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HOME > IDEAS > LONGFORM NARRATIVES

MR. CHEN'S MOUNTAIN

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(Illustration: Michael Byers)

From afar, Mr. Chen's mansion resembles a mosque with a gold dome, but on closer inspection has the look of a national treasury, its windows gleaming gold. Or a palazzo crossed with the Reichstag as imagined by a 1960s mafioso in Vegas. Its vast grounds are filled with Italianate statues crafted out of jade, marble, granite, and other stone. Roman soldiers on horseback rear with spears from the rooftop while maidens in togas pour liquid from jugs. A statue of an American soldier, machine gun in hand, guards the side gate to the grounds along with a more traditional Chinese demon and a statue of a pudgy cop.

"Most Chinese would think his place is great—because it's so unexpected," says my friend Huang Li, who is serving as my translator over the next few days (Huang Li and Mr. Chen are both pseudonyms). "Even if it was in the middle of Shenzhen, we would think it's quite special."

Mr. Chen's Mountain, by Robin Hemley. [Listen to more Pacific Standard stories, read out loud.](#)

This is my second time to Mr. Chen's. A year and a half earlier, I visited with a group of writers from around the world at the invitation of Li and the university where she's a professor. Most of my colleagues were amused by Mr. Chen's mansion and impressed by his hospitality, but my sense of righteous indignation was too easily triggered by Mr. Chen's excesses, as I saw them: five enormous padauk tree trunks, each 20 to 30 feet high, strung up behind his mansion. Shellacked and gleaming, inscribed with Chinese characters, they looked like giant slabs of beef jerky, and they dated, according to Mr. Chen, to about 2,000 years ago, the same era as the lines he had carved into the side of the largest, which proclaimed in Qin Dynasty script, "The King of the Padauk." He admitted that there's almost no way to save the forest they came from, because China wants wood from around the world, and if he didn't buy it, someone else would. As he saw it, the trees had already been cut down, so he might as well buy them as a kind of aftermarket act of preservation.

At dinner one evening he told us that he had considered purchasing an endangered pangolin for us to eat (you have to go farther and farther into the mountains to capture them, he said), but had reconsidered because he thought we would be sensitive about this. The kicker for me was discovering in front of our guest bungalows five enormous trees, which I identified as the endangered *Podocarpus costalis*, a tree that only grows on one island in the Northern Philippines and a few islets in Taiwan. I've seen these slow-growing trees in their natural habitat, and I know someone who helped foil a smuggling ring that was trying to spirit some of the trees out of the Philippines to be sold to rich Chinese businessmen like Mr. Chen, who see them as bringers of good fortune. I asked Mr. Chen about these trees, musing that they must be worth at least \$100,000 each. Yes, he told me with pride. He had purchased them for exactly that: \$100,000 each, a bargain, but now they were worth \$2 million all together. He claimed he had purchased them in Japan, not the Philippines. Perhaps, I thought—but then someone from Japan must have stolen them first.

Huang Li recalls for me the saying: If you spend a day in China you can write a book; if you spend a month, you can write an article; if you spend a year, you can't write anything. The same can probably be said for America, where I've lived for most of my life—it baffles me more than ever the older I get. Somehow, the people with the least experience of a country tend to have the most opinions about it. This is true of individuals as well: We tend to judge most heavily those who we know the least. The richer or more famous, the less we know them. "Fame is a form, perhaps the worst form, of incomprehension," Jorge Luis Borges once wrote.

It was my sense of incomprehension that drove me back to Mr. Chen's, because I knew that my first impressions could not be correct, that there had to be more to him than his unabashed acquisitiveness.

I had been under the impression, as were some of my colleagues, that Mr. Chen was a robber baron who had made his money raiding the forests of Vietnam and Myanmar or some such shady dealings. Mr. Chen certainly has a love of rare hardwoods. Entering his front door into what we might call the Great Hall of the Person, one feels like Jack stealing into the giant's lair: The room is lined with hardwood chairs that could comfortably seat a hippopotamus. At the end of the hall near the grand staircase, one sees not the goose that lays the golden eggs, but a peacock as tall as a man, its plumage a snarl of knotted roots, a carving that any robber baron from whichever century and nationality would be proud to own.

His gold Rolex, his titanium Samsung phone, and his penchant for constantly pouring his guests Hennessy cognac from a bottle that costs \$1,500 all add to the general air of ostentation around him. By his own estimate, he's spent \$46 million on liquor over the last 30 years, which is \$16 million more than the cost of his mansion. But the clothes he wears are serviceable, frumpy even, his shoes nothing fancy. While he was not educated beyond high school, he reveres the Chinese classics. One promenade is devoted to scenes from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and other Chinese cultural treasures are well-represented on his grounds. Inspirational poems adorn the outside walls of the compound, so that strolling villagers might stop and read a classical verse to better themselves:

You plant some flowers and they never bloom. You plant a willow randomly and then it gives a lot of shade.

In the mountains, there are straight trees, but in the world there are no straight people.

His voice is soft as he stops to recite this one day as we stroll along the street that runs through his property and across a bridge over a canal to his ancestral village. "He actually knows them very well," Li says. I'm sure he's studied them—perhaps they were his touchstones of human behavior as he made his ascent. We in the West have our equivalents:

The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

Trust everybody, but cut the cards.

We wind around the pond he widened and stocked with turtles, past the park he made for the people ("The New Rural Happy Garden"), which, he says, is packed in the summer with people playing cards and chess but it's not now. Plenty of honking geese and barking dogs and sunning turtles, but few people. His ancestral home, a crumbling yellow brick structure overgrown with weeds, sits with equally dilapidated houses along a concrete slab of a road. I'd love to speak to some of the villagers to get their impressions of Mr. Chen, but there's no one around except for a farmer working in the middle of a muddy field some distance away. Does he view Mr. Chen as a favorite son, or as some alien who's landed in their midst in a giant spaceship?

The unavoidable comparison, clichéd as it may be, is that Mr. Chen resembles in many ways *Citizen Kane*, and that his spectacular climb to wealth best fits the Aspiration Formerly Known as The American Dream. His mansion, tacky as it might seem to a Westerner, is no more embarrassing than the incongruous homes of the nouveau riche in America, whether in Southampton, Atlanta, Beverly Hills, or Salt Lake City. Or the assorted Orientalist fantasies that inspired Western movie theaters in the early part of the 20th century. So why not turn the tables? That Mr. Chen is fabulously wealthy and has kitschy taste is not in itself remarkable. What makes him remarkable is that he's not the Jed Clampett who moved to Beverly Hills, but the Jed Clampett who returned home. He didn't have to do this. He could have gone to Shanghai or Beijing. He could have gone anywhere in the world. But he thinks Europe is strange, and he doesn't like America. He could have purchased a foreign passport and moved to Australia or Canada or the United States, as many other Mr. Chens have done. A friend of his asked him to go in on an Australian island with him a decade ago for development as a tourist site, but he didn't want to go to Australia. His friend bought the island and has made a fortune. Mr. Chen's island is his mansion, floating over the toil of his ancestors.

Looking around Mr. Chen's village, it's not hard to imagine the poverty into which he was born. An older sister died at the age of three of starvation, a not uncommon fate during the period known as the Great Leap Forward. Beyond this, there's the familiar iconography of the rags-to-riches story: walking barefoot to school for seven kilometers; gathering and chopping wood to pay for tuition. As China's economic policies opened up, Mr. Chen saw his opportunity—not selling newspapers or shining shoes in Horatio Alger fashion, but de-husking rice. Borrowing 1,000 yuan from family members and a bank, he purchased some de-husking equipment, and within six months he had made back his investment.

Over my visit of several days, Mr. Chen shows me where that initial investment has led. He drives me (he likes to drive his black Lexus SUV, modest by billionaire standards) to his international port with its many hectares of stacked cargo containers. But he doesn't enjoy visiting the port so much, because there are no trees, and Mr. Chen, above all, likes wood, whether carved or *au naturel*.

At the port, we have lunch with various associates and his 29-year-old son, to whom he has given control of the port. He drives me to his headquarters in another nearby city, where a lot of people were sent during the Cultural Revolution. Li's own parents, both academics, were sent to the countryside to work, and Li almost had to go as well, but then "everything changed."

This simple statement, "everything changed," accounts for the rise of Mr. Chen, and Li's own academic career, as well as the many high-rises in this port city and the empty lots that will soon no longer be empty.

In 1978, China adopted modernizing reforms to open its economy, protect private property rights, and facilitate international trade, which did in fact change everything for entrepreneur-minded souls such as Mr. Chen, but it also opened an income chasm between the rich and the poor that has widened ever since. Billionaires like Mr. Chen are the face of the new China: assertive, confident, and powerful. Universities throughout the U.S. and elsewhere have benefited from an influx of Chinese students, who pay full international tuition and drive luxury cars through the streets of otherwise modest university towns, such as Iowa City, where Chinese students at the University of Iowa numbered over 2,000 in 2017—up from 537 in 2007. Likewise, the largest number of outbound tourists in the world come from China: 131 million in 2017, according to the China National Tourism Administration. But that's out of a population of nearly 1.4 billion people. What the world sees most often are the wealthy and middle-class Chinese, who can afford to send their children overseas to university and to travel widely. We rarely glimpse the shabbiness of the ancestral village, much less side by side with the stratospheric opulence of a mansion such as Mr. Chen's. Who builds a mansion amid squalor?

The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality, quantifying the economic disparity between the wealthiest people in a given country and its poorest inhabitants. A country with a Gini coefficient of zero—were there to be such a place—would have perfect equality. As the number rises, so does the gap between the richest and the poorest. In 1980, when Mr. Chen and China both began their impressive rise, China's Gini coefficient was 0.3. In 2016, it was 0.47, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, putting China among the top 20 percent of countries with the most economic disparity. (Of course, in the country's communist heyday, greater economic equality simply meant that people were equally poor.) For comparison, South Africa has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world (0.63 in 2013) and Kosovo ranks among the lowest (.23 in 2015), according to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Since China's economic reforms, per capita income has unquestionably risen. Mr. Chen is one of China's 373 billionaires—the second-most of any country in the world, according to *Forbes* (the U.S. has 585, although the Hurun Report, the annual Chinese "rich list," puts China ahead of the U.S. with 819). He shares his wealth, in a sense, with the poor of his village through his public works, the mine he owns just up the road, and the servants he employs, but the incongruity of his mansion to their shacks must seem a little strange to even those villagers who are proudest of him. It's as if Donald Trump decided to build a Trump Tower in his mother's fishing village of Tong on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, rather than a golf course and resort among the environmentally protected dunes of Aberdeen. But then Trump has spent a total of 180 minutes on the island, and a cool 97 seconds in the cottage where his mother was born, according to Scottish media. If the Facebook page "Isle of Lewis DOES NOT Support Trump" is any indication, following in Mr. Chen's footsteps would not be a welcome move on Mr. Trump's part.

At Mr. Chen's HQ, one of his assistants shows me plans for a development nearby, complete with a private school for kindergarten through high school. Mr. Chen could have his name attached to any of these projects, *à la* Trump, but he chooses instead to bury it in the names of his enterprises. His full name is Chen Ze Hong, the last word, I'm told, meaning "big," and the school will be called Hong Xing School, Xing meaning "prosperous." It's a kind of anagrammatic credit he takes, prideful, clever, and reticent at once.

At both his port and on his mansion grounds, a statue of an eagle, its wings spread over a globe with China at its center, signifying, Li tells me, the feng shui concept of success, bears the inscription: "The eagle spreads its wings over the bright future." His name is included in this saying as well.

It's a feng shui world at Mr. Chen's—from the gardens to the placement of statues and furniture (Li tells me his place is organized around its precepts). Over every doorway of his headquarters, an inspirational quote harnesses the power of Chinese tradition to maximize the possibility of good fortune:

You're having a great career.

Everything goes smoothly.

You're going to be safe.

Hardwood tigers and intricately carved roosters signifying prosperity roam the desks and display cases of his office. An artillery shell that used to hold poisonous gas, given to him by his old army mates, sits by his massive desk. It's inscribed with a saying: "You use one cannon and then you prosper." A canal running through his gardens is shaped like the royal scepter, the Ruyi, which the emperors of old held, signifying "Everything as one wishes." Even the number and order of his children, boy/girl/boy/girl/boy/girl, according to Mr. Chen (and yes, he anticipates my question by telling me he was fined for having so many kids), signifies the word for "good." Everything is good at Mr. Chen's. Everything goes smoothly.

True to his name, everything is big too. The mansion boasts a surplus of: furniture, tea, liquor, statuary, food. It's perhaps his humble upbringing, or the starvation death of his older sister, that makes him hoard, but Mr. Chen is the billionaire equivalent of my grandmother, who lived through the Depression, and who left us when she passed away, among many useful things, many other objects she just wanted to store, such as a hundred or so tin pie plates beneath her stove. Somewhere, I'm convinced, Mr. Chen hoards pie plates, though they're probably made of titanium.

The largest conference table I've seen in my life, perhaps 25 feet long (I'm six feet tall, and you could fit at least four of me end to end) dominates a side room on the first floor that seems almost an afterthought. Meetings would more likely take place on the floor of meeting rooms, his third floor, or maybe even the floor above that, dominated by a strobe-lit karaoke hall. One day, we arrive back at the mansion to more hardwood furniture being unloaded, and Li and I both wonder where he's going to put it. The rooms are vast and empty and at the same time cluttered, their walls lined with big and ungainly furniture, like misfits at a school dance afraid of being the first out on the dance floor.

A tower rises by the main building of his mansion, reminding me of a medieval munitions tower I saw once in Florence, but this tower doesn't store gunpowder; it stores liquor, mostly cognac and homemade rice wine made with special herbs that Mr. Chen swears by. Mr. Chen is obsessed with cognac. The French don't particularly enjoy their cognac—less than 3 percent of it was consumed in France in 2016. But it's a big business and a big status symbol in Mr. Chen's circles. I've seen entire duty-free stores in China that sell practically nothing but cognac. In 2011, half of Rémy Martin's world exports went to Asia, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, and three-quarters of that ended up in China. From the looks of it, half of that ended up in Mr. Chen's tower. Outside, the tower gleams like the rest of his mansion, its windows glowing gold. Inside, a narrow staircase leads past mold-covered and astringent-smelling walls to dank and dark rooms, like torture chambers filled with cauldrons of homemade liquor and stacked boxes of imported cognac—enough here, I think, to waterboard a planeload of cognac-averse French.

Still, as with China, the more you're around Mr. Chen, the less you can say of him with assurance. On one of his outside walls is written this:

You know the person, you know the face, but you don't necessarily know his mind.

My initial assumption, that he's simply another greedy *tuhao*, the Mandarin name for the nouveau riche, has started to erode slightly by the end of my first day. I ask him about the *Podocarpus costalis* trees in front of the guest villas that I was certain on my first visit had been smuggled from the Philippines. They're not *Podocarpus costalis* trees, he tells me in his soft voice, unperturbed (despite, Li tells me, my habit of firing questions at him like it's an interrogation). "They're Buddhist pine trees," he says. Sure enough, I've wrongly accused him. The trees are in the same *Podocarpus* genus, and look similar, but Buddhist pine trees are not the same, and they're not endangered.

Li says that her husband was similarly skeptical about Mr. Chen at first. Mr. Chen wanted her husband, an expert in tourism studies, to consult for him on a project. But the more Li's husband got to know Mr. Chen, the more he noticed a kind of thoughtfulness that wasn't simply about slapping down millions of yuan for dubious purposes—though there's inevitably some of that. Li's husband recently stopped Mr. Chen from purchasing a series of rejuvenation injections for \$155,000. But vanity makes fools of us all. And Mr. Chen *did* fly in two helicopters for his son's wedding, which caused a bit of a stir in the county, but *come on*, we all lose our heads a little at weddings.

In other ways, Mr. Chen is methodical and rational (if not exactly always understated), and one of the things he was most interested in when building his mansion was whether it would have lasting value. The government gives him 200,000 yuan a year (\$31,000 USD at the time of my visit) to help maintain his mansion, which has been earmarked as a property with new cultural heritage status. Li thinks he must have had a lot of consultants helping him, for all the care taken to represent certain classical elements of Chinese culture and architecture, from the aforementioned statues drawn from classic literature to a walkway of giant figures from the Chinese Zodiac and a replica of the Nine Dragon Wall from the Forbidden City. But Mr. Chen claims that 95 percent of the structure and the gardens were his ideas.

It's true that what seems at first wildly incongruous begins to make sense on closer inspection, with the exception perhaps of an Easter Bunny statue with a basket and button-down vest that looks like it came from the Garden Center at Walmart, stationed near the front gate. Even the donut cop and American soldier guards make a kind of sense. Mr. Chen figured that, since he was building a Western-inspired structure, he should have some Western-style guards to ward away evil spirits. He doesn't believe in ghosts, he says, though he knows some people who claimed to have seen ghosts and they're all dead. And he once saw some green fire escaping from some graves. So it's best to keep your mind at ease, take the pressure off, especially if you've got the money to do it.

Not that money buys ease of mind, and not that Li or I or anyone else knows what goes on in Mr. Chen's mind. But he seems at ease. He doesn't have the coarseness Li and I associate with *tuhaos*, whether from Southern China or South Carolina. And while he's constantly receiving visitors, and is at the center of many projects, there's a tranquility about him that Li remarks on several times. "The cloud is thin and the wind is light," is how she terms it.

Li, a dog lover, is particularly impressed that he always asks after her poodle—this after the poodle peed first thing in Mr. Chen's office. "He was very forgiving," she says. "Chinese men don't usually have time for animals. It took my husband several years to include the dog in any conversation."

Others seem to like him as well. He has unannounced dinner guests every night during my visit. One night, it's the county executive, four years younger than Mr. Chen. The county guy is constantly complaining and making fun of Mr. Chen to the delight of all the guests, which include his 30-something second wife. "There's too much liquor here," he complains at dinner, "and not enough veggies." And he says that the cigarette Mr. Chen offered him, the Double Happiness brand, is too cheap.

"They cost 100 yuan," Mr. Chen says.

"They cost six," says the executive.

Mr. Chen could easily smoke more expensive cigarettes. One brand, 1916, sells for 8,500 yuan a carton, or about \$1,220. But in the contemporary landscape, a certain modesty is perhaps prudent, as a lot of tall poppies are being cut, so to speak, by President Xi Jinping's much-touted anti-corruption campaign. Which is to say, conspicuous wealth carries some risk. It's best to offer your guests, especially if they're in government, the six-yuan cigs.

Through it all, Mr. Chen sits serenely, one arm across his belly, the other holding his cigarette aloft as though about to deliver an injection. There's a kind of ritualized hospitality that Mr. Chen practices artfully—serving Li and me the many dishes until my bowl and my plate brim with so much food I can't possibly eat it all, and then apologizing for the meagerness of the meal.

Behind the flashy signs of wealth and the false modesty—or culturally imposed, at least—Li suggests there's a kind of salt-of-the-earth quality that makes him a little vulnerable and insecure. He asked her once to set up his second son with a woman from a poor background (not someone of equal status, which would normally be the case), though he required that she be good at accounting. Li set him up with a graduate student, but the woman was bored by the young man, who, as is often the case, doesn't possess the canny intelligence of the father.

Sitting at his table is the one thing in my life I could have held over Anthony Bourdain, if I had ever met him. Twelve ornately carved chairs surround a massive table of some African hardwood (purchased, he says, pre-made at the Vietnam border), dominated by a large lazy Susan around which revolve feasts of preserved duck, daylily soup, steamed chicken, fish, fish-head soup, bok choy, fried rice, spare ribs, stuffed bean curd with pork, fried noodles with a delicious smoky flavor, and dense sticky rice cakes usually made for the Spring Festival. Nothing here has preservatives of any kind, or the flavor enhancer MSG. Only ingredients that are produced on his property: chicken, ducks, geese eggs, vegetables, even the oil in which they're cooked. He happily shows me the oil, stored in jugs in the back storerooms of his kitchen. With 20 percent of China's farmland contaminated by heavy metals, and the many scandals around recycled cooking oil from China's gutters, Mr. Chen's kitchen exemplifies a growing trend among those who can afford it, a somewhat elitist take on traditional back-to-the land movements.

There's no doubt Mr. Chen is a great host, despite the county executive's bellyaching, but how much more lavish a host might he have been several years ago before the corruption crackdown? Now, many older elites are scared, and luxury brands are just beginning to recover from a five-year slump, thanks to increased spending from China's wealthy Millennials. In part, this is why Li asked me to give her and Mr. Chen pseudonyms: The situation in China has been tense, and no one wants to stand out. She's more concerned for Mr. Chen than herself, and while he's most likely not divulged anything that could land him in trouble with the authorities, she would rather err on the side of caution, as she would feel responsible if anything happened to him. I feel likewise about her. The various crackdowns and curbs in China have put a lot of people on edge.

A restaurant that Li likes in Shenzhen has seen its clientele plummet. A friend of hers went into the wine business at exactly the wrong time, importing inexpensive wine from Napa that costs under \$10 in some parts of the U.S. In China, you'll pay 380 yuan (or \$58.00) for it, which is a good value if only because, Li says, the number three means "value" and eight means "prosperous."

Mr. Chen clearly doesn't need Napa Valley wine to top off his prosperity or status. But he's not so rich as all that. "There are a lot richer people than me," he says. "In government."

"But they're all in prison or in hell," says Li with a smile.

Perhaps Mr. Chen's most lasting contribution (even more lasting than his mansion, which he boasts can withstand a magnitude 12 earthquake—not bad considering the highest earthquake ever recorded is 9.5) is his 3,000-foot mountain. Cha Shan, or Tea Mountain, which covers three-quarters the area of San Francisco, he claims, and would take 15 days to explore (Mr. Chen seems a bit prone to exaggeration). His grandfather originally came from this mountain, before there were any of the roads he's built to bring us there. Actually, it's the government's mountain, which he's renting for the next 70 years. He's only allowed to develop 5 percent of the land, which is still pretty substantial: By my calculations, 4.4 square kilometers of development. In his headquarters, he showed me five glossy books that Li's husband produced detailing every facet of the project, dubbed the Tea Mountain Leisure Scenic Spot (the concept, the actual plan and the sections of the park, the blueprint, the environmental impact, and the government regulations). On the early spring day we visit, lilac and other flowering trees and bushes are starting to bloom, and we've got the mountain to ourselves, though the summit is socked in with clouds, so he drives us only part way, to a muddy plane that's been cleared for a hotel with a view of trees that have been spared.

A lot of Chinese tourists, Li explains to me, don't want to simply view nature passively. A vacation on which you didn't do something wouldn't be a vacation. Mr. Chen's mountain theme park will be laced with helicopter pads to lift some of the 10 million tourists he envisions annually up above the trees (again, Mr. Chen seems prone to exaggeration, as this lofty goal would bring him on par with the number of visitors annually to Shanghai Disneyland or the Great Wall of China), and roads to bring them to their lakeside villas (the lakes created by the 20 dams he's in the process of building), and giant stones in these lakes so visitors can traipse across them.

On our way down the mountain we stop at Mr. Chen's hideaway, a low concrete building with a red roof, housing a small turbine for hydroelectric power and modest living quarters. Nestled between hills and a stream with the dam below, it has a view of a wide expanse of mountains. Not a car or another person is in sight. The caretaker, a middle-aged man in Wellies and a blue raincoat, lives here with a skittish dog, a telephone, a TV, and a cell phone. For food, he picks wild vegetables.

Mr. Chen's assistant, a woman in her forties named Chen Hong Mei (also a pseudonym), whose main function during my visit is to constantly pour us tea, remarks that if she lived here she wouldn't ever be able to speak again.

Mr. Chen bustles about the shack, covering a flaky old couch with a towel so we can sit. This is a place he sometimes brings guests, he says, as he shows off the inevitable stash of Hennessy XO and Martell—I'm assuming childhood friends or moguls like him, craving something simple without the burden of constant empire-building and flashy signs of success. Here there are only two dingy bedrooms, one for him and one for the caretaker, each furnished with a simple bed with a thin mattress, a chair, and a desk, remarkably not a splinter of Padauk wood in sight. If this were his only property, you'd think he hadn't come so far from the life his grandfather led on this mountain. I ask Li to ask him if he likes it here because it reminds him of his childhood, but she thinks he won't really understand the question.

And she's right. He interprets the question as one of outcomes assessment. "I had been away from the village for 30 years, so I wanted to come back and do something to benefit my own people."

She tries another way. "Do you feel you belong here?"

He nods simply, *yes*.

Mr. Chen proceeds to tell us about the many and various delights of the place, the water in particular, its source so close to this dwelling that it's remarkably unpolluted. In the summer, you can take a bath in the little pool fed by a small waterfall behind the station, and anything cooked in this water, including a white vegetable Li has never heard of, will taste better, and you won't gain weight. He's even had the water tested.

"I could make a lot of money if I sold the water," he says, smoking his Double Happiness brand and drinking tea.

"Maybe you should," I say.

"I'm not selling," he says with a bluntness that's rare, as though I've asked him to sell a family heirloom.

Back at the mansion, Li, Hong Mei, and I venture out one evening in search of someone to talk to who isn't employed by Mr. Chen. This is the first time Hong Mei has left the property in the month she's been in Mr. Chen's employ. Hong Mei is a fan of Mr. Chen's too. She worked for him 10 years ago when he owned a porcelain business, and she doesn't even know what her salary is going to be yet, but she says she's not worried. And he allows her to joke with him, even yell at him. When one night Hong Mei snaps a photo of him he doesn't like, she says: "What do you expect? I don't have an expensive phone like yours."

He smiles in response. "She's louder than I am."

The cloud is thin and the wind is light.

The village, as always seems to be the case, is deserted. It's as though all the villagers were killed when Mr. Chen's mansion landed on top of them. What kind of shadow does Mr. Chen's mansion cast upon the dilapidated houses not much bigger than his guardhouse, with the requisite chickens pecking in the dirt and scrawny dogs barking? The poor are thin and light, too, like mirages. But if we find it striking that the economic disparity of China has grown exponentially over the past 30 years, perhaps we should examine, too, our own backyards, our own shining mansions casting shadows over the poor. The Gini coefficient for the U.S. is barely lower than China's, at 0.45, and by some accounts the two are nearly tied.

China has been impressive in its steady efforts to catch up to the U.S. in the race toward inequality, given the short amount of time in which it's proven itself a world player in consumerism. It was sixth place in millionaires in 2017—fewer than two million, compared to 13.6 million or so in the U.S., according to Business Insider. Income inequality is a global phenomenon, but few do it better than the U.S.

Though the U.S. has never pretended to be a land of economic equality, as China once did, the gaps between rich and poor, as practically everyone knows, have become as conspicuous as Mr. Chen's mansion. The top 1 percent received 20 percent of America's income in 2015, up from 11 percent in 1978, while, in China, the super rich have gone from a 6 percent to a 14 percent share of national income. Meanwhile, economists writing in *Global Inequality Dynamics* observed a "complete collapse" of the bottom 50 percent of American wage earners' income share between 1978 and 2015, from 20 percent to just 12 percent, while China's bottom 50 percent still managed to earn a larger share of the country's income than the top 1 percent. Here, the knee-jerk patriots among us might consider this an appropriate moment to break into a chant of "U.S.A., U.S.A." We are well ahead of the pack when it comes to widening the gap between rich and poor.

On our stroll beyond Mr. Chen's compound, we spot a tiny store a few yards from his mansion, and I figure there must be someone inside. A man and a woman about Mr. Chen's age, seated on pink plastic chairs, are watching a news broadcast. The room is almost empty except for some modest piles of dry goods and basic household items packed on a glass counter and on a few shelves behind it. The man is barefoot, hands behind his head, his feet propped on a couple of other pink chairs. He says they went to school with Mr. Chen, and Li asks if they keep in touch. "He's so rich and we're so poor," the woman says.

The man, with a look of undisguised disgust, says, "He's busy and even I'm busy," and his legs climb a little high on the chair. He doesn't look busy, except in the sense of being suddenly unable to find a comfortable position for his legs. He tries placing them in the hole between the back and the seat, but he withdraws his feet again and tries a different position. Li points this out, unable to stifle a giggle as his feet keep climbing until he looks impossibly contorted in his attempt to pass for a man of leisure, his feet propped on top of the opposite chairs, his body almost a V. The first thing he sees when he leaves his small home is Mr. Chen's mansion. "We see it every day," he says, trying not to move his feet again. "So it's nothing special."

After our visit, Li can't stop laughing as we walk up the road to view Mr. Chen's quarry. Every few yards, she stops and can barely continue, overcome with giggles by the image of the man trying to prop his feet and get comfortable with his neighbor's impossible wealth. Hong Mei doesn't see what's so funny, while my own reaction is somewhere in the middle. I feel sorry for the guy, but I also recognize the ridiculousness of the situation, watching your neighbor's stratospheric rise with the knowledge that you have been left behind; that you can never catch up. And no matter how you feel about him, he's got the guards to keep out the hungry ghosts of his past, as well your envy, and all the world's bewilderment. ❖

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