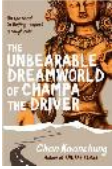


## REVIEW: THE UNBEARABLE DREAMWORLD OF CHAMPA THE DRIVER

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Chan Koonchung. 2014. *The Unbearable Dreamworld of Champa the Driver*. London: Transworld Publishers Ltd., 192 pages. ISBN: 978-0857522078 (paperback, 16.95 USD).

Chan Koonchung's second novel, *The Unbearable Dreamworld of Champa the Driver*, like his first, *The Fat Years* (Chen and Duke 2011), is banned in mainland China for its dystopian and realist depiction of racial discrimination, economic inequality, government corruption, and public dis-ease in contemporary Chinese society. Tracing the adventures of the quintessential anti-hero in the form of Champa, a young Tibetan man from Lhasa on his way to Beijing, a city of wealth, adventure, and opportunity in his mind, Koonchung effectively constructs a depiction of modern youth and masculinity in an economically perilous period, as well as a broader narrative of the difficult relationship between Tibetan and Chinese identity.

The relationship between Champa and Plum, his older, richer, sexually assertive Han Chinese employer serves as an effective representation of the power dynamics between the Tibetan Autonomous Region and China on the political and interpersonal level. In a recent interview in the *Hong Kong Tatler*, Koonchung states that, "I just thought it would be more intriguing to represent Tibetan and China relationships as a sexual relationship – there are certainly more dimensions" (Cheung 2013). Infatuated with her "Champie," demanding of his time and attention, but unwilling to see him as an equal or be seen in public with him among her peers, Plum serves as a representation of the assumed cultural and governmental perspective of the Chinese government towards Tibet and Tibetan culture. Lest this imply the novel is politically and racially biased, Koonchung twists the metaphor to counter the dominant rhetoric of Tibetan narratives, which tend to fall either into romanticism reminiscent of James Hilton's (1933) *Lost Horizon*, or vitriolic polemics vilifying Chinese culture as well as Chinese governmental policy. As Koonchung himself says, "These are the two most powerful stereotypes-the romantic stereotype and the victim stereotype-but if

Murphy, Christine. 2016. Review: The Unbearable Dreamworld of Champa the Driver. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 40:515-518.

you live among Tibetans for a while you know it's not the only story" (Whitehead 2014).

Plum, as the dominant power in the relationship, is female and stands in stark contrast to the cultural patriarchy of traditional Chinese society. Plum pays Champa for sex, another subversion of assumedly appropriate behavior, but as Champa's sexual interest in her fades while his economic instability remains, he finds himself going to ever increasing lengths to psychologically enable himself to perform sexually for a woman he no longer desires. This seems to thwart the frequently publicized notion of Tibet and consequently, of Tibetans, as wild, romantic, and untamed. Instead, we see a stark, sad depiction of manipulation and financial dependency.

"My protagonist," Koonchung says in a recent interview with *Time Out Beijing*, "is a very modern, young, Chinese-speaking male...I wanted to cut across this stereotyping and write a Tibet story without falling into these traps" (Middlehurst 2015).

However, Champa is not a two dimensional picture of victimhood. If Plum represents the dominant rhetoric of Han Chinese governmental and public opinion, then her daughter, Shell, is modern China's burgeoning middle class and intellectual youth. Just as professors of Religious Studies remind their undergraduates that religion exists in both the textual ideal and the lived reality, so too do Plum and Shell seem to represent both the historical depiction of Chinese identity, as well as the nuanced complications of contemporary Chinese life. Champa is initially swept up in Plum's economic and social influence, literally carried away in her car to Beijing, his personal Shangri La, only to be left disillusioned by her disengagement, obsession with money, and disinterest in him as anything other than a sexual object. In much the same way, his relationship with Shell is multifaceted. As a literal next generation of Plum, rebellious, bohemian Shell is subjected to Champa's sexual obsession and his aggressive, albeit unsuccessful, impulses to control her. One wonders, in this instance, if Champa and Plum, representations of Tibet and Old China, respectively, share a similar intoxication and frustration regarding the complicated New China that Shell so clearly represents. Ultimately, Champa leaves, or is left by, both women, no longer dependent on Plum or fascinated by Shell. His fantasy of life in Beijing stands in direct contrast to the reality of his experiences there, and he returns to Lhasa.

Heavy-handed metaphors aside, the strength of Koonchung's text lies in his ability, at once subtle and horrifying, to interweave fictitious depictions of contemporary political problems into his

narrative. Several passages in the book highlight the difficulties of urban life for a recent immigrant, but the most effective are those depicting the daily struggles of average people as they attempt to build a life for themselves in Beijing's complicated city sprawl. In a particularly moving scene, written to emulate a conversation had only through mobile phones, Champa joins Shell and her NGO as they protest a truck full of stolen dogs, all pets with nametags, which will be sold for meat. In another vignette, when Champa leaves his job at Shell's animal rescue organization to begin work as a security guard, he quickly realizes that he is working at a "black jail," or illegal, but commonplace, detainment center. Used predominantly for housing, without trial, protestors who come to Beijing to petition against governmental injustice, these jails were long denied but, as evinced by recent investigative reports in the *New York Times* and *Caijing*, are very real in modern Beijing.

Similarly, Koonchung effectively weaves allusions to recent Tibetan history throughout the text. An enigmatic hitchhiker explains he has abandoned the pursuit of a conventional life following the 3-14 riots, reminding us of the 2008 tragedy in which the observance of Tibetan Uprising Day turned into multiple instances of looting, rioting, and killing across the Tibet Autonomous Region and beyond. Later, Champa learns of the thousands of Tibetans who were detained and "re-educated" when they attempted to return to China after the 2012 Kalakchakra Initiation of the Dalai Lama in Bodh Gaya, India. He also comments on the six separate checkpoints that exist between the first town of the Tibet Autonomous Region and Lhasa, checkpoints that exist solely to prevent Tibetan residents outside Lhasa from entering the city. Many of these situations may be unknown to a percentage of Koonchung's readers, and it is to his credit that they read as part of the overall narrative. There are further references to historically documented instances of torture, famine, and genocide throughout the text, but these conversations or commentaries are deftly written and never feel like a veiled lecture.

The translation of the original Chinese by Nicky Harman is smooth, effectively incorporating slang and colloquialisms. The novel reads quickly, as a funny, if at times unsteady, travelogue told by a loquacious, salacious friend. The greatest success of the novel, in this reviewer's opinion, is not the depiction of the complexities between Tibet and China as a metaphorical sexual relationship, nor the perpetuation of casual misogyny and gender violence as an accepted facet of youthful masculinity, but rather the accessible representation of the nuanced complexities of contemporary Beijing and Lhasa

identity. In an academic classroom, younger readers, particularly those in lower-level university courses focusing on the sociology and contemporary politics of the regions, may derive the most enjoyment from the text. Although flawed, *The Unbearable Dreamworld of Champa the Driver* provides readers outside of the Chinese and Tibetan context an opportunity to avoid cliché, and instead observe a realistic depiction of a complicated life.

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