



Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China

By John Pomfret

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A first-hand account of the remarkable transformation of China over the past forty years as seen through the life of an award-winning journalist and his four Chinese classmates

As a twenty-year-old exchange student from Stanford University, John Pomfret spent a year at Nanjing University in China. His fellow classmates were among those who survived the twin tragedies of Mao's rule—the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—and whose success in government and private industry today are shaping China's future. Pomfret went on to a career in journalism, spending the bulk of his time in China. After attending the twentieth reunion of his class, he decided to reacquaint himself with some of his classmates. *Chinese Lessons* is their story and his own.

Beginning with Pomfret's first days in China, *Chinese Lessons* takes us back to the often torturous paths that brought together the Nanjing University History Class of 1982. One classmate's father was killed during the Cultural Revolution for the crime of being an intellectual; another classmate labored in the fields for years rather than agree to a Party-arranged marriage; a third was forced to publicly denounce and humiliate her father. As we watch Pomfret and his classmates begin to make their lives as adults, we see as never before the human cost and triumph of China's transition from near-feudal communism to first-world capitalism.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Pomfret's first sojourn in China came as an American exchange student at Nanjing University in 1981, near the outset of China's limited reopening to the West and its halting, chaotic and momentous conversion from Maoist totalitarianism to police state capitalism and status as world economic giant. Over the next two decades, he returned twice as a professional journalist and was an eyewitness to the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Pomfret's enthusiasm and personal access make this an engaging examination of three tumultuous decades, rooted in the stories of classmates whose remarkable grit and harrowing experiences neatly epitomize the sexual and cultural transformations, and the economic ups and downs, of China since the 1960s. At the same time, Pomfret draws on intimate conversations and personal diaries to paint idiosyncratic portraits with a vivid, literary flair. Viewing China's version of capitalism as an anomaly, and focused overwhelmingly within its national borders, the book's lack of a greater critical context will be limiting for some. But Pomfret's palpable and pithy first-hand depiction of the New China offers a swift, elucidating introduction to its awesome energies and troubling contradictions. (Aug.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Tracing individual lives is a familiar way to make sense of history, and tracing the intersections of individuals is a familiar strategy for studying identity. Pomfret, a 1981 exchange student at Nanjing University and later an American journalist in China, does both in this coming-of-age story that reads like a novel, complete with conflict, intrigue, illicit sex, convincing villains, and sympathetic, flawed heroes, and drawing as much on Greek as Chinese notions of fate in the lives of individuals and states. Inverting Plato in typical American fashion, he looks at individuals--the small circle of friends whose lives first crossed at Nanjing University when China's "opening and reform" began--to understand the state in which they live. In so doing, he affords readers a glimpse of the intersection of two societies at a time when they were defining themselves as predominant world players. Regardless of whether what followed was guided by fate, Pomfret's narrative of it may prove helpful in realizing something other than collision between the U.S and China. *Steven Schroeder*

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Review

"In this intimate and revealing book, John Pomfret shows why he is one of the great China correspondents of his generation: He has never held himself at a distance, but has plunged in, with vigor and an open mind. His approach to China has no tint of romanticism or awe; the lives he discovers and the stories he tells, including his own, are unvarnished, unexpected, and riveting." *Steve Coll, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Ghost Wars*

"Chinese Lessons is an extraordinary book. Through telling the intimate stories of his former classmates, John Pomfret reveals a contemporary China where many individual lives have been thwarted and twisted. This is a book full of insights, honesty, and compassion. It touched me deeply." *Ha Jin, author of Waiting*

"John Pomfret has written a brilliant, insightful book describing the dark side and human cost of the 'Chinese economic miracle.' His feel for China, based on years of living there, his fluency in Chinese, and his reporting genius cut through the sham and spin." *James R. Lilley, former U.S. Ambassador to China and*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deborah Beaudry:

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