

*The Real Story:*

## CHINA, TATTOOS, INDIANS

by Peter Skinner

Those doubting whether anything truly interesting is left to explore can take hope. In **China Underground** (Soft Skull Press, 978-1-59376-223-0), Zachary Mexico (a fluent Chinese speaker who has lived and worked in China) demonstrates an unrivaled capacity to draw out young Chinese who think and live outside the system. Whether earning honest money, as one peasant-turned-photographer did, or pushing drugs (ketamine is in great favor), selling sex, or just getting by as a *hunzi* (“slacker”), these outsiders must amount to a million pinpricks weakening control, conformism, and Confucianism. Their contact system, China’s QQ Internet messaging network, may well become a subversive tool.

Mexico encouraged his friends—who include a concerned student, a young prostitute, a Uighur (far western Muslim) folk musician, a frustrated gay, and a blocked filmmaker—to talk freely, and they did. Most voiced resentment at China’s pervasive crime and corruption, the pressure to succeed and the shortcuts needed to do so, the gap between rich and poor, and being cut off from so much of what the West offers. With Mexico we enter the lives, hopes, successes, and failures of this population, directly and without filters.

Artists, sociologist, psychologists, and criminologists will find great reward in **Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia: Volume III** (FUEL Publishing, 978-0-9550061-9-7). Danzig Baldaev, a one-time prison warden in Leningrad, spent over half a century drawing prisoners’ tattoos; he was later joined by Sergei Vasiliev, who photographed the larger human canvases. Many male and female prisoners’ tattoos outrageously mock the Soviet system and its heroes. There’s the horned, fanged devil-Lenin whose wings are inscribed “Marxism: Slavery, Famine, Poverty” // “Communism: Tyranny, KGB, Gulag.” And a belligerent Brezhnev pondering, “Who else could I make a little war against?”

Religious, folkloric, erotic, and escapist themes abound, displayed in wonderfully detailed cartoon-and-message format (fortunately with English-language translations). From eyelids to toes, no part of the body went untreated; fully tattooed whole-back and whole-chest work abounds; specialized small panels even extend to the genitals, some with flirtatious explanatory tags in five languages.

As the criminologist Alexander Sidorov explains, prisoners have their castes and tattoos are their

typology. In fact, the whole tattooing enterprise can be read as a complex coded identification system—and as such it was of interest to the KGB. Volumes I and II of this remarkable *Encyclopedia* are available; find FUEL Publishing on the Internet.

In **The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman** (University of Nebraska Press, 978-0-8032-1148-3) Margot Mifflin skillfully demythologizes the case of Olive Oatland, captured by Yavapai Indians who attacked her parents near Yuma, Arizona, as they journeyed to California in 1851. Of nine family members, Olive, aged thirteen, and her younger sister were taken captive; her clubbed (but still-living) brother Lorenzo was left for dead. The harsh Yavapais traded the two girls to the Mohaves. In 1856, Olive was finally “ransomed” and reunited with her brother. Her sister had meanwhile died.

In Margot Mifflin’s analytical retelling, Olive’s story shifts from a simple capture-horrific-experiences-rescue saga into a multilayered examination of her treatment in the Mohave encampment, her acculturation, status, and her own favorable assessment of her captors. The Mohave had, in keeping with their normal practice, tattooed her chin, but she suffered no physical abuse. In many cases, Mifflin notes, young women chose to stay with their captors, rejecting a return to the white community.

Mifflin deftly describes the media hijacking of Olive and Lorenzo. The dubious Reverend Royal Byron Stratton inflated the captivity record, added in Mohave “wars,” invented arrows shot into “quivering flesh” and crucified prisoners, thus providing a platform for racist slurs. “Olive was again a captive—this time of her ghost writer,” writes Mifflin. But Stratton, unlike Olive’s Indian captors, was an aggressive manipulator—he even commissioned highly suggestive illustrations to support his narrative. Olive survived these and other adventures in the media circus, later marrying and moving to Texas.

Informative comment on government policy, Indian displacement, US Army activities, and attitudes toward the Indians add value and interest to this fine book. **F**

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A message from Peter Skinner: *After thirty Almost Missed features, it’s time for another reviewer to offer choices and comments. In signing off, I thank readers for their indulgence and welcome my successor, Joe Taylor, to this pleasurable and rewarding task.*

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