



BOOK REVIEW

THE SHANGHAI FREE TAXI AND LONG PEACE STREET

By Rana Mitter

Frank Langfitt, *The Shanghai Free Taxi: Journeys with the Hustlers and Rebels of the New China* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson)

Jonathan Chatwin, *Long Peace Street: A walk in modern China* (Manchester University Press)

For much of the 2000s, when foreigners discussed China, there was a gap between language and reality. Western correspondents, diplomats, and students wanted to make it clear to their compatriots that a changing China might be one of the biggest stories in the world. Yet there somehow didn't seem to be a turning point—a moment that symbolized a shift to a world in which China really mattered to the rest of the globe. For visitors to China, the place seemed to be the same combination of anomalies that it had been since the 1990s—consumerist but authoritarian, prickly about its identity but keen to engage with the world. The peculiar mixture of pride and deference that marked China's relationship with the world seemed destined to remain that way forever. "China keeps transitioning," one frustrated journalist told me, "but it never seems to transition to anywhere."

That time has come and gone. Whatever you may think of Xi Jinping's China, it is definitely different from its predecessors—unapologetically illiberal and globally ambitious. This attitude did not begin with Xi. The 2008 global financial crisis led the Chinese leadership to doubt the relevance of a "Washington consensus" that had clearly failed to keep its own house in order. However, Xi's rise to power from 2012 has heralded a new attitude both within China and in its relations with the wider world. I see its contradictions when I visit China and when I work with Chinese students in Britain. There is still a

A street in Shanghai. Photo by Yiran Ding.

great eagerness to learn in the Western world and an appreciation of the freedoms that are not available at home. Ironically, the one place on earth where it is impossible to write a critical academic study of China's current leadership is... China. Yet there is also new confidence. Plenty of middle-class Chinese acknowledge and bemoan the rise in censorship and arbitrary exercise of legal power, as well as the constant political pressure in today's China, which makes it much harder for professionals simply to keep their heads down and refuse to engage with politics. But even those who complain will, in some cases, echo one senior media figure who told me, in private: "Still, if there were an election, I would vote for Xi Jinping." Recent uncomfortable evidence from democratic societies does suggest that there is no necessary gap between authoritarian personalities and high levels of popularity.

In times of fast change, well-informed accounts of what is happening in China have ever-greater value. To cover Beijing as a foreign correspondent is not the equivalent of working in Tokyo, New York, or London. Sources are afraid to talk to you, at least by name. The authorities take pride in trying to cut off reporters from stories and then complain that the "Western media" refuses to report China properly. China is a hardship post for journalists – although, like many such posts, it provides some of the most interesting stories imaginable. That reality makes books like journalist Frank Langfitt's *The Shanghai Free Taxi*, and writer Jonathan Chatwin's *Long Peace Street*, valuable and thoughtful reflections on a society that is changing fast and out of recognition.

Langfitt's book is based on a wild idea that emerged to answer the question: in a country as constrained as China, how can you actually get close to ordinary people and ask their opinions? Langfitt, who served between 2011 and 2016 as the National Public Radio (NPR) correspondent in Beijing, decided to buy a car and operate it as a "free taxi." He offered gratis rides in return for conversations about life in China. The book is a superb read; Langfitt has a real gift for narrative, and skilfully uses cliffhangers to keep the reader engaged. Among his passengers is Beer (his self-chosen Western name), a used-car salesman who lends that profession the same shining reputation in China it has gathered in the West. Beer tries to persuade Langfitt that he will be fired if he doesn't buy the clunker that he is trying to push on the Westerner. Other riders in the book have rather higher motivations. His interviewee Johanna, who is a part of China's growing professional middle class, epitomizes the

liberal sentiments that are so often hidden from the surface in China. She became aware of human rights law through the internet and studied it for two years in Sweden. Upon her return, she took on some of the toughest cases that modern China can supply, offering human rights assistance to people detained in Laogai labor camps or persecuted for practicing Christianity. Johanna's story fits right in with what we know about the nature of the Chinese policing system behind the scenes. Activists are regularly arrested and harassed for seeking to exercise rights that are guaranteed under the Chinese constitution.

Another of the characters Langfitt delivers in his taxi sums up the ambiguities of modern China. Ashley is a young Chinese professional

who emigrates to the United States. She is tired of the constraints of living in China. Yet she encounters the United States after the election of Donald Trump, and slowly but surely finds her assumptions about the West also fading. She meets Americans who are hostile to immigrants and have a limited sense of the advantages of democracy. Ashley still supports the idea of democracy, although Langfitt finds her "not completely convinced." But when Langfitt asks her if China looks better once she had been overseas, she replies, "Definitely."

Ashley is a telling example of how the calculus has changed on the contrast between China and the West. Many of the issues that China faces today are not really problems caused by the lack of democracy as such. Instead, as in many liberal societies, it is trust, however constituted, that has become a rare commodity. Some of the darker parts of Langfitt's book concern a young woman searching for her missing sister; it appears that she has become caught up in a network of sex trafficking and drug use. Other characters find themselves caught up in financial scams, losing their life savings to swindlers in

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shiny-looking offices. None of these experiences is exclusive to China. But in the absence of a free media and open discussion, China's modernization seems to contribute even further to a sense of existential lack of balance or stability. Langfitt's book is marked by sensitivity—his “free taxi” clearly enabled him to develop relationships that are authentic and compelling, which makes the book a refreshing and necessary change from the increasingly shrill black-and-white contrasts that mark much of U.S.-China relations.

Jonathan Chatwin's book contrasts nicely with Langfitt's, in that it has a much narrower geographical focus. It takes place on one street in Beijing but has a much longer historical backstory. Chatwin sets aside two days to walk along Chang'an Avenue, “Long Peace Street,” the arterial road that cuts west-east through the Chinese capital, with its center at Tian'anmen Square. If Langfitt's book puts an unease about the face of contemporary China at its heart, Chatwin's is shaped by a melancholy about the disappearing past. Ghosts make their way through the book on a regular basis. One powerful section on the Babaoshan cemetery, where the heroes of the Communist revolution are laid, expresses that absence well. Peng Dehuai, the great general who fought alongside Mao in the CCP's rise to power, was exiled after confronting Mao

over the horrors of the Great Leap Forward, then died during the latter years of the Cultural Revolution. Yet his ashes were not originally laid to rest in the heroes' cemetery; that did not happen until after the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution under Mao's successors. But in an ironic coda, the ashes were then moved again so that Peng could be reburied in his native province. Another “ghost” that appears in the book is the Shou-

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gang (Capital Steel) plant that once stood at the western end of the avenue. As China abandoned its dreams of a command economy and plunged into the market, this once-proud set of furnaces—which also included restaurants, nurseries, and clinics, the cradle-to-grave provision associated with the Chi-

nese “work unit”—was abandoned. The overwhelming sense that comes from Chatwin's portrait of Beijing is of constant renewal: a renewal where the past is not just forgotten, but often deliberately obliterated. Chatwin's humane, gentle prose makes him the ideal companion to poke around the back alleys along the route and remind us of a Beijing that existed just a few decades ago. Indeed, visitors to the capital could take the book with them as they make part of the walk themselves.

These books are written in the context of the 2010s. What aspects of the 2020s can one see nestling in their descriptions of today's China? Probably the single most important element is the growing sense of technology as the most transformative factor in the country today. As China moves down the path to becoming a society where the government collects huge amounts of data with little if any expectation of privacy from its citizens, all of whom operate their lives from their smartphones, many of the interstitial spaces found by both Langfitt and Chatwin seem set to disappear. These two books are excellent examples of how today's China still has spaces where frank discussion of the present and reflection on the past is possible and necessary. Let us hope that such books can still be written 10, 20, and 50 years into the future. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rana Mitter is the current Director of the University China Centre at Oxford University. He is the author of several books including *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction* (2008, new ed. 2016) and the award-winning *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (2004). His most recent book *China's War with Japan, 1937-45: The Struggle for Survival* (U.S. title: *Forgotten Ally*) was named a 2013 Book of the Year in the Financial Times and the Economist, was named a 2014 CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title and won the 2014 RUSI/Duke of Westminster's Medal for Military Literature. He is Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China at Oxford University.