



Changganli

Jiwen

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(392pp)

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In the convincing novel Changganli, four friends witness China's emergence as a modern power.

Jiwen's novel *Changganli* depicts the post-Mao transitions that brought China into modernity in under a generation.

In 1986, the citizens of Nandu gather to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Yousang and her twin brother, Yangyang, are there, as are Xiaoliang, Hanfei, and Lei. The book follows these characters and their families from middle school through to middle age. Each faces opportunities, changes, and rifts unknown to previous generations.

The book pronounces its dominant themes from the beginning. Nandu's oldest neighborhood, Changganli, is the home of the iconic Zhonghua Gate, which dates back to a time long before liberation. Some cherish the gate as a vital link to the past; others see it as a relic that's ripe for modernization. Likewise: Hanfei resents the pressure he feels to join the family's lantern-making profession, but Xiaoliang is so entranced with the tradition that he sneaks tools and materials from home to make them in secret. Both decisions illustrate another theme in modern China: the placement of personal wishes above strict adherence to tradition. A more chilling example of the divide between the past and the present comes through Yousang, who is familiar with the site where her father died, but has been denied both memories and knowledge of why he was put to death.

Yousang and Hanfei's story lines are the most detailed, but the characters who occupy secondary roles are also developed in realistic terms, and each character's story is engaging. As the friends grow older, the story expands to include their educations abroad, careers, and marriages, among other events that shift them forward.

Still, the novel is uneven. Within it, long discussions are devoted to local political histories and debates on ethics within journalism; these have a soporific effect, and they make the characters seem like artificial constructs present to represent specific talking points. As the characters grow older, these discussions fade from the narrative, though. They are replaced by messages drawn from the characters' life experiences and choices. The book's most effective descriptions draw on the natural world and are associated with Yousang, who's most at ease with old Nandu, and whose choice of career merges past and present concerns.

In the convincing romance novel *Changganli*, four friends witness China's emergence as a modern power.

SUSAN WAGGONER (March 24, 2021)

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