

Rory recommends

## A vision of China

Rory MacLean discovers a tale of exhilaration and despair on a desperate chase through the heart of China

Rory MacLean  
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A new vision of rural China in Aya Goda's fugitive tale. Photograph: Udo Weitz/AP

### **Tao: On the Road and on the Run in Outlaw China**

by Aya Goda. Portobello, £15.99

Good travel books, like travel itself, open the door to new worlds. In the strongest works the author's vision becomes our own, especially if his or her subject is a distant destination. For most of us, northern Russia will forever be defined by Colin Thubron's *In Siberia*. Antarctica is Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita*. No matter how many times I visit India, Delhi will always be for me William Dalrymple's *City of Jinns*. Now, an arresting book is about to take hold of our collective vision of rural China.

*Tao* doesn't begin well. In the late 1980s a Japanese student, Aya Goda, travels deep into the heart of China. In Kashgar she meets and falls in love with a charismatic and combative wandering painter called Cao Yong. Although Aya is a confident narrator, her language is at first girlish and gushing. To her, Yong – wildly dressed in Tibetan lamas' robes – is the "wanderer I've yearned to meet ever since I was a little girl" whose "spirit blazes like fire". When he confesses his love for her she responds, "We only met last night. Is he some Don Juan?" For me, these first pages read like a teenage romantic novel.

But then, in Beijing, Yong stages an exhibition of his provocative paintings, attracting the attention of both international collectors and the authorities. The Public Security Bureau, the government body that handles internal policing and social order, seizes the pictures, labelling them as "obscene", and tries to arrest Yong. "I was inside for 10 years," a fellow painter warns him. "You'd better be ready to do at least half that."

Suddenly Yong and Aya are on the run.

The young couple crisscross China with the police on their trail, travelling hard class to avoid detection, taking in a prison town where every resident – from the hotel cook to the doctor – is a political prisoner, smuggling themselves into Tibet. As their exhilarating, eight-month journey grows ever more dangerous, Aya writes with increasing clarity and maturity, casting her juvenile gushings into relief. "China is like one giant prison," she states plainly. "People aren't free to chose where they live or work... every citizen is controlled by a file." In Lhasa, far from the meddling interference of Beijing, they hope to find a place of exile and freedom.

But as in life, and unlike in the dreams of young lovers, little goes according to plan. The couple are hassled by bandits, have their documents seized and are detained by the authorities. Their friends are among the hundreds – if not thousands – killed in the Tianamen Square massacre. Aya becomes pregnant and – in this country of birth restrictions, where ranks of obstetric beds with stirrups line hospital wards – the swift, clinical ordinariness of her abortion without anaesthetic is shocking.

"Teeth clenched, I lift my head and see a blood-drenched lump of flesh pincered between the forceps. She throws it with a plop into an aluminium container. 'It's over. You can go now,' says the doctor."

Tao portrays China as a land of government brutality and individual suffering, run by powerful bureaucrats and frustrated soldiers. The lovers' escape route twists and turns from the subtropical beaches of Hainan Island to the Himalayas ("intense sunlight, thin air, snow-clad mountains that pierce the deep cerulean sky, cobalt lakes nestled in the sere wilderness, clusters of black yaks"). The book brings the reader new insights into Han racism, sky burials and the wholesale eradication of Tibetan rights and culture since the Cultural Revolution. In fascinating detail it relates the life story of Yong, the maverick child born into the Great Famine of the 1960s whose family sold their only pig to pay for the rail fare to send him to university (Yong is now a successful hyperrealist painter in California).

Most movingly, Tao is a spare, heartfelt work of love that captures the thrill of a young woman discovering the world in all its beauty and troubles, from everyday pleasures (tripe soup, Wanzi tea, love-making beside a mountain lake) to haunting terrors. A dozen film producers would die to adapt this book - with judicious editing - into an irresistible road movie, if only Beijing would permit filming in Tibet and China.

Aya chooses to travel to China initially because her mild and subdued "life in Japan is so soft, I really wanted to put myself to the test". On their last day together in China she tells Yong, "I think I'd never known true hatred or anger before. In China, I understood what those emotions are."

He replies, "Are you saying there are places in the world where people don't feel hatred and anger?"

Yes, Aya realises, but in those places they don't feel genuine happiness either.

• Rory MacLean's latest book *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India* is published by Penguin. It is available to buy from the Guardian Bookshop.

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