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China In Ten Words



Synopsis

From one of China's most acclaimed writers: a unique, intimate look at the Chinese experience over the last several decades. Framed by ten phrases common in the Chinese vernacular, *China in Ten Words* uses personal stories and astute analysis to reveal as never before the world's most populous yet oft-misunderstood nation. In "Disparity," for example, Yu Hua illustrates the expanding gaps that separate citizens of the country. In "Copycat," he depicts the escalating trend of piracy and imitation as a creative new form of revolutionary action. And in "Bamboozle," he describes the increasingly brazen practices of trickery, fraud, and chicanery that are, he suggests, becoming a way of life at every level of society. Witty, insightful, and courageous, this is a refreshingly candid vision of the "Chinese miracle" and all of its consequences.

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Customer Reviews

China is a paradox: hard-charging capitalist country and communist stronghold. There's a Wild West mentality now, with every man, woman, and child for him or herself, and at the same time still tied closely to the one-party state, a political system that brooks no dissent. Yu Hua, a best-selling novelist in China, dissects his country through the prism of his own life in *China in Ten Words*, and sees the contradictions as having more in common with the country's past than the average outside observer would see. It's obviously an uncomfortable truth: his book cannot be published in China, even though he lives in Beijing and continues to be popular as a novelist. Hua centers his argument around ten themes, his ten words. They range from, at the beginning of the book, "people" and

"leader" to the two final words, "copycat" and "bamboozle." "People" is a signal word in modern China: after all, it's officially the People's Republic of China. But "the people," when Yu Hua was growing up (he was born in 1960, during the disastrous Great Leap Forward) had a very different meaning than it does now. He dwells on what he considers the major turning point for China: the role of the Chinese people in the Tiananmen Square in 1989, and how, once that movement for political freedom was crushed, economic freedom was the only freedom available. What Hua shows again and again, often through personal anecdotes from his childhood and news accounts of contemporary times, are the startling parallels between the Maoist past and the capitalist present. Many of his stories revolve around the Cultural Revolution, which started when he was six, and only petered out in his later teenage years. It was a time of denigration of past values ("to rebel is justified," Mao told them repeatedly): teachers were scorned; tradition was viewed with deep suspicion; everyone, even family members, were suspect. We've read many accounts of communities turning on themselves during this period, of scores being settled brutally. What's revealing is how the same themes repeat now, as the profit motive makes people treat their fellow Chinese without compunction (think of the horrific working conditions for the former peasants making our iPhones). Corruption is endemic; cynicism is the rule. And just as in the Cultural Revolution, those who rise quickly to the top of the heap are often quickly swept away, and lose everything. "Why, when discussing China today, do I always return to the Cultural Revolution? That's because these two eras are so interrelated: even though the state of society now is very different from then, some psychological elements remain strikingly similar. After participating in one mass movement during the Cultural Revolution, for example, we are now engaged in another: economic development," he writes. That's made very clear in the final chapters. It's open season now for copycats: nothing is sacred, from the products people buy to quotes in the newspaper--often completely made up, shamelessly. Even Mao: the Great Helmsman inspires an impersonation contest held on national TV: the winner is a woman. Hua wonders, upon seeing one of his pirated books for sale on the sidewalk near his home, when someone else will start publishing as Hua. It's all part of the big bamboozle, or huyou. Hua details one corrupt practice after another, often citing very recent examples that he's heard of or read about. It's not just businessmen on the make; the bamboozle permeates society. And, Hua says, all this bamboozling leads to no good end: we are heir to our actions. His is a warning to China, but the fact that his book won't be read there--at least, not officially--is not a good sign that the country will come to terms with the structural weakness in its foundation. *China in Ten Words* is a very personal book, and eminently readable. As a novelist, Hua knows how to tell stories, and it is those stories that pack much more of a punch than a merely

political or historical tome might have. Hua tells us how he got started as a writer: being part of the writers' union seemed a lot cushier than his job as a 21-year-old high-school educated dentist, yanking teeth eight hours a day in a small, nowheresville town. With persistence and determination he makes the leap to the better life, and at the same time, he's telling us about how China has changed: it used to be you were told where you'd work, and that would be that. In other words, some of the changes China has undergone are certainly positive (millions no longer in dire poverty, for starters). The question is, can the country resolve its inherent contradictions without the upheaval it's historically put itself through? Hua doesn't have the answer, but he's not optimistic.

Great writing, great story-telling, and insightful commentary on contemporary cultural events of China through the use of ten essays on the meaning of ten words. The author uses his own life history and his brilliant skills to bring the meaning of these words to life, in the context of his life and the lives of Chinese citizens. He uses his sharp mind and warm heart to analyze political policy and human interaction. I learned so much about the life of the author, but also gained a much deeper understanding of the rapidly changing Chinese culture and political landscape. I recommend this book to anyone interested in China's history or culture, or to anyone interested in how the meaning of one word can change radically when used in a different cultural context, or to anyone interested in reading a fascinating life story. A marvelous read on so many fronts.

Yu Hua tries to depict China's modern history and current situation in ten words. Some words are well written, but some are just about Yu Hua's own life experience, I think. Nice read but not good as his "To Live: A Novel". Most of the book are related to Cultural Revolution, which is indeed a big thing in China's history and to some degree cultivated today's China society and economics. Yu Hua has a sense of humor even when writing tragic things, but many times after I laughed I had a deeply depressed feeling - hell, I'm living in this strange country. Needless to say, it has no chance of being published in China. Ridiculously, anything telling some dark side truth of China can't be published in China, which is like Orwell's societies in his two famous books.

There is a great deal of insight packed into this short, powerful book. Author Hua Yu chooses 10 words that he believes capture the essence of China and its culture today. The first word is "people," which affords Hua an entry to discussing the myriad ways that the Cultural Revolution has shaped contemporary China, since it indelibly shaped the views and character of the Chinese people who survived it, including those who rule the nation now. A child during the Cultural

Revolution, Hua saw many things that most kids should never see, and that probably went a long way toward making him the insightful writer he is today. The second word is "leader," which of course features a discussion of Mao and all of the initiatives that go along with him -- the so-called Long March, the Great Leap Forward, etc. What is notable is that Hua retains a reverence for Mao, even in the face of history's revelations about Mao's eccentric (some would say insane) decisions and personal choices. Upon reflection, however, it seems to me that someone whose childhood was formed in the fires of China in the 60s, with its idolatry of Mao and pervasive propaganda machine, can perhaps do nothing else, lest the mind explode at the futility of all that has passed. The other eight words -- reading, writing, Lu Xun, revolution, disparity, grassroots, copycat and bamboozle -- carry equally compelling associations, but I was particularly struck by Hua's comments on "copycat." He asserts that the entire Chinese culture is, essentially, fake. Fake news, fake freedoms, fake constitution, fake DVDs, etc. This idea of falsity is covered over by language, with 'copycat' being the favored term used by the Chinese in an attempt to legitimize their Orwellian state. Rather than being say, a pirated Gucci handbag, the Chinese will call it a 'copycat.' This takes the sting out of the illegal acts that go into trademark theft and make a 'copycat Gucci' a sort of alternative brand, which then carries a whiff of authenticity, or if not that, at least of truth in advertising. This rings true for me, especially when I recall the young men who stalk tourists on Hong Kong's Nathan Road muttering under their breath, "copy watch, copy watch." Thus, they claim not to be selling fake Piagets, but merely 'honest' copies. True, Hong Kong is not China proper, but I suspect that this attitude of copycatting has migrated from the mainland down to Britain's former colony, which becomes less like Britain and more like China with every passing day. One thing that hasn't changed in Hong Kong, and is in fact now shared with the China mainland, is a nearly singular focus on profit-making activities. Consider these lines in the 'Leader' section of the book: "Many Chinese have begun to pine for the era of Mao Zedong... Although life in the Mao era was impoverished and restrictive, there was no widespread, cruel competition to survive, just empty class struggle [which] mostly took the form of sloganeering. China today is a completely different story. So intense is the competition and so unbearable the pressure that, for many Chinese, survival is like war itself." That sure doesn't sound like the "Red China" many of us picture when we think about the PRC. Hua's book charts a metaphorical course from that Marxist dystopia to the "world's workshop" of today. It is a trip worth taking.

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