

Streetlife China

By Michael Dutton

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Michael Dutton's *Streetlife China* is based on an interesting concept. With the market modernization of China and the shattering of many "iron rice bowls," the number of people who are not dependent on the government for their livelihood has increased dramatically in the past two decades. In those years, independent shops, stalls and restaurants have blossomed. Chinese cities do have an exciting streetlife.

When I first went to China in the mid-1980s, streets were dark and almost deserted by 8 p.m. A couple of years later, arriving in Lanzhou at 9 p.m., there was so much nightlife we could not find a place to feed the family.

Observing China from an airplane at night, one might have believed he was over the ocean for all of the lights that showed. Now, Chinese cities can easily be picked out in the dark, and brightly lighted streets are thronged with people until well after midnight. It is this new China that Dutton attempts to explore.

Among the interesting chapters are those dealing with the commercialization of the "Great Helmsman" in the expanding market economy. Mao badges, once a symbol of the fanaticism of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, are now traded, bought and sold like baseball cards in the States. There are collectors and museums devoted to the genre. Even as heroic Mao statues have disappeared from the cities, Mao memorabilia flourish as never before in the marketplace.

Dutton gives adequate attention to the changing nature of the *danwei* (Chinese work unit) that no longer fulfills all of the needs of its workers. The new nature of the work unit, as it sells off some of its assets, gets the considerable attention it deserves. In today's changing China, many married couples try to keep one foot in the door. One of the couple remains in a work unit because of housing (though that partner may have an outside job) while the other is in the market economy. This reviewer knows one university professor of Marxist economics who spends his evenings running his tiny capitalistic restaurant.

Other interesting chapters discuss the new street populations, migrants to the cities, who are outside of the traditional methods of control. Information is included on how they define themselves and how they are defined by others.



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Considerable attention is given to the attitudes of public security agencies toward the new floating populations; a fairly large number of pertinent documents are provided in translation.

Having said this, parts of Dutton's book were disappointing to this reader. To start, I felt it was mistitled; *Streetlife Beijing* would have been more accurate in delineating the bulk of the material presented. Too little attention is given to China's vast hinterland. Potential workers gather daily in the county towns of Ningxia and other provinces, hoping for a day's work. In any medium-sized city, home improvement workers sit along

the streets with their tools, looking for employment.

Dutton also gives too much attention to those in Beijing who operate at the fringes of society (the petty criminal element), and on country women who are employed as maids and nannies for the *nouveau riche*. He should have spent more time on the myriad of petty shopkeepers and on the owners of clothes stalls and streetside restaurants. Among females, some consideration should be given to the many who are the clerks and waitresses of those tiny establishments owned by others. Here, I think of highways connecting cities. Hundreds of tiny restaurants try to attract truck drivers by having the waitresses sit outside. More importantly, it should have been possible for him to let such workers describe their own lives and hopes. Between customers, these people are happy to kill a little time through talk.

This criticism should not detract from a worthwhile book that uncovers new ground in today's China. Let's hope that the present work is just a beginning. *Streetlife China* is potentially useful for teachers of modern China (history, society, politics, economics and gender) who wish to give their students a different taste of the vast Chinese banquet. Students will find the photos and sketches more useful than the rather esoteric bibliography. ■

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