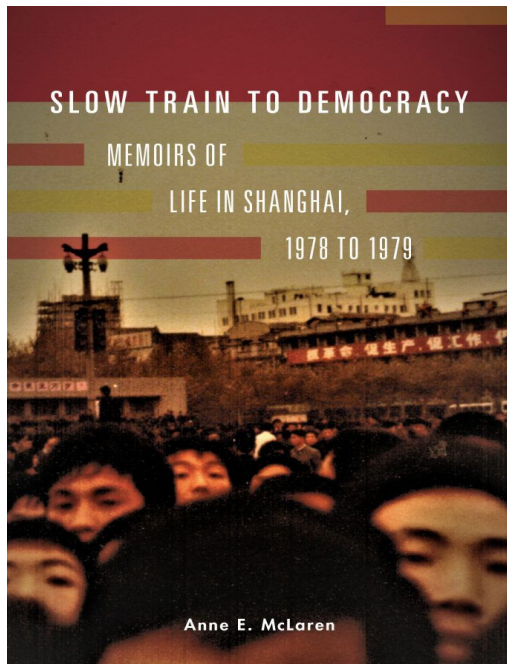


## Book Launch: *Slow Train to Democracy* by Anne McLaren



197 pages, paperback, +44 black and white photos,

Notes, List of useful terms, index.

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<https://scholarly.info/book/slow-train-to-democracy-memoirs-of-life-in-shanghai-1978-to-1979/>

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*Slow Train to Democracy* offers a rare insight into everyday life during the first year of the reform movement that created the China of the twenty-first century. It comprises analysis of the social and political movements in Shanghai from 1978 to 1979 together with a set of primary documents, letters and diary entries recorded by the author during her stay in Shanghai from 1978 to 1979. The book reveals a vast outpouring of

grievances by ordinary people at a time of dramatic social change. Late 1978 saw the emergence of protest movements in numerous Chinese cities. People called for an end to the disastrous policies of the Maoist era and for a new political system where the rulers could be made accountable. Some called for the rule of law and constitutional government. Democracy was a key term employed by demonstrators. The Square was given a new banner as "Democracy Forum". A wall poster stated proudly: "The Democracy Train is in the Square".

The Chinese urban protest movements of the 1970s, like the Hong Kong protest movement of 2019, were marked by the lack of identifiable leaders and known organizations. Once sparked by individual activists in November 1978, more and more people joined the mass movement. Some of them formed cluster groups of individuals who had similar grievances or who belonged to the same work unit. Protestors occupied Shanghai's largest park, The People's Square, where they listened to self-appointed orators on podiums and put up a constant stream of posters on the outer walls. Mobs marched down city streets as far as the Communist Party HQ by the Bund to demand party leaders redress their grievances. The culminating activity was the occupation of Shanghai's central railway station in April 1979. This led to the suppression of the movement and arrest of the ringleaders.

The Chinese urban protest movements of the late 1970s were a significant precursor to the democracy movement in central Beijing from April to June 1989 that led to the bloody suppression of Tiananmen. This book is the only study of the democracy movement in Shanghai of the late 1970s. The author was a student of Chinese at Shanghai's Fudan University at that time and took advantage of the opportunity to record the social and protest movements and interview some of the participants. This book is thus a unique record of this era.

### **Endorsements for *Slow Train to Democracy*:**

To truly understand China, it is important to remember how much it has changed in the last forty years. Anne McLaren happened to be there during the dramatic transition period of 1978-79 and meticulously recorded events and opinions of the so-called "ordinary people," youth, and students, as they abandoned Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and moved bravely towards the new world of economic reform and open door policies. Few people had the language skills and aptitude to compile this dossier. This book is a precious resource for researchers and general readers who are interested in the China of those days or China today.

*Jocelyn Chey, AM, Visiting Professor, University of Sydney, served as Cultural Counsellor in the Australian Embassy, Beijing, from 1975-1978, and as Consul-General in Hong Kong from 1992 to 1995.*

Anne McLaren's first-hand vignettes of an Australian student's everyday life in China in the late 1970s are a delight to read. Her record of the poster protest movement in Shanghai, during a rare period of public outspokenness, is both captivating and historically valuable. She was one of the few foreigners in the city who could read and speak Chinese, making the diaries and letters which form the core of the book particularly insightful.

*Beverley Hooper, Emeritus Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Sheffield, the author of *Foreigners Under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949-1976* (Hong Kong University Press, 2016)*

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## **Author biography**

Anne E. McLaren is Professor of Chinese Studies at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne. Born in Sydney, she studied Modern Chinese and Classical Chinese at the Australian National University, Canberra, where she completed a PhD in 1983. From September 1978 to August 1979 she lived as a student in China, most of that time at Shanghai's Fudan University. She is the author of numerous books and studies on Chinese traditional popular culture, fiction, oral, ritual and performance arts. Her works include *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (2008), *Chinese Women- Living and Working* (2003), *Chinese Popular Culture & Ming Chantefables* (1998), *Dress, Sex and Text in Chinese Culture* (co-edited, 1999). Her research has been funded by several awards from the Australian Research Council and the Taiwanese Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. In 2020 she was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities for pioneering research in the oral and ritual culture of Chinese women.