

## BOOK REVIEW

# Wish Lanterns - Young Lives in New China

## Author: Alec Ash

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**Abstract:** Roughly 320 million people in mainland China are in their teens and twenties - nearly as many as the total population of the USA. They are the ones who will shape the future of the potential superpower. Still, their voices are rarely heard in the West. In *Wish Lanterns*, author Alec Ash opens a window to the reality of the everyday life of young Chinese and lets the reader take part in their hopes, dreams and fears. The book outlines the biographies of six Chinese millennials in a collection of short, but gripping narratives which demonstrate how China's fast-forward development in the last 30 years shaped a whole generation.

**Keywords:** China, young Chinese, lifestyles, consumerism, post-materialism

“Wish Lanterns” is in keeping with a number of other creative nonfiction works about China which were published during the last few years. Best known are the works of American writer and journalist Peter Hessler, whose work has earned him acclaim and has even been translated into Chinese. The genre “creative nonfiction” or “literary nonfiction” is a category of writing which is rooted in accurate facts. But contrary to other nonfiction texts, its authors make use

of literary styles or techniques, so their works read like fiction and have therefore the potential to reach a wider audience.

What is special about “Wish Lanterns” is that the author himself was still quite young when he started to work on this book; a fact that probably helped him to bond with his Chinese peers and encouraging them to open up to him. Alec Ash is from England and moved to Beijing, China when he was only 22, just after graduating from university, in 2008, the year of the summer Olympics. He explains that he was drawn in by the special “dynamism of the country” and fascinated by the “diversity of its people”. He first started to write on blogs, then for newspapers, and in 2012 he began his research for this book about China's young generation.

The protagonists in “Wish Lanterns” are six young women and men, all born between 1985 and 1990, the so-called post-80s generation - the first generation to be born after the introduction of the one-child policy and who have only known post-reform China. It is a generation which is said to be consumption-oriented and nationalistic while at the same time quite liberal and open to the West.

But as always in life, generalizations show only a part of the picture and the reality is much more heterogeneous. Such is the diversity among the

characters in “Wish Lanterns”. There is Dahai, a military child and one of China's many opinionated netizens. Xiaoxiao, a dreamy young woman from China's industrial North-East and the owner of a small clothes-shop. There is Fred, the privileged daughter of a party official, who studies political science in search of an ideology to fill China's post-reform value-vacuum. And Snail, a boy from a small farmer's village who is the first from his family to attend university, but who has trouble adapting to his new life. We meet Lucifer, a wannabe superstar with a big ego, leaving no measure untried to become famous. And, last but not least, there is Mia, a nonconformist girl from Xinjiang in the far West of China. She gains admission to the prestigious Tsinghua University and works hard for a career in the pitiless fashion industry.

Of course, it could be said that these portraits don't capture the whole landscape of this generation. There are no kids from China's nouveau riche families (富二代 Fù'èrdài, the rich second generation), nor are any of the protagonists a typical migrant worker. But a writer's research work has its limits and this is especially true for China. Or as Alec Ash expresses it in an interview “ I did take pains to find and follow six people from different locations and backgrounds, so as to bring out that diversity”

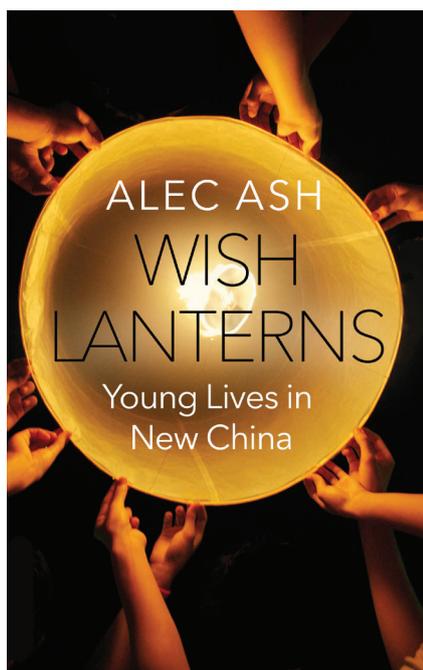


Figure 1: book cover



Source of all pictures: © Picador - Macmillan Publishers.

Figure 2: Mia, the fashion designer (illustration of paperback book cover)

(<http://www.youngchinawatchers.com/featured-young-china-watcher-alec-ash-founder-of-the-anthill/>).

In a note to his readers, Ash explains that his aim is not “to tell” his readers “what it means to be of a particular generation of young Chinese.” Instead he wants “to show” them which he does through vivid descriptions of the living environments in China and it is in these observations of everyday details where Ash’s prose really shines. The reader feels drawn into the lives of these six people and gets a feeling of how hard it must be to be a rebel in a society which still sees 孝 xiào (“filial piety” or showing one’s respect to the older generation) as a very important virtue. Even the rock star Lucifer – however eccentrically he might behave – is, in the end, only fighting for the approval of his parents and trying to

make them proud.

But what about the next generations which already start to gain influence? Ash is aware of this and states that one problem with writing “about real lives is that they keep going on” and that with the post-90s and post-00s there is already “a new texture of young China”. Still, despite the fervor for change, some facts about being young in mainland China stay true for the subsequent generations.

I recommended this book to a Chinese friend in her early twenties. Her approving reaction to seeing the book cover (which shows Mia, the fashion designer) was that “the girl on the cover does not look like how the government wants young people to look. It rather shows how we want to see ourselves”. In this way “Wish Lanterns” might be even

more political than it first seems to be. I also want to recommend “Wish Lanterns” to all Western readers who want a thought-provoking, and at the same time entertaining, read about contemporary China. Alec Ash still lives in mainland China and I am curious to see whether we can expect some more fascinating insights about China from him soon.

#### Bibliographic information

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