

Iron and Silk book Review by Kayden

An autobiographical book revolving around the Chinese culture and martial arts, Mark Salzman's *Iron and Silk* did not seem too enticing. My initial ideas of the book revolved around a 90s China described like every other time I heard before (robotic and bland), and the main head-turning aspect of martial arts, from first impressions, to be merely those types of fighting that did not involve sparring at all. Like Aikido, or certain Taekwondo dojos that only work on Poomsae. To be frank, mundane seemed to be what I received through this book - yet that was not all that bad. Mark, a Chinese Major hailing from the depths of Yale, travels to different areas of China to teach English to Chinese doctors and students within different regions. Along the way, an old and decorated martial artist expert, along with many more, takes Mark under his wing in exchange for these precious lessons. Through this plain plot, Mark weaves together an authentic, realistic interpretation of China that is not biased towards prejudice or positivity. Yet I cannot remember enjoying a book with such a plain plot and plain characters, set in a, more or less, plain environment. Mark knew his audience extremely well in that they were not expecting any fantastic drama within what I imagined to be a cloudy landscape, so he set his focus on enlightening the reader with different meager moments instead. He shined light on the beauty of seeing the expressions of ordinary people seeing a caucasian person on the train for the first time, or the beauty of each stroke in calligraphy. Sometimes, he would highlight the beauty of differing wisdoms clashing in contradiction. For instance, the initial martial artist expert Mark trained under—Pan Qingfu—trained his physique to the extremest extents, either forcing him to punch a iron plate attached to the wall one thousand times, or beginning training at 4:30 am. Hence, that would be the “iron” part of the combined Chinese philosophy. Silk, from how I interpreted it, came from the discipline and the patience found in another martial arts forms that involved more technique than destruction (though those two are equal in terms of purpose within the realm of martial arts). One of his instructors would train in his home, dodging every move Mark Salzman attained in his training with his Pan and then teaching him to do the same with flexibility and inner power. These softer ideals, as I see it, form the silk section of the Mark's title: *Iron and Silk*. The greatness in seeing these two ideals is that one might find their ideals to undermine the other's benefit, yet, unlike a paradox, they work in cohesion. The product of combining these two philosophies together could be seen through Mark Salzman, who had mastered both sides. Although not explicit at first, I found that Mark's training in martial arts to remarkably display different Chinese cultures that may not connect to martial arts directly. This thought came from two meager moments found throughout Mark's autobiography, so would another hundred pages not be worth the read? Others may interpret the title as martial arts (iron) in comparison to every Chinese life (silk), which shows how similar Chinese citizens can be under a different rule.

If you are interested in more complex and urgent plots, this book may not be the best option. I would try reading a genre different from an autobiography in general. However, if you

are open to appreciating the smaller moments in a seemingly plain yet extremely elegant story, *Iron and Silk* could not be a better match. I, myself, greatly enjoyed reading it. Good luck!