

MY PRIVATE CHINA

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Cover design by Catherine Tai

This book is for Joan, who continues to lead me into trouble.

Also by Alex Kuo:

The Window Tree
New Letters from Hiroshima and Other Poems
Changing the River
Chinese Opera
Lipstick and Other Stories
This Fierce Geography
Panda Diaries
White Jade and Other Stories
A Chinaman's Chance
The Man Who Dammed the Yangtze

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INTRODUCTION

Two years after I was born at Boston's MGH just months before Hermann Göring's Junkers and Stukas bombed "defenceless-under-the-night" Poland to begin World War II, my mother took me back to her hometown of Suzhou on Shanghai's western sprawl. On the day the war ended when Paul Tibbets' *Enola Gay* dropped the world's first weapon of mass destruction on Hiroshima, I was old and awake enough to see the flash of its holocaust several hundred miles away at seven on a sweltering Shanghai summer morning.

The family left for Hong Kong two years before the venerable Chairman Mao proclaimed China's liberation atop Beijing's Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen Square) on October 1, 1949. After attending a Canadian order of the Immaculate Conception Tak Sun elementary school and then the British high school for mainly children of expatriates, King George V near the old Kai Tak airport from where we could see RAF de Havilland Vampire fighters on practice runs, I returned to the United States for college and graduate work.

Beginning with a fall semester of teaching American literature at Beijing Forestry University following the political spring at Tiananmen Square in 1989, in the last twenty-five years

I have returned to and left China and Hong Kong almost every other year, sometimes staying a year at a time. Sometimes as a Senior Fulbright or Lingnan Scholar, sometimes on a United Nations or Idaho Commission for the Arts research grant, and sometimes on my own dime, I taught American studies and translation to undergraduates, graduates and faculties at universities such as Peking, Beijing Foreign Studies and Tsinghua in Beijing, Chengdu Science and Technology, Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist, Jilin University in Changchun, and Shanghai's Fudan, which appointed me its first Distinguished Writer-in-Residence in 2008, a first for any Chinese university.

Numerous short stories, novels and poems were written during this period about China and Hong Kong, and of course, the profiles, essays and interviews in this collection. All but two of them have been previously published in magazines and newspapers in the U.S., U.K., Australia and Hong Kong.

Through an exploration of living in China and Hong Kong, they were written and sent home to help me and my friends make sense of what I was experiencing, and how this personal sense of place shapes our political consciousness and understanding of the other—why people get up in the morning, what they do during the day, and what's their last thought before falling asleep, their dreams, wishes and lies.

They can also be read as transPacific public essays (sometimes in narrative form, sometimes in conversation with essential informants such as novelist and Cultural Minister (1986-89) Wang Meng, Chairman Mao's confidant Professor Li, and the winner of the Schumann Competition, pianist Madame Zhou Guangren, teacher of Lang Lang), that look from the

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outside in and inside out, from the altitude of a Boeing 747 at 30,000 feet, a distance of five thousand miles away at a Seattle Starbucks, or just a few minutes north of Beijing at the Great Wall at Badaling. They look at China more than just as a place, something more important than the practical information about its weather, places to stay, or currency. Hopefully this look at the other China will place us in a better position to understand its current economic explosion and what that will mean for the lives of its peoples in their Century of the Dragon.