



China Underground

Zachary Mexico

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China is often in the news, but our knowledge of this massive country is cursory at best. Carefully controlled by the Chinese government, little escapes the scrutiny of those who monitor the media. With such a large land mass, a mix of cultures, and one of the world's oldest civilizations, it's surprisingly difficult to frame an accurate picture.

In *China Underground*, Mexico takes us on a kaleidoscopic journey into the lives of its denizens to reveal the "new" China. It's a riveting ride, with cameos by a drug hustler, a group of club kids, a new prostitute, and some seriously stressed-out teenagers cramming for their college entrance exams. Mexico visits the artists and musicians who comprise the creative class, and the scores obsessed with the newest role-playing game. Through his lens, we see a people disillusioned and full of despair -- a people who've embraced the Western values we cherish.

Like Suketu Mehta's portrait of Mumbai in *Maximum City*, Mexico's peek behind the Great Wall is surprisingly revelatory. Did you know that the Chinese shun credit cards as well as voice mail? Or that the population of many of its cities makes Manhattan seem like a quiet country meadow? Read this gripping, sometimes comic, always illuminating book and find out what it's like to live in China today: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers

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China Underground Details

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From Reader Review China Underground for online ebook

Mathieu Coquelet Ruiz says

Fantastic compilations of encounters that this sino-American student, avid traveler, had during his stay in China. Zachary tells the story of a rock band leader, a gang member, a drug dealer, a prostitute, students at elite university, etc. Background information on politics, social or cultural references are often included to guide the readers. Highly recommended.

Alvaro Mateu says

Leí este libro durante un viaje a China en el verano de 2018. Se trata de una recopilación de relatos protagonizados por miembros de distintos estratos sociales y subculturas que el autor conoció durante su estancia como estudiante en China.

A pesar de ser una lectura sencilla y ligera que no precisa de mucha concentración, Zachary presenta una redacción inmadura, adolescente e incluso egocéntrica que termina aburriendo. Si bien es cierto que se tocan varios temas controvertidos de gran relevancia en el contexto social del momento (prostitución, tráfico de drogas, libertad de prensa, contaminación, etc.), el análisis de fondo que realiza el autor es prácticamente inexistente.

El resultado son historias bastante planas, plagadas de tópicos y exageraciones que carecen de interés real para el lector que pretenda profundizar en la realidad social del país.

Emrie says

As a Chinese major, I'm often trapped in classes, in universities and upper class establishments. But the truth is that the average Chinese person is not like the affluent professors and college students who wear designer clothes and drive their own cars. What's worse is that Party censorship prevents us from understanding the culture any deeper. Drugs, sex, rock&roll - these things shaped America and they've been brought to China whether the government likes it or not.

China Underground is an insightful, and often surprising look into what's under the surface of Chinese culture. Mexico, as a foreigner, shares with us his discoveries through his time in China, revealing the true issues of Chinese society.

This is a must read for anyone studying Chinese or who wants to understand China on a deeper level.

Gloria says

Gift from Lynn; read for book club, too.

Well, I have to say that it is a quick read, and much of it rings true to what I recall from my many years in China, except maybe that the rich are much richer than before, and there are more ways (at least depicted in this book) of entertaining oneself to distraction (rather than fighting to get out, change things, etc).

That said, I also wonder about what a book about the US might look like; and then it became more interesting to think about this book.

Perhaps the most striking thing is underlying throughout is the power of guanxi, and, as one character said, there isn't really a sense of community in China. This became a really interesting point, as in my book club, there are expats from Europe/UK, and they really did point to the American volunteerism as a distinct characteristic...

Robert says

A well-written (though with the occasional errors) exposition on the hidden side of China. Mexico reveals the faces of modern day China that are rarely seen by foreigners, even by many expatriates that live in China. The scars created by its tortured 20th century history, its rapid rise to fiscal and industrial prosperity, all whilst many still are trampled under hoof of its massive economachine. Mexico gives lively portrayals of the Chinese as they navigate their lives within these tumultuous times. And despite the rough portrayals, the tales are gripping and exciting -- it makes me personally nostalgic to return to this cultured, yet troubled, land between Earth and Heaven.

Jason says

I'm sorry, but it amazes me that this book has such a following from so many people interested in China. I found this book poorly researched, immaturely written, and also quite held-back. Did this pseudonym-using "adventurer" actually sleep with the prostitutes? Did he actually do the drugs? Did he really get involved with the criminal underbelly? I never do this, either, but frankly, my own novel *Desert Bleeds Red*, while being a fictional tale, is much more honest. You see, Mr. Mexico, I do not use a pseudonym when I write, because I do not live my life in fear of the Chinese government banning me from ever entering the country again. I also admit readily to my own hijinks in China, which continued over a much longer period of time (I was in country for four years, and left once I married a Mongolian woman and had had it up to here with the government's bullshit).

It's just disappointing that this book has attracted so many readers, and yet it is written poorly, only scratches the surface of the nation, and is even dishonest at times. I'm not a spammer, but honestly, I think readers here would find "*Desert Bleeds Red*" a much grittier and expansive view of the country. If this is the standard (exempting a few terrific writers like Hessler) for "inside looks" at this humongous, mysterious nation, then how disappointing.

Lee says

I've rated this two stars, but I would rate it two and a half, if I could. I didn't like it that much, and it is a fairly quick read for a 300 page book. Nevertheless, there are some interesting tidbits that make it worth picking up from the library, though not buying.

My biggest criticism is that his style is too juvenile. Though he often comes at issues with interesting or provocative analysis of different aspects of Chinese culture, it just sounds poorly written. A lot of the things he writes are overkill, in the way that so many writers write their first book. Furthermore, he did not do a great job of structuring the book; often times he repeats facts that he has already gone over at points earlier in the book.

Most chapters have a part where Mexico explains some very basic background to whatever part of Chinese culture that he is analyzing. In these sections, it is fairly boring to read if you know anything about China, and that takes away from the reading of the book, at least for me. If you are coming at this knowing nothing of China, you might be appreciative that he has included this.

Despite the bad writing and the other flaws, he does take a look at some interesting aspects of Chinese culture, things that often get overlooked in the headlines: gangsters, Nigerian drug-dealers, prostitutes, Chinese Beatniks, etc. Each of the chapter focuses on a different individual or group of people from whatever category he considers underground, so one chapter is dedicated to his interview with the Nigerian dealer, one to the Beatnik, etc.

Still, often times he exaggerates. In Beijing, Nigerians are not "everywhere." Not every Karaoke bar has prostitution. Certainly, in certain parts of Beijing, one could be surprised by how many Nigerians there are and KTV places are often a front for prostitution. That said, having lived in China, I never encountered a prostitute in a karaoke joint and I went months in Beijing without seeing a Nigerian. These sorts of exaggerations make it hard to trust Mexico. How much of the other things he is writing about are true? How much is he just stretching the truth to try and make things a little spicy?

And finally, he is constantly pointing out how he doesn't do drugs or use the services of prostitutes, but seriously? I find it hard to believe Mexico, who is friends with all these party-heavy expats who he uses to connect himself with guys who smoke weed all day in Dali or deal Coke in Shanghai, is not more involved. I don't want to judge him, I just wish he would come out and be more honest.

This book has something to offer, but its flaws detract a little too much for me to recommend rushing it to the top of your reading list. Maybe Mexico has some promise as an unconventional journalist reporting from the dark alleys of a growing China. Perhaps this book is just his first step to being a great writer. Still, he has some way to go.

Elias says

As a 'China-hand' from 2008-2012 I can say that Mexico's book paints a true picture of China neglected in mainstream media and books that make vague assertions on China's "Great" rise. Here we have the anti-heros and outcasts; the hookers, rock and rollers and mafia that are bank-rolling and banking on the road to red Capitalism. As a musician myself I've dabbled in the dark lairs of China's underground, relishing in its

misery and mysticism. Mexico's China experience is unconventional in the eyes of English teachers and expatriate business leaders, but nowadays there are tens of thousands of "laowai" who enjoy a more "underground" existence mingling with China's counter-culture. It's these folks who are the subject of a novel I'm editing, a comedic ethnology of expat culture, entitled, "Laowhy?" Ultimately, Mexico set the bar for a more holistic take on China's development and dispossessed to which he learned from years of "gan bei" of warm beer and soaking in the chaos of contemporary china. Cheers!

Jane says

An interesting collage of stories from the less reported side of China, this book is an engaging and easily digestible whirlwind tour.

Having lived and worked in China, a lot of the stories brought smiles of recognition and sparked off my own nostalgia for the curioser aspects of the country that are never mentioned in the tedious rehashing that passes for commentary on China in most Western media.

The chapters that focus on the stories of individual people, with their histories, dreams, frustrations and contradictions, are by far the strongest and most interesting. Minus points for the some of the duller chapters, which tend to focus solely on travel writing, which is not Mexico's strong point, or China's drug culture, which I'm just not interested in.

Chilly SavageMelon says

I'm mixed here. Zachary, did you try the ketamine? Did you bang a prostitute? If so, why not tell us about it? If not, why the pseudonym? The Party will be after you? Don't flatter yourself, rebel laowei. But he does admit to smoking hash with "the Uighur Hendrix" (who himself says he doesn't want to be called the Uighur Hendrix...). I lived in China for over two years and never saw any K (Bangkok - yes, Beijing - no) but he was clearly running in different circles. For example, the Wuhan punk stuff, which was interesting, and the last chapter, clubbing in BJ, which read like Candace Bushnell... It's also sort of questionable someone would have such connections overall in China, but the scene there is weird like that, and his Mandarin skills are definitely superior to mine. I'm also seriously doubting 10% of women there have done any of the 7 levels of ji work. But even just 1% of just over half of 1.3 billion people is still a whole lot of prostitutes...

The writer comes off like a rich kid who befriended publishers, or his friends became publishers, and encouraged him to get these tales into a book. But that doesn't mean he gets to call himself a "writer". Well, maybe more is coming - we'll see. I'd say don't attempt to wear the Gonzo Journalist hat without getting your hands dirty. But then, his female publishers, Heidi, and half his hipster audience wouldn't be OK with candid whore stories, would they? I would have liked to hear more about Kunming and the time managing the bar where he was supposedly based, but there is more here about Dali. More tales from Qingdao for that matter. But that's OK, I myself was ex-pat Shandongren. And no mention of Xian? So be it, it just seemed he wanted to touch on so many major cities.

Two things I did find serendipitously pleasing: the killing people game - a version of which I came across in a Chengdu hostel last Summer; and the BBC doc 'China from the inside', which I saw last year, and recommend, though it's more of a downer than parts of this book concerning grim realities in modern China.

Overall, how to "rate" this collection? If you've never been, I suppose it paints a good picture of some elements you might not expect. But don't go to China looking for ketamine, or expecting insider connections like he makes seem so casual here. Maybe if you've been studying Mandarin since you were 15, have a bankroll, and years to invest. If you have lived over there, you probably have experiences similar to this yourself, doubt others, and should try and talk your friends into publishing them. But this book goes into the eye easily enough and I'd like to see this "empathetic, exotic, rebel, badass" laowei write more. Just don't worry about impressing us with 4 star hotel deals you booked online, or let the pollution have you running for the KFC. And what's with name dropping all the cigarette brands?

Elizabeth says

hipster american, zachary taylor (with a name like that, of course you are), who studied and lived in china for a number of years writes essays about various cities and people. He introduces us to hipster chinese artists, musicians, journalists and such. there's drugs, sex and rock n' roll, the mafia and a nigerian thrown in for good measure. there's also a healthy dose of what kind of political restrictions go on, the intense level of pollution and also exactly how boomerific China really is. some of the statistics he throws around are mind-boggling, and this is pre- olympic territory. he says that some say about one in every ten women earn her living as a prostitute- nearly 70 million people. HOLY SHIT. an interesting read.

Alexandria Washington says

Awwww yeah, stories about the different subcultures of this monolithic new hegemon? Count me in!

Wait, it's mostly our author talking about himself and his connections? Okay, cool. Whatever.

"China Underground" had potential to be a kind of lurid exposé of different Chinese subcultures. I was really excited to read about the huge drug scene in Beijing, or the HIV/AIDS crisis from the viewpoint of a closeted gay man in Chengdu. And I got a taste of each, but only barely.

The storytelling teased me in a bad way; it gave me certain expectations but then left me wanting more. And let's not talk about how Mexico got lazy halfway through and decided to start dropping f-bombs. I mean, I curse like a sailor but the foul language felt forced. If you're gonna use colorful vocabulary, it's gotta roll off the pen (or keyboard, whatever).

In all, it wasn't awful. And to be honest, now I kinda wanna check out so-called "Killing Clubs" and the punk scene in China. But man, talk about hyping yourself up.

Paige says

As much as I love reading about Asian culture, this book somewhat disappointed me. Yes, it was very cultural and it had good insight into the life of many Chinese people who are frustrated with their faulty government. However, not all of these "short stories" that were written seemed very legitimate. Basically, it just didn't feel like there was a point to some of these stories. I understand what the writer was getting at,

trying to share the life stories of people whom are struggling within China. But the book didn't feel like a book - it felt like mere journalism. And to be quite honest, I'm not a huge fan of journalism writing. So as you can imagine, this book isn't one of my favorites.

Dave says

I've really wanted to visit China for some reason lately and this book both persuaded me to do it and to stay away. On the one hand, the country seems so vast and different that it has to be seen, on the other hand, it seems so miserable. According to this book at least, no one seems to be happy and everything is corrupt. There is no freedom of speech or the press and for the most part you are kept in the class that you were born into. You can be captured and put into jail (or just executed) for no reason and no one will really care. Try speaking out about it and they'll string you up to. Doesn't sound like a fun place to be, even to visit.

Since the subjects of this book are the underground cultures (punk rockers, prostitutes, all kinds of fringe artists), there's plenty of discontent and the author throws in some of his passive commentary as well. It's a great idea to explain China in such a way, but due to the author's limited ability (or time with the subjects - often it seems Mexico will write a chapter about someone after just a 30-minute conversation at a coffee shop), the stories were usually boring. As he's explaining the upbringing of the subject, who their parents were, etc., I found myself looking for the small tidbits that showed me how different China is. Like how pretty much all music is bootlegged so it's hard for musicians to make money on legitimate releases. THIS kind of stuff was interesting, but seemed buried or barely mentioned. More could have been said about the nightclub culture, the dancing and the drinking and the drugs. There are slight mentions everywhere, but Mexico doesn't (isn't able?) to delve deeper. It's kind of a shame, I really wanted to love this book.

Georgia says

An interesting read for people interested in knowing about modern China. It turns out I know the author—I went to college with him and we studied in Beijing in the same summer program. (He was not really a friend—he was the kind of person who, even in college, thought that there were some people who were cool enough to be his friends and some who weren't—but he was extremely gregarious and loved to talk to locals, and I trust his knowledge of China.) He's written about Chinese journalists, punk rock bands, prostitutes, and mobsters he's met, talking about the people who aren't usually talked about by people writing about China. Not all that elegantly written, but it's thorough and clear and at times entertaining. A much better view of what living in China is like than most books will give.
