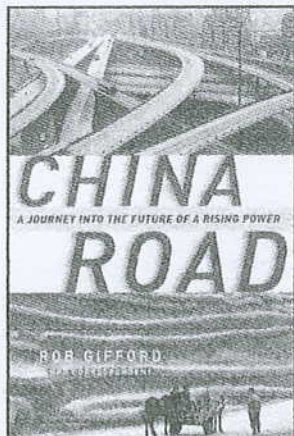


CHINA ROAD
A JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE
OF A RISING POWER
Rob Gifford
Random House (\$26.95)



by Bob Hussey

Will China become the preeminent superpower of the 21st century? That's the question posed by Rob Gifford in *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power*. The former Beijing Correspondent for National Public Radio, Gifford hoped to find the answer traveling China's Route 312, which winds 3,000 miles from Shanghai to the border with Kazakhstan.

Along the way, his encounters with ordinary Chinese range from comical to tragic to bizarre. He has dinner with a Shanghai radio show host who dispenses advice on love and relation-

ships. He meets an Amway salesman whose dream is to make enough money to travel abroad. He encounters a doctor charged with enforcing the government's one-child per family policy, using forced abortions if necessary. When the pastor of a small protestant church fails to arrive for Sunday service, Gifford is recruited to deliver the sermon.

Though the book provides a rich and colorful snapshot of modern China, those seeking an in-depth analysis of the various internal challenges currently facing the country will be disappointed. Urban pollution, the Taiwanese question, unsafe working conditions, and human rights abuses are only briefly addressed. Gifford simply never dwells long enough in one city or province to

probe these issues deeply.

The one challenge that does emerge in some detail is the tension between the ruling Han Chinese and the various ethnic groups that populate the in-land provinces, most notably the Tibetans and the Uighur Muslims. Besides retaining a strong military presence in these provinces and investing billions in economic development, Beijing uses more subtle methods to build loyalty among these ethnic groups, as we see when Gifford meets a young Uighur girl who is given the opportunity to study

at a prestigious school in Eastern China. Despite the separation from her family, and the eventual dilution of her Uighur heritage, it is an opportunity she cannot pass up.

Gifford concludes at the end of his journey that there are too many complexities and contradictions to predict China's future accurately. He believes the answer will ultimately hinge on the amount of democratic reforms the Communist regime adopts over the next decade. The more free and open Chinese society becomes, the greater the odds for long-term prosperity and stability.

As might be expected of a radio correspondent, Gifford's prose style is visual and compact. But there were moments in *China Road* when I found myself wanting more of his anecdotal charm. Gifford's visit to a hermit monk at Hua Shan, for example, and their ensuing conversation about Daoism and the meaning of life, are much too short. Still, this is a minor flaw in an otherwise tightly rendered story. If the worst one can say about *China Road* is that it sparks a greater interest to learn more about China, then Gifford has contributed something substantial, even if he cannot predict what the future holds. ♦