On Michael Meyer’s first visit to Wasteland, the inappropriately named hometown of his wife’s family, the bus driver stopped at the edge of a two-lane road, looked into the darkness and asked, “Are you sure you want to get off here?” Meyer did.

Some time later, the former Peace Corps volunteer, journalist and author of “The Last Days of Old Beijing” rented a home in Wasteland and volunteered to teach school there. He stayed for three years. With “In Manchuria,” he provides an informative history of the region, including a profile of its last emperor, the Japanese occupation in the 1930s and ’40s, Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” and “Cultural Revolution” and a charming and sympathetic account of the relatively prosperous rice-farming community that is about to become a company town.

Meyer grew up in Minnesota and won a 2009 Whiting Award for his first book, “The Last Days of Old Beijing.” His model for his new book is Pearl Buck’s 1931 novel “The Good Earth.” Like Buck, he knows the language, loves the countryside and focuses on “the slower story, observing changes to individuals and the land over time.”

He also laments the losses associated with China’s economic transformation. In “Wasteland,” he writes, “there were no good old days, only good old families enduring the conditions together.” When Frances, his wife, visits, she runs to show Michael the wet black soil on which she sat, watching her grandmother sing folk songs as she planted rice seedlings. Three decades later, Frances can “still see the past clearly through eyes welling from joy.”

Eastern Fortune Rice, Meyer tells us, bought the homes of the citizens of Wasteland, but provided no compensation for the land on which they sit, which belongs to the village collective. And the apartments the company has constructed are more cramped than farmhouses, are dim with low ceilings, face other apartments, not foothills and fields, and do not allow renters “to absorb the earth’s energy by living with their feet on the ground.”

Moving elderly people into modern apartments is not a bad idea, in theory, Auntie Yi tells Meyer. “But, she asks, ‘what if you want to keep things just as they are? What if you prefer the status quo?’

A retired Communist Party official, Auntie Yi tries to take the long
view. People are always unhappy when confronted with change, she points out, because they don’t know what it means for the future of their families. She maintains, however, that unhappy people can change things.

Meyer seems more resigned. When Boss Liu suggests that the village’s name be changed to Eastern Fortune, Meyer insists that Wasteland is a great name. He seems ready, however, for “the stinging wind” that is pushing down Red Flag road, to a new destination.

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