

# CON MEN AND COSMOPOLITANS: TWO VIEWS ON MAO'S CHINA

A Conversation Between  
Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland



## REVOLUTIONS ARE NOT (ALWAYS) WHAT THEY SEEM.

Lofty projects to remake a nation's culture and identity produce larger-than-life heroes, but also all kinds of tricksters and con-men, opportunist fraudsters and ordinary people who resort to creative and unconventional means to make sense of the new. After 1949, producers

and consumers of Chinese culture had to make space for themselves in the new society, and they did so in imaginative and unconventional ways. In this conversation, Christopher Rea (University of British Columbia) and Nicolai Volland (Penn State University) offer new perspectives on the culture of the early People's Republic. Con men, Rea argues, loomed large in the cultural imagination of New China. A wave of "anti-spy" novels, stage plays and films about imposters in the revolutionary ranks, and high-profile court cases in the 1950s evince a sense of paranoia about the regime's vulnerability to fraud. Cultural cadres responded by promoting a rhetoric of exposure to heighten the masses' vigilance—a trend with chilling long-term effects. Volland draws attention to the fate of transnational culture and its role in Mao's China: Rather than disappearing in the face of stringent censorship and vehement orthodox critique, China's cosmopolitan tradition went clandestine, surviving in the cracks and crevices of the New Culture through means such as illicit reading, publications for internal circulation, and other inventive strategies. Together, Rea and Volland show that the culture of the Mao was much more diverse than its surface appearance might suggest—findings with important repercussions for today's China.

### CHRISTOPHER REA

is Associate Professor of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He is author of *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (California, 2015); editor of *China's Literary Cosmopolitans: Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, and the World of Letters* (Brill, 2015) and *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays by Qian Zhongshu* (Columbia, 2011); and co-editor, with Nicolai Volland, of *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia* (UBC Press, 2015). He is currently co-translating a Ming dynasty story collection called *The Book of Swindles*.



### NICOLAI VOLLAND

is Assistant Professor of Asian Studies and Comparative Literature at Penn State University. He is author of *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming); and coeditor, with Christopher Rea, of *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia* (UBC Press, 2015). He is currently working on study of China's cosmopolitan tradition through the long twentieth century.



4:00-5:30PM | SEPTEMBER 20, 2016  
HENRY R. LUCE HALL, ROOM 202  
34 HILLHOUSE AVENUE