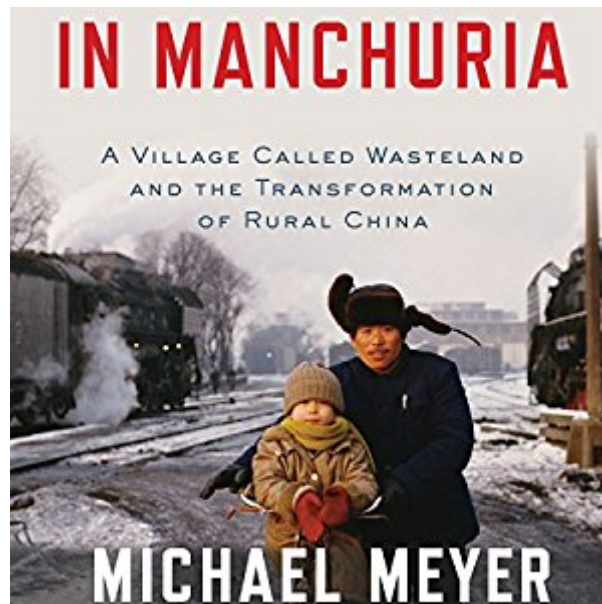


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# In Manchuria: A Village Called Wasteland And The Transformation Of Rural China



## Synopsis

In the tradition of *In Patagonia* and *Great Plains*, Michael Meyer's *In Manchuria* is a scintillating combination of memoir, contemporary reporting, and historical research, presenting a unique profile of China's legendary northeast territory. For three years Meyer rented a home in the rice-farming community of Wasteland, hometown of his wife's family, and their personal saga mirrors the tremendous change most of rural China is undergoing in the form of a privately held rice company that has built new roads, introduced organic farming, and constructed high-rise apartments into which farmers can move in exchange for their land rights. Once a commune, Wasteland is now a company town, a phenomenon happening across China that Meyer documents for the first time; indeed, not since Pearl Buck wrote *The Good Earth* has anyone brought rural China to life as Meyer has here. Amplifying the story of family and Wasteland, Meyer takes us on a journey across Manchuria's past, a history that explains much about contemporary China, from the fall of the last emperor to Japanese occupation and Communist victory. Through vivid local characters, Meyer illuminates the remnants of the imperial Willow Palisade, Russian and Japanese colonial cities and railways, and the POW camp into which a young American sergeant parachuted to free survivors of the Bataan Death March. *In Manchuria* is a rich and original chronicle of contemporary China and its people.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The subtitle of the book is a good summary of what the book is all about: *A Village Called*

Wasteland and the Transformation of Rural China. Meyer who first spent time in southern China as part of the Peace Corp, married a woman from northeastern China (Manchuria). After being married for thirteen years, his wife (now a lawyer) took a job in Hong Kong. Meyer (a travel writer and author) decided it would be a great time to visit her family in Manchuria and travel around the area. His wife's family was from a little town on the Songhua River outside of Jilin in the middle of Heilongjiang Province (Manchuria), called Wasteland. All he could find out about the town was that it was declared a village in 1956. Prior to 1949, it may have just been a group of houses off a side road. After the takeover of the Communist Chinese it was declared a commune and the land in the area was flooded and turned into rice paddies. The village was famous for the type of 'sticky rice' they grew known as 'big wasteland rice'. Meyer (from Minnesota) spent three years living in the town which was just like a small town in the Middle West of the US. He lived among his wife's aunt and uncles who had spent their whole lives in the village, from before World War 2. They remembered the times when the land was owned by absent landlords, the wars of the Warlords (before WW2), the Japanese occupation. They were there when the Russians chased out the Japanese and the war between the Communists and the Nationalists. Under the Communist Chinese they were forced into communes, attacked by the Red Guards during the 'Cultural Revolution' and were part of the first areas to be given private use of the land they lived on. By the time Meyer went to live in Wasteland, the village was being swallowed up by a huge new Agribusiness called 'Eastern Resources'. Everyone in the village remembered his wife as a child (when she was called the Princess) before she married Meyer and went off to the US. In the US she went to college and became a lawyer specializing in international law. Meyer spent much of his time traveling around the Province studying the wars between the Russian, Japanese and Chinese over this land. He interviewed (he is very conversant in Mandarin) many of the local politicians and toured all the important Museums in the area. In his own way Meyer gives the reader a history lesson as well as a discussion of the cultural changes to Manchuria during the twentieth century. For me though the best part of the book is his descriptions of the older people of the village of Wasteland. These are the 'common people' of the area who have lived through all of the changes from the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the Chinese Republic of 1912-1949, and under Communist rule. His description of the small town atmosphere where everyone knows everyone's business is truly worth the read. All during his stay in the village the old 'aunties' question him as to when he will start a family. (At the time he was 39 and his wife Frances was 34.) This is a great view of the changes to rural China (and the whole country) from ground level. Well worth your time. Zeb

'In Manchuria' is one of those blends that the English used to do so well. It's a history, a travelogue, a memoir that somehow mashes up into something that's both very personal and very political. I'd also point out that unlike much of what's written on China, this book is frequently funny. A fluent Mandarin speaker, Meyer goes to live in the village where his Chinese wife grew up, a tiny dot on the map (vaguely) famous for producing a specialty rice. Through conversations, Meyer is able to bring three dimensions to the inhabitants who often seem frozen in time against a China very much on the move. What Meyer finds is a village that has no official history. Yet everyone in the village over the age of seventy has witnessed the entire formation of modern China. Meyer digs up the past - war against the Japanese, Mao's victory, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution - all the way up to now. And now seems no less threatening than what came before as a vast agri-business begins to buy up the land that's been in these families for generations. In a village called 'Wasteland' Meyer has found a tiny corner of the country that deserved a history. It's a blessing that he's given it one.

China has undergone an incredible transformation since 1979, going from a backwater third-world largely rural nation to a rapidly growing world power with impressively dynamic and rapidly growing cities sporting attractive architecture. Not all of China has participated equally, however, in that transformation - especially areas in its rarely seen (by Westerners) Northeast. Ironically that area was once the birthplace of China's Qing dynasty that ruled China until 1912. Today, a quarter of China's villages have died out since the year 2000, largely due to millions migrating to rapidly growing urban centers. Author Meyer focuses on a village called 'Wasteland' (unknown etiology of its name, population 1,459), spending three years living there - his goal is to experience/relate to life that few of us have seen, and rapidly disappearing. Why Wasteland - that's where his wife grew up. She has no interest in living there again, so he lives there by himself and teaches school, while she, armed with a U. of California, Berkeley law degree, practices in Hong Kong. She does visit him and her recollections and connections greatly assist his ability to connect with locals. Wasteland is a place mostly described by what it doesn't have - no local newspaper, graveyards, library, battlefields, etc. There are, however, nearby Japanese POW camps from WWII and a bridge bombed by the U.S during the Korean 'Police Action' (War). Now, even Wasteland's future is in play - Eastern Fortune (rice company) is buying the land and moving the farmers into small and drab high-rise apartments - with indoor plumbing. Turns out Wasteland's history dates back only to the

1950s - then its marshes were drained to allow cultivation of rice.

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