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China Mountain Zhang

Written by Maureen F. McHugh

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SF MASTERWORKS

China Mountain Zhang

MAUREEN F. McHUGH



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INTRODUCTION

by Jo Walton

China Mountain Zhang is a fascinating example of a near future science fiction mosaic novel. There are a number of notable mosaic novels – my favourite other examples are Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion*, Samuel R. Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrion* and Paul Scott’s *The Jewel in the Crown*. A mosaic novel seems at first more like a short story collection all set in the same world, like Ursula Le Guin’s *Four Ways to Forgiveness* or Orson Scott Card’s *Capitol*, but it soon becomes apparent that it is more than that. A normal novel tells a story by going straightforwardly at it, maybe with different points of view, maybe braided, but clearly going down one road of story. A mosaic novel builds up a picture of a world and a story obliquely, so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

China Mountain Zhang is one of the best mosaic novels ever written, and this was reflected in the attention it got on publication. It won the Tiptree and Lambda and was nominated for the Hugo and Nebula. I read it because of the Hugo nomination (after all, how many first novels get Hugo nominations?) and I’ve read it again probably every couple of years since, because reading it is a very enjoyable experience.

It’s a very unusual book. It’s not just the mosaic thing. It’s also a small scale book about ordinary people winning small scale victories without changing or saving the world. Yet it’s immensely readable and very hard to put down. It raises the stakes for what the stakes can be. Also, it has terrific characters.

China Mountain Zhang centres on Zhang Zhong Shan. His story spirals through the novel, and all the other stories and characters touch his. Zhang is fascinating. He’s a gay man from New York with spliced genes who’s passing – not only passing as straight, but

also passing as Chinese. His voice is immediate and compelling – indeed, one of McHugh’s strengths is in the splendid solidity of the voices of her characters. But the real central character of *China Mountain Zhang* is the world.

This is a world dominated by China. At some time in the past, the USA has had a proletarian revolution, and at some time only about fifteen years ago has had the Cleansing Winds Campaign, an overwhelming event like the Cultural Revolution in China. Global warming has made much of the interior of the USA uninhabitable. Mars is being settled. Everything is socialist, but there are cracks. Stories often take place in the cracks, and this one is no exception.

This is a book about ordinary people getting by and coping with their everyday problems in a world that’s both weirdly different and weirdly similar to our own. It’s a very political book in the sense people normally mean. It’s showing us a world after a proletarian revolution in the USA, for goodness sake. And yet it certainly isn’t a fantasy of political agency. None of the characters in the novel have any political agency at all. They’re all helpless against the system, and getting by as best they can in the cracks.

Zhang is an ordinary working-class working guy getting by without thinking about things too much. He’s an engineering tech who, during the course of the book, becomes an engineer. He uses futuristic cyberpunk equipment to do his job, but he takes it all for granted. He jacks in to his tools with a sigh. There is no glamour, even when he’s using computer systems to design houses organically. He’s also gay, in a much more unromantic and realistic way than I’m used to seeing with gay characters written by women. He has casual sex. He has a terrible time when he’s forced to live on Baffin Island where there’s no possibility of meeting anyone. He’s forced into an embarrassing situation taking the daughter of his boss on a date.

We also have the points of view of Martine, a twenty-year veteran who’s now lonely among her goats on Mars; Angel, who races a kite (a huge powered hang glider) through the skies of New York City; Alexi, another Martian settler, who wants to get better at engineering; and San Xiang, an ugly girl who gets a new face and finds out it isn’t really what she wanted.

It’s surprising how unusual it is to have an sf novel where the

characters really work. Maybe I've just read too many quest novels and too many stories about interstellar traders. But it seems that in most sf while characters may have a job, the story takes them away from it. We don't see much in the way of actual work being done. Zhang's work is futuristic and half-cyberpunk, but he has to do it, and keep doing it. The economic relationship between work and living is more realistic in this novel than in any other sf future I can think of.

In the end, you're left with a mosaic picture of a man in his world. Zhang's world has clearly descended from our world. It's better in some ways and worse in some ways. If not a plausible future, it's not a future that's dated itself out of existence in the fifteen years since the book was written. If not a hopeful vision, it's not a disastrous one either. It has texture and ambiguity. I value that, and I'd like to see more of it.

Jo Walton

A simple way to get to know about a town is to see how the people work, how they love and how they die.

—ALBERT CAMUS, *The Plague*



China Mountain

Zhang

The foreman chatters in Meihua, the beautiful tongue, Singapore English. "Get he over here. All this trash here! Got little time." He is a stocky little Chinese man who has suffered disappointments. "Someone work that cutter, *xing buxing?*"

Someone is me, the tech on the job. "*Xing*," I say, "Okay." Good equipment can't be trusted to stupid New York natives. I heft the cutter, balance it against my thigh. My goggles darken, shutting out the buildings, even the lot we are clearing to build.

"Okay," he says, backing away, glad to have an ABC engineer. ABC—American Born Chinese, or like the *waiguoren*, the non-Chink say, Another Bastard Chink. With my goggles dark I can't see anything but the glow at the end of the cutter as it goes through rusted, twisted steel, girders in tangles and lying there like string dropped in a pile. Where the cutter touches it goes through like butter, and where the steel is cut it will shine clean and rust-free. Steel drops spatter like quicksilver, glowing metal white. The air smells like a thunderstorm coming.

I swear softly at the foreman in Spanish, but he is too far away

to hear anything, which is good. He does not know I speak Spanish. ABC; he knows I speak Mandarin—*Poutonghua*—and American Standard and the Singapore English Asians call *Meihua* and *waiguoren* call Chinglish. (*Waiguoren* don't get the joke. *Meihua*, beautiful language, because this is *Meiguo*—America. In Mandarin, *Meiguo* means “beautiful country” because “*Meiguo*” approximated the sound in A-mer-i-ca to Chinese ears.)

The foreman is all right, for someone born inside. He speaks English as if he learned it in school in Shanghai, which he did, but at least he speaks it unaugmented. He likes me; I work hard and I speak Mandarin better than most ABC. I am almost like a real Chinese person. My manners are good. An example of how breeding will out, even in a second rate country like this. He can talk to me, and there are probably very few people Foreman Qian sees each day who he can talk to. “You here what for?” he asks me. “You smart. You go Shanghai?” Everyone inside thinks that all the rest of us are dying to go to China.

If I went to China to study I'd be doing a great deal better than working as a tech engineer on a construction crew. Maybe the rest of us are dying to go to China, maybe even me. But maybe Spanish is the first language I ever learned because my mother's birth name was Teresa Luis and it's just because my parents paid to adjust the genetic make-up of their son that I look like a slope-head like my father. So Qian doesn't know; my last name is Zhang and I speak Mandarin and when he asks me why I don't go to Shanghai or Guangzhou to study I just shrug.

It infuriates him, that shrug. He thinks it is a native characteristic, that it indicates indifference and a kind of self-defeating fatalism. But just looking Chinese is not enough to get someone to China. My parents weren't rich and tinkering with genes is expensive. Maybe I would map close enough to Chinese standard to pass; then again, maybe something in them would prove me Hidalgo. I don't apply so I don't ever have to take the medical.

Pretty soon the steel is lying in pieces that can be carried away.

I shut off the cutter, my goggles lighten and I'm back in the real world. "Give it fifteen minutes to cool," I say, "then get it out of here." The crew has been watching me cut, they'll stop to watch anything. The foreman stands there with his hands on his hips. *Waiguoren* think that Chinese never show any expression, so of course he's not showing any and neither am I. So the crew thinks we are angry because they're not doing anything and drifts back to work. They're a good crew except when Foreman Qian is here, then I can't get them to do a damn thing.

"Zhang," the foreman says and so I follow him into the office. Inside, over the door it says "The Revolution lives in the people's hearts" but the paint is wearing thin. It was probably painted during the Great Cleansing Winds campaign. I don't think Foreman Qian is very pure ideologically, he has too much interest in the bottom line. It is like the crucifix in the hall of the apartment where I grew up, something everyone passes every day. I have no religion, neither Christ nor Mao Zedong.

"I often ask you, what you do with your life, you pretty good boy," Foreman Qian says. "We each and each respect, *dui budui*?"

"*Dui*," I say. Right.

"Here, you tech engineer, job so-so."

"*Bu-cuo*," I answer, Not bad.

"I have daughter," Foreman Qian says. "Request you to my home come, meet her, *hao buhao*?"

I have the momentary sense that this conversation, which Foreman Qian and I have had before, has just gone way out of my depth. "Foreman Qian," I say, stuttering, "I—I cannot . . . I am only tech engineer. . . ."

"Not be fool," he says and drops into Mandarin. "How old are you, twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six, sir."

"My wife and I, together we have one daughter. There is no one here for her, I would like her to meet a nice young man."

"Foreman Qian." I do not know what to say.

"I have no son, and I will not get to go back to China—" He is a Chinese citizen and if the best he can do is a job as a construction foreman, he's in disgrace. I wonder what Foreman Qian did during the Great Cleansing Wind to get in trouble. "I have a cousin at Shanghai University. I would sponsor a son-in-law there."

This is unexpected. This is disaster. Whatever has old Qian thinking that I would make a good son-in-law? It looks great from the outside, offer a twenty-six-year-old a chance at Shanghai University and citizenship-by-marriage which is almost as good as born-inside-citizenship. Maybe I would get a chance to stay inside, then his daughter would have a home there. Foreman Qian and his wife would retire to China and live with their daughter and son-in-law.

"I understand that you have not even met my daughter," Foreman Qian says. "I mean nothing except that you should meet."

"I cannot, Elder Qian." I am quaintly formal in my attempt to say something, falling back on school book Mandarin, ludicrous phrases. "I am unworthy." *Mea culpa*. I am violently flushed, for the first time in years I am so embarrassed that I actually feel hot. "I, I am a foreigner."

He waves that away. "Accident of birth place."

I open my mouth to say no, but I cannot say it. Not only is it rude, but I can't say it. I am impure, a mongrel. I am an imposter. And there is more that he doesn't know. When I tell him what I am, he will look foolish because he has mistaken me for Chinese, he will lose face. We will pretend that nothing was ever said. Then when this job is finished he will inform me that the company can no longer use me. It is not easy to find jobs.

"You think about it, meet her. Maybe you will not get along, maybe you will. No harm in meeting."

I should finish this now, explain, but I flee.

* * *

I meet my mother for lunch every six months or so. Filial duty. Teresa Luis lives in Pennsylvania and commutes to work here in Manhattan. She has another family, a husband and two sons. She and my father were divorced during the Great Cleansing Winds. Elder Zhang lives out on the West Coast where he is an office manager for a company that builds robots to do precision robotics. I have not seen him for fifteen years.

I meet her in the market, getting off the subway at Times Square.

I don't know why she likes to eat in the market; I think it is a tacky place with all the close streets and the booths and sidewalk sellers. She says it has charm. My mother works at Citinet in International Banking. She is a clerk. She always wears those suits that are almost like uniforms—drab colors with tails to the backs of her knees. Never short tails, never the long ones. She is very religious and she believes in Marx and Mao Zedong. Do not make the mistake of thinking her stupid; she has to juggle a lot of Kierkegaard and Heiler to explain but she manages a full wipe.

"Hello," she says and takes my arm. I am never sure I am her son, although I don't rationally doubt it. It's just that the connection between us is very tenuous. Perhaps I have so few of her genes that we are more like cousins.

"Zhong Shan, what's wrong?" Zhong Shan is my Chinese name, Rafael is my Spanish name. There isn't any similarity. I am named for a Chinese revolutionary, and for her Spanish great-great-grandfather, who was a union organizer before the great collapse. He was a party member in the secret days of the Second Depression, and later, during the American Liberation War, a martyr.

"I am in trouble," I say, and tell her about Foreman Qian. While I am talking I watch the copper marks under the skin of

her wrist. Then I watch the copper marks on my wrist, almost like bruises. She ties into her terminal every day, I use my jacks only when I'm working with machinery. With those jacks, Foreman Qian can access my records. But only my surface records, not my deep records, he doesn't have clearance. There is nothing personal in my surface records, and my mother's name is listed as Li Taiming, her name from when she was active in the party.

When I am finished she says, "The Chinese are the worst racists in the world." This is not surprising, nor is it helpful. Nor is it a good political thing to say but everybody knows it. "What are you going to do?" she asks.

"Turn him down. I don't even know the girl. Even if it worked out, when I apply they'll do a medical. They'll do a background check. If I pass a medical I'll still fail the background check." Legally everyone is equal, but even here at the other end of the world in the Socialist Union of American States we all know better than that. Be it Rome or Beijing, we bring tribute but we are not admitted. Unfortunate day I was born.

"You can go to dinner," she says. "Maybe the daughter won't like you. Maybe you'll forget your upbringing and sneeze at the table."

"It's a lie," I say, "and you always told me that a lie always creates complications." But my face is a lie as well, and she condoned that. I am sure she hears the accusation, but we never talk about my mother's contradictions.

She does not touch me, although for a moment I think she is going to cover my hand with hers and I am afraid.

"It is not the revolution that is at fault," she says, "it is the people who are implementing it."

I don't believe in socialism but I don't believe in capitalism either. We are small, governments are large, we survive in the cracks. Cold comfort.

* * *

There is a game I play when I am out by myself among people. I play it on my way home, descending into the bowels of the city, taking a three-hundred-year-old train to the bottom of the island and under the choked harbor to Brooklyn. The subway sways and like idiots we all nod together. My game is this: I become other people.

A man reading a cheatsheet flimsie, picking the horses. An office clerk in his boxy suit. This evening I am a power tech, a young woman sitting under a subway sign listing the number to call for info on resettlement on Mars. She's wearing Edison Fission Authority green, her sturdy calves outlined by the tight legs of her coveralls. All day she sells and channels power and I imagine the city's energy pouring through her hands, the hair on her head rising with the build-up of static charge. Of course that's not true, she sits at a terminal and feeds information, watches the lines, drains the power reservoirs when they're needed and fills them when demand falls.

The train stops at Lawrence and the doors open. My power tech gets off and I'm just Zhang: 1.80 meters (almost), sixty-four kilos, leaning against the door with my feet spread to brace myself, right under the sign that says in English, Spanish and Chinese, "Do not lean against doors." I could go cruising, stay on the train and head for Coney Island and see what I could pick up. But that's just to avoid thinking about Foreman Qian and anyway, I'm too tired from work.

Still, I don't get off at my stop, I ride the train all the way to the end. Coney Island used to be a nice neighborhood, condos on the water and all, until the smell in the water drove everybody away. The smell is better now, what with the project to filter all the water that comes into the bay, but Coney Island is still the end of the line. The young couples are starting to move in and brave the crime to get permits to cheap condos and establish communes where everybody knows everybody else in the building. Pretty soon everybody will be begging permits to move out here and the

little free-market greengrocers will open up, but right now Coney Island is gray in the transition and the hawks like me ride the train there to spread our wings.

Gray is a good word; when I come up on the street it's twilight, the buildings are gray, the wind off the water smells gray and ashy. It's quiet. A quiet neighborhood is a bad sign out here. My jacket isn't very warm but I walk down to the water. I wonder if part of the harbor has been burning again, but the ash at the water's edge could be old.

I walk the cracked concrete walk beside the water, my shoes crunching in the sand blown across it. A young man leans against a bench and my heart quickens. He looks twenty, younger than me. He is wearing coveralls, utility blue, and they hug his legs and pelvis. He is dark though, and I have blond Peter on my mind. Our eyes meet and he is arrogant, dangerous-looking, but his gaze lingers with the possibility of invitation. I think about slowing down, asking him what he's doing, I just keep walking. I didn't really come out here for a coney. When I glance back he is prowling stiff-legged in the other direction.

So I find a public call box. The chain on the bracelet is short, to reduce the chances that someone will yank it out, so once I get the bracelet on I have to fumble one-handed for my number book. I read Peter's number, the call clicks through. Waiting for him to answer, the only part of me that's warm is my wrist where the contact's made, and that's just an illusion anyway, just excited nerves at the periphery of contact.

"It's Zhang," I say.

"Hey," Peter says, looking preoccupied, by which I mean he is looking at something on his lap rather than me.

"Hey. I'm out on the beach."

That perks him up, blue-gray eyes on me and he sounds interested. "Yeah? Come up."

Peter lives in a wretched commune, Lenin knows how they ever got a permit. Just goes to prove that five years ago anyone could

get permission to live in Coney Island. The slogan over the door says, "The force at the core of the people is the Revolution" from the *Xiao Hongshu*, the Little Red Book. I press my wrist against the contact and Peter has told the building to expect me because the street door opens.

I climb the stairs because I have a theory that Peter's building dislikes me and I won't get in the elevator. Peter only lives two flights up. I knock on the door and he opens it and kisses me there in the hall. He swears nobody cares but I still hate when he does it; if anyone suspected I'm bent it could cost me my job. Not that Lisa and Aruba, who live next door, are in any position to complain about our morals.

"China Mountain," he says, "where the hell have you been?" China Mountain is a possible translation of my name, Peter likes it.

"I work," I say. "Got any *pjiu*?"

He hands me a beer. Peter and I lived together for three months, we're still friends. Better friends than lovers. "Want to go to the kite races?" he asks. Peter works in an office but sleep deprivation has never seemed to bother him.

No, I don't want to go to the kite races. "Foreman Qian wants to sponsor me to Shanghai University." I sit in one of his big cushions, sink into it like it was a hug and it thrums gently and starts to warm me up.

"Isn't that kind of surprising?" Peter frowns. Three little lines appear in the middle of his forehead. His eyebrows arch like gull wings. They are lighter than his summer tan, just beginning to fade.

"He wants me to marry his daughter. Then I'll go to the university, get a job in China, and he can retire back inside."

For a moment Peter looks as if he is going to laugh but he takes a long pull on his beer instead. "He's kidding, isn't he? I mean, arranged marriages are pretty feudal, you know."

"He's a pretty feudal kind of guy."

He thinks a moment. "Can you tell him you already have a fiancé?"

"No, he's asked before."

Peter shakes his head. "You have such a complicated personal life."

No kidding.

"Hey, China Mountain, don't sit there all stony. You're all in your skull again. Come on, Rafael, don't go all Chink."

"Maybe I shouldn't have come," I say, sulking.

"Guilt, guilt, guilt, I feel horrible. Now get off your ass and let's go to the kite races. I'll introduce you to a flier and he's skinny and blond and you can polish your obsession for yellow hairs. He doesn't have a brain in his perfect little cranium but he's still *hao kan*."

"If I go I'll be up all night and I'll be a wreck at work tomorrow." But I go, and we watch the silk gliders race all night above Washington Square; red and yellow sails swooping and skimming in the searchlights. Peter never does find his flier.

Next day, Friday. I get back to my flat, shower, change and catch the train back to Manhattan. How does Peter do it? I am at work at six-forty-five, pouring coffee in the vain hope that if I drink enough I won't accidentally cut my foot off with the cutter. Foreman Qian is there at seven-thirty. I do not know what I will say to him. I will tell him that there is really a girl. I will tell him that I am involved in the sale and transfer of illegal goods and not a suitable choice. I will tell him I am against feudal arrangements like this. I will tell him I have an incurable disease and only have six months to live.

I follow him into his office and he sits down. I notice his jowls hang a little, like a tired bulldog's. Then I stare at the wall in back of him.

"Engineer Zhang," he says in Mandarin, "Please you come to dinner on Sunday."

The wall is white and needs painting. "Thank you, Foreman Qian," I say, "I would be honored." And then slink out onto the site.

Long terrible day, with Foreman Qian smiling at me as prospective son-in-law. The crew knows something is up, and with Foreman Qian lurking around the site, nothing gets done. I do not ever reprimand them directly, it is not the way to get them to work, instead I find small ways to express my displeasure. But my heart is not in it. At noon I lie in the sun on a sack of cement—it's not comfortable but I only mean to sit a minute. I put my forearm over my eyes and fall asleep, jerk awake and drink more coffee. We finally finish at four. As I pass out pay chits I look at each one, "Your hard-earned pay," I say.

I hear Kevin from Queens mutter, "Qian been bustin' the bastard's ass again."

Little do you know.

Friday evening I sleep for about five hours and then meet Peter at eleven to drop in on a friend's party. I fully intend to be home by two o'clock, three o'clock at the latest. When I get home it's eight in the morning and I sleep the day away. Saturday I promise myself I will stay home that evening, but I end up meeting a couple of guys for a vid. Sunday morning finds me, as always, tired, broke and with a flat that desperately needs cleaning. It's not a big flat, it doesn't take any time to straighten up, I just don't get around to it for weeks on end.

At six I present myself at apartment sixteen, in a complex on Bay Shore. I am carrying a carefully wrapped copy of Sun-zi's classic on strategy. Not that I think Foreman Qian is such a fan of military strategy but because I think he will be flattered by the insinuation he reads the classics.

Foreman Qian's daughter answers the door, "You are Engineer Zhang?" she says. "I am Qian San-xiang."

She is astonishingly ugly. More than ugly, there is something wrong with the bones of her face.

She is a flat-faced southern-looking Chinese girl of twenty or twenty-two. She has a little square face like a monkey and small eyes even by Chinese standards. Her little wizened face is so unexpected I blink. I think instantly of some sort of bone defect that would create that almost nonexistent chin. She looks at me expressionlessly and then drops her eyes and glances sideways at her mother. Her mother is a matronly-looking woman clasping her hands together and smiling at me; Foreman Qian comes into the doorway to the little foyer and says hello and there we all are, four of us crowded into this little space. San-xiang slides between her mother and father and disappears into the next room.

"Let me take your jacket," her mother says. "I am Liu Su-ping." Chinese women do not take their husband's names, and it is evident that I have left the West in the hall.

I shrug out of my jacket and casually leave my package on the little table by the door. As a polite person I do not call attention to the gift; as polite people the Qians pretend not to have noticed it. We go into the living room, full of heavy wooden furniture clearly brought over from China. The elaborately paned window faces the harbor. The apartment is pretty but extraordinarily cramped. I sit and am offered something to drink, which I decline.

"No, please have something," Liu Su-ping insists. She has small soft-looking hands which she keeps clasped tightly together. I decline respectfully. Am I certain I would not like some tea? "San-xiang," she calls, "bring Engineer Zhang some tea."

"No, do not bother yourself," I say. I am not an engineer, I'm an engineering *tech*. A technician. Two-year degree, not four. I hate when people call me an engineer.

"It is sent by my sister, Dragon Well tea, from Huangzhou," she says.

Having politely declined three times I can now say yes, I would be pleased to have some tea. It is always easier to let people give

you something than to convince them that you are not being polite, that you really just don't want it.

Now, however, while San-xiang makes tea, silence falls.

"So," I say in Mandarin, "I have always meant to ask you, Foreman Qian, where is your family from?" There is a little burst of conversation. His family is from Chengde, in the west. Her family is from Wenzhou, in the south. They met when he was on a two-year assignment in her province. Where is my family from?

I can only say I don't know. Elder Zhang was born and raised in the States. I have a grandfather on the West Coast but I haven't seen him in twenty years. And there is no need to discuss my mother so I don't mention her.

"You speak Mandarin very well," Liu Su-ping says. "Where did you learn it?"

"I went to the Brooklyn Middle School of Theory and History and all of our classes were in Mandarin," I say, "but I am afraid I was not so quick as my classmates. My Mandarin is very poor."

Oh no, oh no, they say, it is very good, very smooth. Oh no, I say, they flatter me.

We lapse into silence. My only consolation is that I must not be making a good impression.

San-xiang brings in tea on a tray. The tea is served out of a pretty porcelain tea pot. It is nice tea, smoky and strong. I say so.

San-xiang serves tea and sits down, eyes on her lap. She is dressed nicely but more casually than I expected. Foreman Qian is in tailored coveralls, he is dressed exactly as he is every day at work. But San-xiang and her mother are dressed in tunics with mandarin collars over tights, very casual. The clothes might even be from China. I am overdressed and conservative, wearing a long black shirt to mid-thigh, but I thought this would be more formal. It is too late to worry. I wish I was brave enough to do something truly rude.

After a moment San-xiang gets up and goes back into the kitchen and returns with a plate full of peanuts, candied walnuts

and ersatz quail eggs. I hate ersatz quail eggs, but I carefully taste everything.

I am relieved that I have to get up early tomorrow, it will provide me with an excuse to leave early.

Dinner progresses pretty much as the rest of the evening has, that is to say, laboriously. The food is good; pork stuffed with hard-cooked eggs, dumplings, a fresh salad, and lastly, soup. Foreman Qian and I talk business and in the course of the evening San-xiang says hardly anything to me. I keep waiting to hear her speak. Her voice, when she does speak, is high and soft, a little girl's voice. I know she is in her early twenties. A very sheltered girl, I think.

At nine I apologize and say I must be at work early the next day, I have a strict boss. Foreman Qian laughs. "It has been good to have you, we don't have guests often."

I am not surprised, considering that they seem to have little social grace. "I have had a wonderful evening," I lie.

"I realize that you two have not had much chance to get to know each other," Foreman Qian says. "Next you must spend some time together."

San-xiang glances sideways at her mother. I feel the color start to rise in my face. Why does his suggestion sound somehow illicit? Not sexual, but I feel compromised. "Yes," I agree. "Perhaps next time we will have more chance to talk."

"Perhaps on Saturday, you two might take the time to get to know each other."

Lenin and Mao Zedong. But I beam like an idiot. "That would be very nice," I say. "Saturday."

"Fine," Foreman Qian says, "you decide what you should do. And I will see you tomorrow."

The door closes and I am standing in the hall. I stare at the closed door.

Oh shit.

* * *

"Perhaps," I suggest to Foreman Qian, "your daughter would like to go to a vid with me." This is a nasty comedy we play, one of Shakespeare's problem comedies, like *Measure for Measure*. A tragedy that has lost its nerve and is trying desperately to pair principals who have no business with each other.

He nods, he is doing accounts. After he has finished whatever he is writing he looks up at me. "I think you with her to kite race go. Often you tell me you to kite race go. *Hao buhao?*"

"I don't know. Maybe kite race have no interest," I say, falling into Chinglish.

"This time, first time my daughter to kite race go. She tell me it have interest."

"Ah, good," I say. "We to kite race will go."

I don't want to take her to the kite races, they don't start until nine-thirty and if I took her to a vid I could take her at seven-thirty and have her home by eleven-thirty, midnight at the latest. If she's as charming as she was at dinner it's going to be a night that will feel like six months anyway.

So Saturday I again present myself at flat sixteen at the building on Bay Shore. The door is opened by Liu Su-ping, San-xiang's mother, and I am forced to make small talk while San-xiang finishes getting ready. She finally appears in tights and a long red jacket. She has nice taste in clothes but the night already has the same out-of-synch quality as all those times in middle school when I took a girl out. At least now I am not hoping that something will arouse some sort of latent heterosexuality.

We are told to have a good time and then we leave. She watches the floor, and then the numbers in the elevator. I resist the impulse to say, "Nice weather."

We walk towards the subway and suddenly she says in English, "I want to tell you I'm very sorry about this."

"Nothing to be sorry about," I say brightly.