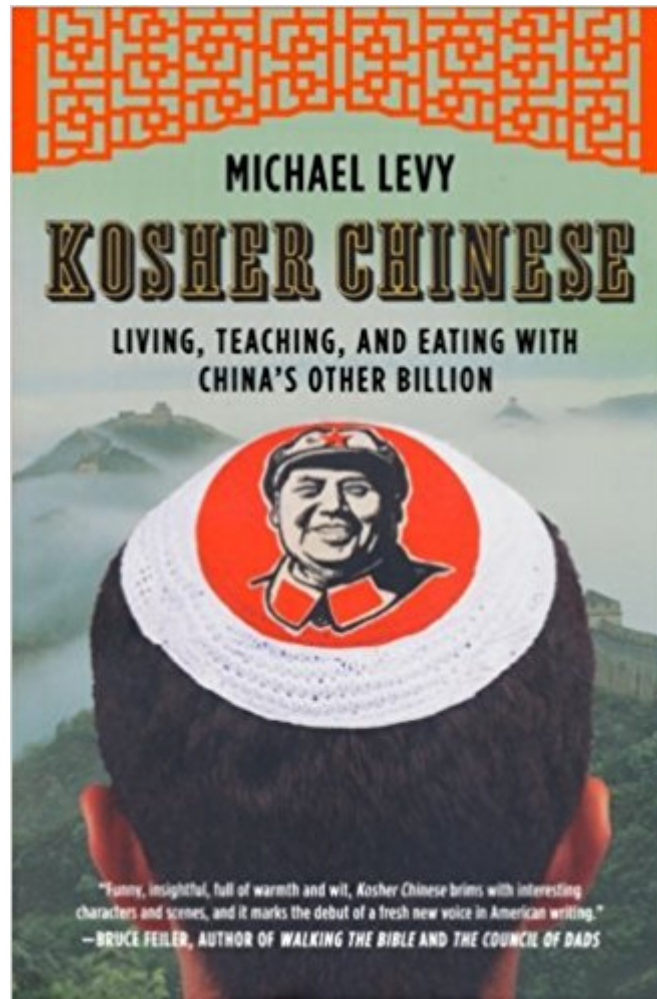


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Kosher Chinese: Living, Teaching, And Eating With China's Other Billion



Synopsis

An irreverent tale of an American Jew serving in the Peace Corps in rural China, which reveals the absurdities, joys, and pathos of a traditional society in flux. In September of 2005, the Peace Corps sent Michael Levy to teach English in the heart of China's heartland. His hosts in the city of Guiyang found additional uses for him: resident expert on Judaism, romantic adviser, and provincial basketball star, to name a few. His account of overcoming vast cultural differences to befriend his students and fellow teachers is by turns poignant and laugh-out-loud funny. While reveling in the peculiarities of life in China's interior, the author also discovered that the "other billion" (people living far from the coastal cities covered by the American media) have a complex relationship with both their own traditions and the rapid changes of modernization. Lagging behind in China's economic boom, they experience the darker side of "capitalism with Chinese characteristics," daily facing the schizophrenia of conflicting ideologies. *Kosher Chinese* is an illuminating account of the lives of the residents of Guiyang, particularly the young people who will soon control the fate of the world.

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Customer Reviews

This is a memoir of an American who travelled to Asia to teach English. I've done two tours of this duty myself and am always happy to have the chance to compare notes with another veteran. (I haven't lived in Seoul in years; it's mostly laziness that keeps me from updating my hometown on here, but a small part of my heart is still there, and it beat quite strongly as I read this book.) The gold standard for such a book is *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (P.S.) by Peter Hessler, who has contributed a blurb endorsing this book to the promotional material. (Hessler journeyed into

the interior of China with the Peace Corps in the mid-90s; Levy did so a decade later, and while the two volunteers did not serve in the same region a side-by-side comparison of the authors' experiences is a useful way to track China's rural development in the intervening years.) It's a tearfully poignant tale of cross-cultural friendship and a chronicling of an ancient society in transition. As for this book, the rather flip title and especially the kitschy cover illustration had me worried that this would read more like a cheap parody. But one shouldn't judge a book by its cover; it wasn't long before I realized that *Kosher Chinese* is, both intellectually and emotionally, every bit the equal of *River Town*. And that's high praise indeed. The book strikes a slightly goofy tone, especially in the opening chapters, but that's only because the author is faithfully recounting his first impressions of a new culture; and when one is making the acquaintance of a society quite different from one's own, there are many times when one must simply bow to the absurd. As it goes on, Levy becomes increasingly used to the rural Chinese lifestyle, and his descriptions of it take more and more uniquely local habits for granted, but he never fully acclimates to some of them. A recurring theme is the struggle to balance himself between respect for another culture which is in no way inferior to his own and the desire to share the experiences and perspectives of his American life. He recounts many failures to strike the right balance and often thinks back on a cynical Australian he met at a party who told him "They know what they want from you, and they'll take it and use it and leave the rest, no matter how hard you try to stop them." He often thinks back on Greg the Australian, as part of a larger theme of reflecting on how, in the name of "X with Chinese Characteristics," the Chinese assimilate elements of other cultures and mix and match them in ways that are hardly recognizable to someone familiar with the original article: sometimes amusingly, sometimes impressively, sometimes horrifically. He encounters facets of Chinese society which are extremely jarring to him; sometimes (like abandoning kosher laws) he breaks his own cultural taboos and finds himself better for it, while other times (like witnessing an appalling case of animal abuse) he gives in to feelings of outrage which are likely just to make a bad situation worse. No matter how upsetting an incident may be, he never invokes some objective standard of morality but scrupulously avoids making cultural judgments. Humor is present throughout the book--irreverent where Hessler would have been ironic--but it's far too intelligent to turn the book into the parody I had initially feared it would be. It's often used to dilute upsetting passages, but in ways that complement rather than compromise the pathos of the incident being described. One very memorable example involves Levy recounting how, despite the skill his Jewish mother and grandmother brought to the task of instilling in him a sense of guilt, not even they had prepared him for "Guilt with Chinese Characteristics"--which is what he felt when he realized there was nothing he

could do to help a once-happy young girl who had been forced to drop out of school and collect recyclables on city streets: a victim of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. All of these things are weaved together perfectly to produce a seamless narrative, but the strongest element is friendship. The book is filled with people who are separated from Levy by barriers of cultural misunderstanding, but who are nonetheless able to recognize mutual goodwill and establish unique, unusual, but definitely genuine and meaningful relationships. The book is beautiful and heartwarming. It's a must read for anyone interested in cultural exchanges between the US and China; but beyond that, it rests on universal truths of diversity and commonality of human experience which anyone, anyone at all, can appreciate.

Much in the tradition of "Iron and Silk", Michael Levy has written a very good first hand account of teaching English in China. Through his stories and the people he meets, the reader gets a good sense of what modern China is like. I liked the fact that the book focused on a part of China that is not the eastern 1/3 that we always hear about. Shanghai and Beijing are very different from the rest of China. The book is funny too. For me, having travelled to China, I liked that the author talked about how there are no such things as a line in China, it is very Darwinian to wait on line in China. I also liked that he too noticed that the Chinese love John Denver and Take Me Home Country Roads. There are plenty of books out there where an American goes to China and is a fish out of water. Some are really good: Salzman Iron and Silk or China Road or River Town. And some are not. If you like this genre of travel narrative, you will like this book. The only problem that I have with books like this is the timing. The author was in China in 2005 and 2005 China is very different than 2011 China. For that, I recommend reading The Last Days of Old Beijing or China Road, two first person fish out of water narratives of China that are more up to date. Regardless, this was a great book to read.

It's a tightrope, really, to write compassionately but not condescendingly about people in a culture radically different than one's own. And this writer pulls it off in grand style, writing with self-awareness and in a way that expresses respectful interest in even the characters at the edge of the story, such as President Bill. He conveys his curiosity, and yet he avoids voyeurism: not an easy feat. All this said, it is a funny and poignant story. Here is a teacher who wants to give his best in a system where his methods and aims are, to put it mildly, out of step with the prevailing idea of pedagogy. And here is a human being intent on establishing genuine relationships while holding on to his own values, if not the precise rules, of his own culture. For such a gentle story, there is a

surprising amount of tension. In the end, the author is able to draw together disparate threads such as basketball, post-modern literature, and rural poverty. It is a strangely cohesive story, a crazy quilt held together by the author's frame of reference and point of view. I enjoyed it and, at a time when China's prominence is poised to eclipse the USA's, I learned from it.

I have taught two semesters of university sophomore English in Shandong Province. My experiences paralleled the author's. It was refreshing (not to mention validating) to have someone else's take on life as an American teacher in China. Levy's book is gently written with self-deprecating good humor. The affection that grew for his Chinese students and friends over the two years that he taught is sensitively portrayed. Anyone would enjoy and benefit from reading this account of Peace Corp work in a provincial Chinese city. It makes sense of Chinese thoughts and customs that otherwise are baffling to the average Westerner.

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