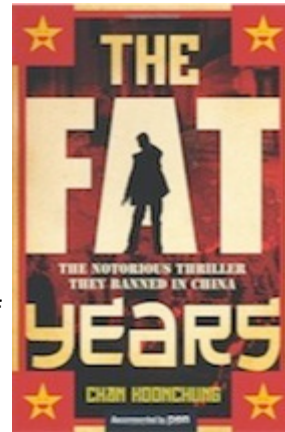


## *China Book Review*

by Matthew Griffiths

### **The Fat Years, Chan Koonchung, (Doubleday, 2011)**

This book by Chan Koonchung, the Shanghai-born and Hong Kong-raised author now based in China, sketches out a view of China that is a little too close to reality for the comfort of the authorities. Officially banned in China, it has reportedly gained a wide underground audience there.



The novel is set in the near future. A global financial crisis even worse than 2008 has hit the global economy. China however, has survived and prospered as the rest of the world has fallen into economic depression. People in China are happy and content and China has reclaimed its pre-eminent place in the world. The central character, Old Chen, a writer brought up in Hong Kong and Taiwan, is living in Beijing and among those contentedly going about their lives. Amid the near- universal happiness, however, something is not quite right. Around the time of the financial crisis, a whole month disappeared, and some people have not forgotten. Two years after the strange events of that time, Old Chen bumps into a couple of old friends who both tell him that all is not well. Each is pursuing the matter in their own way and slowly and reluctantly Chen becomes involved in their quest.

Written as a thriller, it engrosses the reader in a mystery of the events of the time, while introducing us to a variety of characters. These represent people who are inside and outside the mainstream of modern China, including an online dissident whose son has Party ambitions, a real estate tycoon, a high-level political adviser, a high-price prostitute; underground Christians and a former slave worker.

Fans of action and high body counts will be disappointed. It is a leisurely thriller by those standards. Its exploration of the characters is sketchy rather than in-depth, but the glimpses they give of modern China are sufficient to flesh out a picture for the reader beyond the headlines of break-neck economic growth and China's increasing international influence. It is critical of aspects of Chinese society and government and explores these through the lives of the characters and the strange events at the centre of the novel which they each attempt to piece together in their own ways, and eventually together, resorting to a risky plan to uncover the truth.

***The Fat Years*** is an interesting and intriguing read. Its portrait of contemporary China, and a plausible and disturbing future not too far removed from it, is one which many people who know China will recognise. The book challenges the reader to consider the implications of the collective memory loss imposed by the government regarding events in China's past and other aspects of China's current political and social environment. Is 90% freedom enough? Is a fake paradise better than a "good hell"? As China continues its economic development while maintaining its one party system, these questions will continue to occupy minds both within and outside China.

***The Fat Years*** is available from the Public Libraries in Hastings, Havelock North, Napier and Taradale. *The Fat Years* is also available on Amazon.com.

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Matthew Griffiths is a long time member of the NZ China Friendship Society. He loves Chinese food, has visited China many times, studied Mandarin, and attempted to learn Tai chi. He and his Chinese-born wife Deborah have two bilingual children. They lived in China from 2008 to 2010 and he still can't get enough.