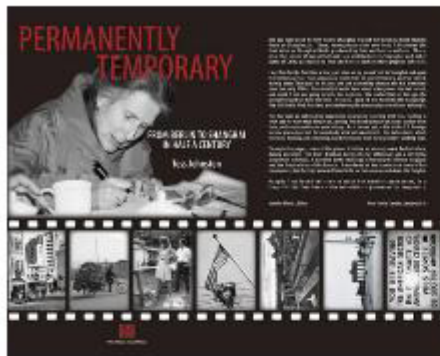


# Tess Johnston's "Permanently Temporary"



## Books

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Written by Aelred Doyle

### A new memoir from an old China hand

Self-described "new old China hand" Tess Johnston has shown an impressive tendency to find herself just off-center in some of the 20th century's notable hot spots: from wartime Saigon to Cold War East Berlin to Shanghai at

the dawn of reform. She even had a short stint in the American Embassy in Tehran mere months before the staff there were held hostage for over a year in 1979. In this absorbing and unpretentious memoir, *Permanently Temporary: From Berlin to Shanghai in Half a Century*, long-time Shanghai resident Johnston takes us through her life of travel, mostly with the US Foreign Service. ([Read More](#))

It's telling that she jumps straight to the meat of the book without any 'let me tell you about my childhood' preamble. Bang, she's in Berlin in 1954, a green Southern girl on her first posting abroad. She never seems to have been much for beating around the bush. A pattern of independent exploration, of a fascination with architecture and of keen observation is set, one that continues for the rest of the book.

Most dramatic are her seven years in Vietnam, during which she came under shelling during the 1968 Tet offensive. She's in a great spot to describe the Americans she worked with and for, as a non-military insider who was relatively junior but had access. What comes through clearly is how much of an adventure the whole thing was for people like her. She was a definite minority, as a young attractive American woman, and as a result found she could always get a space on a helicopter when she wanted to visit somewhere new.

One of the pleasures of the book is that Johnston doesn't hold back on her opinions. If people behave stupidly, words are unminced. There's a definite sense that she must be a fierce friend and equally fierce opponent. The same goes for locales – she hated her time in New Delhi and Tehran (the latter sounds quite frightening at the time) and says so.

Her first stint in Shanghai started in 1981 – and if you think you get stared at on the street now, imagine what it was like then. Life was hard, but good antiques were plentiful and Johnston took great pleasure in the relationships she built with locals and found much to appreciate in a low-rise crime-free city with ample parking spaces and bicycles dominating the streets. Even far worse pollution than now, little heating or air conditioning and a severe shortage of nightlife options didn't hinder her enthusiasm, and Shanghai's Art Deco buildings soon caught her eye. Except for a three-year period she has been here ever since, and is retired in name only, having written or co-written 25 books about the city's history and architecture.

Any regrets about a life spent traveling from place to place? Not one. As she says to finish the book: "I only wish I had started earlier."