

# China From the Ground Up

Two memoirs describe a country in profound transition.

By HANNAH BEECH

IN CHINA, everyone has a home. But most have never lived there. *Laojia*, translated literally, means “old home” and the phrase denotes the ancestral wellspring of a paternal lineage. In a restless, rapidly urbanizing nation with at least a quarter-billion people on the move, most Chinese are several towns removed from their “old homes.” Yet in a land of such mass displacement, where unlovely Communist-era cities are being gutted and equally unlovely capitalist-era ones are materializing

## THE ROAD TO SLEEPING DRAGON

Learning China From the Ground Up

By Michael Meyer

296 pp. Bloomsbury. \$28.

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A Memoir In and Out of China

By Xiaolu Guo

Illustrated. 366 pp. Grove Press. \$26.

in their stead, people still confer an almost talismanic importance to their *laojia*.

Michael Meyer, a Minnesotan who went to China as one of the Peace Corps' first volunteers there, and Xiaolu Guo, a writer and filmmaker who grew up in a salt-splattered Chinese fishing village, explore the meaning of home in a nation perpetually in transition. The China they describe in their memoirs no longer exists, covered by layers of concrete, glass and fiber-optic cables that have tethered even the most isolated farmer to the modern age. Still, it is the journey through heady, whiplash times that helps us understand where the nation is going. If the 21st century is to be China's era, it's important to know how it will get there.

As with so many Chinese born during the Cultural Revolution, Guo's roots are both tangled and tragic. Battered by a political purge, her parents offload their baby girl to a childless couple. But food is scarce. The foster family can't grow enough yams for an extra mouth. Instead, until she is almost 7, Guo must live with her destitute grandparents in a fishing hamlet where sustenance comes from strips of kelp and watery grael.

Even when her parents take her back and she moves to the grimy city of Wenzhou, Guo is motivated most by a need to sate her hunger. At one point, she traps a bird and eats it with such urgency that she gulps down feathers and guts. Emotionally, she is also starved, particularly by her mother. In Guo's world, neither love nor any other sentiment is easily expressed. “Silence was common in Chinese culture, it served a purpose,” she writes. “Never mention the tragedies, and never question them. Move on, get on with life. . . .”

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China has changed so much over the past few decades that it's easy to forget how much the vestiges of mass famine — both physical and psychological — still shape the national consciousness. When Guo wins a place at the Beijing Film Academy — one of only 11 successful applicants out of 7,100 candidates — she seems almost as excited by the plenitude of the canteen as she is by classes studying Godard and Kubrick.

Meyer arrives in Sichuan Province in 1995, charged with teaching English to country pupils. A college administrator, who is a member of the Communist Party but also a lover of British Romantic poetry, dictates what Meyer's curriculum should cover: the Bible, the stock market and the Beatles. Filling one's belly is no longer an all-consuming endeavor but China remains a place with a great cuisine and lousy food. Meyer spends years suffering from food poisoning.

I studied in the eastern city of Nanjing the year before Meyer arrived in China and later covered the country as a reporter. His descriptions of the 1990s and early 2000s awakened my memories: the ambitious men with their pagers clipped to leather belts; the young women click-clacking in heels and half-rolled pantyhose; the endless questions about life in America, especially how much everything cost. (Meyer's recollections also echo those of “River Town,” the 2001 memoir by his fellow Peace Corps volunteer Peter Hessler, who now writes for *The New Yorker*.)

Like Guo, Meyer ends up in Beijing, where he teaches at an international school, writes freelance stories and courts a feisty woman from Manchuria who will become his wife. His Beijing is a city so dedicated to self-improvement that it reflects little on what is lost on the way. “Maybe,” Meyer writes, “Beijing kept tearing itself down to bury its unexamined past.”

Meyer will go on to write a book about the destruction of Beijing's traditional alleyways, “The Last Days of Old Beijing,” as well as “In Manchuria,” which chronicles the transformation of his wife's hometown in the rural northeast. But his memoir, like Guo's, also captures a China where the syncopation of pile drivers only adds to the drumbeat of national optimism.

I lived in Beijing back then. As in China as a whole, the sense of possibility in the capital was intoxicating, even if the ghosts of students massacred near Tiananmen Square lingered. Guo documents performance art in which exhibitionists eat human placentas to critique China's one-child pol-



Michael Meyer



Xiaolu Guo

**In a land of mass displacement, Communist-era cities are yielding to capitalist-era ones.**

icy. The police descend on grungy artist colonies but self-expression flourishes.

Today's Beijing is sanitized and modernized. Bentleys and Serrano ham are on sale. But the city is no longer a playground for struggling artists or idealistic intellectuals. Late last year, entire warrens inhabited by migrants were razed. And under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese dissident movement has been

starved of oxygen. So many of my friends and acquaintances — lawyers, writers, activists and artists who dared to articulate a different dream for China — have either left the country or are in jail.

Guo exited early when she won a scholarship in 2002 to study film in London. She is now a British citizen and has written novels in English, like “A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers.” In 2013, *Granta* named her one of the best young British novelists. When her memoir veers to exile in Europe, its emotional punch is weaker, just as Meyer's story lags when he strays from Sichuan, Beijing and Manchuria. While he criticizes foreign correspondents for their facile coverage of China, his dispatches from Tibet and Xinjiang, vast lands on the edge of the Chinese Empire, also rely on quick anecdotes to fill out a larger truth.

Still, Meyer is an amiable narrator, and he introduces the reader to some of China's greatest paradoxes, notably a pride in history that co-exists with a compulsion to destroy the past. Guo uses her book to explore another contradiction: the role of women in a society where Chairman Mao deemed that women should hold up half the sky even as he kept a stable of concubines for his pleasure. Born long before the Communist revolution, Guo's grandmother was a child bride considered so insignificant that she lacked a name. The Communist census-takers who came to her remote fishing village were appalled by this relic of a feudal past, with her bound feet and bent body.

By contrast, Guo's mother starred in revolutionary operas after her factory shift was over. Yet Chinese women are still owned and exploited. While confiding to dorm mates at the Beijing Film Academy, Guo realizes the pervasiveness of the sexual abuse she suffered as a teenager. Her best friend throws herself out of a window because of a man. Being a mistress is now a career choice for young women in China.

Both Meyer and Guo begin their memoirs with quotes from “Journey to the West,” a classic 16th-century Chinese fable starring a Buddhist monk and a magical monkey. In search of Buddhist scriptures and enlightenment, man and monkey venture to India. For her part, Guo is raising her daughter in London. Meyer now teaches writing at the University of Pittsburgh. Perhaps their elegies for vanished homes in China required distance to write. After all, in these mutable times, a *laojia* exists not so much on a map but in the heart. □