

## Hoo Lee Jing: Fox Fairy

**Margaret Zee**

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*The nostalgic historical novel Hoo Lee Jing concentrates on a group of Americans in China, around whom conflicts erupt.*

During the Communist Revolution, a group of genteel American expatriates try to recapture the glory of pre-war China in Margaret Zee's novel *Hoo Lee Jing*.

A hulijing is a Chinese fox spirit that can be malevolent or benevolent, but must be respected. Americans have no such respect for it—which is how Eve comes to lease the Red Chamber Court, a portion of a palace, in late 1940s Peking. Hagglng with her landlord secures her the right to sublease her many rooms. Into them she welcomes Cordelia, Nellie, Mrs. Stirling, and BeeBee and her daughter Darlene. The gates also open to a revolving door of others, including Nellie's father Doug, Dr. Stone, and Cordelia's family, the Kings. Against the backdrop of post-war Peking, this coterie of emigrants socialize, study, and work. All the while, the shadows of war and revolution grow more prominent.

Despite the full cast, the book revolves around Eve, who is brought into community with the rest because of her rooms. Still, the narration sometimes trips into the perspectives of others, always returning to Eve. Eve's genuine interest in Chinese poetry, in particular that of the previous royal resident of the Red Chamber Court, influences scenes of travel through the Chinese countryside, where the easy writing flourishes. Mountains and fields outside of the city, as well as the hutongs, pedicabs, and architecture within the city, are detailed in a sentimental way; these sensibilities grow stronger as the communist forces' influence grows.

The undercurrent of Mao's guerrilla tactics is a serious yet distant backdrop to the book's general frivolity. Eve, her boarders, and their visitors exist in an air of benign neglect. In the Red Chamber Court, this stems as much from the lack of hundreds of servants for upkeep as it does from the way that the characters interact with Chinese politics. The incongruity of the bitter reality of a country in the midst of a violent ideological conflict, juxtaposed with the Americans, who do not experience the conflict in any real way, is disconcerting. Indeed, Eve experiences financial gain while her Chinese landlords sell off family heirlooms.

These oppositions are also present in the interactions between the Americans. Gentility is core to Eve's personality. She is always aware that she is not of the same class as her boarders, but she is as well educated, intuitive, and integrated into Peking society because of her fluency in Mandarin. That much of her background is established through an early suicide attempt and exposition dumps is both a feature and a drawback to the book.

The hulijing features in as a fun fable for the expatriates, not as the respected and feared spirit it is for the Chinese. This theme reverberates through the book. Even when dealing with the realities of living in a country in the middle of war, its narration still feels separated from those conditions. The Americans, and the Chinese people with whom they interact, are aware that they can leave, and commentary on old-world Peking is subdued because of this.

The historical novel *Hoo Lee Jing* is nostalgic as it concentrates on a group of Americans who live in relative privilege while conflicts erupt around them.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (May 19, 2021)

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