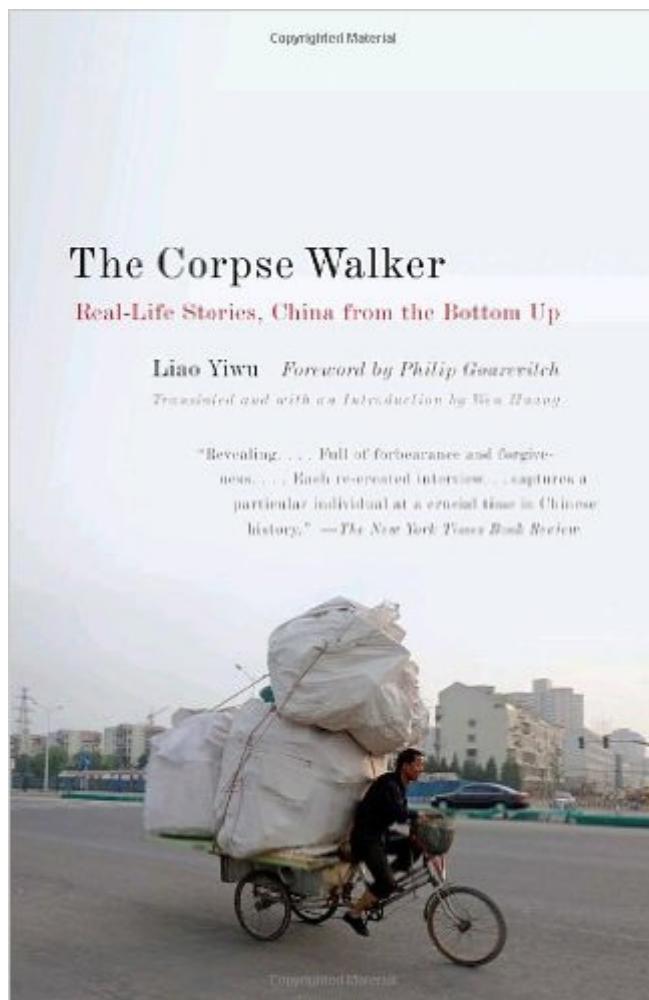


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# The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China From The Bottom Up



## Synopsis

The Corpse Walker introduces us to regular men and women at the bottom of Chinese society, most of whom have been battered by life but have managed to retain their dignity: a professional mourner, a human trafficker, a public toilet manager, a leper, a grave robber, and a Falung Gong practitioner, among others. By asking challenging questions with respect and empathy, Liao Yiwu managed to get his subjects to talk openly and sometimes hilariously about their lives, desires, and vulnerabilities, creating a book that is an instance par excellence of what was once upon a time called "The New Journalism." • The Corpse Walker reveals a fascinating aspect of modern China, describing the lives of normal Chinese citizens in ways that constantly provoke and surprise.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This collection of short stories is easy to read and never boring. It gives the reader a picture of life in China that is very different from the propaganda we get from the governments in China and in the United States. If anyone wants to know about a culture or a country, observing the bottom of society is much more enlightening and accurate than looking at the society from the top. I suspect that most of us, in China and the rest of the world, are much closer to the bottom of our societies than we are to the leaders of those societies. I thank the author for braving the wrath of his government to show us a glimpse of real life in the real China. It makes me think that the more different we appear to be, the more we are all the same.

As Studs Terkel did for American workers in "Working" and other books of oral history, so Liao does for the Chinese in this wide-ranging collection of interviews. From landowners to restroom attendants, from former Red Guards to Tiananmen parents, from professional mourners, feng shui practitioners, and fortune tellers to safecrackers and human traffickers, Liao encourages the ordinary people of China to tell their extraordinary stories. A dissident poet and journalist who has himself been imprisoned, Liao has talked to everyone. Twin themes of incredible cruelty and quiet endurance run through the interviews. Some of the exchanges are hilarious, many of the accounts are deeply disturbing and tragic, and all of them portray the rapid changes China has undergone since the 1949 communist victory. A Red Guard tells of torturing a school principal who had dedicated his life to the revolutionary cause, only to be accused at the start of the Cultural Revolution of forcing Western science on his students. The principal committed suicide. When asked if he ever felt he had gone too far the former Guard says: "I was born into a family of blue-collar workers. The Cultural Revolution offered me the opportunity to finally trample on these elite. It was glorious. I couldn't get enough of it." The human trafficker, Qian, interviewed in prison, describes how China's shortage of girls led to his success in the kidnapping and forced marriage business. He discovered the money to be made by selling his own daughters. "What do they know about happiness?" Qian responds when Liao expresses distaste. "My daughters are the children of a poor peasant." Liao does not bother with Western journalism's objectivity. After Qian brags about his lying skills, Liao concludes the interview: "If I were the judge, I would first cut off your tongue as punishment. It deserves to be cut off." No one has escaped China's political upheaval. The title interview, "The Corpse Walker," describes an old custom in which, back in unpaved China, people who died far from home would be taken on foot back to their families. But what starts out as a rather colorful, curious tale of an outmoded profession turns tragic as mob bloodlust and class hatred intervene. The Cultural Revolution transformed a generation. Education was devalued, lives were blighted, torture and execution were common. The stories are heart-rending, but most of the tellers are more philosophical and fatalistic than bitter. There is overall agreement that life in China is better these days, though many find the preoccupation with money ironic and a few lament the passing of their professions. The professional mourner describes how funeral rituals have changed, incorporating pop songs and limos. "People are not what they used to be. They don't even pretend to be sorrowful." These very particular, individual stories breathe life into swathes of history. A Buddhist abbot describes an old woman's generosity during the widespread starvation of the 1960-61 famine, an old man tells of forsaking his bright revolutionary future for the love of a politically incompatible woman during the Cultural Revolution, a peasant matter-of-factly

demonstrates the still destructive power of superstition (and the gulf between city and country) in "The Leper." Liao's sympathetic and insightful interviews paint a complex, often breathtaking portrait of a convulsive period in a vast land.

I picked up this book after reading a review in the Financial Times. And I couldn't put it down. There is so much being written about China but nothing out there presents such a fascinating glimpse into the lives of ordinary people who are out of view in all the talk about the economic power.

I read this book after seeing a positive review in the Chicago Tribune and it did not disappoint. Each story of everyday Chinese citizens and their struggles was very memorable, touching and thought-provoking. As an American, I also found it very enlightening, and thought the stories were so important that I recommended the book to family and friends. The Corpse Walker is the kind of book you will think about long after you've finished reading it!

This is a fascinating and engrossing book that provides 27 glimpses into lives that have not fared so well in China. The author, Liao Yiwu, is a poet who has drawn upon his own life to conduct interviews with people from the bottom of society. This extremely well-done English translation draws upon 27 interviews from the 60 in the original Chinese book. The people range from the occupation from which the book draws the title - an ancient method of transporting dead bodies for burial - to a 103 year-old Buddhist abbot to a rest room manager to a blind street erhu player. Liao is by no means an objective interviewer; he does not let the Human Trafficker (already in jail) off easily. Each chapter is titled by the role or occupation of the interviewee. These are people who have suffered under the various deprivations of revolutionary communism, the cultural revolution, or the newest era of capitalist communism. Liao brings a harsh light to many of the sufferings of the past. However, despite the accumulated human misery, this is not a depressing book. Many of the people interviewed, as the original Chinese title describes "Interviews with People from the Bottom Rung of Society", are not the wildly successful, they often have come to accept their lot in life, and they have a quiet dignity that perfuses their words. I would highly recommend this to anyone who wants to see a very different view of life in China.

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