



Unsavoury Elements

edited by Tom Carter
Earnshaw Books

★★★★☆
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What would you do if you were a foreigner in a Chinese prison and ordered to write a "self-criticism"?

That is one of the remarkable stories in this excellent anthology by 28 people of their experiences in China. They include bestselling authors such as Peter Hessler, who wrote *River Town*, *Oracle Bones* and *Country Driving*, and Jonathan Watts, environment correspondent of *The Guardian* and author of *When a Billion Chinese Jump*.

The story comes from Dominic Stevenson, a Bangkok-based writer, of his two and a half years in the Shanghai Municipal Prison; he is one of five foreigners serving time for smuggling hash. Until the 1990s, the mainland expelled foreigners who broke the law, "but it had recently entered the War on Drugs and was eager to show its credentials as an international player".

The staff were ill-equipped to deal with the "big noses"; they were not permitted to work since many of the products made in the prison were exported to western countries. Nor did they wear prison uniform.

But the prison specialised in "reforming" its inmates through labour or education; so a warder, given charge of the errant five, ordered them to write a self-criticism, with the carrot that this might bring a reduction in sentence. One refused, the other four agreed.

Stevenson wrote a report praising the work of the government in fighting the smuggling of falcons – which he had read in the *China Daily*. The warder was pleased to see he had written a report but pointed out that he should have written

about his own crime, not that of someone else.

The accounts are concise and truthful, describing an event or people that left a mark on the author. All are new, except for *View from a Bridge* by Hessler, which was originally an essay in *The New Yorker*. It describes a visit to Dandong, the city on the Yalu river that borders North Korea and a theft from his hotel room, probably by a North Korean refugee.

In one story, a teacher of English in Beijing explains how he was offered US\$18,000 to rewrite 18 essays for students applying for admission to elite American high schools. "Your American students get admitted to elite schools because they are alumni, they play sports well or they have a connection," said the man running his school. "I know exactly how it works there ... If it is not you writing the essay, it will be someone else."

The most moving are stories by three women. Kay Bratt describes a visit to an orphanage where she gives a day out to a six-year-old girl who had been abandoned by her

parents after being handicapped in a car accident. At McDonald's, she takes her to the children's play area – but the other children will not play with her because of her disability.

At a shoe shop, they are peppered with questions by inquisitive onlookers. "Kay and Xiao Gou [the girl] were emotionally close enough that, even in spite of the language barrier, the child could sense what Kay was feeling without her ever saying a word."

Kaitlin Solimine describes an intense relationship with her "Chinese mother", the lady of the house during a five-month home stay in Beijing when she was 16.

The mother left such a deep impression that for the next 20 years Solimine regularly visited her family even though the mother died less than two years later of cancer.

Jocelyn Eikenburg describes courting her Chinese husband. "From the first time I started to love a Chinese man, hiding became part of my life." This is a rare account from the inside of a relationship that is much less common than that of a western man with a Chinese wife.



Almost 30 foreigners provide remarkable accounts of their experiences on the mainland in *Unsavoury Elements*. Photo: AFP