

Evans, Harriet. 2020. *Beijing from below: Stories of marginal lives in the capital's center*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 288 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9781478008156.

Book review by

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In 2019, after years of uncertainty, word came of the imminent destruction of Beijing's last remaining historic core areas. This entailed the relocation of a hundred thousand people in exchange for modern flats and monetary compensation. Among these areas was Dashalar, an old neighborhood of narrow alleys, lanes and small dwellings arranged around courtyards.

We can only grasp numbers like that as statistical summaries. The people are lost to archives, to history, and to memory. Evans's task was to offer a few of those numberless individuals a voice, to make a place in history for them. She did this by telling the stories of six people she recorded from 2004 to capture something of the intensity, pace, and reach of the changes then engulfing Beijing from 1949 through the Mao years, the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, and Neoliberalism with a Chinese accent.

The stories have some things in common: people adapted to changing circumstances as best they could, renting a few square meters of dwelling space, cooking in the lanes, sharing public baths and toilets, and trying to earn enough money one way or another to pay for the space, food, fuel, and healthcare. For many, that meant some form of informal economic activity. Early on, one woman had the job of hand processing clothes salvaged from the battle-dead to remove shrapnel and blood before mending them to be used again. Others scavenged. The opportunities changed with each policy change, though the people Evans spoke with did not mark time in terms of the usually acknowledged historic periods. None of them made a significant difference in their lives.

This is the story of the de-gentrification of a neighborhood that had been occupied by officials and scholars during the last years before the Revolution. Places were divided and divided again as waves of immigrants came looking for space. It is the story of some of those immigrants and how they lived on the streets until they were apprehended and repatriated to their places of origin, only to return once more to Beijing.

Another refrain of these stories is the ineffectiveness of well-intended policies in the face of local official sabotage, whether this be ignoring police beatings or accepting bribes for services. From the point of view of the people of the underclass with whom Evans spoke, it made little difference who was at the top; the local police and bureaucracy endured in their control of the neighborhood. Life went on. Until it didn't. Without access to health insurance or steady income, health problems often went untreated for a lack of resources.

One family left their provincial apple farm because they could no longer tolerate the gang violence that plagued them in the face of official indifference. They joined the exodus to Beijing and lived a precarious street-and-slum existence for years. The stories "share memories of hardship, family fragmentation, struggles and strategies for family survival, sadness, anger and loss, cooperation, loyalty, violence, sickness and death, and occasional pleasure." (p. 3)

Some of the saddest stories were those of the people who might have expected privileged lives before the Revolution. But neither the Revolutionary nor any of the subsequent administrations made much impact on male privilege, and patriarchy remains a legacy of loyalties to family and filial duty. One of the less sad stories is that of the successes of a person who had health insurance, savings, and a pretty secure life thanks to having been an industrial worker.

The context for all of the stories was life in the neighborhood with its shouting matches between neighbors and local patrol officers, stinking public toilets, unlicensed pedicab drivers, police beatings, and fights. None of this is represented in the archival sources of any level, from the local to the national that Evans consulted.

If one of the tasks of anthropology is to offer a voice to the voiceless and invisible of the world, then Evans has done a good job of taking readers into this neighborhood before it was razed in the face of the encroaching markets of neoliberalism.