On the road in China

By Trudy Bush in the February 24, 2009 issue

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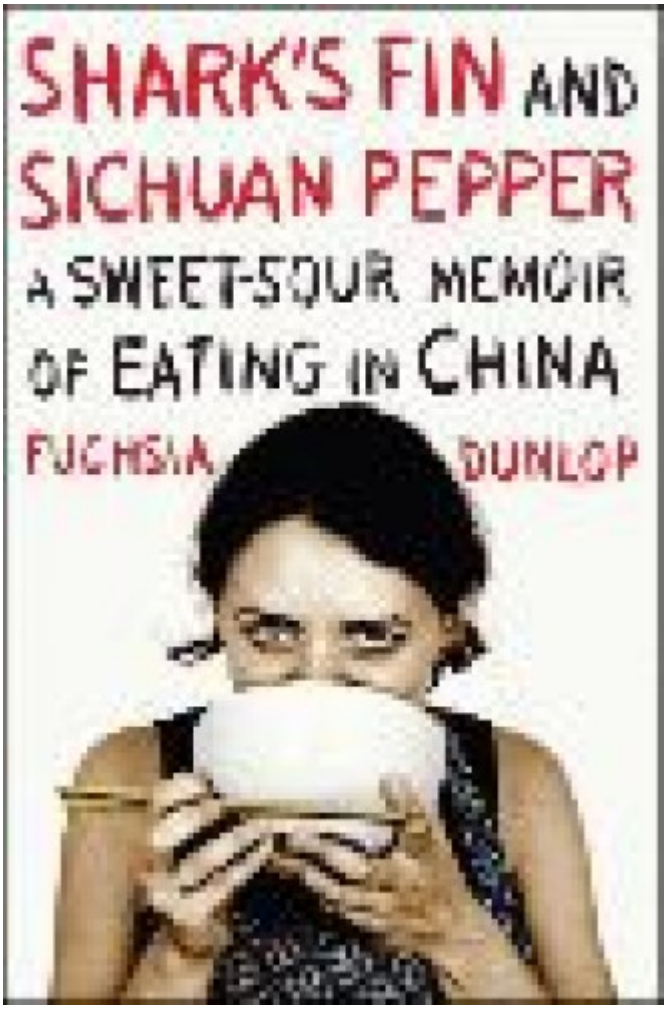
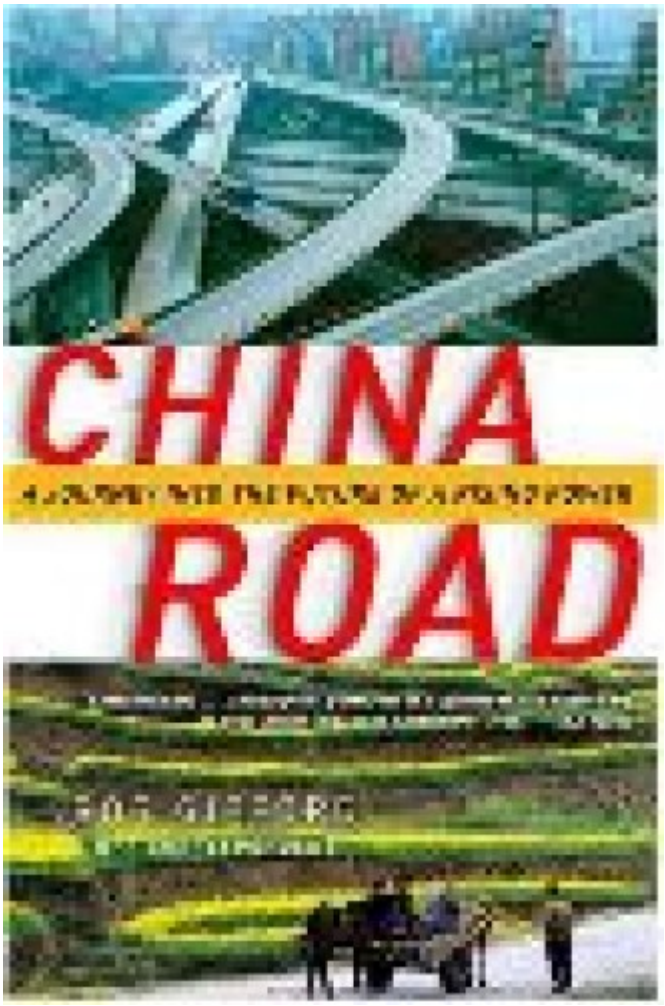


Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China

Fuchsia Dunlop
Norton



China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power

Rob Gifford
Random House

“It’s impossible to be neutral about China,” Rob Gifford writes. “Some foreigners hate it from the moment they set foot here. Others love it so much they put down roots and never go home.” But it may be getting harder to love China. Gifford, an NPR correspondent stationed there for six years, has tried—with mixed success—to be objective about the country, “to keep love and hate in balance.”

Fuchsia Dunlop arrives at a similarly difficult balance in her memoir of 16 years of traveling, living and eating in China. Her relationship with the country begins as a love affair but ends in disillusionment, tempered by an enduring connection to the place and affection for many Chinese friends.

Why does China call forth such strong reactions? I struggled with those reactions during the recent month I spent in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. In 1994, when Dunlop arrived in Chengdu to study at Sichuan University, China still seemed marginal to the rest of the world. “No one, then, would have considered going to Shanghai for a glamorous holiday or *shopping*,” she writes. Fourteen years later, I walked along a wide Chengdu boulevard looking at the Cartier, Armani and Burberry display windows in this city far from China’s political and economic centers. Instead of shopping at the colorful outdoor markets that enchanted Dunlop, I bought my groceries at crowded French and Japanese supermarkets—or, sometimes, at Walmart.

Chengdu’s misty mountain air is now thick with pollution. Cars, not bicycles, fill the streets. The narrow lanes and traditional courtyard houses that Dunlop loved have almost entirely disappeared, replaced by wide boulevards and endless high-rise developments.

“It felt like a personal tragedy for me, to fall in love with a place that was vanishing so rapidly,” Dunlop writes. “To start with a city so charming and distinctive, and to replace it with one that might be anywhere in China—what a waste.” Yet she was buoyed up by the tremendous energy and optimism that filled China as it began its transformation into a modern society. Though the energy hasn’t abated, the optimism has been tarnished by people’s awareness of the huge problems that have accompanied this rapid development.

On a recent two-month road trip across China, Gifford had a similar reaction to many of the cities he had visited earlier in his nearly 20 years of traveling in and writing about the country. Even the remote Silk Road town Urumqi, in the Gobi Desert, has become a sprawling city and home to companies such as Cisco and IBM. But as Gifford mourns the disappearance of the old China and explores the history that led to its deliberate destruction, he also celebrates the opportunities symbolized by the new highways. Rural peasants may be poorer than ever, but they are no longer trapped. The young and strong can now take the road to the city, where, though they will be exploited, they will also earn far more than they could have back on the farm.

The lightning speed at which China is changing fuels both writers’ ambivalence about the country and gives them reason to fear for its future. Both approached the place in a way that brought them into contact with a wide range of people and gives

them exceptional insight.

Dunlop, a food writer, got to know China by exploring its culinary culture—first by training at the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine (she was the first Western student ever admitted) and then by spending time in other provinces. Gifford traveled down China's equivalent of U.S. Route 66: Route 312, which begins in the glitter of Shanghai, traverses the barren Gobi Desert and ends at the Kazakhstan border. Each writes about the Chinese people with great affection and respect, but each also sees what Gifford calls "the dangerous fault lines" that threaten China's future: environmental degradation, the growing gap between the urban rich and the rural poor, rampant corruption due to a lack of checks and balances in China's one-party system, and the materialism and spiritual void that have replaced China's traditional culture.

Dunlop remembers her first years in China as a golden time. Like many of the international students at Sichuan, she quickly discovered that her limited ability to speak the language and understand social and political realities made it useless to try to do the work she had set out to accomplish (studying China's policies toward ethnic minorities). Instead, she spent her time exploring Chengdu, and she grew more and more enthralled with its food. Dunlop got to know street vendors, cooks and restaurant owners and discovered that "talking about food is a particularly good way to make friends in China, because everyone talks about it all the time." In the flush of youthful enthusiasm, she overcame her Western squeamishness and ate everything from snakes, dogs, insects, fish eyeballs and chicken intestines to civet cat and other endangered species. She noted but accepted the unconscious cruelty with which animals are slaughtered and sometimes eaten alive. "If you want a real encounter with another culture," she writes, "you have to abandon your cocoon."

When Dunlop returned to China after publishing her Sichuan cookbook *Land of Plenty*, well-to-do people invited her to lavish banquets, renowned chefs prepared special feasts for her and intellectuals and culinary historians befriended her. But since Sichuan really is a land of plenty—it's China's most fertile area—her poorer friends also ate well, if much less lavishly. It wasn't until Dunlop expanded her culinary research to poorer provinces that she began to lose her appetite.

An extended stay in Chairman Mao's home province during the 2002-2003 SARS epidemic tested Dunlop's devotion to China. She was amazed at the reverence otherwise sensible people in Hunan continue to have for Mao, refusing to blame him

even for the manufactured famine of 1958-1961, which killed at least 30 million people. Here she was treated with suspicion, and hostile bureaucrats impeded her work. But food proved to be a fruitful way of understanding Chinese history. Dunlop talks about the role that Nationalist officials' lavish dining and indifference to others' hunger played in their defeat by the communists. She wonders if Mao's unsophisticated tastes and hatred of fancy food contributed to his "willingness to oversee the destruction of elite and bourgeois culture." Eating in Hunan during the SARS epidemic also led her to explore the relationship between food and medicine in China.

On a trip to Xinjiang, Dunlop temporarily gave up pork out of sympathy for the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority group. In the mountains of Fujian province, she dined on endangered species—and learned that even bear paws could be easily procured and that government officials were complicit in the slaughter. During a trip to the villages where the best Sichuan peppercorns are grown, Dunlop unthinkingly accepted the lavish hospitality of the corrupt government officials who were squeezing the farmers dry. Her friend Mu Ma, who refused to join her, showed her what the officials' dinner and gifts had cost the farmers.

Other Chinese friends led Dunlop in developing her conscience as well. Liu Wei, a Buddhist, set an example of simple and compassionate eating that made Dunlop feel guilty about her own rapacious appetite. Ismail, a somewhat chauvinistic Uyghur, called the Han Chinese "a greedy race. Look at them with their Kitchen God, and their shrines to the God of Wealth. . . . I ask you, what *kind* of people worship food and money?"

The final step in Dunlop's disenchantment was a visit to a lake famous for its hairy crabs, a great autumn specialty in southern China. The crabs were delicious, and she enjoyed them completely—until she and her friend went to the farm where this "green food product" was raised. The water was so filthy that anything fished from it lost its appeal. "Every time I look in a Chinese newspaper these days, it is full of food scares," Dunlop writes, offering a sobering list of recent food scandals. One major result of China's corruption and environmental devastation is that much of its food supply is now hazardous to eat. It's hard to enjoy meals made with contaminated food, however expert the cooking.

Simultaneously, more and more people can afford to eat well—and to excess. The extravagance of the typical restaurant banquet came to seem to Dunlop like an orgy

of wastefulness. She notes that this is not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon, and that most Chinese people eat simply and moderately at home. Still, she wonders if in coming years these banquets “will seem like an hallucination, echoes of a few greedy, giddy decades sandwiched between periods of rationing and scarcity. Decades when we forgot the value of things.”

What’s a food writer to do when she’s lost her appetite? Dunlop wondered if she would be forced to give up both her love for China and her livelihood. But during a 2007 stay, her enjoyment of and hope for the country were revived—by a book and a city. Cao Xueqin’s 18th-century novel *The Story of the Stone* took her back to the culture, religion and values of the old China. And Yangzhou, the ancient gastronomical capital of eastern China, gave her a glimpse of how this elegant culture could form a part of China’s present and future. The city has been modernized without being demolished; its people are gracious and exceptionally kind, more interested in living well than in amassing material goods and money. And its food is healthful, moderate and refined. Yangzhou, which was “rescued and reborn from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution,” gave Dunlop hope “in a Chinese future that was more than just rampant capitalism.”

While Dunlop immersed herself in the food and life of China, journalist Gifford observed and interviewed the people he met on the road—a road he traveled via public transportation and car trips with local people. Gifford’s deep knowledge of Chinese social and political history makes his account of modern China especially valuable. While it’s wider-ranging and more objective than Dunlop’s book, it covers some of the same territory and reaches similar conclusions.

Gifford’s trip along one of China’s most historic roads gives him a framework for putting his interviews and conversations into a broad historical context. Route 312 takes him through the AIDS villages of Henan province, where he talks to poor farmers who became infected by selling their blood—something China has been anxious to cover up. The road leads him close to Tibet and into the Uyghur region, giving him ample opportunity to explore the history, position and attitudes of China’s ethnic minorities. He talks about China’s environmental problems, but his framework doesn’t lend itself to this issue as well as Dunlop’s concern with food. It does, however, allow him to explore another topic in far greater depth: China’s spiritual condition.

Gifford's interest in China began when, as a boy, he read the biographies and autobiographical writings of 19th- and early 20th-century missionaries to China. Route 312 took him to the cities in which Pearl Buck and James Hudson Taylor lived. And Gifford often compares his experiences to those of Mildred Cable and Francesca French, who worked and traveled in the Gobi Desert and whose books he took along on his own trip there. Gifford reminds us that many missionaries were deeply committed to China and brought modern education and medical expertise to the country. Their influence lives on. The little church that Taylor built in 19th-century Zhenjiang now holds multiple services to accommodate the growing number of worshipers.

As a Christian steeped in the writings of these missionaries, Gifford is particularly sensitive to China's spiritual state. He writes that the country can appear as a "strangely soulless place," and in his travels he repeatedly encounters people who echo this concern. A Shanghai talk-radio host, a Daoist monk living alone on a sacred mountain, an avant-garde artist in Xi'an, a long-haul truck driver—each laments the lack of ethical standards that has resulted from China's destruction of its traditional culture and religion. This destruction began in part as a reaction to the humiliation China experienced at the hands of the "ocean people," the European colonizers who arrived in the 19th century. It was completed by Chairman Mao.

An anticorruption protester tells Gifford that Chinese people lack an internal moral standard and, if nothing external stops them, will simply do whatever they want. Is this true? Is China a country in which, because there is no religion, everything is possible—from human cloning to forced abortion to melamine-laced infant formula? Are most urban Chinese motivated entirely by the race for material prosperity?

As he considers such questions, Gifford takes a close look at Eastern philosophy. One of the big problems with Confucianism, he writes, is "its insistence that man is by nature good" and that individuals therefore can police themselves. The resulting lack of checks and balances has plagued China throughout its history, leading to the gradual corruption of every dynasty and, now, the Communist Party.

While the Chinese have never fought a war over religion, Gifford points out that one of the reasons is that China never had a "monotheistic faith claiming to be revealed as divine truth." (That is, not until the introduction of Christianity, which is still the religion of only a very small minority.) He agrees with those Chinese intellectuals who lament "the lack of any firm concept of revealed truth," which "has led to an

unhealthy moral relativity in the Chinese mind.” But whatever its shortcomings, Confucianism did provide a coherent ethical system. Gifford ties China’s phenomenal economic growth rate to its current secularity. In destroying traditional ways of thinking, China “has done away with any ethical restraints on the headlong pursuit of wealth and development.”

Of course, anyone who has studied England’s industrial revolution knows how much human misery it caused: child labor, terrible slums, the exploitation of workers and, yes, terrible pollution. The headlong pursuit of wealth often trumped morality in that Christian nation as well. But there was a difference. In England (and the United States), social reformers, novelists and poets often spoke out against misery and exploitation. This sort of ethical concern is common in China, too, as Gifford makes clear. But as much as possible, such voices are silenced by the government. What China lacks may not be people of conscience but rather the political freedom and social openness that would enable them to have more impact.