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Nicole Mones: A Novelist Who Exemplifies Chinese-American Friendship

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periment that until recently enslaved blacks and women. But her main focus is China.

Sections include China's history (chaotic), urban migration (doubled in past 20 years), health care (unstable), materialism (on the rise), the pursuit of religion, and environmental challenges. Of this last topic, she writes, "More than three-fourths of the country's forests have disappeared. Two-thirds of its 600 cities fail to meet the country's air quality standards. Only one percent of China's urban dwellers breathe air considered safe. Water pollution is severe and deteriorating. Ninety percent of urban rivers are polluted, 62 percent of surface water cannot support fish, and 26 percent is unsuited for any purpose. In addition, about one hundred cities in northern China were suffering severe water shortages."

Interspersed among these alarmingly heavy topics are personal vignettes about the realization of her impossible dream to study in the U.S. And at the end of each chapter is a section wrap-up, which reiterates the East-West differences presented, but stresses these should be complementary differences.

"In today's globalized world, it is in our best interest to learn from each other. Once we understand the different modes of thought between the West and the East, such as linear versus non-linear thinking, we can see they are actually complementary, like the right and left sides of the brain. By learning to use both, we can achieve a greater oneness in thought that we can use to enhance personal and global problem solving for the betterment of all."

The Chinese Dream will be of interest to those readers wanting a basic summary of some of the major issues facing China and the U.S. today, and those needing a reminder of why it's vital—as many members have oft repeated—that our nations be friends.

Nicole Mones: A Novelist Who Exemplifies Chinese-American Friendship
By Andrea Kempf
Delacorte Press:
- Lost in Translation, 1998
- A Cup of Light, 2002
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt:
- The Last Chinese Chef, 2007
- Night in Shanghai, 2014

In 1977 at the age of 25, speaking no Chinese, Nicole Mones went to China and began trading textiles. In the course of seventeen years she learned Chinese, developed a thriving business, and observed the astounding changes that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution. Then she began to write novels drawing on her experiences and the things she had learned and observed. So far she has published four highly praised works of fiction that focus on Americans living and working in China, their relationships with Chinese men and women, and little-known aspects of Chinese history and culture.

Published in 1998, Mones's first novel, Lost in Translation, won the Kafka Prize for the year's best work of fiction by an American woman, the Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Association Book Award for the year's best novel from the five northwestern states, and was selected as one of the New York Times Book Review's Notable Books.

It tells the story of Alice Mannegan, the daughter of a Congressman noted for his prejudice against African Americans. To flee her father's racist reputation, Alice moved to China where she is an interpreter for English-speaking business people. She also actively pursues one-night stands with Chinese men she picks up in bars. Then she is hired by an American paleontologist who believes the missing bones of the Peking man were hidden in the deserts of Northwest China by the French scholar Teilhard de Chardin when the Japanese invaded China in World War II.

As the paleontologists begin their work, Alice learns about Chinese archaeological prehistory. She also learns about some of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution from a Chinese archaeologist in the group whose wife has been missing for 20 years since her arrest. Combining the present with the past, American racial prejudice with Chinese racial prejudices, and a serious investigation of archaeology, Mones offers readers a view of China rarely seen in American fiction. She writes with the knowledge of an insider who is captivated by China and Chinese culture.

A Cup of Light, published four years later, was the author's second novel. In this work she moves to the world of Chinese porcelain and into the universe of art lovers, art forgers, and smugglers. Again she introduces the reader to an American woman in China, protagonist Lia Frank, an expert in antique porcelain. She has been sent to China to evaluate a collection for a buyer in the United States.

In this book, as in Lost In Translation, a lonely American woman is working in China. She becomes involved in intrigues surrounding the collection. Are the pieces authentic? How will the sellers smuggle the collection into Hong Kong since it is illegal to sell Chinese treasures abroad? Who forges these pieces with such accuracy?

The reader and Lia encounter smugglers, forgers, and Chinese officials who want to keep China's historical treasures in China. She also meets an American doctor who just might add romance to her hitherto quiet life. This novel is part mystery, part romance, and part scholarly lesson on the history and art of Chinese porcelain. A Cup of Light illuminates an aspect of Chinese art and history that most readers will encounter for the first time.

Mones's third novel, The Last Chinese Chef, explores the Chinese culinary world. The protagonist is Sam Liang, a direct descendant of the last Chinese Emperor's chief chef. Sam has returned to China to open a restaurant and reconnect with his family, whose attention to culinary
excellence exceeds the imagination. He is also competing for a place on
the Chinese Olympic Food Team.

Enter Maggie McElroy, an American food writer whose magazine
has sent her to China to write about Sam's restaurant while she is also on
a personal mission to discover if her recently deceased husband had a
child in China and whose family is pressing a claim against the estate.

Again Mones manages to combine a romance with a serious discussion of
an aspect of Chinese culture, this time food. And the author does know her
food. She is a contributing writer for Gourmet Magazine. The Last Chinese
Chef won first place in the World Gourmand Cookbook Award contest in
the U.S. and third place worldwide. Most delightful is her depiction of
Sam's cranky family of chefs who want him to succeed, but are rigid in
their approaches to perfection.

Finally there is her latest novel, Night in Shanghai. This time Nicole Mones
ventures into Chinese history. She writes about Shanghai in the
1930s on the verge of World War II. At that time Shanghai was one of
the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. The British, French, Americans,
and Japanese had carved out concessions in the city. The Chinese
did not require visas for entry, which made the city a haven for Jews fleeing
the Holocaust in Europe. The population loved jazz, so African American
musicians were imported to the city to entertain the population.

Night in Shanghai manages to tell several stories with historical accuracy. There is the story of the African American musicians who were free and
more respected in China than they ever were in the United States. There is the story of the Shanghai Ghetto, whose 20,000-plus Jewish
refugees were saved from extermination. There is the story of the growing divide between the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-Shek and the
Communists led by Mao Tse-tung, whose inability to join forces aided the
Japanese in their conquest of China during World War II. There is the story of the tongs, the gangs who controlled much of Shanghai's business—legal and illegal. In addition, there is Mones's signature love story to keep the readers' interest.

In sum, Nicole Mones has written four fascinating novels about Americans in China in the 20th and 21st centuries from an insider's perspective.
She has explored archaeology, fine porcelain art history, cuisine, and
Shanghai on the eve of World War II. She speaks Chinese, she knows the
Chinese people. She is a member of the Committee on U.S.-China Relations. She may possibly be the first American woman since Pearl Buck to write so knowledgeably about China. Her novels are well worth reading.

Andrea Kempf, Professor/Librarian Emeritus at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, was named Fiction Book Reviewer of the Year 2000 by the Library Journal. She is also an alumnus of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center, University of Hawai'i.

New Literature from China

By Andrea Kempf

The Fat Years
By Chan Koonchung/Chen Guanzhong

Winter Sun Poems
By Shi Zhi
Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2012, translation by Jonathan Stalling

In The Fat Years, a fascinating novel that was officially banned in
China, journalist Chan Koonchung describes a not too distant future
when China has entered the "Age of Ascendancy." At the same time, the
economy has tanked in the West, and former economic powerhouses
like the United States, France, and Germany are struggling to stay afloat.
Furthermore, almost everyone in China is happy, not necessarily euphoric, but certainly satisfied with life. Those few who are not always smiling remember a month before the announcement of China's economic ascendance that was filled with chaos and bloodshed—a month that seems to have disappeared from the memories of the Chinese citizenry.

The mystery of the missing month is driving certain people on a mission. They want to know the truth. This disparate group includes an itinerant world traveler named Fang Caodi; Little Xi, a failed lawyer who posts anti-government screeds on the Internet as she hides in various places throughout China; and Zhang Dou, a young man who was a child slave-laborer and now plays guitar in small restaurants. They converge on a noted Taiwanese author, Old Chen, who has moved to Beijing because life has become so pleasant in China.

At first, Old Chen doesn't want to get involved with these people. However, he has a long-standing crush on Little Xi, so his romantic interest gets the better of his desire to continue his pleasant existence. Then Fang Caodi begins to present his evidence to Old Chen. It seems that old publications and journals are no longer available in print—only online; however, the online versions have airbrushed out occurrences like the Tianannmen Square uprising and similar unpleasant events of the past sixty plus years.

More important, there are no magazines or newspapers from the
missing month. Fang Caodi has collected small bits of evidence, like a few pages of a publication from the missing month that he found in a trash can, a scrap of paper mentioning the crackdown of that month.

The mystery builds. It leads Old Chen to an underground Protestant
Church in Henan Province where Little Xi has found refuge, but not
religion. It takes him to the home of Old Chen's girlfriend. There is Miaomiao, a former journalist, who is now somewhat out of her mind and spends her days feeding stray cats.

The answers come when the group kidnaps a high-ranking party official and learn what happened to the missing month, why everyone is so content with life, and what the Politburo's plans are for the people of China.

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