



Beijing Bastard: Into the Wilds of a Changing China

Val Wang

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A humorous and moving coming-of-age story that brings a unique, not-quite-outsider's perspective to China's shift from ancient empire to modern superpower

Raised in a strict Chinese-American household in the suburbs, Val Wang dutifully got good grades, took piano lessons, and performed in a Chinese dance troupe—until she shaved her head and became a leftist, the stuff of many teenage rebellions. But Val's true mutiny was when she moved to China, the land her parents had fled before the Communist takeover in 1949.

Val arrives in Beijing in 1998 expecting to find freedom but instead lives in the old city with her traditional relatives, who wake her at dawn with the sound of a state-run television program playing next to her cot, make a running joke of how much she eats, and monitor her every move. But outside, she soon discovers a city rebelling against its roots just as she is, struggling too to find a new, modern identity. Rickshaws make way for taxicabs, skyscrapers replace *hutong* courtyard houses, and Beijing prepares to make its debut on the world stage with the 2008 Olympics. And in the gritty outskirts of the city where she moves, a thriving avant-garde subculture is making art out of the chaos. Val plunges into the city's dizzying culture and nightlife and begins shooting a documentary, about a Peking Opera family who is witnessing the death of their traditional art.

Brilliantly observed and winningly told, *Beijing Bastard* is a compelling story of a young woman finding her place in the world and of China, as its ancient past gives way to a dazzling but uncertain future.

Beijing Bastard: Into the Wilds of a Changing China Details


Date : Published October 30th 2014 by Avery (first published 2014)

ISBN : 9781592408207

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Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Cultural, China, Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir, Biography

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Maura Elizabeth says

I borrowed *Beijing Bastard* from the library after hearing it recommended on an episode of the Sinica podcast that discussed Beijing in the 1990s. I think anyone who spent time in China during the late 1990s-early 2000s will enjoy Val Wang's memoir of her three years in Beijing; those who have no familiarity with the country, on the other hand, might find her stories rambling and fragmented. This is a book that conveys a sense of time and place, though like others who speak of Beijing at the turn of the century, Wang is certainly prone to romanticizing the experience.

Honestly, though, it's hard not to. I moved to Beijing a few years later than Wang did, in 2005, and still think fondly of long dinners at Hidden Tree and bicycle rides through the hutongs. Yes, we were living in an expat bubble and avoiding the "real world" of life back home. But we were also getting to know a city in flux, where neighborhoods were being demolished and rebuilt in the space of weeks and no one could predict which city-living campaign the government was going to roll out next. Beijing really has changed since then—it's become too big, too sprawling, too difficult—and every time I go back, I miss the way the city used to be, as Wang obviously does.

I also like *Beijing Bastard* because it's one of a very few books by female expats in China. The other big one, and a nice companion to *Beijing Bastard*, is *Foreign Babes in Beijing: Behind the Scenes of a New China*, by Rachel DeWoskin. The two books share a similar weakness—that reading about someone else's journey to "find herself" can be eyeroll-inducing—but their shared strength is how they've captured the essence of 1990s Beijing, warts and all.

Daniel Olds says

This is one of the better memoirs about expat life in modern China prior to the massive changes that took place for the Olympics in Beijing. Val describes Beijing well, always taking into account that her daily life is both Chinese and American. Her identity seems fluid, just like Beijing during that period.

The honesty of her prose combined with the accuracy of the sounds and actions she witnessed in Beijing is laudable and comforting especially to those that lived in Beijing during this period. She makes Beijing seem accessible and challenging at the same time.

Her experiences with the underground filmmakers and Peking Opera family members also provide a glimpse into these unique communities in China without providing exhaustive detail which can be found in more academic texts.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in Beijing prior to the massive infusion of wealth and cultural change that now grips Beijing. It is a great travel book and perfect for any student about to embark on a experience living, working, or studying in China.

Jennifer says

American born Chinese becomes an expat in Beijing. She resents her Chinese relatives for not providing more pleasant accommodations for her, and her parents for having any expectations. A flirtation with married filmmaker somehow doesn't launch her documentary career. Prior to her living in Baltimore for a year or ever visiting, she compared a street in Beijing to "the kind of dinky bar street you'd find in a second-tier city like Baltimore or Omaha." For an aspiring cosmopolitan (from this current Baltimorean), this seems awfully provincial. She meets a family trained in Peking opera and starts to film them, but dislikes them and acts awkward; somehow this documentary fails to take wing as well. Some of the personality of urban China in transition shines through beneath the relentless din of her mocking almost everyone she meets and being generally miserable.

Liralen says

"I know what I like most about being here. Freelancing," I said. "Freedom in general. I feel really free here." John started laughing. "You're from the United States of America and you come to the last huge Communist country in the world to find freedom," he said, with a combination of pity and admiration that somehow pleased me. (215)

After college, Wang departed for China, the country her parents had left decades before. As a child, Wang had to be pushed by her parents to learn Chinese, and she felt the cultural clash of one whose parents are immigrants; as an adult, her parents now just wanted her home. Why go back to a country where they'd seen so little opportunity?

But China was changing, and Wang wanted to spread her wings a bit. Explore. Brush up on her Chinese. Investigate Beijing's underground art scene. Maybe, just maybe, film her own independent documentary.

The Beijing Wang came to know and love was one in flux -- tradition battling modernisation; *hutongs* being bulldozed in favour of cookie-cutter apartment buildings. She butts heads with her relatives, who don't know what to do with this very American niece; she falls in with an assortment of expats and Chinese artists; she struggles to find motivation to actually get out there with a camera and pursue her dreams.

If you're looking for a memoir with a strong through-line -- one in which something Big happens, or at least the book goes from Point A to Point B -- this is probably not the one for you. But once I realised that this was not that book, that Wang was not going to (view spoiler), I settled in and just enjoyed the ride. There's not a lot of direction, but then, that's true of many (most?) twenty-somethings on a quest to find something Different. She packs a lot of detail in -- and yes, the prose gets overwritten to the point of being positively purple, and yes, it sometimes drove me nuts, but it also felt cluttered in a weirdly good way, as though all that detail represented the chaos of Beijing growing and changing and finding new norms.

I'm reminded, by the way, of *The Emperor Far Away*, as Wang ultimately comes to a conclusion similar to a point that Eimer makes early on: *I realized China was a place I could return to, says Wang, a place my parents could return to, as long as I accepted that none of it could ever be counted on to stay the same. (334)*

I received a free copy of this book via a Goodreads giveaway.

Laura says

This was incredibly rambling, and there never seemed to be much of a purpose to it. I can't remember who recommended it to me, but I am surprised that someone ever did, since it was a really boring read that I slogged through just to get to the end. Unfortunately, even the end didn't seem to have much of a point to it, and I kind of wish I had just put it down permanently.

Helen says

There was so much potential here but Wang's memoir feels let down by a lack of cohesion and a non-existent narrative arc. Less memoir and more like a linear diary, I made it to the end of the book but only through dogged determination. It's a real shame as there were so many themes I could relate to (rediscovering family heritage, the east v west parent and child dynamic, pursuing artistic career paths vs traditional safe jobs etc) but I didn't really get a sense of who Wang really is, how she sees herself, how she sees her family in China and the US, or old China vs new.

Stephanie says

This book was simply wretched. I cannot believe someone actually agreed to publish this. The writing jumps back and forth from one idea to another almost as if she is writing in a stream of consciousness, but it is so jarring it produces a whiplash effect. She will introduce a new subject and then never follow through to discuss the outcome. I'm not even clear as to what the goal was in writing her book. She initially says she wants to find herself and discover contemporary China. Then she wants to become involved with the underground art movement in and around Beijing. Then she decides that she wants to film a documentary. And through all of this, her writing is deplorable. The metaphors and similes she concocts are absurd: "talk zinged around the room like crazed bats", "holding his hands apart the length of a baby crocodile", "an accent that wobbled higgledy-piggledy", "ricocheted around the room like Tweedledee and Tweedledum", "I felt the complicated swirl of the moment", "he listened with hungry eyes". When she was trying to think of ideas for her documentary, she considered a movie on hairdressing salons, calling it, "Salon" or a film on small shops called, "Boutique". This pretty much demonstrates the lack of imagination and creativity exhibited throughout the entire book. Just a true disappointment on every level.

Ran says

Val Wang grew up in Maryland where she struggled with her familial relationships and her Chinese American identity. After graduating college, she migrated to Beijing and worked in journalism for the majority of her twenties. I found it strange that I had unwittingly picked up two biographies this year about Chinese / Chinese American women with interest in Chinese film. (The title of the book is an homage to Zhang Yuan's 1993 film.) She thoroughly detailed her experiences in China as being both Asian and American. It's a well-written thoughtful biography which I remained interested in throughout the work.

The blurb on the back of the book has Val living in only B-cities: Beijing, Baltimore, Brooklyn, and Boston. This just held my interest throughout her journey, with a question of how is she in Boston now. Turns out she actually lives in Cambridge and teaches at Bentley. Hmm, charm dispelled a little.

Louise says

2.5 stars

If I hadn't picked up this book for free at work, I wouldn't have read it, but now that I have, I'm glad I did, but also disappointed that it wasn't better. This could have been a much better book after some better editing. There are flashes of brilliant writing that are unfortunately drowned in lots of loosely-connected anecdotes. The author had a point, but it was hard to tell what it was because she seemed to focus on different things at different parts of the story.

Was this about her family's history with the courtyard-style houses of Old Beijing? Was this about her struggle to find a subject to make a documentary on? Was this about her indecision about where to call 'home'?

I could relate to many of the things Wang went through, which was ultimately what compelled me to complete the book: seeing her family home, navigating relationships in China when you look Chinese but are more American, misunderstandings thanks to cultural barriers, absurd sightings on the streets, parental obligations. Reading this made me nostalgic for Shanghai, but like Wang, I'm nostalgic for a romanticized version of Shanghai and not the modern, real, thing.

Caroline Szumowicz says

Val Wang, A Chinese American, followed her roots and her dreams to distant lands. This book made me feel like I was right with her as she at first rebelled against her upbringing and family tradition then embraced them. I was the American sidekick cheering her cheeky American attitude. I mourned the loss of old traditional homes and neighborhoods. I shared the feelings of anxiety associated first with new experiences then the need to return to America.

Beijing Bastard: Into the Wilds of a Changing China was a book I received as a pre-release publication. I was intrigued by the small blurb written about the book. Once I received it, I couldn't put it down. I wanted to hear more about Bobo and Boma and the rest of the characters that Val Wang met. This was a great book of a young woman exploring her roots in a land with very different traditions, culture and standards than we are use to here in the USA. Thank you Val, for inviting me along on your worldly adventures

Laurel says

In Beijing Bastard Val Wang has attempted to write an account of her search for family and self. I have no doubt her time spent in this ancient city provided much opportunity for both, but this book is uneven at best. What you get is surface, of a city in transition and of Wang herself. Strangely enough, she does better with the city. With herself, she never quite gets beyond the ex-pat, rather shallow and slightly whiny "American girl rebelling against her parents" impression. There was so much fodder for depth in this book, Grandfather Zhang and the Peking Opera, Bomu and Bobo, but not only did the author not take advantage of it, she did not show much empathy. I wish she'd go back and try again.

Brandy says

I received a copy of this book for free via Goodreads giveaways.*

I'm surprised by the bad reviews this book is getting on here. Although it's not the best travel writing/memoir I've ever read, I really did enjoy it. Yes, the writing can be a bit detached or jumpy, but I think that that reflects her life/experiences/Beijing so it worked for me.

What makes me consider this book successful is that China has never been high on my travel list (it's there, just not a priority, ya know?) but this one makes me want to commit to an Asian trip.

Karen says

3.5 Stars

The story is of losing and finding oneself in the dynamic and ever changing flows of rising China. I found the story itself relatable, having lived in China myself, but other than my connection and personal interest in the setting I didn't find much else of the book pulling me in. The writing itself is gritty, which at first seemed part of the allure but ultimately came off as a bit mess and took away from the overall feeling.

Disclaimer: I received this book for free in a Goodreads giveaway; however, this in no way altered my review or opinion.

Kylie Sparks says

This is a fresh, honest memoir by a young woman who doesn't take herself too seriously. She rebels from her strict Chinese American family by going to China, the country her family worked so hard to move away from. She chronicles what Beijing was like in early 2000's. Beijing as a city was also rebelling from its roots, and going through massive changes. I was thrilled to see this book. I'm interested in Beijing because I'm learning Mandarin and hope to travel there. I see that a lot of other reviewers thought it shallow but I did not. This is the view of Beijing by an ex-patriot who loves the city, trying to create a new life for herself in a culture where it is not easy for outsiders to integrate. My language teacher, who is from Beijing, had told me that Beijing is all different now, nothing is the same as it was when she lived there. After reading this book, I understand why that is, and I understand a lot more about Chinese culture.

Chloe says

I came across this book in the gift shop of an MFA exhibit (entitled Megacities: Asia), and I was intrigued by the premise of a Chinese-American returning to the motherland, of sorts, by packing it up to live in China for a few years. As a Taiwanese-American who has nurtured more than a few dreams of having a small apartment in Taipei, I figured this book would speak to me, so I added it to the to-read list. I don't quite know what I expected - I suppose Beijing Bastard does a good enough job of explaining Val's family and some of the difficulties of being only semi-fluent in Mandarin, but it left me cold. I don't often read memoirs, and I

think I was looking for tighter narration, or more insight into the author and her subjects, and I never really got it. I liked seeing how Val's relationship with her family changed over the course of her life in Beijing, but her fleeting friendships, romances, and the oddly rushed happy ending (which even the author points out) left a unclear impression of who the author was or what Beijing was like. I suppose, though, that it's foolish to rely upon a book to show the soul of a city.
