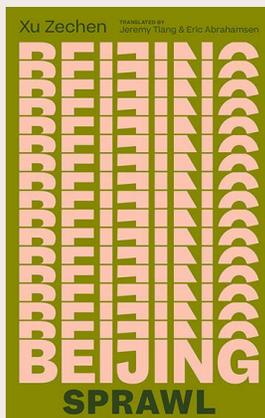


BEIJING SPRAWL

Xu Zechen, translated from Chinese by Eric Abrahamsen and Jeremy Tiang

1. In [his introduction](#) to the story “On the Rooftop” in *Electric Literature*, translator Jeremy Tiang describes the characters in *Beijing Sprawl* as “jingpiao”—individuals from rural areas adrift in a large city with little resources and few prospects. How does this tentative in-between existence impact Xu’s characters and how they experience the city?
2. The tone of *Beijing Sprawl* is often lighthearted and humorous. However, sudden bursts of violence interrupt a number of the stories. What role does violence in each story, and what does it call attention to?
3. In “Wheels Turn” the character Mingliang repeatedly states that “wheels turn,” meaning that a certain outcome is inevitable. Are the stories in *Beijing Sprawl* fatalistic? Are there stories, or moments within stories, that work against this fatalism?
4. In *Beijing Sprawl*, characters are almost always on the move, whether running, in trucks (“Wheels Turn”), on subways (“Prince of Morocco”), or in the nightly hustle of illegal work. What role does mobility play in these stories? What forms of mobility are open to these characters, and what routes, though they may be visible in the distant high rises of central Beijing, are closed?
5. Throughout *Beijing Sprawl*, Xu’s narrators communicate through a sort of folk wisdom. What other truisms do these characters subscribe to? What do these statements provide to the characters, and to the reader?
6. Many of these stories discuss leaving Beijing and heading back to one’s rural home. What does “home” represent to Xu’s characters? What draws them to the city, and what draws them back home? How are movements between the village and the city impacted by questions of class and financial stability?
7. In “Coming of Age” the character Xingjian says to his friends: “You know what it means to ‘profane’ something, right? You read books. I need to keep something pure” (pg. 35). What does he mean by this? How might this sentiment apply to some of the other characters or situations in *Beijing Sprawl*?
8. How do Xu’s characters conceive of masculinity, traditional or otherwise? How do they balance the expectations of traditional masculinity (i.e., responsible breadwinner) with the youthful ideal of the adventuring male hero? What role does male friendship play in creating or maintaining a sense of identity for these characters?



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