

With three you get egg roll

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Mention the word ‘Chinese’ these days and most folks think of Wal-Mart goods and takeaway restaurants. That’s a shame, because China is home to one of the world’s oldest and most distinctive civilizations, a rich culture harbouring many diverse and colourful traditions. Of course, not all traditions are benevolent: the ancient Tongs have morphed into today’s Triads, gangs of organized criminals whose members number in the thousands, and whose reach is world-wide. Not surprising, then, that crime writers should turn to China for inspiration.

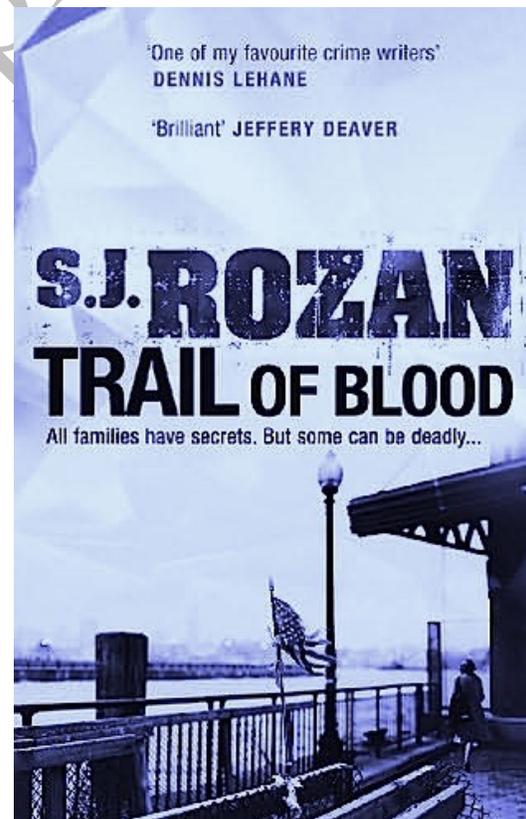
This week, then, a trio of tales that have their roots in China: each is unique, and each author draws upon Chinese culture to tell a captivating story in which personal and cultural histories are inextricably intertwined. And just as modern China itself casts its influence over the globe, so each of these tales inevitably finds its way back to North America, in ways that will shape their character’s lives in this part of the world.

S. J. Rozan, *Trail of Blood*

(Ebury Press/Random House Group,
2009)

After a hiatus of several years award-winning author S. J. Rozan has returned to her fine series of tales featuring New York-based P.I. Lydia China and her estranged partner, Bill Smith. Shortly after Lydia is asked by a former mentor to locate a missing brooch known as the

Shanghai Moon her friend is killed, and Lydia is dismissed from the case. But his death weighs heavily upon her, and she reunites with her partner Bill to pursue the case on their own. Their quest will take them back to the Shanghai of the Second World War and into a ghetto established by Jewish refugees who had fled Europe in a desperate attempt to avoid the Nazis. Before it is over the trail of the missing brooch will lead back to New York City, where the past will catch up with the present.



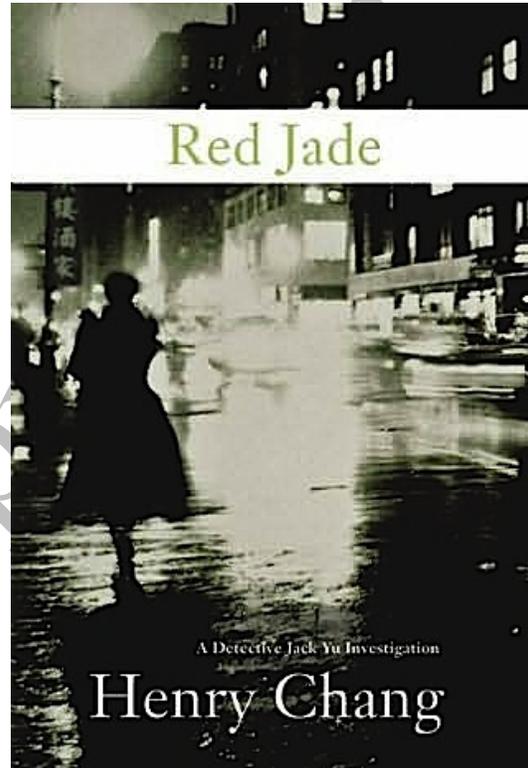
Part historical novel, part mystery, and part thriller, *Trail of Blood* (published in Britain as *The Shanghai Moon*) holds the reader firmly in its grasp from beginning to end. Rozan is a fine storyteller who has a good ear for dialogue and the ability to create a strong sense of place in a few, well-chosen words. She is eloquent in her depiction of the conditions facing the refugees, and leavens those dark scenes with light-hearted banter between Lydia and her mother, and equally entertaining exchanges with her partner. With a plot as intricately-fitted as a Chinese puzzle-box, Rozan weaves her tales seamlessly against the background of wartime Shanghai and New York City's Chinatown of today, and lays bare a part of history of which many readers will be unaware. Not to be missed.

Henry Chang, *Red Jade*
(Soho Crime, 2010)

The third in author Henry Chang's brilliantly-textured noir series featuring New York police detective Jack Yu, *Red Jade* finds the loner detective redefining his life in the wake of his father's death. He is also seeking the man who shot his friend 'Tat' Louie during a robbery and left him in a coma. The trail leads to Seattle, and Yu accompanies his lady friend, lawyer Alex Lee-Chow there, ostensibly to watch her Chinese citizen-rights group receive an award, and using his free time to track down the man responsible for his friend's condition.

But unbeknownst to Yu an old nemesis is also in Seattle, preparing to return to Hong Kong. Known simply as Mona, she had been the mistress of Uncle Four, the head of a powerful Tong in New York City. Tiring of his possessiveness and her dead-end life, Mona killed him and ran away with valuable coins that

would enable her to start a new life. Months earlier Yu had almost nabbed her in San Francisco, but she eluded him. Even in a land as big as America the trails of Chinese fugitives are likely to intersect, however, and the Tong picks up Mona's trail, closing in on her just as Yu tracks down Tat Louie's assailant. The result is an atmospheric, fast-paced thriller that builds to a gripping climax.

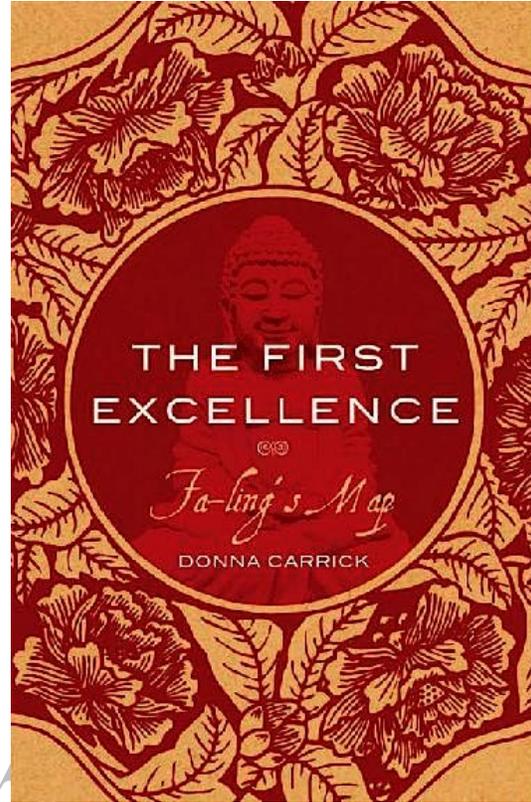


Rooted in the cloistered world of Chinese-Americans, where everyone knows something and old grudges are not easily laid to rest, *Red Jade* continues the compelling saga of the elusive and cold-blooded Mona in her quest for a new life, pursued by a cop who cannot let the case go. The clash between the two becomes a memorable tale of conflict both internal and external, and makes for another fine read from the discerning folks at Soho Press.

Donna Carrick,
The First Excellence
(Book Surge Press, 2009)

An exquisitely-crafted saga of one person's search for her roots set against a clash of cultures. In 1989 a young Chinese girl, Lí Fa-líng, is given her newborn baby sister and sent away, so that the grandmother will not kill the unwanted infant. Against all odds she manages to find refuge in an orphanage where they are cared for and raised; but the sanctuary harbours its own dark secrets. Eighteen years later Fa-líng has grown into a strong young woman, and she and her sister have emigrated to Canada. Determined to put her troubled past to rest, she joins a group of Canadian couples who are traveling to China to meet their adopted children for the first time and take them home. The China she returns to, however, is far from the open society in which she has been raised in the West. Populated by dissidents and police spies, and motivated by repression and greed, before Fa-líng's journey draws to a close she will be drawn into a labyrinth of deceit and violence, her own fate far from clear.

Drawing on her own experience as an adoptive parent of a Chinese child, Carrick sets her tale against the grand sweep of events as China wrestles with the more open ways of the West, and skillfully employs converging story lines to heighten the suspense. An intricate plot that mirrors the subtlety of China itself, *The First Excellence* combines an original and entertaining tale with an insightful account of a complex land that remains a mystery to most Westerners.



So there you have it: three very different stories, each drawing on events of the past and then skillfully weaving them into engrossing contemporary tales that provide glimpses of the unique culture of China. Readers will not come away from these novels with a comprehensive understanding of that ancient land, but they will gain fascinating insights into a unique and often secretive people, and be well entertained in the process.

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