

NICK HOLDSTOCK

In Search of the Willow Palisade

In Manchuria: A Village Called Wasteland and the Transformation of Rural China

By Michael Meyer

(Bloomsbury 365pp £20)

When I first went to China, in 1999, no one I knew had been there. Most of what people claimed to know about the country was either a stereotype or hopelessly outdated: my grandmother asked me if they had telephones. Sixteen years later, it's no longer unusual to spend a week (or a year) in Beijing, Shanghai or Kunming. The boom in tourism has made the country much better known, both to Chinese people and to foreigners. Yet the mostly rural interior of the country remains little visited and scarcely reported in foreign media; one rarely hears that someone went to Anhui, Henan or Hunan provinces on their holiday. Perhaps the least visited region is the northeast, whose three provinces (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang) are together the size of France and Germany combined, and with almost the same size population. I never visited any of these in the three years I lived in the country because I thought of them as freezing cold and remote, even by Chinese standards. I suspect the only reason I would have visited is that which initially drew Michael Meyer to the place: he was in love with a girl.

In Manchuria is primarily an account of the year he spent living in Wasteland, the village where his wife grew up. Meyer also travels widely in the region in search of traces of the region's history, which is a palimpsest of transformations wrought by competing powers. The region used to be primarily inhabited by the Manchu, a set of tribes that became rulers of China in the mid-17th century and whose emperors, the Qing dynasty, lasted until 1912. In the first half of the 20th century, the region was fought over by Russian, Japanese and Chinese forces (both nationalist and communist). Today the Manchu account for only 10 per cent of the region's population. Like many other minorities in China, much of their cultural identity has been lost; their language has only a handful of native speakers.

Meyer's first book, *The Last Days of Old*

Beijing, was a rich portrayal of life in the city's quickly dwindling old *hutong* neighbourhoods, where he taught at a local school and lived in a courtyard house. *In Manchuria* bears some superficial resemblances to it, in that Meyer again taught in a local school and lived in fairly basic conditions (albeit this time with broadband internet). As in his previous book, there's also a sense of a community under threat – in *The Last Days* the agent of change was the bulldozer; in *Wasteland* a company called Eastern Fortune Rice is trying to acquire land for cultivation by encouraging farmers to sell their homes and move into new apartments. Meyer ably ties this into China's shifting approach to farming, where agribusiness is replacing small tenant farmers, with the government's encouragement. He is careful not to present this as a David and Goliath story – unlike the citizens of the *hutong* (whose houses were forcibly demolished), the villagers of *Wasteland* aren't being forced to sell their houses (at least not yet). Some are happy to move into modern homes, and even some of the villagers who oppose the changes, like Meyer's Auntie Yi, accept that what bothers them most is the uncertainty. Nonetheless, she asks the excellent question, 'How do you know when a place has developed just enough?'

There's a running joke throughout the

book about people's apparent lack of historical awareness. Meyer's attempts at research are frequently met with indifference and he is told that he is 'too late for history'. The official history of *Wasteland* consists of the single sentence, 'In 1956, it became a village.' But Meyer's deep personal relationships with the villagers of *Wasteland* allow him to elicit a different kind of history, one that 'was personal, and living, stretching back only as far as each resident could remember'. These recollections alone make the book worth reading. It's perhaps only a kind of readerly greed that makes me wish the book contained more of the voices of the villagers of *Wasteland*, especially from outside Meyer's in-laws (unlike in *The Last Days*, there is little about his students or their families).


In the wider region, Meyer manages to find traces of more distant history, often in small-town museums. One of the great joys of this always informative and frequently very funny book is the sense of being along for the ride on these modest quests. Idle curiosity and luck are essential parts of the process. In Qingyuan, where Meyer is looking for traces of the Willow Palisade, an old fortification, he is randomly approached by one Mr Li, who then takes him to the home of the oldest woman in the area. She turns out to be in a hospital, which they visit, and are then passed on to a local historian, who doesn't have a copy of the book he wrote on the Palisade. In search of one, they go to the local school and find its principal hoeing a row of onions. The book is missing there, so the historian has to show Meyer to a 'mud embankment' with a 'stubby, leafless willow trunk. No plaque marked the spot. "The Willow Palisade," he said.'

Reading *In Manchuria* made me wish that there were similar books about other rural regions of the country. Where are the great books about country life in Hunan or Anhui? It's unlikely that these will appear soon, not just because China's cities swallow so much of our attention. Perhaps the greater reason is the unfortunate rarity of people willing to focus 'on the slower story, observing changes to individuals and the land over time'. Though Meyer writes this approvingly of Pearl Buck, author of *The Good Earth*, he is just as deserving of the accolade.

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