and is a true story about China's great train robbery of 1923 — a people story about banditry, hostage diplomacy, and geopolitical intrigue.

Fragile Cargo: The World War II Race to Save the Treasures of China's Forbidden City

Adam Brookes

Fragile Cargo is a gem of a book that follows the extraordinary efforts of museum director (Ma Heng) and a host of dedicated curators (Ouyang Daoda, Chuang Yen) to save the priceless imperial collection of China's Forbidden City and Palace Museum during the onslaught, devastation, and looting that came with the fall of the Qing dynasty, warlord infighting, invasion by foreign forces, and civil warfare. By rail, road, and river a small group of dedicated men and women worked tirelessly and unselfishly to move and conserve millions of irreplaceable artefacts out of harm's way. Brookes takes the readers on a white-knuckle flight across China as these heroes put their lives on the line to preserve China's ancient treasures.

Fragile Cargo is indeed a people story, tracing the lives of the key characters, their triumphs and tragedies, including the final days of Ma Heng, whose lifelong efforts to save China's history were met with persecution and cruelty by his Communist tormentors after he remained in Beijing in 1949. Brookes correctly reflects that Ma Heng's own story is a mirror reflection of China in the first half of the 20th century: *"From his youth as a subject of the Qing empire, to life as a wealthy businessman in industrial Shanghai, to his position as a Peking University scholar at the heart of China's intellectual upheaval, to his wartime work as conservator and logistician safeguarding the imperial collections, to, right at the end of his life, a student of communist ideology, Ma Heng's transformations reflect those of his country."*

The Last One Out: Yates McDaniel, World War II's Most Daring Reporter

Jack Torry

I am fascinated by the personal stories of foreign journalists, people that venture out beyond the safety of their hometowns to chase the stories and cover events around the world to feed humanity's desire for news. *Last One Out* is an extensively researched and well-written true story about the life of war correspondent C. Yates McDaniel, an Associated Press reporter and bureau chief in Asia. Torry

takes the reader on an enthralling, two-decades long journey following McDaniel as he moves about Asia's greatest cities besieged by the threat of war and ultimately reduced to rubble or that became the killing fields of the Second World War. As adeptly told by Torry, McDaniel survived and wrote real-time what happened on the front lines of the battle zones of Nanking, Hankow, Burma, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sumatra, Java, New Guinea, Manila, and many places in between — and was always the last guy out of town and thus a witness to history.

Torry's book does much to honor the extraordinary efforts of not just McDaniel, but also a litany of other journalists of the era, a special breed that always put themselves in harm's way to meet the public's thirst for timely and accurate news. *Last One Out* should be required reading for would-be war correspondents and reporters working in today's politically and militarily challenging environments to learn about one of the greatest journalists of all time that lived through it all.

Bernardine's Shanghai Salon: The Story of the Doyenne of Old China

Susan Blumberg-Kason

Blumberg-Kason tells the fascinating story of Bernardine Szold Fritz, a journalist, writer, and actress, who formed a salon — a social gathering of intellectuals, writers, poets, musicians, politicians, and filmmakers — featuring a who's who list of intelligentsias in 1930s Shanghai. Sophisticated and unlike many of the expatriates living in China at the time, Bernardine's salon brought together the best of the East and West, American, European, and Chinese alike. *Bernardine's Shanghai Salon* is a well-researched and interesting book that introduces the reader to the vibrant social scene of early 20th century Shanghai, before the Second World War and invasion of China by the Japanese empire.

Blumberg-Kason takes the reader on a journey through Bernardine's life starting in the early years as a journalist, to the time she reluctantly moves to Shanghai to marry businessman Chester Fritz, and follows Bernardine to her end years after relocating to the U.S. The cast of characters in *Bernardine's Shanghai Salon* is an extensive list of the movers and shakers living or

passing through Shanghai in the 1930s, and a testament to Bernardine as someone who was at the top of her game. Throughout the narrative, Blumberg-Kason skillfully reflects upon the troubling aspects and sadness of Bernardine's life, especially her failed marriages and disconcerting relationship with her estranged daughter. Yet, overall, *Bernardine's Shanghai Salon* is a story of how one extraordinary woman overcame life's challenges to thrive in a patriarchal world.

Murder in Manchuria: The True Story of a Jewish Virtuoso, Russian Fascists, a French Diplomat, and a Japanese Spy in Occupied China

Scott D. Seligman

Murder in Manchuria is a page-turner, yet also a gut-wrenching story where the title itself reveals how it ends for Semyon Kaspé, a talented pianist whose life was cut short. Equally talented was his father, a former Russian soldier who stayed behind to build a life in the northern city of Harbin after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, where the once powerful Far Eastern naval forces of the Czar were systematically destroyed by the Japanese. Within two decades, the elder Josef Kaspé became a successful businessman and hotelier, well-known and well-respected in the Harbin Jewish community of twenty thousand souls.

Seligman skillfully tells the story with clarity and detail bringing the wide cast of characters to life. Over a period of three months in 1933, Semyon was kidnapped, tortured, and eventually murdered by disaffected Russian fascists acting at the behest of Japanese military masters, who were intent on stealing Josef Kaspé's wealth. One of the unexpected heroes in the story is a French diplomat who launched his own investigation into the murder when the local Harbin authorities, corrupt and under the control of the Japanese, refused to act. The real travesty was the fact that the murderers (and the Japanese prosecutors) argued that the kidnapping and murder scheme was an act of patriotism based upon the false narrative that Jews were somehow responsible for the fall of the Czar and the rise of Soviet Union — never mind that Josef Kaspé served with honor in the Czar's naval forces.

The larger story in *Murder in Manchuria* is the pervasive and destructive antisemitism besetting Manchuria in the early 20th century, and how the chaos and uncertainty following the murder of Semyon Kaspé led to the exodus of almost the entire Jewish population of Harbin to safer havens. Seligman's research reflects a deep review of the multi-language resources and records from around the world, some of which have never been published to date.

Fortune's Bazaar: The Making of Hong Kong **Vaudine England**

In *Fortune's Bazaar*, Vaudine England tells the ultimate people story — the “making” of Hong Kong. Simply put, it's a story that reflects the diversity of Hong Kong as a city and society. Indeed, the origins of Hong Kong is neither 100% British nor Chinese, but a multicultural social system of people from all walks of life that ended up on the shores of the colonial island: English, American, Spanish, Chinese, French, Portuguese, Persians, Bengalese, Javanese, Filipino, German, Italian, Russian, Danish, Swiss, Dutch, Belgian, Parsi, Arab, Turk, Armenian, Tartar, Siamese, African, and so on. Throughout most of its history until recently, Hong Kong was an open and free society of multinational and mixed-raced people under British colonial administration, all having an impact on the culture and economy.

Fortune's Bazaar is nothing short of a challenge to Beijing's narrow view and resulting rejection of the one-country, two-systems equation. Beijing and its clumsy under lords in Hong Kong consider the former British colony as more Chinese than it really is. Indeed, Hong Kong has its own distinct history, and to ignore this history is revisionist at best. *Fortune's Bazaar* is an excellent read for anyone that wants to better understand Hong Kong's history, especially in light of its current place in the world as a declining and rudderless former financial and business hub that has forgotten its true roots and diversity.