

Nicholas Jose, *Bapo* (Giramondo, 2015)

Bapo is the name given to an unusual kind of Chinese painting that tricks the eye into thinking it sees a collage of fragments. The word literally means 'eight broken', where eight is a Chinese lucky number and broken (damaged, worn) suggests that luck has run out, and if it has that there's another kind of luck in simply surviving, less glorious maybe, but not so bad in the long run. (1)

Bapo is a collection of 18 stories by Nicholas Jose, written using what he terms 'a kind of writer's *bapo*' (2). It is indeed a kaleidoscope of historical progress, personal memory and experience. While it's not directly about China, its ideology or its politics, indirectly these elements are present. A collage of characters, among them artists, intellectuals, officials and travellers, allows readers a glimpse of a China reinventing itself.

'Donkey Feast' is a perfect opener to display this *bapo* style in a story hinting rather than telling directly the events from which a group of eight artists, reunited by a feast and a photograph, now seek to salvage and retrieve some kind of cohesion:

together around the table, the same people or not, as the turbid water that has flowed between us washes out to sea. In sight is the moment of first connection, before life's divergences, the turning of the backs, the forgettings and betrayals. That's the heaviness behind our eyes as the ritual of cleansing plays out. (11)

As this one-time 'band of brothers' (14) drive home they pass by the scene of a crash. They are unanimous in deciding not to offer help, discovering fear and mistrust still hovering after all.

In 'Ha-ha-ha!', an unremarkable artist suddenly gains notice among foreign tourists, which leads to a visit from Party delegates with a proposal the artist may not easily refuse (30-31). However, in a clever twist the artist responds with an ultimatum of his own. Perhaps it is the voice of his 95-year-old grandmother that he hears commenting 'that in a crisis governments and politicians always make the wrong decision' (21).

'Kong: Fossil' explores the value of finding a centre and self-discipline, freedom and the importance of family. A fossil passes from an about-to-be-exiled father, an expert in birds and shells, to his wild and wayward son, Kong, who he fails to discipline. Eventually the son migrates to Australia as a political refugee. Once more the fossil is passed to another generation in a family reinventing itself.

'One Fine Day' explores the arena of cultural exchange and partnerships as it parallels the story of *Madam Butterfly* through a woman at a bus stop who tells fellow passenger Ping about being left behind by her western lover: 'Jumping from the balcony was not the right answer' (50). Perhaps *Madam Butterfly* was not the right answer to begin a partnership either. 'Loving China' is a delightful story of love-at-first-sight between Cara and Claude, Australians with a common attachment to China. Revelling in their shared discovery of China, they believe fate is cementing their lifetime bond. Wealth and power exploited for personal ends in 'The Game of Go' as an academic Professor Theo Weiss and his Chinese rent boy, Princie, each broker a game of power and sexual politics gradually reversing fortune and shifting power. 'Beautiful Island' is an ironical peek at free enterprise in an exchange between a Chinese marketing entrepreneur and a New Zealander negotiating a potential partnership to bring Kiwi Fruit (Chinese gooseberries) to China.

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‘Angled Wheels of Fortune’, so titled after the sculpture near Sydney’s Kings Cross, concludes Part 1. Rain, painting, poetry and umbrellas thread through eight cameos narrated by a tourist sheltering at a cafe. I enjoyed the meditation about ‘which pronoun to shelter under’ (138) and also the beautifully descriptive prose:

I gaze out at the rain as it ... polishes fat ducks as they waddle over the muddy bank, brightens green leaves against the shining black rocks of a Zen garden. The rain falls on the pond in countless circles that come and go like a crowd of umbrellas ... the line that rings of ripples cross is endless exchange from light to dark and back again. ... The ducks stay on the pond. I’m the one who flies away. (136-37)

This piece is a wonderful collage of the opposites of China, busy frenzied life in a hugely populated city but also elements of quiet, calm and peaceful enjoyment.

Part 2 is an anticlimax as it shifts away from China and the *bapo* style, entering short story form to explore emotional and personal aspects of partnership. ‘Marriage Bonds’ revolves around a ménage à trois in which each party is captive to the other even as each would prefer to break free to move on alone. In ‘Tripping’ a drug trip goes awry and the tripper is rescued by a couple with whom friendship grows. ‘After the Show’, ‘The Aunt’s Garden Story’ and ‘The Disappearing Book’ each explore aspects of coming to terms with the changes and loss that old age brings. ‘George’ is the oddity in the collection. A beautifully written tribute to the iconic orang-utan now honoured with a statue at the Adelaide zoo, it is perhaps an indulgent memory from the author’s own childhood. ‘Diamond Dog’ returns to China, hinting at the potential for China-Australia partnerships through a friendship between a lonely Australian boy and an only precious daughter of an immigrant Chinese artist living across the street. It is the girl’s courageous act when she rescues the boy’s dog about to be the meal of an over-zealous python that wins her family respect and belonging in the neighbourhood.

Nicholas Jose’s mastery of the written word is evident throughout; his is a voice of personal experience as Cultural Advisor to the Australian Embassy 1987-1990, during which time he experienced Tiananmen Square first hand. These multi-layered stories are easy to read, but best taken slowly; allow time for reflection and re-reading. Like all good works of art, it is worth taking time to discover light and shadow, perspective, and the deeper potential within.

Kay Hart