

# THE FORBIDDEN GAME

Exploring China's complex relationship with the 'rich man's sport'

BY AELRED DOYLE

What does golf mean in China? Statistically, zero percent of the population plays it and many course laborers don't know what they are working on. Is golf even about golf? Many new courses are actually real estate plays. Is golf even *legal*? New golf course construction has been prohibited since 2004, and it remains politically taboo. You'll never see pictures of government leaders on the course. The answer to all these questions depends on who you ask. Dan Washburn is interested in the big picture though:

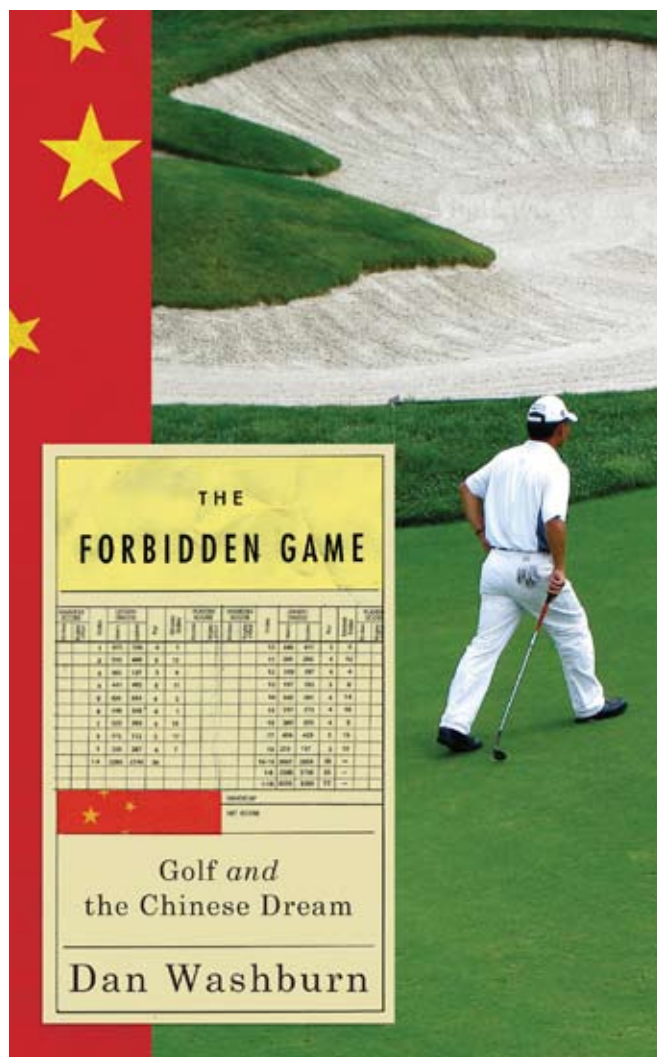
"The story of golf in China actually [has] very little to do with golf itself... Golf, its emergence and growth in China, is a barometer for ... the country's rapid economic rise, but it is also symbolic of the less glamorous realities of a nation's awkward and arduous evolution from developing to developed: corruption, environmental neglect, disputes over rural land rights, and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor."

In positing that the story of golf here is really a story of modern China, Washburn won't surprise anybody. In this country, nothing is ever just about that thing. But as the founder of Shanghaiist and an experienced and versatile journalist, he's got the balance just right here.

Low on grand pronouncements, high on intelligent analysis, straight about how much we can only guess at when it comes to the larger forces involved; he comes at his theme through the stories of three people whose lives have been transformed by the golf boom.

Martin Moore is an American course constructor who lands in China by accident in 1994 and soon finds himself running golf projects of extraordinary size and ambition. Land is leveled by hand on a massive scale, whole cities of digging equipment rise up, money and labor is thrown at projects in a way the world has never seen before. Moore finds himself in situations where he is literally not sure whether there are enough qualified people in the world for his needs.

Wang Libo is a Hainan villager whose life changes when a massive, secretive golf project sets up right next to his village. The conflict between developers and landowners



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is a running story. The way it affects Wang, his family and relationships between villagers is intriguing.

The person Washburn spent the most time with is Zhou Xunshu. A migrant worker from rural Guizhou, he gets a job as a security guard at a golf course in Guangzhou. Despite having no knowledge of the sport, he is quickly fascinated. Even though he is not even allowed to play the course he still manages to teach himself. The day he hits

a golf ball with a real club on a real course for the first time, to the mockery then disbelief of the Taiwanese GM of the club, is a thrilling sports movie moment.

Zhou is determined to become a professional, and he does. But it's a hard life on the fledgling China tour. Prize money never matches his expenses and he spends too much time working to be able to practice enough. His success is a tribute to his amazing perseverance and natural ability.

As he starts coming up against younger players who grew up in privilege with professional training, a classic Chinese contrast reveals itself during events, with the older professionals mostly from the countryside, dark skinned and direct, spending half their time looking for the cheapest hostel and restaurant to stay in for each event, drinking beer together at night; and the slick new players with sponsorship and the best equipment, looking sharp in their high-end gear.

It's very hard to tell whether the stories of Zhou and Wang are inspirational or discouraging. That's up to us to decide. There's so much here, and Washburn stocks the book with great vignettes, most memorably of some of the people Moore has to deal with.

A town mayor insists Moore be his guest at an execution; a rich boss arrives at his club with ludicrous security overkill, including motorbike outriggers; at meetings, one guy has young women attending whose sole job is to light his pipes; one guy wants a hole to be a giant funnel – "Mini-golf on a professional golf course," Martin sighed."

The contrast between the laughable but powerful, and the admirable but powerless, is explicit. And one nice detail: the highest taxpayer in Shenzhen in 2001 was reported to be Tiger Woods, based on his appearance money for an event there.

Washburn has a rich topic, and he does it justice. This is a China book, not a golf book, and it's a very good one.

*|| The Forbidden Game is available on Amazon.*