

Michelle Dammon Loyalka, *Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Front Lines of China's Great Urban Migration*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles London, 2012, pp. 264

Dominique Tyl

The stories told in this book, not fiction but real accounts of ordinary life, are beautifully narrated, and are very informative of the mentalities among Chinese urban migrants. They make very pleasant reading, and the author must be congratulated for her tact and perseverance in following the persons she wanted to interview in order to understand their way of life, their motivation, or simply their resilience when facing "bitterness" in harsh circumstances. Indeed these migrants encounter many difficulties, as they candidly express to the author. But the title *Eating Bitterness*, if a faithful translation of the Chinese "*chiku*", would give the wrong impression if it were understood only as "great suffering". On the contrary, along the pages of the book, one gets the feeling of a pervading kind of optimism. That again is not to deny that life is not always easy, that difficult choices have to be made, that not everything is according to some deep desires...But challenges are accepted with a high dose of hope for a better future, or at least with a sort of refusal to complain which would drive a negative bitterness, even despair.

The pages of the "Research Notes" at the end of the book (pp. 247-251) explain why and how the author conceived her work. As she writes, it has been a combination of planning, luck and fate. She recalls how she came to know all the people with whom she spent so much time to become acquainted with them on a personal level. Who are they? A "Big boss", but not of the kind of socially very high entrepreneur; more like someone who, after a stormy youth, and with an acute sense of commercial opportunities, succeeds in getting rich. Another man, rather of the type "Take-it easy", was working at that time in a recycling centre. A woman selling all sorts of sheets invited the author to go with her to her village of origin. A nanny in a socially up-scale family is depicted as affectively being torn between the kid she has to take care of and her own daughters. Some rather young girls have a demanding job in a beauty parlour and a knife-sharpener, among others are introduced along the eight main chapters of the book.

Now the social as well as geographical map of Xi'an, where the author conducted the interviews, is also changing fast. The old quarter where she found her "informants", or more truly persons more or less interested in being interviewed, will probably disappear to allow room for an expanding high-tech zone. It may result in a new configuration of social fabric. The years spent in "eating bitterness" with solid hope may evolve, for many, into a new situation where great expectations will fade out, and more failures will lead to fatalism for some. But this is not the bulk of the book. It is true also that the interviewees cannot be said to represent all the migrants. Tragedies or insurmountable challenges may already be the reality of many. Nevertheless, the book gives another image of the migrant life, different somehow from what is described in Son Ye's *China Candid*, or even Leslie T. Chang's *Factory girls*, and other books of the kind cited in the research notes.

It is also worth noting the resolute decision of the author to keep herself out of the book (p. 249). It gives more force to what she reports of her conversations with migrants. For example, at the end of Ch. 1 ("The Veggies Vendors"), the man acknowledges that their situation now is far better, although very demanding, than what it was when they could not even satisfy their hunger in the village where he spent his youth. The picture of the young girls working in a beauty parlour (p.83) shows them wearing fashionable clothes and

sunglasses in their village, which they surely would be reluctant to return for the rest of their life. One of them just says: "So you have to rely on your own abilities to survive" (p.95). Another one declares: "We definitively wouldn't want to be farmers again" (p.126). A lot of pearls like these make the book very vivid with real stories, and you, the reader, seem to accompany the author in her encounters with the migrants.

Of course, not everything is said concerning the Chinese urban migrants, and sociological surveys remain necessary to have an overall picture, with careful statistics, and a view of changing mentalities among generations of these people. That is not the purpose of the author, although remarks here and there show that she has gathered good information on the topic. More important is the living portraits she paints. And this is an invaluable addition to make acquaintance with Chinese people today. For sure many readers will be attracted by these pages which are each equivalent to a wonderful short story if they are available to a large public. They are about China urban migrants, but may well, in their singularity, have a more universal meaning.