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Richard Atimniraye Nyelade

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Book Review

Evans, Harriet. *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Centre*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, 288 pages.

Richard Atimniraye Nyelade
University of Ottawa

Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center provides a unique look into the fragile livelihoods of what the author Harriet Evans refers to as the "subalterns of history" via profiles of inhabitants of the Dashalar area in Beijing's central district. Using subaltern historical accounts, the author seeks to challenge the dominant narrative of the Chinese communist party's success story. Her findings contradict the widely held belief that urban poverty was practically non-existent during the Maoist era because the government provided some form of assistance to every citizen, resulting in a society where everyone was treated fairly and equally. As per this storyline, urban poverty is a product of economic liberalization, which has resulted in an increased social and economic difference in metropolitan areas. Contrary to this perspective, historical accounts of minority personal experiences like those Evans has documented in her book show this prevailing worldview to be exaggerated. Discrimination against Dashalar people in Beijing demonstrates how the borders of regional and native place identification, as well as their intersection with class, are inextricably linked to deeply established structures and attitudes of inequality and contempt among China's Han population. Evans argues that inhabitants' claims of local identity do not reflect a sentimental attachment to the past, but rather a rejection of exclusion and a yearning for acknowledgement. Evans challenges official narratives of China's socio-economic development by raising critical issues about the subaltern's role in history by focusing on the experiences of the Dashalar's elderly residents.

Evans' research methodology, based on an empirical study undertaken between 2007 and 2014, incorporates document analysis, fieldwork, and historical accounts to create a cohesive whole. A total of seven chapters are

included in the book, plus an introduction, a conclusion, and an epilogue. The first chapter introduces the district of Dashalar to the reader. The remaining chapters are each constructed around the life history of an individual, with an "interlude" for her interpretation of it. The personal narratives of people and their families, whom Evans visited on several occasions for years, are presented in the following parts. The conclusion provides local and global findings of the interlocutors and what their experiences add to broader interpretations of Chinese history and oppressed minorities. Evans demonstrates the inextricable link between location, geography, and chronology that gives meaning to the existence of the Dashalar people. She demonstrates that history is not frozen in a snapshot inside the photographic frame, nor is it frozen via the representation of location. The combination of a profile, a character, a location, an item, and an activity in a photograph evokes a sense of the past in the present. Simultaneously, the temporal quality of pictures is influenced by reminders of another temporal reality, as portrayed in shots of scaffolding supporting future developments, now the neighbourhood's new present.

With Old Mrs. Gao, Evans' first interviewee and the one with the most life experience, Evans meticulously knits together a cohesive narrative of her life and death, which occurred soon after she was forced to leave her Dashalar house. It is a fascinating narrative that shows how, via her children, Old Mrs. Gao built her agency and reputation as a moral person and the family matriarch while raising her offspring. Her story is intimately intertwined with the lives of her son and his wife and with neighbourhood issues and the significance of her now destroyed house to her sense of self-worth and self-acceptance. Old Mrs. Gao is the most evident example of subalternity. Her upbringing in poverty and her child marriage during the Republican period precluded her from even envisioning going to school. Nothing improved with the advent of the People's Republic. Her lack of formal qualifications and education cemented her place on the periphery of the new prideful working and middle classes.

The testimony offered by Li Fuying and his wife, Zhang Yuanchen (Chapter 5), who are migrant labourers from Shaanxi province, is perhaps the most shocking. They have experienced great deprivation, abuse, humiliation, acute precarity, neglect, and violence throughout their lives. They only stayed in Dashalar for a short period before relocating to various areas in and around Beijing, interspersed by cruel repatriations back to Xi'an. Because of their position as "outsiders" (*waidiren*), they were also socially isolated from other inhabitants

in Dashalar and across Beijing. Humiliation and attacks were heaped upon Li and Zhang because they refused to give up on their conviction that working in Beijing would provide their children with a better life, especially their son. They were forced to live in great poverty in a slum on the outskirts of Beijing, which the Chinese government has since razed.

Zhao Yong (Chapter 7) exemplified what is known as *yemen* in Beijing and other parts of northern China. A kind of stereotypically masculine person characterized by attributes such as strength, loyalty, knowledge, domination, and audacity, all of which relate to being a "true man." The Cultural Revolution was a singular event in a long history of hardship and scarcity for participants like Zhao Yong, who lucidly remembers his father being battered by Red Guards. However, he made no statement regarding the status as a victim that usually springs up in eyewitness testimonies of the late Mao era. He seemed to have no personal stake in telling the story of the Cultural Revolution's horrors. According to him, the Revolution was hardly a "state of exception," as Agamben phrased it, nor a glitch in what otherwise would be a smooth transition from Republican capitalism to post-Mao economic liberalization. Rather, it was a single traumatic episode amid a larger painful history of deprivation, neglect, and prejudice that spanned his whole existence. Evans argues that the tales that have shaped our understanding of the Cultural Revolution are mostly shaped by their writers' socioeconomic origins.

Evans' book sheds new light on the concept of the "internal boundaries of the state." The individuals about whom she writes were deemed unsuitable persons for the cultural revolution's propaganda. The historical record confirms this, as do the accounts of her subjects. In the book, she demonstrates how the Dashalar people she encountered were so removed from the state's direct rhetorical and institutional logic. As a result, Evans claims, the rich and instructive oral histories offered by her interlocutors, force "a vision of history that is many" because they "compel a view of history that is multiple" (13).

Evans portrays a community and a way of life that have all but vanished into the area's rebuilt bright commercialism via a series of compelling and wholly unique ethnographic oral histories of the subaltern inhabitants of a now-destroyed Beijing neighbourhood. Evans' interlocutors are the kind of individuals that vanish from history. They are never prominent performers on any stage and hardly appear on the theatre of Beijing's transitions. Her ability to depict these forgotten urban dwellers is astounding. The book is a remarkable

contribution to a growing set of ethnographic research that prioritizes the bottom-up approach to the urban experience below the shiny and glittering Beijing skyscrapers. This book will be essential to anybody interested in Chinese urbanism, recollection studies, historiography, culture and heritage, racial politics, and the agency of the urban poor.

Reference

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