

Softcover: UK

CD reviews Taiwan

# China today, the world tomorrow

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

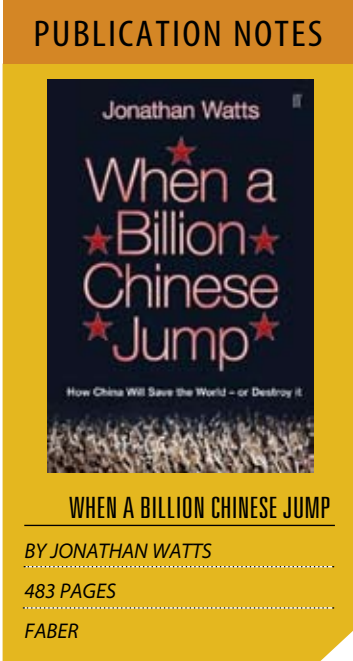
It's always wise to be careful what you wish for. When China was poor and communist, its government disdained consumption and castigated the evils of capitalism, while in the West we argued that happiness lay in the joy of stuff. The good news is that China now agrees about the stuff, embracing a strange hybrid of capitalism with distinctly Chinese characteristics. But that is also the bad news, as Jonathan Watts explains in *When a Billion Chinese Jump*.

The title derives from a boyhood nightmare: the Chinese, Watts thought then, were so numerous that if they all jumped together they could knock the world off its axis. Now that most of China's 1.4 billion people prefer to live better today than to trust the promise of a socialist paradise tomorrow, the shock to the world's economy, atmosphere, soil, water, forests and natural resources seems set to trigger his boyhood terror: the demands of a billion Chinese bent on becoming prosperous consumers could indeed, on China's present trajectory, knock the world off its axis.

Each industrial revolution has been dirty and environmentally damaging and the cumulative unintended consequences include changing the climate on which human civilization depends. But while industrialization was confined to a handful of relatively small countries, the environmental impacts, climate aside, were relatively local. In China, though, carbon-fueled industrialization and unsustainable development has metastasized by virtue of its scale and speed into the global game-changer of Watts' title. The West invented unsustainable living; China has taken it up with enthusiasm.

We are barely three decades into China's industrial and consumption revolution. There are still hundreds of millions of poor Chinese who wish to prosper and consume in a country that wastes so much energy that its average per capita carbon emissions already equal those of France. The most worrying thing about the Chinese industrial revolution is not the appalling damage that Watts meticulously chronicles, but the capacity for more that is still in the system.

Few were counting the cost in the first giddy decades of China's industrial revolution, but in the past 10 years, the bills have begun to come in: they include acute and chronic water shortages, toxic algae blooms, desertification, acid rain, dying grasslands and angry people. The new middle classes in the prosperous cities of eastern China now want dirty factories closed or cleaned up, but the inland provinces further back in the queue for prosperity are keen to welcome them. In 2007, the World Bank conservatively estimated the cost of Chinese pollution at 5.8 percent of GDP. (Others have put it as high as 8 percent to 12 percent.) If we subtract these sums from China's headline growth, the present looks substantially less impressive and the future more worrying still. Illegal deforestation in China continues, despite belated prohibition; the pollution carried down China's rivers poisons the sea from the Bohai Gulf to the Pacific;



particulates are carried on the winds to other countries and China's contribution to the great brown cloud helps to create a giant smog blanket even over otherwise unpolluted areas of Asia.

In Beijing there are efforts to turn to a less destructive course. Sustainable development is now the mantra of government policy and China is committed to a low-carbon economy, not least in order to dominate the technologies of the future. But as Watts discovers, to accomplish this unprecedented feat at this stage of development requires more than shaky legislation and a fiat from the top. It requires a profound cultural shift away from the entrenched idea that nature exists to be exploited and plundered and that any environmental problem can be fixed by engineering.

Watts' journey takes us to nature reserves where the animals are served up in official banquets, to the tragic province of Henan, once held up as an exemplar of Maoist development, now stricken by poverty, soil exhaustion, corruption and an AIDS epidemic traceable to an official blood-selling scheme. Then there is Linfen, a coal town in Shanxi Province, said to be the most polluted place in the world, where birth defects run at six times the national average which, in turn, is three to five times the global norm; and where the miners' death rate per tonne of coal is 30 times that of the US.

The Yellow River is all but destroyed. The government has encouraged people to move west from the overpopulated heartland into the arid and mountainous lands of the Uighurs and the Tibetans, places able to support sparse populations but where ecosystems rapidly collapse under the weight of numbers.

If this is a bleak story, it is because the prospects are bleak. Watts tries to balance this journey through dystopia with signs of hope, but we sense he would wish to be more convinced than the evidence allows. This book is not simply an indictment of China's development path: it is a lesson for us all in the dangers of how we live. Will we heed the lesson and will China's bid for sustainability prove more than a rebranding exercise? Any reader of *When a Billion Chinese Jump* must hope so.



**The Choshui River Has Taken a Wrong Turn (濁水溪出代誌)**  
Various Artists  
Gamaa Music

There are no sappy ballads on this 15-song compilation, and that's exactly the way Gamaa Music wants it, says the label's founder and rock singer Nuno Chen (陳信宏). Chen, who runs the Taichung-based indie label, has been fighting Mando-pop power since 1999. Gamaa started out as a distributor for underground rock bands from abroad and introduced Taiwanese record buyers to groups like Australia's Dirty Three.

Nowadays Gamaa is devoted to promoting non-mainstream rock bands from Central Taiwan. This collection contains a fair amount of hard rock and metal, a few punk tunes and a rock-rap song. Most of the performers are up-and-coming bands, which is painfully apparent in a handful of songs that are rough around the edges. But the bands make up for their lack of finesse with youthful and energetic performances.

Chthonic's Freddy Lim (林昶佐) might be heartened by Metal Blood's (鐵血政策) speed metal romp *Nationality* (民族), in which the singer belts out in English with a gut-wrenching scream, "I am, I am, I am independence/I am, I am, I am freedom."

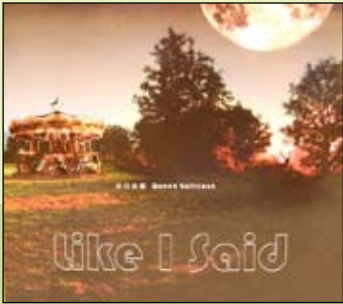
And what metal fan would not be curious to hear a song from a band called Groin Destroyer (鼠蹊部破壞者)?

Damnkidz, a Taichung group, offers *I Can't Wait to See You Again*, an athletic demonstration of happy-go-lucky emo punk. It's a silly but catchy tune.

Another reason Chen created this collection is to encourage younger rock bands to compose their lyrics in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), and challenge the common perception that only old-fashioned crooners sing in the language. With his own group, The Tonic (主音), Chen composes many of his lyrics in Hoklo. In *Trial* (審判), he laments global warming and climate change, backed by a rousing, anthemic hard-rock arrangement.

The most promising music on this compilation doesn't come from guitar-wielding, distortion-loving metal heads or punks. Chen named the album after the track from acoustic folk rockers Country Boys (農村武裝青年). Their song, also sung in Hoklo, decries how the Choshui River (濁水溪), which "flows from Nantou to the flatland plains of Changhua" (從南投流出彰化平原), has been sucked dry by industrial parks that dump "poisoned water" into the oceans. It is the spirit of this song that perhaps embodies Chen's vision for the future of rock 'n' roll in Taiwan.

— DAVID CHEN



**Like I Said**  
Queen Suitcase (皇后皮箱)  
Himalaya Records

The 1960s and 1970s are sounding fresh again. Queen Suitcase (皇后皮箱), the winner of this year's battle of the bands competition at the Ho-Hai-Yan Gung-Liau Rock Festival (貢寮國際海洋音樂祭), is in love with rock's golden age, and that affection shows on the group's first release, *Like I Said*, a five-track EP.

Many indie pop bands have a penchant for psychedelic atmospherics and Beatles-style chord changes, but this five-piece group gets it right.

The keyboardist and lead singer, Carla Chung (鍾卡拉), has a sultry voice that does well even when drenched in reverb and electronic effects on the title track. This playful song is full of sonic references that bring to mind different eras of rock: it's driven by a 1960s-sounding organ, noirish post-punk guitars and swooshing, high-pitched electronica effects. It won me over at the start with a sample of screeching elephants that launched the band into its outer space rock groove.

On the piano-driven rock ballad *I Won't Forget You* (不會忘記你), the band is clearly channeling the Beatles, but almost a little too much.

Queen Suitcase, which formed in 2005 and has gone through a few lineup changes over the years, clearly showed its mettle at last week's competition. But it's hard to imagine that it could capture on stage the exquisite dreaminess of a song like *Let's Go Outside*, with its quiet, hypnotic drum loops and Chung's ethereal vocal harmonies. The EP is worth getting for this song alone.

Queen Suitcase's next scheduled performance is at Legacy Taipei on Aug. 6.

— DAVID CHEN



**Baby (寶貝)**  
Karen Mok (莫文蔚)  
Universal Records

After two albums of folk and opera aria covers, the immensely talented singer-cum-actress Karen Mok (莫文蔚) returns to songwriting with *Baby*.

A collaboration between Mok and producer Zhang Yadong (張亞東), her rumored boyfriend, the singer co-wrote all the album's 10 tracks.

*Baby*, a collection of romantic odes inspired by mundane experiences, steers clear of the conceptual ballads of Mok's past output. The quietly beatific title track *Baby* (寶貝) sees Mok coaxing her lover to fall asleep in a lulling voice, while in *Song to Sing in the Shower* (洗澡時唱的歌), the singer croons about her various elations while taking a shower.

The album breaks new ground by paying pop music tribute to classical poetry. In *Holding Thine Hands* (執子之手), a phrase borrowed from *The Book of Songs* (詩經), Mok offers her pledge to grow old with her beloved, and in *Eat Drink, Men Women* (飲食男女), inspired by *The Book of Rites* (禮記), she explores the joys and complications of sex.

Roaming the stylistic spectrum, the album is musically adventurous.

Though none of its tracks comes across as a radio-friendly anthem, *Baby* is a candid and touching work from the perennially professional Mok.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG



**Princess Tone Ai (跳痛)**  
Tai Ai-ling (戴愛玲)  
Sony Music

Despite promising so much when she delivered the power ballad *The Right One* (對的人) on her debut album, Aboriginal pop siren Tai Ai-ling (戴愛玲), also known as Princess Ai, failed to live up to expectations. But with *Princess Tone Ai* (跳痛), her fifth outing, Tai proves that A-mei (張惠妹) is not the only Aboriginal pop princess worthy of adulation.

Previously pigeonholed as a singer with an "iron lung" (鐵肺) who squandered her explosive vocal powers on hackneyed songs, Tai makes up for lost time by delivering her most satisfying pop album to date.

Tai's voice is her best asset. Even in the title track, *Jumping Pain* (跳痛), she elevates clichéd lyrics such as "the pain is deep, the injury is heavy" with her bravura vocals.

Elsewhere, unimaginatively titled songs, such as *Plus, Minus, Multiply, Divide* (加減乘除) and *Future Tense* (未來式), do little to show off her vocal prowess.

Tai delivers fireworks on the opening track *Close My Eyes to Love* (閉上眼睛愛), her soaring voice swirling and plummeting around the infectious chorus.

The album's highlight is *Just Another Glance at You* (只要再看你一眼), a duet with Roger Yang (陽陪安) that pays tribute to and even rivals A-mei's *Within a Glance* (一眼瞬間). The pair's voices hover and flirt with each other like two fluttering butterflies.

Tai stretches her musical muscles on rap number *Yesterday's Tomorrow* (昨天的明天), a song about frazzled love performed with Paiwan reggae rocker Matzka, and *Good and Bad* (好壞), a disco rouser about misspent love.

Tai is known for starting off songs mildly, then thundering into climactic highs. However, on *Princess Tone Ai* she shows restraint by not galloping full pelt into the upper octaves.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

Softcover: UK

# Genius as an infinite capacity for taking pains

*Though missing morsels of literary insight, 'The Orwell Diaries' reveal the prosaic details of a life spent pursuing truth and honesty*

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

I haven't always taken kindly to Orwell. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* excepted, his novels appear two-dimensional and lightweight, in addition to being humorlessly bleak. Many of his essays are classics, though, and his political writing is never uninteresting. But these diaries, published by Penguin in an edition superbly edited by Peter Davison, are quite exceptionally readable. Maybe, despite the possibly inflated claims currently being made for this author, these diaries are the really classic Orwell.

Their texts have already been published in *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (20 volumes), but not with the detailed notes Davison provides here. Furthermore, when put together in one book like this, they constitute, though with gaps, the beginning of an autobiography for the years they cover, 1931 to 1949.

Not everything is discussed, though. Most disappointingly of all,

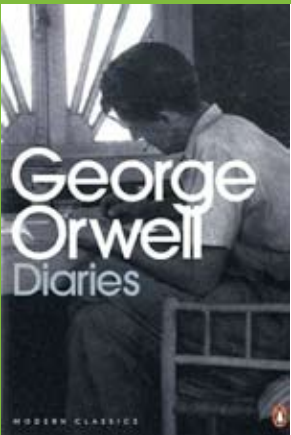
there's no reference to the writing of his books. There's very little that throws light on his personal relationships either. Instead, there's a huge amount about gardening — growing his own food was one of Orwell's passions, and almost a necessity when he moved to the windswept Scottish island of Jura in 1946. There's also a good deal of the kind of social commentary on the lives of the extremely poor found in *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, plus political analysis (there's one section, *Diary of the Events Leading Up to the War*, covering July to September 1939). But above all there's endless observation — of nature, of people and of events.

Orwell can be considered as the ultimate realist. He wasn't, of course, because the worlds of myth, aesthetics and even music, so important to many people, were closed books to him. But from his practical, no-nonsense, down-to-earth point of view, largely excluding the realm of the

imagination, he was the ultimate stickler for a record of what had actually happened. These diaries are full of the prices of things, how many eggs his hens laid, how much people earned (in the UK and in Morocco, where he spent the winter of 1938-1939 for the benefit of his lungs), and whether the birds he saw on Jura were this species or that, and how they differed.

Deviation from this limited kind of truth was intolerable to Orwell. A committed socialist, he later became the hammer of the left because he saw for himself the suppression of other left-wing groups by the Communists in Spain in the 1930s, learned about the cynical rewriting of history in the Soviet Union, and became appalled by the willingness of the British left to turn a blind eye to such things. He was an enemy of fascism (he offered his services in the war effort in September 1939, eventually working for the BBC on its broadcasts to Asia), but his two most famous books were attacks on the left and on the dishonesty

PUBLICATION NOTES



**THE ORWELL DIARIES**  
BY GEORGE ORWELL  
531 PAGES  
PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

he believed Marxist societies routinely indulged in ("All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others," and so on).

These diaries are nevertheless extraordinarily dissimilar. At the BBC he's chatting about Churchill or Duff Cooper and considering the propaganda value of suggesting that Japan was planning to invade Russia, whereas when picking hops in Kent and researching the poor in Lancashire he's staying in filthy lodging houses smelling of rancid margarine and sleeping four to a room, and then on Jura trying to make cress and raspberries grow in the most hideously rainy, windy, cold conditions, without electricity, phone or a car.

It's impossible not to see a kind of masochism in Orwell's character. He won a scholarship to Eton, even though his middle-class family was far from rich, and couldn't afford to send him to any university. Yet he stubbornly dedicated himself to investigating the British underclass, assuming a cockney (East London working-class) accent in order to

disguise his origins, walking in the rain between towns in the North of England on blistered feet when it would have cost him very little to take a bus, running a neighborhood store selling, among other things, his own garden produce, and then living for two years on Jura, a Hebridean island 45km long and 13km wide with a population in 1946 of 250.

Very few other people, in other words, were willing to try living there, but Orwell, despite suffering from tuberculosis, thought he could do it. His wife Eileen had died on the operating table the previous year, and Orwell was accompanied in his desolate hidey-hole by his adopted son and his sister. He thought he was escaping the modern world in all its forms, but the bleak reality he opted for was something even he couldn't manage, and he died in a London hospital of a hemorrhage of the lungs on Jan. 21, 1950.

Even that date seems symbolic. Orwell's is a winter world, both

in the cold endured by the people he spent months living with, in the austerity he endured along with the rest of the British during and after World War II, and in the horror and sorrow he forced himself to confront in the USSR. Furthermore, there's something bleak about his unimaginative realism. He tried smoking marijuana in Morocco, as he relates here, but it didn't have any effect. He's occasionally hostile to women — one Manchester woman here had "adopted her husband's views as a wife ought to." He wouldn't, you feel, have had much time for the swinging 1960s had he lived to see them.

But depression, though an inescapable feature of Orwell's books, features rarely in these marvelous diaries. Instead there's endless observation and hope. "Turnips want thinning ... Put up place for ducklings ... Spinach germinating ... One egg."

A selection of Orwell's diary entries can be read at [orwelldiaries.wordpress.com](http://orwelldiaries.wordpress.com).