



Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao

Jonathan Tel

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In busy Beijing, everyone is connected. So a writer discovers when he's tasked with telling the billionaire Qin's enmeshed story in Jonathan Tel's deliciously tangled *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*.

In the book's opening movement, a just-fired man infiltrates Qin's funeral and steals an expensive pair of shoes with the promise of compensation; instead, he finds himself playing a bit role in the fevered fairy tale of a woman who survived the Cultural Revolution. Near recompense comes later, when an envelope stuffed with cash, intended as a bribe, falls into the lap of her ex-husband, a street performer who desperately wants a second chance.

Both the woman and her husband are entangled with a cast that includes young women on the rise, greedy middlemen on the take, a gullible model forced to ride through Beijing's streets in a panda costume, and a former librarian within Mao's nuclear development facility.

Qin's daughter is sure that these characters are among the many who benefited from her father's goodwill. She boasts that he was "A financier *and* humanitarian." But there's a reason that the people closest to the subjects make their worst biographers: the writer's investigations reveal little that's humane about Qin's decisions, which have inexorable consequences for the unsuspecting people who act as pawns in his schemes.

Its language at first a frenzied blur to match the thief's desperation, and toward the end diffuse as it grasps for second chances, the book experiments with form in fascinating ways. Its characters rise and fall, then return again later, their scars and hardened shells exposed and complex. The end impression may be less flattering than Qin's daughter would like, but it reveals certain truths, among them that every action must eventually be answered for.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2020)

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