

Red Roulette: An Insider's Story of Wealth, Power, Corruption and Vengeance in Today's China, by Desmond Shum. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021. 320 pp. US\$30.00 (cloth), US\$14.99 (e-book); also available as an audio book.

Whenever an insider account of China's leadership is released, misgivings may arise as to its authenticity and objectivity. This book stands strong on both motives and sources. It is a candid first-hand account of how the author, Desmond Shum and particularly his ex-wife, Whitney Duan, worked at the heart of power in the PRC and achieved access, wealth, and influence during their partnership with China's political elite in 2004–17. In the face of political risks, this is a courageous book.

The tone of the author is cathartic. Mr. Shum wants to come clean about his past cooperation with a political system that he is now deeply disillusioned with. This pertains not only to his economic pursuits on behalf of his powerful clients but also his united front work in Hong Kong on behalf of central authorities. The result is a sincere narrative that does not seek to conceal, even while he may rationalize the ways by which he got things done. Readers get a rare authentic peek into elite China behind opaque curtains, especially the patterns for amassing wealth, the political corruption, and how these intertwine with state capitalism.

The red aristocracy (*taizi dang*), although a minor theme in the book, sets the context in which to understand the author's former wife, Ms. Duan. That exclusive group, comprising offspring of the founders of the PRC and members of the Politburo, leverage their family lineages for private gain: access to monopoly businesses, favorable concessions, and exclusive contracts that are bargain priced but amount to licenses to print money. Relatives of Deng Xiaoping gained rights to sell bottled water to the high-speed rail system, while those of Jiang Zemin got to sell duty-free products at the capital's airport. Princelings trade their access to power for hefty payoffs from domestic and foreign capital seeking to maneuver China's complex system of state approvals and controls. Some leaders shunned aiding family members, such as Premier Wen Jiabao; but others did not, such as Jiang Zemin or Jia Qinglin, an ex-member of the Politburo Standing Committee. Even Wen's children, despite his detachment, landed lucrative deals or jobs due to his name.

Below the red aristocracy came Ms. Duan, who thrived in the second tier. With a humble background, she plotted for access by painstakingly cultivating *guanxi* with major groups of political players. The power of those actors, as well as the Shums' art of cultivation, says much about arbitrariness in the Chinese system that renders it conducive to abuse.

The first group was the Gang of Wives. Here Duan's ultimate prize was Auntie Zhang, Wen Jiabao's wife, who opened access by lending the halo of her husband's name. Their exchange was implicit: besides watching out for Zhang's family needs, Duan fronted business deals on her behalf, including the infamous

purchase of shares of the Ping An Insurance Company. In Zhang's defense, if she were a red aristocrat, she would have been more guarded and would not have needed an outsider friend like Duan.

The second group was the Gang of Bureau Chiefs. Despite endorsements from Auntie Zhang and the ministers she introduced to the Shums, they had little control over the myriad of approvals needed from bureau and local chiefs. Shum's cargo terminal project required some 150 official stamps, which took him countless drinking nights and teams of employees waiting for layers of officials at various venues for months. The entire process took three years and hundreds of millions of dollars, including a \$50 million new office building in exchange for approval from the airport's general manager.

The third group was the Gang of Secretaries. Political aides knew the agendas and preferences of their bosses and were themselves a wealth of access and contacts. Most notably, Duan cultivated relationships with the assistants of Wang Qishan, then mayor of Beijing, and Sun Zhengcai, then an up-and-coming official in Beijing.

Another critical revelation is the ruthless nature of China's succession politics. Lacking appointed heirs apparent or a system of open competition, ambitious officials vied for network support and weaponized the anti-corruption campaign against political rivals. Wang and Sun relied on Duan as a confidant and counselor in dealing with their bosses in the central government. Sun allocated land to Duan and to relatives of Zeng Qinghong, a powerful member of the Politburo Standing Committee, to align support. Being in the wrong network can be dangerous, even fatal, even for an official not guilty of serious corruption. This is true, too, of political vengeance: Wen Jiabao played a vital role in Bo Xilai's downfall because Bo's people allegedly exposed the Ping An Insurance Co. scandal to foreign reporters.

This book paints a chilling picture of the forces behind China's rise in recent decades. Ironically, Ms. Duan and Auntie Zhang, commoners by origin and at heart, emerge more as heroines than villains, pushing boundaries in a system of hierarchy and exclusivity. However, some members of the current top leadership emerge as less than heroic, as their relatives have amassed large asset holdings overseas, but they escape guilt by association.

Yan Sun
City University of New York
