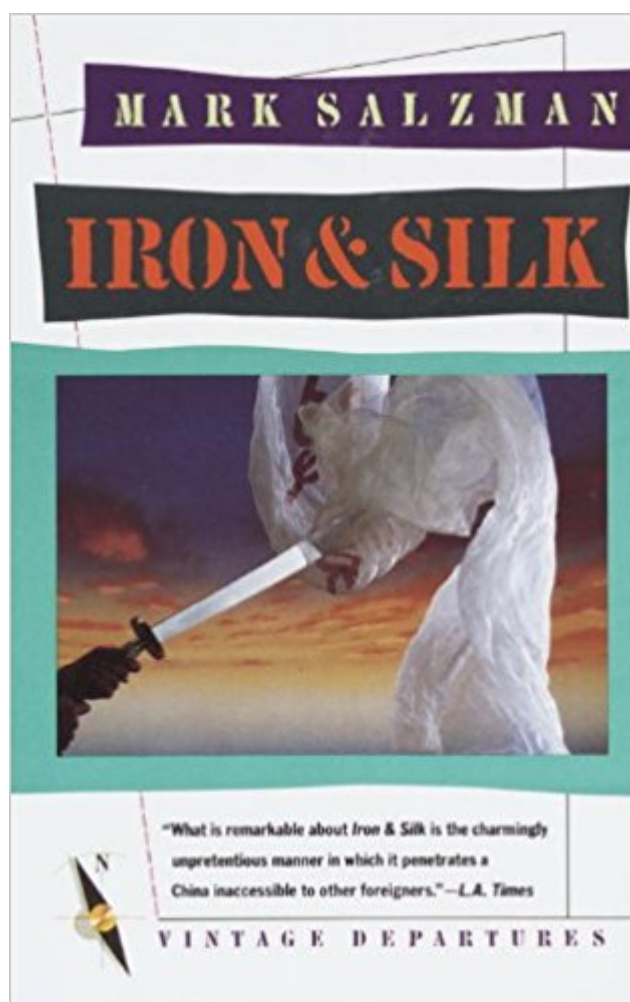


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Iron And Silk



Synopsis

Salzman captures post-cultural revolution China through his adventures as a young American English teacher in China and his shifu-tudi (master-student) relationship with China's foremost martial arts teacher.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 30 short anecdotes, Mark Salzman gives a compassionate and humorous account of teaching English and studying martial arts in Changsha, a provincial capital in central China shortly after the opening of the country in the early 1980s. Changsha has the reputation that "there is nothing to do, nothing to buy, the people have no manners, the food is terrible and their dialect sounds awful" - so the book might have become very different from what it is: insightful, very funny, and full of respect for the often strange customs of traditional Chinese culture. In the best manner of innocents abroad, Mark Salzman knows how to make fun of his blunders in a very charming way. He conveys his sense of wonder beautifully, and does not pass judgment on anything he witnesses. Unlike many other authors who write about China, he is able to appreciate traditional Chinese forms of expression and self-mastery like martial arts (wushu) and calligraphy on their own terms. In his anecdotes he catches the essence of these arts: dedication, commitment, respect. "No matter what the quality of brush or paper," explains his calligraphy teacher, "one should always treat them as if they were priceless." What Mark Salzman wrote about China some 15 years ago is not dated in many ways. Strange ideas are still being trumpeted as truths, and bureaucrats still like to harass

foreigners (although humiliating unwitting foreigners is not "something of a popular sport in China" anymore; today it may even happen that a young female police officer at a police station first lectures you for half an hour on a minor transgression, but asks you out for a date right after she is finished). Mark Salzman has a wonderful, gentle humor, and an admirable open-mindedness.

Mark Salzman managed to convey the essence of the Chinese political system and the manner that the basic culture and manners have survived its attempts to remake it. Salzman is able to do this by first exposing his own personal traits, his obsessive need to "keep moving" in order to avoid worries and other aspects of solitude and an unoccupied mind. His quests to learn martial arts, calligraphy and Chinese art and customs were also opportunities to discover the 'hidden' China, the secrets that the people must whisper to avoid waking the dragon of a system and censorship. He met an embittered sculptor whose most valued possession was an old postcard of Michaelangelo's David. He ate in Chinese households, his bowl constantly full, while the children and uncles waited their turn; the leftovers to be distributed when he had finished. Hospitality, respect, the obligation of children to their parents have remained essentially intact, despite the often absurd connivances of the revolutionary government. For high school students, Salzman manages to distill the history of the cultural revolution, the fallacies that are emitted from a highly controlled media and that are part of a repressive and unsympathetic government that led, ironically, to Tiananmen Square, the day after, the author flew home. While the government forbade Salzman any more practice time in the specialized martial arts, the people continued to train and honor him. We find repeatedly that these people retain a deep and profound interest in foreigners and especially Americans. That the Chinese looked down upon dark skinned people was easily established when a Sudanese told his tale of a black man living in that enormous country.

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