



## China Mountain Zhang

*Maureen F. McHugh*

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## **China Mountain Zhang** Maureen F. McHugh

With this groundbreaking novel, Maureen F. McHugh established herself as one of the decade's best science fiction writers. In its pages, we enter a post-revolution America, moving from the hyper-urbanized eastern seaboard to the Arctic bleakness of Baffin Island; from the new Imperial City to an agricultural commune on Mars. The overlapping lives of cyber-kite fliers, lonely colonists, illicit neural-pressball players, and organic engineers blend into a powerful, taut story of a young man's journey of discovery. This is a macroscopic world of microscopic intensity, one of the most brilliant visions of modern SF.

## **China Mountain Zhang Details**

Date : Published April 15th 1997 by Orb Books (first published March 1992)

ISBN : 9780312860981

Author : Maureen F. McHugh

Format : Paperback 313 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Dystopia, Lgbt

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## From Reader Review China Mountain Zhang for online ebook

### Bradley says

This book is one that's brilliant on multiple levels, but first, you have to manage your expectations. What do I mean?

This came out in 1990 but it resembles the more modern trend of literary SF in that most of the focus is on characterization and social interactions but in my opinion, it is superior to those because McHugh's wild worldbuilding is detailed, pervasive, and devoted to a fundamental conclusion. Or several conclusions. Interesting ones. In this respect, it's more like Samuel Delany's work.

Stand out features: Post-American revolution where China takes it over. The MC and the focus are on the LGBT community, including a very dystopian view of living conditions, especially in China. Revisionist history, it also has complicated things to say about how history is made that breaks away from most older SF in that it relies on Systems Theory, and best of all, the whole book IS a Study In Systems Theory.

I loved the world-building, and I really got into the main character, himself named China Mountain Zhang, but it's the interwoven nature of the tightly focused life he lives, the one day at a time style of writing that gradually catches hold of you and won't let go.

Like I said, it's more literary SF than anything, but it has a really awesome hard-SF core that satisfies on several additional levels. I definitely recommend this for any classic SF afficiandos who like their stories full of character.

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### Michelle says

if the plot had been half as interesting as the characters were, or the world they inhabit is, this book would have been fantastic. as it is, only so-so.

basic concept summary: china has come out on top of the political/ideological dogpile, so the world is a (mostly) socialist sino-centric place. the good schools, the quality jobs, the big money, and all the envy & prestige are gazing toward china. enter zhang, who's chinese/hispanic - his parents had him gene spliced as a kiddo to look purely asian, and it serves him rather well - a sort of dead-end-job slacker feeling some post-adolescent blahs. the plot is very basic & straightforward, and pretty much serves only to push our quasi-hero through interactions with others. the people are all marvelously realized, and somehow you genuinely care about the characters, all the while being completely unsurprised (perhaps even unimpressed) by the plot itself.

not really standard sci-fi fare (there's a real minimum of space travel, no green-skinned martians, etc), more of the modernist dystopian future sort of speculative fiction. it's an intriguing world with captivating people in it, just wish the story was as engaging to match.

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## Cheryl says

The GR-default cover (red & black, vibe of a pyramid) is much better than the mm pb I read (military vibe). This is not an adventure, much less a military one. It is world-building, it is philosophy, it is character development and interaction. How does one young man, a gay "half-breed," stumble up from being an ordinary construction worker to being a professor of organic engineering? From being uncomfortable with his identity to realizing that he can bring beauty and joy to the worlds?

I do recommend it to anyone who reads Speculative or Literary Fiction. If you're like me, you might have trouble with the first section. But persist, at least until Baffin Island. Google for images of Baffin Island. Watch how everything kinda sorta comes together, but not really, just like real-life. Pay attention to all the gritty details of this extrapolated alternative future (sure, some things the author got wrong, but everything certainly seems plausible from her perspective in 1992)... it's not really a dystopia, but fans of same might like it too....

The epigraph by Albert Camus is apt: "A simple way to get to know about a town is to see how the people work, how they love, and how they die."

"Einstein [the billy goat] does his trick, leaping high over Carmin [a nanny] and pushing off the wall to vault into the middle of the pack. Goats do well in light gravity [Mars], unlike cows, poor stupid things."

"I hadn't changed by getting on a shuttle and coming to Mars. I wasn't happy. I can't say it was a mistake, I wasn't happy on earth, either. But on earth at least I was comfortable. For a long time I wasn't comfortable on Mars. Six months after I got here I about made up my mind to go home, but I kept putting off doing anything about it and now it's gotten to the point where it's easier to stay than go."

Ah, I'm not doing a good job of explaining why I enjoyed and admire this book, or of recommending it. Maybe you'd be more interested if I admitted that I'm not giving my copy away, and do plan to reread it? Well, put it on your list anyway. Maybe someday you'll be lucky enough to have time to enjoy and admire it yourself.

(Oh, and don't let it bother you that McHugh is allergic to the semi-colon.)

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Second read. Again found it entertaining, satisfying, and impressive. Highly recommended. I'm glad to see that there's a kindle edition... it's worth it, imo.

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## Nancy says

The story is set in a near future US that has undergone a socialist revolution and the Second Great Depression and is dominated by China. Each section is a novelette-sized story featuring several characters in different locations -- New York City, Baffin Island, China and Mars. The characters are engaging, realistic and likeable. The story is upbeat and enjoyable, though I found myself wanting more at the end.

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## **Manuel Antão says**

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

“*Dao ke dao, fei chang dao*” = “The way that can be spoken is not the way” (page 220).

This simple aphorism exemplifies the tone of this novel. Lots of things left unsaid, but at the same time, because of that, conveying lots of meaning.

I've just finished this astonishing novel and I'm still trying to deal how it made feel.

One of the things that impressed me the most was McHugh's refusal to let her secondary characters remain two dimensional pictures in the novel. It included several parallel stories apart from Zhang's story, each one of them quite above average writing-wise.

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## **Ian says**

When I was reading *China Mountain Zhang*, I was enthralled by the authenticity of the characters, the believability of their words and actions, and the credibility of the future that McHugh envisions. It was thoughtfully and elegantly written. I truly felt for, and felt with, the characters. I didn't have to suspend disbelief as the storyline was so plausible. It was easy to read. Not "easy" like Shoots and Ladders is easy to play, but easy in the way a beautiful painting (or a beautiful woman) is easy to look at.

Sounds great, you say? Sign you up, you say? Well before you rush out and grab a copy, take note of the qualifier to begin my description: "When I was reading ...." Think about that for a second. So long as I held the book in my hands, I had a hard time putting it down. Eventually, though, I had to put it down for the most practical of reasons, like sleeping, making dinner, driving to work, actually working while at work (a rarity) ... you know, stupid things. Then, having been away from the book for a few minutes or hours or days, I had a hard time picking it back up. I just wasn't interested. I was satisfied with what I'd read and didn't feel the need to read any more. I did ultimately finish the book, but only after making a conscious effort, time and again, to pick the darn thing up.

Each time I picked up *China Mountain Zhang*, I was glad I did so, as I again immersed myself into McHugh's very believable future and very sympathetic characters. Then, each time I put it down, I had little or no interest in picking it up again. So the three stars represent the enjoyment I had while reading it, and the two missing stars are for the disinterest in finishing it.

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## **Daniel Roy says**

I always feel guilty when I quit a book halfway through, and I don't think I've ever felt guiltier than with this novel. Everything about it sounds like I would absolutely love it. But yet as I made my way through the pages, I found myself dreading my reading sessions more and more, until I just decided it was time to move

on.

That's not to say I don't recognize the book's strengths, and there are many. The idea of a futuristic world where China has taken over the United States is brilliant, and it's executed with brio. Ms. McHugh clearly understands Chinese culture and grasps the flavors of language. I've lived for three years in China, and I was thrilled at these aspects.

Also very appealing was the protagonist, Zhang Zhong Shan. He's such a refreshing change from the usual SF tropes: he's of mixed ethnicity, gay, and an everyman in a genre that seems to prefer world-shaking Übermenschen.

So, where did *China Mountain Zhang* go wrong with me? Two major issues.

First, even though I liked the realistic, toned down nature of the characters, they just felt flat to me. They lack any ambition or spark, and feel colorless and depressing. Zhang himself was no exception. He has nothing to live for, no ambition that drives him. He's flotsam. That sounds like an interesting choice of character on paper, but it just drove me nuts reading it. I found myself growing increasingly annoyed at his flat delivery, his restraint, his lack of emotion.

Second, the plot doesn't go anywhere. It wanders slowly through a world which in its scope is promising, but in its details is dull and colorless. The kite races didn't inspire wonder; there was no adrenaline to them, only some sort of detached description of going through the motions.

All that being said, I can't shake the feeling that this book was great, but I was just not a great enough reader to appreciate it. *China Mountain Zhang*, it's not you, it's me. I hope you go on to better readers who will show you the love you deserve.

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## Brad says

\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\* This is a reading journal rather than a review, so it will be riddled with unmarked spoilers. You have been warned.

**China Mountain -- Zhang:-** So far, Zhang is nothing like I expected, neither the character nor the book. I expected a cyber-punk action thriller, and it may still become that, but this first chapter offers no signs that a change is going to come. At this point it is a study of two characters: Zhang and San-xiang; the former is our gay half-ABC (American Born Chinese) half-Spanish (from Spain) engineer; the latter is our unfortunately "ugly" political girl. It's them, together, moving through New York in a Chinese dominated near (not so near?) future, thrust together by her Chinese parents and finding that they quite like each other despite his sexuality (which she never seems to peg) and her ugliness (which fascinates him). It's moody, it's atmospheric, and the milieu is entirely plausible. But the banality of the tale, so far, is quite a surprise. It is an average character study that could just as easily be told in your city, right now, today, and it would still be as likable and readable as this story is. If there is going to be something more like actiony Sci-Fi I can't imagine how it would come about. But then, I don't think I want it to. I am liking this book for its banality. Why not set a story like this in the future? Works for me.

**Kites -- Angel:** Now it feels like my favourite of things -- a book of short stories loosely, loosely connected, and I will be disappointed if this book is pegged into a novelistic plot. I don't want to go back to Zhang (at

least not too often); I want new people, new experiences, in this future Socialist Union of American States; I want criminals or a nurse in a future hospital or maybe even some other kite fliers; I want more exploration of gender, of the bents and the straights; I want a far reaching set of stories rather than one deep exploration told close to the body. I loved Angel and her kite flying genius, but I need someone new.

**Baffin Island -- Zhang:** I am fully convinced now that if this is a novel it is a novel consisting of short stories, even though two of them already follow the same guy. There is no plot to speak of, and I love that -- “Fuck plot,” I say. This is all about character and place, and places -- be they New York or Baffin Island -- are characters in this book. I continue to adore Arctic tales too, so the story of Zhang in the Arctic station doing the maintenance work for a bunch of scientists tracking whales, nearly losing his shit in the *land of the noontime moon* is exactly the sort of tale I am made to love. I feel the need to go North before it is completely gone, before I am gone. Enough about me: it’s a great chapter as Zhang begins to see himself, and I find myself cheering him on. I can’t wait to see what we get and where we go next.

**Jerusalem Station -- Martine:** A commune on Mars. Crazy. Nothing prepared me for the leap from Earth to Mars, but it was deftly handled by McHugh, and it’s another *place* lovingly turned into a character in the tale. Martine’s goat farm/apiary, and the round about way she falls in love with (or falls in care for) Alexi and Theresa is exactingly created. It is all nuance, nuance written to capture truth in a future that almost seems like it is rather than it could be. I am officially in love with this book now. And Martine and Alexi. I have no idea what else Maureen F. McHugh has written but it is something I am going to read. (one more thing: as I finished the chapter I couldn’t help noticing the word “nurse” in the first line or two of the next chapter. I love that I am going to get my wish.)

**Ghost -- Zhang:** The hint of a plot finally appears in *Ghost—Zhang*, but only because it is our third chapter following the life of Zhang. He’s in China after his stint in the Arctic, studying Engineering at the prestigious University of Nanjing, and he’s in love with his tutor, a man named Haitao. In love in a place where being “bent” is a crime that the government either *Reforms Through Labour* or solves with a bullet in the back of the head. Zhang seems a bit naïve about the threat and the world he’s living in, but that naïveté is gone by the time Haitao kills himself. The slightest nudge and all the gains we’ve made will tumble and we’ll be hiding in back alleys and parks all over again. It’s a fucking tightrope. This story hit me where I live.

**Homework -- Alexi:** Goats. Goats and marriage. Goats and marriage and a tutor for Alexi’s correspondence course through the University of Nanking (a tutor named Zhang). This is, perhaps, the most banal chapter of the lot, but lovely in its simplicity, even so.

**Three Fragrances -- San-xiang:** I can’t help thinking of my biannual re-reading of Jonathon Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*. Written nearly 400 years ago, Swift’s pamphlet is a catalogue of everything that is wrong with the world. Except it’s not simply a catalogue of what was wrong in his world of 1729, it is a catalogue of what’s wrong in our world of 2012. The problems are all the same. What’s wrong never changes; hence, my confidence that we are doomed to create our own extinction because we can’t change. We like to pretend things are better, but they’re not. And here’s San-xiang, face finally restructured, jaw firmly and perfectly in place, looking pretty for the first time in her life, and a predator picks out her vulnerability, and she walks inexorably into the predator’s lair, and he rapes her. McHugh doesn’t shy away from telegraphing what’s to come, and that dramatic irony is what creates the suspense that pushes this story forward. When it finally happens, when Billy rapes San-xiang, but worse seems oblivious to having raped her, I felt the ache that took me to Jonathon Swift and the thought that nothing changes. Why doesn’t it? I’m convinced it is because we invariably treat symptoms rather than diseases. But I have been known to make mistakes ... from time to time.

**Rafael -- Zhang:** I could read another three hundred pages in McHugh's future world. The stories were that good. This final short wraps up the "novel" precisely as it should -- with life continuing for everyone in the directions they've chosen or had thrust upon them. There are connections that all link back to Zhang, connections to all the other players from all the other stories, that are touched with the most delicate of touches, and none of them feel too good to be true. There is no destiny at work, no impossible predetermined coming together of people from different places. They're simply intersections and crossings between lives -- all of which make perfect sense (the sorts of things I've experienced again and again in my own life). *China Mountain Zhang* is about a possible world that probably won't happen, but could. It is an act of Sci-Fi world building that I've rarely seen matched. But for me, McHugh's real achievement is the people she created. They are beautiful. The whale scientists and engineers and hustlers and Martian colonists, the wounded the harmed the foolish the suicidal the nasty the kind the living, and the dead, San-Xiang and Haitao and Invierno and Peter and Zhang. I will miss them.

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### **Alfred Haplo says**

Nothing about *China Mountain Zhang* \* has immediate appeal. Both the man named thus, and the book. A SciFi story about a closet gay, biracial engineer in a sino-centric world where chinese communism reigns supreme after a revolution - "Great Cleansing Winds" Campaign - with America kowtowing as its second class socialist comrade seems like too much mental acrobatics for a lazy weekend.

Fortunately, it is not terribly taxing. For starters, there is not much of a plot. Or energy. Or complicated SF-esque technology. Or, even much connection between chapters, between characters, between me and them, between what I was reading and why I like it. Even the revolution is just an ideological box within which our characters navigate, sometimes surreptitiously but never rebelliously at the very farthest corners.

There is no overarching story per se, but there is progression as each character finds their niche. Narratives are first person, though the characters tend to be close-guarded and usually only reactive to the moment, so we never really properly hear feeling or depth in their thoughts. Much of that is perhaps due to strict socio-cultural upbringing and fear of challenging authority, where it is respectful to say yes for no, and no for yes, depending on the "right" response. There are exceptions, and the sparks of this book. Both are outliers with one up in the sky as a human kite, and the other out in space living on a Martian commune.

*China Mountain Zhang* loosely intertwines stories of regular people living in the now, who cross paths superficially. They possess a passivity to life that slows down the pace of the book and my reading faster seems to be the only way to quicken it. What glues it altogether, strangely for me, is a sense of... voyeurism, for lack of a better, politically correct word. We get tantalizing glimpses of the characters, revealed through a chinese silk screen, with the rest to be wondered at. What are they really feeling? Why are they doing this? Is there more to it? Anticipating something revelatory kept me turning the pages but in the end, there is nothing revelatory.

Then there is the main character, Zhang *ZhongShan*, namesake of Sun Yat-sen, a great chinese leader, which literally means *China Mountain Zhang*, and he is also Rafael Luis to his Hispanic mother. To everyone else, he is simply Zhang, a regular last name. That he is gay is quite incidental. Same with being from Brooklyn, NY, biracial and a tech engineer. None of those things explain his inert nature, disrupted only by extreme experiences outside of his control. Much ado is made about his name, a source of self-consciousness and probably the only complex facet of him. Everything else, he is simply Zhang, a regular guy.

Generally, people are depicted kindly. Indeed, there are no overt “bad guys” with the exception of one *weiguoren*. That feels like a peace offering from the author, Maureen McHugh, to her one-time host country in portraying the villain as not the government or those under its charge, but the seductive and errant foreign predator. Characters are written well with a pragmatic, immediate perspective that rings true for those living in an authoritarian state, I think, where choices are limited. Yet, none of the characters have no real choices, as all start their stories with a leg up. At which point, I started seeing the theme as a hopeful one. A “what-people-do-with-advantages”, rather than “people-in-oppression”.

This 1992 pioneer offering was drawn from McHugh’s cultural immersion in China, and coincidentally, published a few years after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Her literary impression of the culture, language and societal governance is largely convincing to this layperson but I wonder how Chinese reviewers from China might perceive a foreigner’s portrayal of communism in this futuristic piece in the 22nd century. It could be offensive, I suppose to some, to be reminded of a perpetual shadow cast over nationalistic progress. As long as people play by rules, then by all means be free and creative. Cross the line between perceived freedom and real freedom, then there will be torture and death.

*“There is a brilliant light inside of me. It is not Christ, it is not Mao Zedong. I do not know what it is. I am Zhang, alone with my light, and in that light I think for a moment that I am free. But I am only free in small places. Government is big, we are small. We are only free when we slip through the cracks.”*

China Mountain Zhang neither endorses nor challenges the system; that is not the story - or his. As we learn, victories start small from within. McHugh helps her characters achieve some measure of success, from immaturity to maturity, idealistic to realistic, isolation to intimacy. She seems determined to tell their stories - her story - on hopeful notes. Overall, it is too optimistic for me but I think that can appeal to many readers.

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[\* Awarded 1993 Lambda Literary Award, 1992 Locus Award Best First Novel, 1992 James Tiptree, Jr. Award. Nominated 1992 Hugo Award Best Novel , 1992 Nebula Award Best Novel]

### **Jamie Collins says**

This is an elegant science fiction novel, set in a future where China has become the dominant world power. The cover blurb tries to impress you with the futuristic setting, but this is a strongly character-driven story, and only loosely plotted. It’s almost a series of related stories rather than one coherent novel. I found it a mesmerizing read.

Most of the book is about a young New Yorker named Zhang trying to make his way in this wonderfully realized future world. His career path is rocky because he’s American Born Chinese rather than a citizen; and also because of other secrets he keeps, including the fact that he’s gay. Zhang is a great character, and I was grumpy the first time the narrative moved away from him.

The other pieces in the novel are concerned with people tangentially connected to Zhang. My favorites were the ones set in the commune on Mars.

The author mostly avoids techno-babble except for some casual talk about “systems” and “jacking in”. My least favorite sequences were those that focused on technology: the kite flyers, the weird game in the men’s

club, and the “organic engineering” conceit.

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### **Scott Hitchcock says**

DNF after 75 pages.

There was zero action and the interactions between the characters had a trite YA quality to them. I put the book down for a couple of days, after 45 pages, to see if a change in mood would help but it didn't. I was engaged in a few other reads and wanted to get back to those.

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### **Wastrel says**

Not recommended for: those who want action and excitement.

China Mountain Zhang is a very peculiar novel. It is set in the China-dominated near future, showing the lives of several characters, particularly one mixed-race gay engineer. It's hard to know how to feel about it. On the one hand, it has an annoying and boring central protagonist, almost no action, little psychological insight or progression, and a setting too close to the real world to be enthralling. On the other hand, it is mostly very well written - the world and the characters are depicted sympathetically and precisely (and I could happily have read novels about some of the secondary characters, who were far more interesting than the main protagonist!). In particular it does a great job of showing a future that, on the one hand, is frankly just a little shitter than our present, but that also has - so rare in SF - the realistic feel of a world that doesn't know it's the future: a world that's still waiting for the future, still excited by its own possibilities, and dismissive of its own accomplishments.

So, on the one hand, I didn't feel that enthralled by it. On the other hand, I for some reason unknown to me kept dipping into it whenever I had a free 30 seconds - I've rarely been so dedicated to reading a book. On the one hand, it didn't leave a stunning impression on me. On the other hand, I keep thinking of it more and more fondly with hindsight.

I'd say it's a book worth reading for what it shows is possible within science fiction - but not, perhaps, a triumph in its own right. I'm certainly going to read more of her work, though.

Anyway, THIS is where you can find my fuller views.

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### **Tatiana says**

This book is one of those that sneak into your high regard. It's not flashy or sensational, it's just very real. The author has the knack of writing characters you care about. All the various subplots weave together, touching at points. You find that you care deeply about what happens to each of them, and the story of their struggles, their loves, and their accomplishments makes really good reading. The world is extremely well-built and realistic. I totally do think China will be the world's main power in not too many more years. Everything about it feels true.

While I was disappointed at the story of my favorite character, the supervisor's daughter, (I thought she got a raw deal, and I would have liked to get more resolution on her story line), I found all the plot-lines engrossing. I want to know, too, what happened to the goats, and if the Martian contingent was able to get their system repaired or replaced in time to prevent any harm to the goats or people.

I thought it was interesting how the author chose a gay man for her title character. I thought it was sad that she depicted a world in which gays are no more accepted than they are today in ours. I would have hoped in 250 years or so that things would be better than that for gays and also for women. But not so.

In all things the book is understated. The struggle is not to save the world or to battle evil, but just to find a place, to make some room in the world in which the characters can live. In that way it's very like our own struggles in life, to earn a living, to pay medical expenses, and so on. It's a book that bears thinking about, one that grows in the imagination, and in the depth of the characters portrayed. I really liked this book.

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### **Carol. says**

China Mountain Zhang is an impressive work, well deserving of its Hugo and Nebula nominations and its Tiptree and Lambda awards. Thoughtful, precise writing and Zhang's fully developed characterization make this a stand-out read, with only overall structure and the subject of one point of view preventing me from awarding a full five stars.

Unfortunately, Goodreads has failed to announce a change in service that includes deleting reviews for being off-topic. They've stopped the mass deletions after people protested, but the policy has not been retracted. The remainder of all my reviews will be posted where they won't be deleted, at wordpress and BookLikes.

<http://clsiewert.wordpress.com/2013/1...>

or

<http://carols.booklikes.com/post/7114...>

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### **Nick Imrie says**

**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

China Mountain Zhang is the perfect protagonist for this subtle, under-stated book. Unambitious and introverted, Zhang is trying not to draw attention to himself, but his attempts to just get by end up with him posted to an Arctic scientific station, studying daoist engineering in Wuxi, tutoring Martian colonists and eventually coming back home to Brooklyn. Through the eyes of China, and the characters who interact with him ever so briefly, we see the world that Maureen F. McHugh has built: a work of seemingly effortless realism.

**The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed** - William Gibson

And this is beautifully demonstrated by the characters lives. As we bounced between viewpoints we see the

difference between the cutting-edge engineering software in Wuxi, which effortlessly attunes to the mind of the user, and the shabby Brooklyn library software which doesn't work even when you're jacked in. From the futuristic Shanghai hospitals where doctors can grow a new kidney inside you, to the hard-scrabble Martian colonies where homesteaders hunt down air-leaks with candles.

Always, always there is a wonderfully quotidian realism to this future. People might be able to jack in and experience a thrilling kite race from the perspective of the driver – but they also have to live in crowded tenements that've been thoughtless sub-divided by careless developers. Gene-splicing exists, but it's expensive and medically restricted. Bureaucracy is still a machine that grinds the unfortunate between its wheels.

### **'Government is big, we are small. We are only free when we slip through the cracks.'**

And yet, this carefully constructed, wonderfully drawn world is never more than backdrop. The focus of the story is always on our characters and their lives. McHugh is brilliantly clear-eyed and pitiless in her depictions. It would be easy to set up China's story as a tragic or heroic: certainly his sexuality has cost him his first job and his chance of a great career in Shanghai: the beating heart of the world economy and the cutting-edge of his profession. But China isn't sentimental about it, and the choices he and other characters make are shown without judgement. China chooses his friends, his lovers, his community – his home, really – without regretting what it costs him. And the ups and downs of his relationships are sympathetically drawn, from the delicate dance of a blossoming love affair to the social protocols of cruising on the boardwalk. Like the cyberpunk elements, this could easily have been sensational and theatrical, but instead, is sympathetic and unremarkable.

There's something terribly lonely about this book: poor China hiding his race and sexuality, San-xiang, isolated by her deformed face; Alexi and Theresa, bounced from pillar to post by an uncaring system; Martine, in her distant homestead. And yet, none of them are helpless. However big and uncaring the world, people still do what they can to steer their own destiny and reach out to help each other. Whatever the future we may live in, we are all still human. By focusing on individual struggles of little people the book resolutely refuses to become 'about' something. There is socialism, but it's not about socialism; it's not about space colonisation, it's not about cyberpunk, racism, homophobia, poverty or a life lived on the margins. It's about the individual people that feature in the story, and of course, because everything effects these people, it kind of is about everything after all.

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### **David says**

I feel pretty confident in saying that this is the best book you've never read. I had the joy of discovering this book when it first came out, almost a decade and a half later, I still feel it is one of the best SF novels I've ever read. The novel is made up of several stories loosely intertwined.

McHugh draws upon her experiences living in China to craft a future in which China has become the dominant power, and America has been reduced to a third-world country controlled by China. Chinese-born Chinese are the top tier of society, while American-born Chinese occupy a lower tier (but are still higher than non-Chinese).

Into this setting, she places Zhang Zhong Shan (which literally translates to China Mountain Zhang), an ABC struggling to move up in society while hiding the fact that he is gay (which is, if I remember correctly,

against the law). Zhang's story is the main story, and there are a few other stories, too. To me, Zhang's story is the most interesting.

The novel won a ton of awards when it came out, and deservedly so. Sadly, McHugh became ill and her writing fell by the wayside after only a few novels. Here's hoping she returns to writing soon! In the meantime, definitely pick up this book, and check out her other novels, as well.

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### **Zach says**

In which the titular character is a gay American man of Chinese descent living in a future post-collapse/revolution US that has become a state-capitalist satellite of the hegemonic People's Republic of China, starting off as a construction foreman and ending up as a kind of super-architect. I just spoiled the entire plot of this book for you, but if you're a plot-centric person this won't appeal to you anyway. This is getting a little too close to the dreaded *bildungsroman* for my taste, but McHugh manages to reign that in to an acceptable degree by using this book as a subversion of the usual dystopic *bildungsroman* in that Zhang, although he grows as a person, is never anything more than a pretty typical guy - he never overthrows or even challenges the system (outside of his participation in the outlawed gay community), or does anything much outstanding or extraordinary. McHugh's inversion of the CHOSEN ONE trope goes so far as to even decentralize Zhang from his own narrative. The book is divided into 9(ish?) sections, with the odd chapters following Zhang and the even ones focusing on other characters very tangentially related to him - these other characters, it might go without saying, being just as believable and unexceptional as Zhang himself.

The novel's message is almost anarchistic in its critique of bureaucracy and emphasis on day-to-day life, but I think this in combination with the inversion of genre/tropes renders the setting vague and unbelievable. Does McHugh intend this the way I read it, as a failed socialist revolution that has faltered and sputtered down into yet another form of state capitalism ("the stranglehold of Stalinism, the form of the counter-revolution in our day, the absolute opposite of the proletarian revolution")? Off-handed references are made throughout to "free-market zones" administered over by the statist bureaucracy, Zhang interns and interviews with various corporations, and the happy ending of the book is his creation of an independent business. Surely we aren't supposed to understand this as an actual communist worker's state? I don't know. Clearly, I am more sympathetic with a reading of this book in the tradition of *1984* as a critique of power systems in general moreso than any particular political ideology.

page 6: "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."

and again on page 44: "There is a brilliant light inside of me. It is not Christ, it is not Mao Zedong. I do not know what it is. I am Zhang, alone with my light, and in that light I think for a moment that I am free. But I am only free in small places. Government is big, we are small. We are only free when we slip through the cracks."

And yet, having brought up *1984*, with all of its impressive gloom and hopelessness, I have to say that with the exception of Zhang's sexuality, none of the characters here face many hardships (with the exception of one chapter that was actually kind of physically difficult for me to read, but that had nothing to do with the larger setting except inasmuch as it shows that things operate pretty much the same way there as they do here) - the bureaucracy seems to be the worst part of this "dystopia." Again, satire of anti-communist individualist genre pieces or just misstep on McHugh's part? Either way, it's all a little too optimistic for me -

the problems here revolve mostly around alienation and dehumanization, with Zhang bringing an appropriately disengaged somnambulant narration to the table.

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### **Sandi says**

I'm not sure what I expected from this book but considering all its awards and nominations I was hoping it was legitimately good. I got what I hoped for. While I love space opera and action styled science fiction, I also love a good character driven story. This falls into the latter category.

I gravitate towards the more specific genres of science fiction such as dystopian, post apoc and cyber punk because they are topics that I've put some thought into. So has McHugh. A Chinese dominated dystopian society is not one I've even considered and add into the mix the fact that the main character is also gay. It made for some really good backdrop, dialogue and therefore good reading. It could even be said this is an alternate universe as it doesn't feel like a distant future.

There are many subplots that almost weave into one. All of them do touch on the main character at one point or another but not all are resolved or are they resolved very obliquely. Which didn't seem to matter to me because I was so caught up in Zhang's character.

I also loved the glimpses into some future or possible current tech. Nothing too earth shattering but the swim suits were a fascinating concept and totally plausible. I'm glad I delved into this book before I ventured into some other current dystopian novels where the emphasis seems to be more on the physical horror.

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### **Lit Bug says**

**3.75/5**

In the 22nd century, China has replaced America as the world's dominant political, economic and cultural capital, following a political revolution in America that has displaced its capitalistic economy and brought in an era of socialism.

It is an immensely well-imagined and portrayed account of a plausible future where China takes precedence over the States – the latter becomes akin to a third-world dump following a financial crisis, while China rises in economic importance, and consequently, in cultural importance. Chinese phrases, Mandarin itself, Chinese dress and cuisine and Chinese genes suddenly become the next-gen cool things, the way everything symbolizing America/the West is hip now. With the Great Cleansing Winds in the US, followed by a Second American Revolution and a Second Civil War, the status-quo is changed.

Zhang Zhong Shan (Rafael), the protagonist, is a young gay man of mixed heritage, a Chinese father and Hispanic mother – born in Brooklyn and having undergone gene splicing in infancy in order to look more 'Chinese' (the reverse of what the Chinese are doing today – double eyelid surgery, for instance, to look more 'Western') and therefore attempting to gain social leverage as well as possible opportunity to study and live in China, his life takes a series of unexpected turns as he navigates through the turmoil of sexuality, cosmetically altered genes, identity and cultural legacy in and out of America, China and the Arctic.

The novel takes place in roughly the same time, following different threads that sometimes merge, and sometimes merely touch each other. While Zhang comes to terms with his life, Martine and Alexis, on Mars, try to eke out a living that ensures them a different kind of security, but at the same time, demands of them a hefty price. San-Xiang, a young Chinese girl in the US struggles to come to terms with her own marginalization on account of her ugly face, and then with the consequences of her cosmetically-enhanced beauty. Haobai, perhaps, followed by San-Xiang, is the most compelling character – the social critique hits the hardest and sharpest in these characters, while it is akin to merely a pervading mist in the rest of the work.

There is so much to both like and dislike in this work – there are aspects of it that sparkle throughout the text – its subtexts, its layers of thought and experience form the crux of the work – the sadness, the sarcasm, the brutality of an unequal, hypocritical world, the variously covert forms of marginalization that follow the lives of hundreds of people eking out a precarious survival. It is a story less of hope, more of the desperation to survive, merely survive – because the dream of flourishing is forbidden. Of forever having to move in the shadows, in the dark. Knowing that coming out in the light would not bestow warmth, but blister their lives, simply because they do not fit into the majority's ideas of normalcy, of acceptability.

The LGBT angle, the marginalization by making it illegal, is a double blow to the hypocrisy of the world – not just a critique of the present, but also a sharp jab at the communists' claim of equality of all, irrespective of everything. One is constantly reminded of Orwell's statement in Animal Farm – Everyone is equal, but some people are more equal than others.

This critique of communism is also resonant in its economic critique, where despite landing as a student of the reputed Nanjing University, Zhang finds it difficult to find a decent job back in the US. As a critique of communism and its ideal of perfect equality, it is breathtaking. The critique is often thinly-veiled, making it all the more impressive in places. As a work that examines the way in which misfits are marginalized, strongly alluding to our present times, it is truly engaging, and in some scenes, brilliant even. The politics of marginalization are acutely present throughout the work as one of its subtexts.

Where this work fails to engage is primarily its plot – the world-building is pretty neat and convincing, the science part adequate to qualify as SF (climate-control equipped homes - and the Kite-flying and ball-game sequences are pure brilliance), but the plot is not linear – chronologically, it is – but it follows no clear direction, even at the end. Like the characters themselves, the reader too is clueless of the novel's destination, which is a bad thing when it turns out at the end that the story has no coherent plot at all.

Agreed, this is more of a Bildungsroman novel, but then it fails mostly on that account too. The story of Zhang is only one of the many threads of the novel, such as Martine/Alexis on Mars, Haobai in China or San-Xiang in the US, and yet, it is, despite taking up the most space, the most flimsy character. He comes out only slightly more mature than he first encounters the world's injustices. A hugely disproportionate time is also spent upon Alexis/Martine, and though it is a charming little episode, they, or the whole existence of the Martian colony, does not in any way affect Zhang's life, save allowing him to think in a different way of solving engineering problems.

The most glaring drawback is that the story of Alexis/Martine is left incomplete, in the sense that there is no definite conclusion into what happened to their farms, which could have been used to magnify even better the consequences of being pushed back onto the fringes.

The most striking characters, rather, are the ones that have served as the background in Zhang's life – San-Xiang, the ugly girl (she appears fleetingly in Zhang's life, but does not make any impact on the way his life

turns out, so in that sense her role is inconsequential to the main crux of the novel), and Zhang's erstwhile mentor and secret lover Haobai. Their scenes are truly touching. It is primarily in these two characters and their scenes that this novel achieves its brilliance, bringing out the sadness, the thinly-veiled critiques, the helplessness and the incurable anguish of surviving on the periphery of an unforgiving society, of being utterly marginalized without hope of redemption – their stories, especially of Haobai, is dealt with astounding maturity and skill, which sort of falls flat in the case of the major character, Zhang Zhong Shan.

Another major drawback of this work is in how much space is allocated to insignificant details. Cooking and eating take up an enormous time, both in the US, China and Mars – food, when used as metaphor, is a brilliant device – but gets in the way when used without significance. Almost every other page threw up pizzas, pastas, salads, noodles, tandoori chicken, burgers, poori, rice and beans, cakes and God-knows-what Thai food.

While it exceeds expectations and shines bright in many places, it also falls below its own spectacular achievements in quite a lot instances. And yet, this is one book I'm glad to have read. Not one of the best, but definitely commendable. Although, I think, it has garnered adequate attention by winning the Lambda, the Locus and the Tiptree Awards, while rightly getting only a nomination for the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

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### **Matt says**

I find it challenging to pinpoint exactly why this book is so remarkable, especially because the plot is not its strength, and I find that's what most people are looking for in a book (I see that many of the lukewarm reviews point to this). Part of my admiration is for the richness of the language. For a 300 pager, the language was dense enough to make me feel I was reading something epic (i.e. longer), and I found myself slowing down to savor every bit. There's no padding . . . every single word counts, and details that you might not think are notable will find their relevance later.

Another aspect I appreciated was that the main character isn't met with implausible intrigues or adventures, which is fairly common in science fiction. This reads as a story about the Everyman in a world (the future? an alternative history?) that's believable and relatable, and the conversations characters have play a large part in the believability because they don't seem contrived. This book is up there among the most believable in the dialogue department that I've ever read.

Finally, I'm a great lover of form experimentation in fiction, and I think this may be the primary reason I've recommended *China Mountain Zhang* to a handful of my favorite fellow readers and writers who experiment with form. Incidental characters get fleshed out in intervals throughout Zhang's story, whether they have any true bearing on the events in Zhang's life or not, giving the reader a feeling of seeing detailed snapshots of how people generally live in this world and what constraints and freedoms they deal with. Some reviewers call this a collection of short stories, but it's more connected and subtle than that.

This form shouldn't work, but it really does. An impressive and truly original reading experience.

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