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In Case You Missed It: China Road
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By guest contributor Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

So many authors and pundits today attempt to predict China’s future by looking at the numbers: GDP, population, military spending, trade surplus, environmental measurements. Taking any combination of these figures, it is easy to declare that China is either a rising superpower, destined for world domination, or a teetering giant, bound only for disaster. The fact that both perspectives can—and have—been argued indicates the complexity of China’s situation and the inability of statistics to predict much of anything.

Rob Gifford, former Beijing correspondent for National Public Radio, took a three thousand mile-long journey along China’s Route 312, from Shanghai to the border with Kazakhstan, in his own effort to answer the question, “Which is it going to be for China, greatness or implosion?” (xix). China Road (Random House, 2007), the product of that trip, offers no definitive predictions for China’s future, but does provide readers with an enjoyable and informative glimpse into various pockets of Chinese society today and the challenges the country faces as it moves into the twenty-first century.

Gifford’s first trip along Route 312 produced a seven-part series of reports for NPR in the summer of 2004; the book is an expanded account of that journey and an additional, longer, trek the following year. China Road is clearly geared toward the widest audience possible: Gifford takes pains to include pronunciation guides for all those tricky Chinese words, and his tales of life on the road are interwoven with basic explanations of Chinese history and society. While I didn’t find any of Gifford’s analysis revelatory, I appreciated the fact that he often appears as confused about China’s direction as I am, and I’ve recommended China Road to several friends and relatives who seem to like my stories about living here. For China specialists, this is beach reading—no highlighter or note-taking required.

The premise of China Road is a simple one: Gifford begins in Shanghai—the Emerald City—and travels backward along the Yellow Brick Road of Route 312, reversing the route of migrant laborers who come east looking for jobs. As he moves deeper into China’s interior, Gifford encounters people and places which spark ruminations on all the Big Questions of China today: the One Child Policy, AIDS, environmental degradation, prospects for democracy, the legacy of Communism, and the gulf between rich and poor, east and west. This “journey into China’s frailties” (xviii) vividly portrays all the contradictions of contemporary China, and raises questions as to how long the government in Beijing will be able to sustain a system in which cities are oases of prosperity and development dotted among a vast rural backdrop of grinding poverty. While Gifford acknowledges the cyclical nature of Chinese history, and the possibility that social unrest will once again topple a dynasty in the near future, he sees Route 312—and the other new long-distance roads and railroads crisscrossing the country—as a potentially crucial factor in breaking the cycle. By providing an outlet for rural citizens seeking a better life in the cities, highways “have become the steam-release valve on the pressure cooker that could previously be released only by rebellion” (277). Whether or not these roads and China’s urban centers can bear the burden of 800 million villagers in search of an escape route remains a question in my mind, but I understand Gifford’s point nonetheless.

While Catherine Sampson had the privilege of being a featured speaker at the recent Shanghai International Literary Festival, I went as an audience member and joined a large crowd of expats assembled in The Glamour Bar (a stylish nightspot located in one of the Bund’s elegant treaty-port era landmark buildings) to hear Rob Gifford speak about China Road and his thoughts on China today. Appropriately enough, Gifford’s first words were almost drowned out by the sound of jackhammers at a construction site next door—tools probably operated by migrant laborers who had traveled to...
Shanghai along Route 312 or one of China’s other major arteries. Gifford’s talk, like *China Road*, was smooth and polished—he has, after all, been publicizing the book for almost a year now—but not stilted or stale. Relaxed and self-deprecating (two necessary qualities for an appearance on *The Daily Show*), Gifford also spoke seriously about the feelings of both hope and despair he sees in Chinese society; to illustrate this contradiction, he read two memorable selections from the book. The first concerns his encounter with Amway salesmen in the Gobi Desert (chapter 15), who enthusiastically aspire to change their families’ fortunes and transform their society through pursuit of the new Chinese Dream: success, empowerment, respect (and, of course, a car and apartment as well). In stark opposition to this, the next excerpt concerns his meeting with a restaurant owner in Xinjiang (chapter 19), who sees no prospects for change in the lives of China’s peasantry, stating “Endure. That is all we can do. *Ren shou*. We can and must endure. That is all we have ever been able to do” (232). The disparity between these two visions for China’s future is a gap few statistics can portray; despite its occasional weaknesses, *China Road* effectively calls into question the notion that China is heading along any single predictable path, and does so in a pleasant and engaging manner.

*(Cunningham is a graduate student at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center.)*