



The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up

Liao Yiwu , Wenguang Huang (Translator) , Philip Gourevitch (Foreword)

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The Corpse Walker introduces us to regular men and women at the bottom of Chinese society, most of whom have been battered by life but have managed to retain their dignity: a professional mourner, a human trafficker, a public toilet manager, a leper, a grave robber, and a Falung Gong practitioner, among others. By asking challenging questions with respect and empathy, Liao Yiwu managed to get his subjects to talk openly and sometimes hilariously about their lives, desires, and vulnerabilities, creating a book that is an instance par excellence of what was once upon a time called "The New Journalism." **The Corpse Walker** reveals a fascinating aspect of modern China, describing the lives of normal Chinese citizens in ways that constantly provoke and surprise.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up Details

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From Reader Review *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up* for online ebook

Vanessa Hua says

This is the best oral history of China I've read (and I've read many) -- filled with pathos and humor and crassness -- and I really appreciate the care in which the journalist and his translator asked questions (often challenging or prodding the source) and creating a narrative. Amazing stories, about people who walked corpses home, who ran public toilets, Rightest love stories.

Zak says

From author description: Liao Yiwu is a writer, musician, and poet from Sichuan, China. He is a critic of the Chinese regime, for which he has been imprisoned, and the majority of his writings are banned in China.

This book was simply fascinating. Liao Yiwu speaks to an interesting cast of characters from the bottom rung of Chinese society. Many have gone through interminable hardship and suffering during the decades of upheaval brought on by the civil war and the numerous "revolutions" and "big leaps forward" brought on by the painful birth of communism in China.

It was enlightening to find out that many among the Chinese people were actually caught up in the fervour of creating a new nation where everyone would be considered equal. Unfortunately, things did not turn out as initially hoped, resulting in situations where colleagues turned on each other, tenants turned on landlords, students persecuted professors and even family members denounced each other. Torture, beatings and even killings became norms. I had thought all along that the majority were indifferent to politics and simply resigned themselves to a new regime, but it seems that many amongst the populace were actually active supporters, if not participants, in the "revolution". It also became apparent, in contrast to my earlier belief, that many of the transgressions and cruelties were actually carried out by rabid mobs of ordinary people, instead of government forces. Due to the prevailing atmosphere, any expression of doubt or demonstration of failure could be construed as a sign of not being fully committed to the cause and one could easily be labelled a counterrevolutionary. Hence, when crops failed and famines hit, village chiefs continuously lied to party officials that everything was dandy and even offered to provide relief to other stricken areas. All whilst their own people were eating clay to assuage their gnawing hunger and literally starving to death. Therefore, in many respects, it was the people themselves who brought on a lot of the suffering on each other.

The writer talks to 16 different people in this book and is very frank in his interviews, not hesitating to chastise them when he feels they have done wrong. The most interesting one to me was the "corpse walker." If you have watched some Chinese or HK vampire films you would have seen some scenes where dead bodies hop along led by a person holding a lantern and ringing a bell. My guess is that these scenes originated from the original corpse walkers in China, people who are paid to bring bodies back over extremely long distances to their home town for burial. The reasons for the lantern and the bell are explained in the book.

Audacia Ray says

Reading horribly depressing/angry-making books is sort of my thing. But damn, *The Corpse Walker* really did me in. Story after story of horrific things that the oppressive Chinese government has done to its people, horrific things people do to each other, and the horrific things people survive and keep on being people.

The stories are all interviews, done by Liao Yiwu, who is himself not in favorable standing with the Chinese government. The conversational style of the interviews is lovely - Liao is not a passive listener, and he doesn't just ask question, but often challenges his interviewees and calls them out on things he disagrees with or doesn't think are true.

My major beef with the book is that out of 28 interview, ONLY THREE ARE WITH WOMEN. One of the three is titled "The Yi District Chief's Wife," and its clear that if the Chief were alive, he'd be the one Liao was interviewing.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

I really enjoyed *God is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, though "enjoy" is an odd word to use. Perhaps I should say, I got a lot out of it. So I was eager to read this, Yiwu's first book, which is/was banned in China. He writes about a life he knows, having been a political prisoner, street musician, and man on the run for many years. From the simply unfortunate to the conmen and thieves, we are introduced to the marginalised members that no society wants to acknowledge. Some of those interviewed have suffered from political events such as the Tienamen Square massacre or Maoist purges, while others suffer due to their own ignorance or criminal choices. On occasion, the author remarks to his subject, "You're such a jerk!"--but only when justified, as in the case of the human traffickers, the "illegal border crosser" or the "migrant worker" who basically ditches his wife and three daughters and lights out for pastures new, and claims that he can't be held responsible for his own genitals' desire to breed. When the author presses the human trafficker to acknowledge that he makes money from selling ignorant young girls into prostitution, the reply is: "She's the child of ignorant peasants; what does she know of happiness?"

What indeed.

Not a book to be read straight through justlikethat. Some of the people I met in this book, such as the sleepwalker and the "leper" who is not a leper at all, will haunt me for months. I learned that Mao Tse-Tung invented both the concept and the term "political correctness" though of course with a different meaning, though the Western interpretation is as astringent in its own way.

Meghan Fidler says

I really try to avoid should-ing on people (my dad always says it's like sh!t-ing on people), however I'll make an exception in this case.

You should read this book,
because should know this story.
And you should be prepared. These people will make an impression.
The stories are short, you can take the book in little intellectual bites.

"The Corpse Walker" is filled with life stories from people who lived during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976?) in china. With depictions of daily life the book provides an in-depth examination of a centralized government's attempt to speed, control, and shape social change. Liao Yiwu captures the impact of this tumultuous time through interviews, allowing each individual their own voice. He also does a fantastic job sharing his own thoughts on the subject being discussed by including his own comments and questions.

Among the darkness of the human trafficker who began by selling his daughters, the red guard who still seeks the meaning and retribution his old position gave him, and the monk who watched people claw away at centuries old temple architecture, are images of human beauty. The humor of the Public Restroom Manager was, dare I say it, a refreshing breath of air. And the soft forgiveness of so many torture victims makes the heart ache.

Thank you, Liao Yiwu, for enduring political persecution and jail time. Thank you for sharing these underrepresented voices.
I am delighted that Kang Zhengguo recognized the importance of this work and helped get it published.

Ensiform says

translated by Wen Huang

This is a collection of reports from the 1990s on everyday men and women at the bottom of Chinese (mostly Sichuan) society: a professional mourner, a public toilet attendant, the neighborhood cadre man, a leper, a grave robber, a Falung Gong practitioner, and so on. There is even an interview with a human trafficker who sold unwilling "wives" to local men. (The title comes from an interview with a man hired to "walk" a corpse to its burial place in a show of reverence for the departed.) What emerges in these disparate accounts is a population left behind, either neglected by the state, actively persecuted, or merely mystified by the rapid change of China's economy and cultural compass. The guiding thread throughout is that the pursuit of money is making people careless of others. The professional mourner, for example, is losing work. Farmers want to be rich and live urban lives; they no longer want to pretend sorrow for show. The ancient abbot of a Buddhist monastery looks on in dismay as cadres see the temple only as a source on enriching themselves.

Liao, previously imprisoned for his writings about the Tiananmen Square protests, knows there is more than one side to nearly every story. The trafficker, in prison, is painted as a monster, whether social forces created an opportunity for his work to thrive or not. Liao's interview with the father of a student killed during the protests reveals that the Chinese state could be a remorseless machine before the arrival of Chinese capitalism. He discusses with a party leader how famines in the 1960s got so bad that some people turned to cannibalism. However, there is also a feeling of hope and optimism: his subjects remain resolute that the past need not haunt the future. Forgiveness and a stoic resilience are a common theme.

Samo says

Spo?iatku bolo dos? ?ažké sa do knihy za?íta?, hlavne kvôli úplne odlišnému mysleniu, kultúre a životu ?í?anov, ale nakonáhle sa do toho ?lovek raz dostane, je to skvelá sonda do života ?udí v tejto ?udnej krajine. Plus má u m?a kniha aj za to, že nezobrazuje každého chudáka ako dobráka, ktorému len osud nedoži?il, ve?a objektov rozhovorov boli vyložene nesympatickí ?udia.

Sara says

One of the most fascinating things about this book is how it came to be. Liao Yiwu is constantly on the run from the Chinese government, has been jailed, tortured, and forced to be a wandering street musician. The text for this book was smuggled out of China and published for the rest of the world to read, and wow, what a read! Yiwu interviews the members of the lowest rungs in Chinese society like the public toilet manager, a leper, a grave robber, a father who lost his son in the Tiananmen massacre, a blind erhu player, a human trafficker, a migrant worker, and many others. Most of them give graphic, detailed accounts of what life was like for during the famines and political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward. I do wish that there were more interviews about current times now that China has opened up its economy a lot more as this would have provided a powerful compare/contrast situation.

One of the funniest chapters was the interview titled 'The Peasant Emperor'. In 1989 Zeng Yinglong declared himself emperor of his village and was later thrown in jail for it. The interview goes something like this:

Yiwu: Are you the well known emperor that people talk about in this jail?

Yinglong: You should address me as 'Your Majesty.'

and then hilarity ensues.

One of the most memorable interviews was from a retired Communist Party official who discussed the difficulty of the 1960s famine and how his attempts at curbing cannibalism in his region were a failure. Apparently little girls were targeted since they are seen as disposable and some families would swap children in order to not eat their own. He raised some interesting moral questions about what one would do in a similar situation. Do you eat one child to save the rest or let them all starve to death?

Overall a really interesting and worthwhile read.

Horace Derwent says

Tortilija says

The description of this book is a little misleading. Yes, technically we do get to read about the lives of a

whole lot of people from different (usually unusual) walks of life, but only in a couple of these stories are they the real main character. The real main character consistently is Mao's communist China and, to put it lightly, how much it sucked living in it. Also little bit about how it still sucks (less) in current whoever's China.

The translation suffers from the same thing a lot of Asian (or at least Chinese) translations suffer - everything feels really flat and robotic at times. Might not be a problem for some. Interesting read nonetheless. A proper bummer.

Neil says

Wonderful interviews with Chinese people, reminiscent of Mayhew's "London Labour and The London Poor". The accounts of life during the cultural revolution and the starvation that followed the Great Leap Forward are chilling, but the people are never less than fascinating.

Beata says

An interesting insight into China. The book proves that Beijing is not China and that ordinary people can tell incredible stories. A European reader like myself feels challenged by the stories that are shocking or, to say the least, incredible.

Lisa says

Did you know that Confucius was once a professional mourner, paid to put on a good show at funerals? No? Neither did I until I started reading this collection of stories from Liao Yiwu, a dissident author, oral historian and poet from Sichuan Province in China who was due to visit Australia in May, but as of yesterday (May 9th) has been refused permission to travel by the authorities.

Some time very soon indeed, China's economic output is going to exceed America's. In my lifetime and yours, they will become more powerful economically and in time, also militarily. Let's hope it becomes only 'interesting' (and not scary) to see what happens when the balance of power shifts from the West to the East, and from a democracy to a totalitarian state. Certainly there will be 'adjustments' to be made. All of us need to start a belated education about China...

Liaw Yiwu, who earns his living as a musician, has a growing international profile since the publication of *The Corpse Walker*, a collection of interviews with the underclass in China. The authorities don't like this because officially, of course, there is no underclass in (a-hem) 'egalitarian' Chinese society.

To read the rest of my review (and to see how you might be able to help ease Yiwu's plight) please visit <http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/201...>

Karen says

Liao Yiwo, a poet and political prisoner, became interested in others on the outskirts of Chinese society. He performed interviews, some of which were risky, with people who didn't fit in modern times. Old people who remembered traditional ways - like the corpse walker - people who had suffered under Mao's purges, people who had been marginalized by recent accommodations with capitalism. Although Liao travels a bit, most of the interviews take place around Chengdu, his home. The 26 stories in this book are only a fragment of the oral histories he has taken, and they had to be smuggled out of the country. Chinese life under Mao was capricious and mad, like life in Spain at the height of the inquisition. Cynical accusations could mean ruin or death for whole families. During the Great Leap forward, farms were abandoned, forests cut down and household metal objects melted down in a futile attempt to jumpstart industrial production. Instead, people starved in the millions and some families ate their own children rather than leave everyone to starve. During the Cultural Revolution, treasures of a thousand years of civilization were destroyed because they represented the old ways. These people showed a terrible resilience in the face of nightmare, and they almost universally praise Deng Jiaoping for stopping the madness when he assumed leadership on Mao's death. Together the lives build a remarkably coherent picture of China culture constructed in layers - outer layers are the new veneer of capitalism, middle layers the Communist excesses, at the core remnants of traditional culture lurking beneath the surface.

Horace Derwent says

years ago, i heard 'bout that this poet had been persecuted by comm motherfuckers in different ways when he was in prison?4 diff ones of transference in order not to let the international society to notice, and torture and insult and means of suffering, etc, of course, as well as his pregnant wife, FUCK is that!? and he'd tried to commit suicide for at least 2 times but was lucky enough to escape to germany thereafter

i really wish there cud be more people that lucky just like him

and i wish someday i can finally get the fuck outta chinkland and never fucking return to this rotting and soulless nation!!
