



China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power

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Route 312 is the Chinese Route 66. It flows three thousand miles from east to west, passing through the factory towns of the coastal areas, through the rural heart of China, then up into the Gobi Desert, where it merges with the Old Silk Road. The highway witnesses every part of the social and economic revolution that is turning China upside down.

In this utterly surprising and deeply personal book, acclaimed National Public Radio reporter Rob Gifford, a fluent Mandarin speaker, takes the dramatic journey along Route 312 from its start in the boomtown of Shanghai to its end on the border with Kazakhstan. Gifford reveals the rich mosaic of modern Chinese life in all its contradictions, as he poses the crucial questions that all of us are asking about China: Will it really be the next global superpower? Is it as solid and as powerful as it looks from the outside? And who are the ordinary Chinese people, to whom the twenty-first century is supposed to belong?

Gifford is not alone on his journey. The largest migration in human history is taking place along highways such as Route 312, as tens of millions of people leave their homes in search of work. He sees signs of the booming urban economy everywhere, but he also uncovers many of the country's frailties, and some of the deep-seated problems that could derail China's rise.

The whole compelling adventure is told through the cast of colorful characters Gifford meets: garrulous talk-show hosts and ambitious yuppies, impoverished peasants and tragic prostitutes, cell-phone salesmen, AIDS patients, and Tibetan monks. He rides with members of a Shanghai jeep club, hitchhikes across the Gobi desert, and sings karaoke with migrant workers at truck stops along the way.

As he recounts his travels along Route 312, Rob Gifford gives a face to what has historically, for Westerners, been a faceless country and breathes life into a nation that is so often reduced to economic statistics. Finally, he sounds a warning that all is not well in the Chinese heartlands, that serious problems lie ahead, and that the future of the West has become inextricably linked with the fate of 1.3 billion Chinese people.

“Informative, delightful, and powerfully moving . . . Rob Gifford’s acute powers of observation, his sense of humor and adventure, and his determination to explore the wrenching dilemmas of China’s explosive development open readers’ eyes and reward their minds.”

—Robert A. Kapp, president, U.S.-China Business Council, 1994-2004

China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power Details

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From Reader Review China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power for online ebook

R?hul says

Rob Gifford, a long-time foreign correspondent in China, writes this travelogue of his journey from Shanghai to the far reaches of China's borders with the Turkic peoples in central Asia. Gifford, a Mandarin speaking American, travels on Route 312 first along the Yangtze, then northwards, further through the Gansu corridor and finally in the deserts of China's Xinjiang. The Chinese are optimistic, and they are eager to show off their national rejuvenation to a sympathetic Mandarin-speaking white man. His very existence in China is a departure from the European raiders whose superior power, 150 years ago, had humiliated the prestige of the Qing Dynasty and the self-assurance of the Han Confucian elite. The Han Chinese are the world's largest "nation", and they were a nation even before the concept of nationhood developed in post-renaissance Europe. Whatever happens among the Chinese is, by definition, at a larger scale than anywhere else. However, among the empires that ruled the world before the 20th century, China is the only one that has not splintered into constituent nations. Modern China continues to rule over Tibetans, Uighurs and other ethnic groups in the west of the country, whom Gifford finds to be quick to vent their dissatisfaction at continued forced assimilation, and Han Chinese migration into their territories, although they are also mostly resigned to their fate.

Gifford's narrative reinforces one's sense that in China today, the tomorrow of the whole world is being built. However, since his travels in 2006, much water has flown under the bridge. The great recession in the west led to a great divergence in global growth between China and the west, with China having caught up now in PPP terms with US GDP. Simultaneously, rise of illiberalism worldwide has led to a retreat in democratic values. Gifford's frame of China's prospective move towards democracy, while a common sentiment in 2006, seems rather quaint and short-sighted now. History has not been kind to his then-widely held view.

The strength of this book is in Gifford's ability to connect with ordinary Chinese, the "old hundred names", both Han and ethnic minorities. He taps into the pervasive optimism of a great and self-confident people determined to find a leading place for themselves and win respect worldwide. Besides the voice of ordinary Chinese, this book is also a window into the view of the western establishment, with Gifford as its representative, on China pre-great recession. With the communist party having further consolidated control in 2018, this book is an interesting view of 2006 when there were still western hopes of a rising China being accommodated in the western system.

Dan says

Rather than trying to capture all of China, Gifford takes us along on a guided road-trip; a backpack-toting, hostel-sleeping, diesel-driving, 3000 mile journey through modern China. It is, by his account, a nation divided: obsessed with a future improbable enough to be terrifying, and bound by a past whose release could be fatal.

This is not a scholarly work (though there are some elements of that), but a personal account of the lives of real people: a roomful of villagers infected with AIDS by bad government policy, a cell-phone carrying hermit who meditates alone on mount Hua Shan, an Amway salesman who is beginning to see his dreams become real, a school teacher who helps children from his own nation give up their heritage to become Chinese (their best chance at success). None of these stories are in-depth enough to be completely satisfying on their own, but taken together they paint a picture of present-day China, in all its industrious complexity and

contradiction.

Just as when you walk by a fence and build a picture of the backyard from a series of tiny slices, we get a taste of many different lives in such brief duration and rapid succession that a shape, at least, begins to form. China rushes forward with big-city dreams and peasant feet. No matter what happens there over the next twenty years, the rest of the world will feel it.

coffeedog says

British author Rob Gifford, fluent in Mandarin, with 20 years experience in China as a student and journalist, decides to travel Route 312 from Shanghai to Korgaz (China's border with Kazakhstan). Devoting a summer to this 3000-mile trip via buses and taxis, he brings his career experience to ponder the questions of China's future. [return][return]Talking with ordinary people of many ethnic, economic and social identities, and putting today's China into historical context, the result is informative, thought-provoking, and brings us closer to understanding the sensitive issues facing this vast country. We receive a well-reasoned speculation about whether China will be able to change in a different manner, or will it continue a cycle of collapsing and rebuilding? Exceptionally well written, with sound historical background, a sense of humor, and profound understanding of China's people.

Mag says

A travelogue from the journey made along Route 312- sort of Chinese Route 66- from Shanghai to Kazakhstan's border, chronicling the changes the post Mao communist regime and globalization have brought to the country. Gifford made the trip east to west and through the Gobi desert along the former Silk Road the way the locals do- mostly by bus, hailed truck, carpooling with others, or by taxi. On the way, he spoke to ordinary people he met: truck drivers, restaurant owners, fellow bus passengers, all of them sometimes able to explain the social phenomena better than many scholars or political analysts. It sure helps that Gifford speaks fluent Mandarin and has spent the last twenty years on and off in China, first as a student and then most of the last five years as a reporter for British NPR.

It's a great book full of nice, clear insights and good basic background information. Gifford explains China very well, and has an ability to succinctly connect what's happening in it right now to its political and cultural heritage. His writing is good, easy going, and unpretentious- it's one of those books you hate to finish.

I wrote down a quote that I liked early on, even before I decided to buy the book- so here it is to give you a taste of it:

‘After the killing of the students in Tianamen Square in 1989, the Communist Party leaders made an unspoken deal with the people of China: stay out of politics and you can do anything you want. During the 1990s, for the first time in more than forty years (or perhaps four thousand), the Chinese government began to retreat from people's everyday lives.

This was a very clever move by the Party. The tiny birdcage in which Chinese people had previously lived became an aviary. You cannot yet fly up into a clear blue sky and they can still catch you if they want to, but there is plenty of room to fly around.

First of all, yes, there is a consumer boom, but the majority of people have no access to it. If in the United States you need money to get power, in China you need power to get money.” P.15

Paul Holbrook says

Rob Gifford convinced me that China an enigma to much of the world for good reason, not just because of our ignorance. Points that stuck with me:

First, China is a collection of ethnic minorities, some of whom have almost nothing to do with the rest of China except by political fiat. Head west in China, as Rob Gifford did, and you find yourself with people who are being swamped by the Han Chinese, the 92% ethnic majority. We have nothing quite like that in the US.

Second, China's relationship between the state and the people is so radically different than the US or Western Europe that our standard assumptions - that democracy will inevitably overtake all other forms of government - simply doesn't hold water. In China centralized control is baked into the history.

Last, China is preoccupied with its own needs to a very great degree. They don't need to be expansionist or seek to control other parts of the world - they are quite busy enough at home, and don't need the distractions.

There's much more here. The virtue of Gifford's book is his point of view, the way he struggles with what's good and bad about China today, and how he comes to understand it better as he crosses variously takes buses, cars, and almost anything he can to get himself further west.

Sarah says

Incrediballz. Definitely a worth-while read. Super informative about the transition of power in modern China and the struggles the CCP is facing and will face in the near future. Plus, it all becomes quite personalized; you meet the most wonderful characters along Route 312 - from Wu Faliang who is struggling with the western pursuit of survival to Princess Pinky who is chasing the eastern pursuit of happiness; from the Han, the Mongols, the Tibetans, the Uighurs, and every ethnicity in between; from Islamic influence to the re-emergence of Christianity all within an officially atheist 'nation-state' - you name it, Gifford's got it. In his own words, "For every fact that is true about China, the opposite is almost always true as well, somewhere in the country." In China Road, where we cover almost 3,000 miles in just 300 pages, the contradictions in Chinese society are revealed to the reader. Gifford takes a closer look at some dangerous fault lines across China, which suggest the stability of the country and its much-vaunted rise may not be as smooth as one might imagine.

Julie Christine says

For a reader such as I, who knows so little about China, this was an excellent and accessible overview. As he experiences the tidal wave of hyper-modernity that begins in the eastern cities and rushes into the remote western deserts and mountains, Gifford offers neat bytes of China's immense history. The bibliography is a trove to mine. Upon finishing the book I had a solid grasp of China's possibilities of growth and tumult

respective of its past cultural and political development. AND I yearn to learn more.

But what I really loved about this travel-narrative was Gifford's voice. He has long been one of my favorite NPR correspondents and it was delightful to get to know the man behind the voice. He did not hold China at arm's length; he embraced the experience and told a fragment of China's story in an admittedly personal, subjective voice. We are roughly the same age and even though he is British and I American, he attended graduate school in the US and has worked for NPR for many years. His cultural and generational references were so familiar to me and I appreciated the spirit in which he undertook his adventure and his ambivalence about globalization and democracy.

Heidi says

Just before packing up and leaving China for good, NPR foreign correspondent Rob Gifford bused and hitchhiked his way along China's 5000 kilometer Route 312. Route 312 spans the country from east to west, from the modern city of Shanghai, through the industrial areas along the coast, alongside the poor rural farmers in China's central region, and right through the Gobi Desert. Along the way, Gifford (who is fluent in Mandarin) talked to the local people and made his own observations about China's future.

It's difficult to write a summary of this book because the whole book is a summary, in a way. Many of the observations were surprising for me, probably because I don't know much about China. The devastating AIDS epidemic in the Hunan Province, for example, was caused by poor farmers selling their plasma for money--to health care workers who were using unsanitary techniques. And when traveling through a farming area, Gifford meets nurses who not only admit to performing forced abortions on late-term fetuses, but who are actually proud of the contribution they're making to keeping China's population down.

But it wasn't all grim. Gifford does a good job of accurately representing the people he comes across. I laughed out loud when he ran across one of China's newest and most enthusiastic entrepreneurs: an Amway salesman. I also liked the fact that Gifford was unashamedly religious, which seems to be rare in a news correspondent.

The book had lots of interesting historical details which related well with Gifford's analysis of modern China. I found it interesting and well worth the read.

Pauline says

Just got back from a tour of the Mainland and one of my travelmates lent me this book while we were there. I read it on the train and it was neat to follow our progress on the map and in the stories. Gifford's book gives wonderful background into past and modern day China. As a Chinese American, I also appreciated the explanations of common terms that I've heard my parents' use, like "lao bai xing" - old hundred names.

I liked how Gifford makes the point that we Westerners should not judge China solely by our standards. The India vs. China comparison is a good example. I've read several articles stating that India is clearly going to outdo China in the next couple of years. The author reminds us that much of this is based on our

preconception that a democratic government is always the winner...and we forget that corruption can exist anywhere. After having just visited China, it's clear that as of now, there is no way - given the sheer number of people in the country - that there could be any order without the government as it is now.

Jeremy says

I know next to nothing about China, and Gifford's book is a nice way to sort of skim through the impossibly broad array of cultural and socio/political issues and shifts which make it up. Unlike most people who write about China, he's actually more interested in the Chinese people he meets than in the Chinese economy, which no one actually knows what to make of (including most Chinese). He also does a lot to illuminate the historical tensions between Chinese peasants and the centralized ruling power, of which the CCP is merely the latest massively corrupt iteration. He also handily demolishes quite a few idiotic stereotypes that outsiders (myself included) have about state censorship, personal freedom, the tibet issue, the treatment of ethnic minorities, Tiananman square, etc. Gifford jumps around a lot in an effort to cover a lot of material and physical space (let's see YOU write succinctly about a nation this big) but his humane approach is a breath of fresh air compared to the glut of soulless economic interpretations of Chinese culture and history which have flooded American media in the past few years.

Leanna says

Several years ago, I listened to Rob Gifford's series "On the Road in China" on NPR. Three of my siblings (or siblings-in-law) have lived in Asia, and though I've never traveled in the area, I was fascinated by his series.

With this in mind, I intended to read Gifford's *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* when it first came out last year. However, my local library did not immediately add it to its collection, so I forgot about the book.

Until I read *The Geography of Bliss*.

In *Geography*, Weiner suggests that Rob Gifford is a "hedonic refugee," that he has an affinity for the United States (Gifford is British). Since Gifford was NPR's China correspondent for six years, this statement took me by surprise and reminded me to read *China Road*.

Now that the longwinded introduction is behind me, I'll write about the book. China is a hot topic and will continue to be so, particularly with the Beijing Olympics this summer. I was surprised, though, by how little I really know about China. For example, Gifford discusses in detail the many ethnic groups that comprise the country. In my Western mind, only Chinese people live in China, but this is just not true.

Like with the NPR series, I was most interested in the "human interest" stories Gifford shares. I was fascinated with the places he visits and the people he meets, so I've decided my next trip should be to China.

Much of the book, though, deals with policy, politics, and China's future. These sections, of course, are of extreme importance. However, they are much less engaging than the rest of the narrative and tend to drag.

Gifford suggests, and I agree, that China's future (both political and economic) will have a major impact on the global community—and the United States in particular. As such, this is one topic that all Americans should be interested in.

Orlaith says

This is the book to read before you go to China. I loved it - he blends the personal with the historical (told in an accessible way) and sociological. It's not a hagiography but clearly he loves China - warts and all.

I knew nothing about the blood scandal in Henan where villages are almost wiped out from selling blood in the 90s and there was cross-contamination. This blood was for Western pharmaceutical companies. Of course there was a huge cover-up. Rob Gifford is rightly angry about it.

Don't miss the touching tribute to his wife in the acknowledgments.

Zhifei Ge says

??I've been reading quite a lot of books on China, not simply because I love this country, but I've never had a unified opinion about China. My own attitude towards China has always been self-contradictory. This travelogue just echoes my confusion with lively and thought-provoking anecdotes.

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??The travel starts from Shanghai and ends in the Gobi Desert along the Route 312. In the first few chapters, Rob is still near the coastal areas and stories of successful Shanghai have been repeated by many other authors. In this part, the government has successfully bought off the people, and the middle class is expanding. People living in this part have more sympathy towards the government.

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??Down the Silk Road, the socioeconomic diversity of China is increasingly apparent and the issue of China becomes increasingly complicated. The tension between the people and the government, the Han people and the ethnic minorities are increasing. Because of China's colonial capitalism in this part of China, the road towards economic prosperity and the road towards freedom are both vague, confusing and hard. Adding to the confusion is the historical cycling. This combination of stories in ancient, modern and contemporary China in this book delineates the confusion of the Chinese people.

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??I have been taught since elementary school that the Chinese people have historically been weak and peace-loving. But after reading this part of the book, I have to say that this is a lie.

Ray Smith says

A rather boring and very annoying book. I was expecting a travelogue like Paul Theroux's excellent *Riding the Iron Rooster*, but instead, the book's broken down so:

20% -- real-life stories Gifford encounters on his trip, which are almost never interesting.

30% -- recycled historical stories about China, stuff I've heard 1000 times before.

50% -- Gifford's endless and sweeping pronouncements about China, which are never original or interesting.

This is stuff I've heard 100,000 times before (Tibet, democracy, party corruption, female infanticide).

To give you an idea of this, I heard the unabridged audiobook to this book, which is about 10 hours long. Gifford's actual road trip ends at the 9-hour mark, and he proceeds for the last hour to pontificate endlessly on what he thinks are China's problems and their solutions. Again, that might be okay if he says anything original or interesting, but he doesn't. I guess this might be halfway interesting if you don't know anything about China, but trust me, this is very, very old stuff, essentially warmed over ideas from Gordon Chang's *The Coming Collapse of China*.

Skip this and read Peter Hessler's Chinese books instead, and again you can't beat Paul Theroux's travelogue, which is filled with awesome experiences he'd encountered on his trip. And if you want to read about Chinese history, get Jonathan Spence's incomparable *Search for Modern China*.

Barbara says

After living in China for a while, I've come to dislike almost all western reporting on China. While it's rarely factually wrong, it generally misses the point. I'm looking at you, CNN.

This book is one of the handful of exceptions. Rob Gifford is well respected here as a true China expert, and his book gives a true and vivid picture of modern China, with all its contradictions.

He uses the device of traveling along Route 312, a 3000 mile road that connects Shanghai with the Western Chinese border, to give vignettes that illustrate the breadth of China (in all senses) and the extreme differences between the prosperous Eastern cities and the economic struggles of the under-developed western region..

One of the strengths of the book is the finely nuanced picture of the relationship between the Chinese government and the ethnic minorities who resist the cultural dominance of the Han Chinese - which includes not only Tibetans but also the Muslim Hui and Uygyur people.

I didn't find it quite as engaging as my other two favorite books on China, which are James Fallows' 'Postcards from Tomorrow Square' and J. Martin Troost's 'Lost on Planet China'. Perhaps it's because, as a rule, I'm not all that entranced by books and movies focused on The Road.

But I would definitely recommend it to others who are interested in China, particularly if you want an expert's overview of this amazing country.

Sherri says

Fabulous book! After living in China for 20 years, former NPR journalist, Rob Gifford, took a summer long trip from Shanghai to China's western border on Kazakhstan along route 312 (which he compares to America's Route 66), before leaving China to go back to Europe. Gifford documents his trip in this book, slipping in some of his thoughts and impressions about China and the future of China formed after living

there for 20 years and witnessing the incredible pace of change and development. The book can be a little self indulgent at times, but I didn't mind at all because Gifford is an excellent narrator with the right mix of fact, history, and human interest to keep the book moving along. I learned so much (maybe because I knew so little going in). I highly recommend this book. Americans know too little about China, and this book is an easy, entertaining way to start to change that.

The only down side to this book is that it may be somewhat out of date. It was published in 2007, and with the pace of change in China described in the book, there are sure to be many new developments in China that are not covered (the Hong Kong protests being one). Maybe we can convince Gifford to go back and take another trip so we can get an update!

bsc says

I found this book to be fascinating. Knowing relatively little about China, this was a very eye-opening book.

The premise is that Gifford, a journalist with many years spent in China, travels Route 312 from the coast of China all the way to the Kazakhstan border. The journey is filled with conversations with the Chinese people he meets. Along the way, he educates the reader in Chinese history. Much more emotionally charged than I was expecting, but it is also very funny and entertaining.

Ettore1207 says

Gifford ha vissuto in Cina dal 1987 e quindi è un grande conoscitore di questo immenso Paese. Nel libro descrive un viaggio di oltre 4000 km lungo la Route 312, una strada che taglia l'intero territorio cinese da est (Shanghai) a ovest (confine con il Kazakistan). Un bel libro ricco di descrizioni vivide di cos'è la Cina oggi (e di com'era nell'antichità), di acute osservazioni personali ed interpretazioni. Gifford pone l'accento sui cambiamenti molto rapidi, o forse troppo rapidi, che stanno avvenendo e che fanno intravvedere un futuro incerto. Molto interessanti sono i colloqui con le persone comuni incontrate durante il viaggio.

Però Gifford, da buon anglosassone, porta dentro di sé un odio viscerale verso il comunismo ed una visione molto individualista della società: *"Per me, la sola possibilità di un'intrusione del governo nella mia vita è inaccettabile."* Credo che ciò lo porti a sottolineare con troppa enfasi i difetti, pur innegabili, passati e presenti del regime cinese. Inoltre egli difende a spada tratta i benefici di una crescita dell'economia e della produzione industriale, senza porsi troppe domande sugli effetti collaterali e su cosa succederà quando ci si dovrà fermare (e prima o poi ci si dovrà fermare). E' anche, purtroppo, un fautore del "trickle-down": *"Ma non c'è ombra di dubbio che l'economia cinese in molti settori sta andando a gonfie vele e che ci sono molte più scelte a disposizione di chi ha ambizione di riuscire. La Route 312 dimostra anche questo, e l'effetto trickle-down è enorme."* Il trickle down è una teoria economica secondo la quale la ricchezza si diffonde capillarmente e spontaneamente ai ceti sociali meno abbienti ed all'intera società se lo Stato, anziché finanziare i servizi sociali e le opere pubbliche, sovvenziona le grandi aziende ed alleggerisce il carico fiscale dei ricchi. Sarà vero? Temo proprio di no.

Ethan Cramer-Flood says

A perfect book for the China generalist. Entertaining, enlightening, wide-ranging, smoothly presented. Just

the right helpings of culture, politics, history, quirk, engaging anecdotes, moving stories, enlightening revelations, social commentary, etc. If you want to know a whole lot more about all the facets of modern China -- rather than just focusing on the politics as I often do -- this book is a great way to start. Yes, it will tell you a lot about the political situation, but it will also serve as a great introduction to the Chinese people and their culture and society, and how real human beings in China fit into this dramatic narrative of China's rise. Rob Gifford is a highly experienced journalist and old China hand, and he could have written a much more targeted book focusing on politics had he wanted to -- but he did us all a service by broadening his range and incorporating voices not often heard in Western books about the Chinese situation. Gifford's magical ace in the hole is his fluency in Chinese, an all-access card that so few foreign writers can bring to bear. In some ways it gives him a credibility that even the most knowledgeable scholar can't hope to match.

Recommended for anyone who wants to know as much as they possibly can about all elements of the China story without having to read ten different books.

Ensiform says

The author, an NPR reporter and fluent speaker of Mandarin, traveled on Route 312 by car and bus from Shanghai through Henan and Xi'an, then through Uighur country and the Gobi desert to Korgaz, a town on the west border of China and Kazakhstan. Along the way he talks with farmers, factory workers, monks, prostitutes, and truck drivers about the changes China's political and financial systems are going through (in 2007). Gifford's observations lead him to two main themes in the book: first, while the prosperity that China's brand of capitalism ("moderate prosperity") has brought great change to the coast and the big cities, the life of Old Hundred Hands, the peasants, remains one of limited choices and limited opportunities. Second, while the central government is not currently using force to oppress minorities such as the Tibetans, Hui, and Uighur as much as it has in previous decades, the influx of Han Chinese settlers, food, and culture is turning these traditional minorities into a sort of exotic sideshow in their own lands. Another theme running through the book is that explicit oppression of people does still go on, as in forced abortions and people being forced through financial hardship to sell blood, only to contract AIDS and be given a pittance by the government as compensation. (Of course, one could argue that all of these social ills exist in the United States as well, from the decimation and mockery of Native American culture to the lack of upward mobility and lack of healthcare, but this is a book about China.)

Gifford is a wonderful observer and reporter of the human condition, and his knowledge of China is superb. The chapter on "Power," an exploration of the lack of any checks and balances or challenges to the strong central government in China (no church, no population of nobles as in Europe) is eye-opening. The final chapter, in which Gifford reluctantly makes a few predictions about where China is headed and whether it can continue to exist as a one-party system without sparking an angry revolution, is also very instructive. Because of Gifford's wide knowledge, this stands out in a crowded field of books on China as especially engaging and wise.
