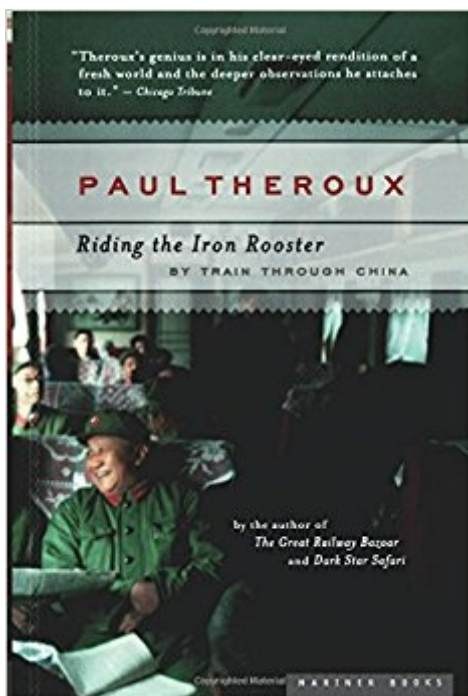


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# Riding The Iron Rooster: By Train Through China



## Synopsis

Paul Theroux, the author of the train travel classics *The Great Railway Bazaar* and *The Old Patagonian Express*, takes to the rails once again in this account of his epic journey through China. He hops aboard as part of a tour group in London and sets out for China's border. He then spends a year traversing the country, where he pieces together a fascinating snapshot of a unique moment in history. From the barren deserts of Xinjiang to the ice forests of Manchuria, from the dense metropolises of Shanghai, Beijing, and Canton to the dry hills of Tibet, Theroux offers an unforgettable portrait of a magnificent land and an extraordinary people.

## Book Information

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1 edition (December 8, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618658971

ISBN-13: 978-0618658978

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.2 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 110 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #297,845 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #53 in [Books > Travel > Food, Lodging & Transportation > Railroad Travel](#) #151 in [Books > Travel > Asia > China > General](#) #261 in [Books > Travel > Asia > General](#)

## Customer Reviews

"[Theroux's] books have enriched the travel literature of this century...China, with its guard down, its buttons undone, and its fingers greasy, looks even more magical with a little of its mystery revealed." USA Today "[A] very funny, beautifully written, wonderfully observant, and deeply insightful description of the vagaries of life and politics in China." -- Conde Nast

Traveler "Fascinating...the portrait that emerges is a luminous, almost uncanny, and situationally accurate one. Theroux is particularly good at catching the surreal quality of China." The Miami Herald "Theroux's genius is in his clear-eyed rendition of a fresh world and the deeper observations he attaches to it." The Chicago Tribune

PAUL THEROUX is the author of many highly acclaimed books. His novels include *The Lower River* and *The Mosquito Coast*, and his renowned travel books include *Ghost Train to the Eastern*

Star and Dark Star Safari. He lives in Hawaii and Cape Cod.

Paul Theroux is a master writer and this observation is a very entertaining read. His journey begins in Europe as he takes the transAsiatic train to an area where he can turn south and pass through Mongolia and eventually into China where the true subject of the book begins; suffice to say the reader is in for a major treat. Theroux passes through the most significant regions of China; his descriptions, particularly of his fellow passengers will delight some and almost anger others. As any readers to Theroux's books know he does not query his verbiage when describing the people in whose country he is passing through. He is at his best when describing the passengers with whom he must share his cabin or his dining room car. The reader cannot but realise that Theroux is confronted frequently by references to the Cultural Revolution and Mao's death throughout the journey in China; both of these tumultuous events had occurred in recent Chinese history. He makes no apologies for his distaste of both; they form a stage curtain for his entire journey. Consequently I found his descriptions of his final destination, Tibet, to be sweet, dare I say when dealing with Theroux's written language virtually beautiful to the extent you might need to return to the passages for a re-read. This Theroux book is worth putting aside, leaving for some years and then returning; it is that good.

Theroux is a master travel writer and the feeling of traveling with him is strong. China and its railways have changed a lot since the 1980s. Perhaps what's most interesting about the book is comparing the past with the present and seeing how China has progressed since the cultural revolution. A good read though I think the reader should have some previous knowledge of China.

Theroux shares with us many of the experiences he had as he traveled all through the different parts and different trains of China and also gives colorful, often laugh-out-loud commentary to accompany these experiences. Of course he retells his experiences with normal people he meets along the way, but he has a knack for landing interviews with some interesting high-society socialites and politicians and sharing these as well. These interviews - if recounted correctly - give a very interesting view of the state of China right before it really begins its dramatic rise to power in the 1990s. Especially of interest was Theroux's seeming obsession with the Cultural Revolution and gathering people's accounts and feelings about it. Some of these accounts are very fascinating. However, as the title indicates, these oases of fascinating accounts are often littered with somewhat dull accounts that made the book feel too long (in fact at nearly 500 pages for the

paperback version, I might argue it WAS too long). Some parts dragged and at that point I would check what percentage I was finished (read it on Kindle) and couldn't believe how long it took to progress even 1%. I found myself doing a skimming/skipping combo at these parts. Particularly from about halfway through the book until the concluding Tibet part it seemed to take a long time. On that, the concluding part on getting to Tibet and Tibet itself was one of the more interesting parts, and probably saved this from being a two-star review. Also, maps should have been added to the book. It became very confusing to understand where he was journeying which may have defused the ability to imagine yourself riding and experiencing 1980s China with him. Perhaps there is a map in the paper copy, but in the Kindle version, no such map is readily accessible. This could be one of the reasons that it seemed to drag at parts; you start to get the "why should I care?" feeling about the writing. People particularly interested in China - particularly a close-up, qualitative, at times very humorous look at Chinese society during the transition period of agricultural collective to the economic powerhouse - will perhaps enjoy this more relaxed account of a foreigner traveling in China as it is. But there are other books you should probably read first if you want something a little more serious (for example "My First Trip to China: Scholars, Diplomats and Journalists Reflect on their First Encounters with China"). For people with just a mere passing interest in China, it is too bad there is not an edited-down 200-300 page version. That would be more enjoyable. In its current state, I would say skip it or be prepared to skip parts.

This is a wonderful book that takes one on a rail adventure in a China that seems so far in the past compared with today's boisterous prosperity. Theroux has a keen eye for so much that is interesting in a rapidly transforming China. And his sometimes fellow travelers and guides are described and occasionally skewered with deft prose. Even if you never go to China, you will immensely enjoy this narrative.

I promise you will live this journey! It is incredible how Theroux describes the people, the places. A rail journey through China was nothing short of heroic back then, and I am sure would be nothing short of heroic now. I met the people, sat on the train, ate the strange foods, could taste the strange foods, slept on floors, in what is kindly described as inns. The rail stations, the villages, the towns. And the weather. I cannot imagine freezing like that, or sweating like that. Or can I??? All I know is that I want to make that journey. I was near there not too many years ago, shortly after I read the book for the first time. I was on a boat on the Amur River in the Russian Far East, and looked down toward China and thought of Theroux and his journey. Riding the Iron Rooster is great literature for

anyone who loves adventure travel.

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