9-22-2009

In Case You Missed It: The Beijing of Possibilities

Xujun Eberlein

Inside-Out China

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/614

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Earlier this year, we ran two excerpts from Jonathan Tel's (then forthcoming) collection of short stories, The Beijing of Possibilities (the excerpts were “Year of the Gorilla” and “Though the Candles Flicker Red”). Author (and occasional China Beat contributor) Xujun Eberlein recently reviewed the collection at her blog, Inside-Out China, and has allowed us to repost her review in full below.

By Xujun Eberlein

Chinese stories can be exotic to foreigners, while a foreigner telling stories about China can be exotic to the natives of the land as well. In recent years, there has been no shortage of nonfiction books set in Beijing written by expats, but fiction in the same category remains sparse. Jonathan Tel’s new story collection, The Beijing of Possibilities, stands out as a notable exception, its twelve stories displaying a gripping juxtaposition of realism and allegory.

Tel’s prose treats serious themes in a romantic, humorous, at times mystical way. He is evidently very familiar with Beijing’s settings, geographically and culturally, having lived in the capital city as early as 1988. The stories, set in places and with characters the author has clearly experienced or observed, present Beijing’s distinctness in an enjoyable combination of realistic detail and imaginative musing. Often a story starts by building up a picture of a very real situation, only to surprise the reader by the sudden twist to parable. Or vice versa.

One familiar with Chinese literature might see traces of influence from the classical novel Journey to the West, a hybrid between a fictionalized historical event (a Tang Dynasty Buddhist’s journey to India to fetch the holy scriptures) and the myth of Monkey King (who helped the monk completing the perilous journey). Tel’s opening story, “Year of the Gorilla,” features an unnamed migrant worker in a Monkey King suit. But that is hardly the only connection.

Among the so-called “four greatest Chinese classics” – A Dream of Red Mansions, Three Kingdoms, and Outlaws of the Marsh being the other three – only Journey to the West is a fantasy with a happy ending. In Chinese literature typically filled with great tragic stories, that is a rare presence. In world literature, though written some 350 years earlier, Journey to the West belongs to The Lord of the Rings category. It seems that its fantastic nature makes Journey to the West more easily resonate with Westerners than the other Chinese classics.

It may not be a mere coincidence that The Beijing of Possibilities opens with the line “It’s been a while since the Monkey King set out on his Journey to the West.” In more than one way, many of Tel’s
stories apparently continue the literary tradition of *Journey to the West*, bringing the reader into a fictional dream where reality, parable and fantasy can hardly be told apart.

One of my favorites is “The Three Lives of Little Yu,” which tells the story about a childless country couple’s life-long attempts at adopting a daughter. Each time they name the girl “Little Yu,” and each Little Yu is “as delightful and talented as the previous versions,” but each dies unexpectedly young, until time turns to the mid 1980s. At last, to the reader’s relief and fascination, the third Little Yu grows up, her “health couldn’t have been better,” and she has memory of her previous lives:

She remembers her first childhood: the precious spoonfuls of sorghum gruel and how in her hunger she chewed bark off the trees. She remembers the coughing, the ache in her chest, the fever and the fading away of her body. She remembers her second childhood too: the entire school dancing the Loyalty Dance – left hand up, right hand out, “Loyal loyal loyal / to Chairman Mao! / Boundless boundless boundless / Forever forever forever!” – while the commune secretary kept time, taping a spoon on the desk.

Thus, in a clever, parable-like structure, the story reflects a three-decade history realistically.

Another amusing story is “The Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch.” It starts as a time-travel sort of tale, about a relationship across four centuries, between a Ming Dynasty princess and a modern-day young man who works at an advertising agency in Beijing. The cross-century communication between the two is certainly entertaining, but it is the turn at the end that is the drollest yet totally realistic: their dialogue that has been exuding tenderness and love unexpectedly turns into a text message war. Both characters’ personalities change, a common phenomenon we can’t be more familiar with on today’s internet.

Tel’s stories are full of contrasts. The past and the present are comingled in the romance across time. The city and countryside are blended when the two farmers arrive in Beijing to collect baby Yu on the words of a soothsayer. Right and wrong are confused when the man dressed as a monkey is punished for his good deeds. Adventure and duty are probed when a boy tries to collect a cotton-candy machine for his grandfather. The underlying theme in all of this, not surprisingly, is that Beijing offers opportunities both real and imagined for those who come. That the opportunities are fraught with peril, and that the people taking them are both good and bad is as it should be.

Americans are said to be an optimistic people. The Chinese are accustomed to millennia of calamities. Perhaps the biggest contrast between Chinese and American authored stories is pessimism versus optimism. From China’s classical literature to its contemporary counterpart, it is rare that a novel or story has a happy ending. In contrast, none of the stories in *The Beijing of Possibilities* ends tragically. For those readers who have had their fill of Chinese “scar fiction,” this book should be a pleasant change. On the other hand, while the descriptive details about the Chinese lives usually ring true, the musings and imaginative reality that occupy the stories seem more akin to Western perceptions of China than to the way Chinese people think. A reader should not expect to gain significant insights into Chinese thinking, but he or she will certainly get a good glance at the Beijing life through an observant expat’s eye.

Tags: fiction