



Book Review by Ho Lin

To Get Rich Is Glorious:
Jonathan Tel's *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*

[*Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*](#)

By Jonathan Tel

Turtle Point Press, 220 pages

Everything under heaven is in utter chaos; the situation is excellent.

- attributed to Mao Tse-Tung

Is this the Chinese century? At the very least, we're living in a Chinese moment. Name a current catchword, any catchword—trade war, political protests, pandemic, power projection—and it finds a locus in the Middle Kingdom. Yet to Western eyes, much of China remains indecipherable. Autocracy, capitalism run amok, industrial might, cultural mongrelism: all these descriptors still fail to explain the hurlyburly beneath China's slick monolithic surface. Most literature about China in the English language is content to wallow in the past, using familiar dramatic set-ups: outright repression, separations and tragedies, families and children torn apart by war and revolutions. One step away from history, one step closer to soap operas and TV miniseries.

It's not so easy to pigeonhole a modern China in which the genie of economic progress has fled the bottle. Despite all the government prohibitions and cultural whitewashing (yellow-washing?), China still retains a whiff of the wild frontier about it. If grand dreams of empire and revolutions have been replaced by more mundane fantasies of real estate and BMWs, it's still a place where avarice and innocence saunter side by side, in which anything and everything goes, until it doesn't, and then it goes again. Documenting these whiplash currents of change and chance is akin to grabbing at water as it splashes through your hands.

Jonathan Tel embraces these kaleidoscopic, dizzying contradictions in his collection of interlinked stories, *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*. Puzzle-like and playful in its construction, the book ranges from pinpoint-precise anecdotes to expansive stream-of-consciousness musings as it locates us at modern China's urban Ground Zero. Tel's book orbits around an enigmatic center: would-be billionaire Qin (who takes after the mighty emperor Qin Shihuang). Like those rulers of old, Qin is constructing a magnificent edifice to himself—a mammoth office tower that will make his name (and rescue him from financial insolvency). But at the very start, we're informed that Qin has died under clouded circumstances. What has led to this pass? In answering that question, Tel skips backwards and forwards in time, seesawing between calamity and opportunity as he cycles through a broad cross-section of haves, have-nots and never-hads: transient construction workers, bumbling hoodlums, ambitious party girls, veterans of the Cultural Revolution, and scheming power brokers, all of whom cross paths with Qin, however tangentially.

Tel scatters his cast of dozens into the flow of the book like depth charges, with connections gradually revealing themselves. As one would expect, making it big is foremost on everyone's mind. (One character blithely sums it up: "China and money. What greater theme could there be?") In the wry opening story, "The Shoe King of Shanghai," a purloined pair of bespoke shoes from Qin's funeral offers a glimpse of a whole underground economy based on transient workers and transient goods. Commodities of another sort are the subject of "Elvis Has Left Beijing," as two sisters weigh the pros and cons of dating foreigners versus local Chinese men (Chinese advantages include "Can meet his parents," while foreign dudes "let you get away with whatever you want"). Soon enough the duo are embroiled in sticky affairs, with corporate secrets exchanged instead of true affection. Financial transactions and culpability are further linked in "The Average Person in China," when a nondescript academic receives a bribe by mistake, has his own crisis of conscience, then passes the payoff on to a street calligrapher, whose own downtrodden life (and the fallout of China's Cultural Revolution) is recapped in "The Water Calligrapher's Woman."

Throughout, Tel displays an anthropologist's eye for the idiosyncrasies of Chinese life, where forbidden minority folk songs alternate with the bruising beats of dance clubs, brothels pose as barbershops, filial piety butts up against the dream of being a jet-setter, and a phrase like "one small step for man, one giant leap for

mankind" is transmuted into a nationalistic slogan. Hopscoching about, *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao* strands many of its characters *in medias res*, on the verge of catharsis or disaster, approximating the feel of what's like to be in a China in which anything can happen next. The more memorable entries in the collection have the brevity and bittersweet aftertaste of a Mandopop ditty. "Year of the Panda" finds a young model forced to don a panda costume after a shady agent steals her clothes, leading to the surreal sight of a giant panda bicycling the streets of Beijing, followed by a rare moment of self-empowerment. The title story might chronicle a hapless young couple's attempt to rip off a barbershop, but also finds a surprising symmetry (and sympathy) between the thieves and the similarly sad-sack cops who nab them.

The collection's best one-two salvo connects past and present. In "The Human Phonograph," a wife is dispatched to the Qinghai hinterlands to support her geologist husband during China's first forays into the nuclear age; life may be worth little in this harsh landscape, but Tel locates both acceptance and tenderness in the couple's plight, as love and remnants of the region's ethnic culture persist, despite history's best efforts. "Records of the Grand Historian" is a cynical flip side to that coin, taking a great leap forward into a present day that's been bitten by the get-rich-quick bug. The geologist's son (now Qin's business partner) recounts a life lived on the knife edge between wealth and disposability, as bourgeoisie and bureaucrats joust, and ethics go missing in action. Still, everything pales compared to the next big payoff. "We often feel like killing each other," the son sighs about his partnership with Qin, "but they say that's the sign of a thriving business relationship."

Tel keeps the narrative wheels turning until the final meta-fictional flourish of "The Sadness and the Beauty of the Billionaire," in which Qin's somewhat less than bereft daughter, now eyeing movie deals in Hollywood, seduces a Sinophile into becoming her ghost writer (while cajoling him into bed). In the process, Qin's ultimate fate is revealed—or is it? In a nation filled with storytellers and bullshitters, the veracity of the story and the motives of the teller are always in question. "The world needs to see the human face of Chinese business," Qin's daughter purrs, but while the book presents plenty of human faces and travails, it prefers to leave them (and us) dangling, minus the benefit of definitive answers—perhaps a fitting correlative for today's China, where destinations are unknown. If Tel's characters sometimes seem more like paradigms than flesh-and-blood people, and his structuring of events more dazzling sleight-of-hand than robust narrative, he remains a canny, intelligent ringmaster, and *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao* weaves a fascinating web of intersecting perspectives that reveals China in all its seductive, sinister, absurd and bewildering glory.

Ho Lin is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*, and author of [China Girl](#), published by Regent Press. For more on his work, visit www.holinauthor.com.