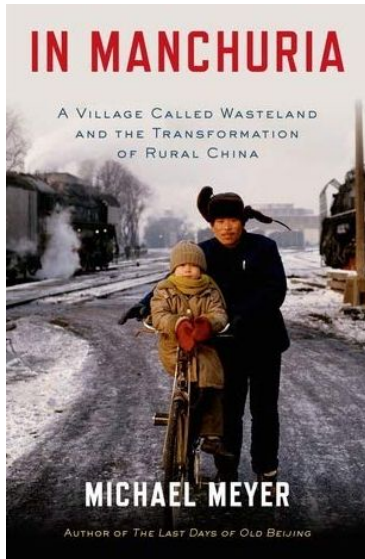


Book Review #3: In Manchuria: Journeys Across China's Northeast Frontier by Michael Meyer.



In August, 2017, I travelled to Manchuria. China is a big country (about the size of Canada) and I always have a fascination with Manchuria especially since I watch the movie *The Last Emperor* by Bernardo Bertolucci.

I wanted to read a bit more about this region before my trip and this book definitely fits the bill. In fact, I learnt so much more from Meyer's keen eyes. Maybe because of his personal connections, his wife is from Manchuria and he has taught and lived in China for a number of years, it is quite evident that Meyer has a love for the people and the land.

With a population of 1.39 billion (1,390,000,000) people, feeding its people has always been one of the biggest challenges for any Chinese government. When it comes to commerce, the current government is really communist in name only because, since its opening to modernity in the late 1970s, it employs capitalistic practices happily if it means progress.

In this book, Meyer did an excellent job illustrating the tremendous change of rural China from the standpoint of a single rice-farming village called Wasteland. In China, only farmers are legally allowed to own lands and most of them only possess a tiny plot of land (a few football fields). In Wasteland, a company called Eastern Fortune is offering the farmers more money than they could earn if they would lease the land to the company. Once enough farmers do that, due to economy of scale, Eastern Fortune would then use machineries to increase the yield of the land. In fact, East Fortune would also buy the dilapidated old houses from the farmers and flatten them to create more farmland. In exchange, farmers will be able to move into a modern apartment that comes with heat and plumbing.

Food safety is a high priority issue of the Chinese government. It much prefers to deal with a corporation rather than thousands of growers when quality control becomes virtually impossible.

So, progress is good, right? Farmers could earn more money and move into apartments that have heat and plumbing. Eastern Fortune could take advantage of mechanization and economy of scale to increase yields, and the government could perform quality control much easier.

Alas, never is ever so simple. What if a farmer doesn't want to lease his or her land? What if a former Communist Party faithful thinks the whole idea is wrong because it betrays the ideals of the revolution? A villager has asked Meyer a key question: "How do you know when a place is developed enough?" Meyer took us to the village and we soon found out opinions definitely varied.

In addition to chronicling the life of a village facing tremendous changes of development, Meyer also covers the recent history of this region. In China, the name Manchuria has been replaced by the Northeast Three Provinces or simply the Northeast. Manchuria probably invokes the tragic and painful history when Japan created a new country Manchukuo. Pu Yi -- the Last Emperor of China -- was crowned as emperor for Manchukuo (1932-1945). Pu Yi's life during this period was well captured in *The Last Emperor*. Whenever I mention Manchuria, people often say the only Manchuria they know is the movie *Manchurian Candidate*. I have never seen the movie but I assume it has to do with the puppetry when one is being controlled.

The life of Pu Yi is indeed fascinating. Borned in 1906 and crowned as Emperor of the Qing Dynasty in 1908 but, at age six, he was forced to abdicate by the Nationalist Government in 1912. He was allowed to stay inside the Forbidden City with his household of servants. He had a English tutor, Reginald Johnston (whose book *Twilight of the Forbidden City* I read many years ago). In 1924 (age 18), Pu Yi and his entourage was expelled from the Forbidden City by a Chinese Warlord. From 1932 to 1945, he would become Emperor again. This time, as a puppet head

of state for Manchukuo under the Japanese. At the end of the war, although he wanted to go to Japan, he was captured by the Russians and was put under house arrest in Russia until 1950 when he was returned to China. He spent ten years in a reeducation camp and wrote an autobiography : The First Half of My Life; From Emperor to Citizen. The Last Emperor of China died, as a commoner, of cancer in 1967.