

## The China Connection

**AJ Basinski**

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*The China Connection is an enjoyable and plausible thriller set in interesting locations with plenty of twists and turns.*

Secrets, corruption, betrayals, and international intrigue force a retired detective to go outside the law and far from home to find justice in A. J. Basinski's absorbing conspiracy thriller *The China Connection*.

Jerked from sleep in his cabin aboard the cruise ship *Mardi Gras*, former detective Mario Morales finds an attacker battering his wife, Sun Li, but he can't stop the intruder from escaping. With circumstantial evidence pointing to Morales as the assailant, he jumps bail and hunts his quarry to Sun Li's home city, Shanghai—with FBI and criminals in pursuit.

A slightly overweight fifty-five-year-old, the easygoing Morales makes a compelling and sympathetic protagonist, even though—or perhaps because—he's not a classic action hero martial artist and firearms expert. Much of what makes the book engaging comes not from dramatic car chases and shootouts but from mild-mannered Morales figuring out how to find and pursue a risky trail despite few clues and many obstacles.

Supporting characters are an interesting cast and are also written with more of a nod toward real people than glamorous Hollywood clichés. For instance, Morales's lawyer, Rick Chopin, is short, with an unfashionable haircut, a mail-order suit, and oversize glasses. He and the story's other characters are well rounded, built up with their own concerns and agendas.

The plot is tightly constructed. Actions and incidents flow logically into one another, making the narrative easy to follow and plausible despite unexpected developments. Chapter cliffhangers make the story hard to put down. While not a legal thriller, the book offers some interesting legal details as Chopin spars with the district attorney's office over Morales's case.

The book's second half, with its Shanghai setting, is also interesting. There, Morales and Chopin chase clues and unravel a major conspiracy amid skyscrapers towering over narrow streets teeming with rickshaws, cars, and bicycles. Setting details add tension as Morales navigates the unfamiliar environment with few friends or resources. They also keep characters well situated in clear, realistic scenes.

Writing is economical and straightforward. The narration is conversational, and dialogue is realistic and easy to read and follow. Except for the assault that sets the story in motion, violence and fireworks are minimal. The understated narrative keeps the story solidly real, constantly charming, and compelling.

Frequent switches between points of view from Morales to a third-person omniscient narrator are distracting. Morales's narration is engaging; the sudden switches to third person are less personal and seem needless and confusing.

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GARY HENRY (April 14, 2018)

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