

China Images

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A Fifteen Year Journey

December 1989. My forehead pressed against the window of the China Eastern 747 as it banked smoothly. Scattered lights emerged from beneath the scudding clouds. “Shanghai,” I whispered. My forehead pushed harder against the cold glass. I began to see buildings along the roads, mist softening their edges. I was sure my excitement made my eyes glow in the darkened plane, even though anxiety clawed at my stomach. What if no one was down there to meet us? Our advisor had called from Shanghai two days before to tell Joe and me, his PhD students, someone would meet us. I told myself to relax, but we had no idea where we were staying. Chinese money couldn’t be bought on the international market, so we were arriving penniless. What if our visas weren’t any good? Despite my worries, it had all worked out. We were met, housed, and sent off by train to Nanjing for our three-week stay.

Joe and I, mid-career graduate students and educators, had been invited to accompany our advisor to China. Six months before we arrived, the world had watched the Tian’an-men Square carnage when China had disintegrated into destroying her own citizens. It was a difficult time for China.

Voices had come at us while we planned our trip. Those at the university were intrigued, and sometimes jealous. Others asked if we would buy them silk or tea or weight-reducing soap they thought the Chinese used. And some dear friends were

shocked. “How can you go to the land of such butchers?” one friend queried, using the ever more popular term for the Chinese. I wasn’t good at responding to bluntness, but I knew this was a critical time to go. Cutting off contact with a people accomplishes little. We weren’t condoning a government policy; our hosts wanted to stay engaged with the west, to keep conversations going. To the best of my knowledge we weren’t going to be hobnobbing with evil butchers. Also, at age 50, I knew that today’s enemies are often tomorrow’s friends and allies. International dynamics are unpredictable, and human contacts increase stability.

Banquets honored our presence. During one, clustered around the table with a vice president and eight faculty members, we talked of the June chaos. Savoring morsels of shrimp and vegetables, we learned of their support for the students, whose quest for democracy carried forward what China had been struggling toward periodically throughout its beleaguered 20th century evolution. (Nanjing students, like students throughout China, had coalesced in support of the democracy demonstrations and started the long march to Beijing. They were turned back on June 4.) The faculty had also realized that what the students were doing was increasingly dangerous as it collided with rigidifying government responses. The animated dinner conversation accentuated the feelings and disagreements flowing among our hosts. Then Liu Haiping’s [Lee-oo High-ping]

quiet voice broke in, bringing a momentary pause. “China cannot afford more chaos,” he said simply. Although I didn’t quite understand, the brief stillness was palpable. Those present had survived the Cultural Revolution when thousands of their colleagues had been killed or emotionally destroyed. They had lived through life in pigsties and labor camps in constant humiliation and fear. They had also survived the earlier Japanese invasion, years of hunger, and civil war. By the end of our visit, we understood that they had sympathized with the students’ ideals, but were frustrated that the young people hadn’t seen their path leading to chaos.

We settled into a routine studying preschool children and discussing ideas with professors. We were up at 6 a.m. to martial music blaring from loudspeakers compelling the students to get moving. As they piled out of their dorms for calisthenics (just outside our windows) I dressed and hastened through winter light to buy steamed buns at the nearby cafeteria. Back in one of our rooms we clutched hot tea mugs and discussed the day’s plans. By then the orange plastic phone was ringing and graduate students and faculty were arriving to verify arrangements and whisk us to our separate preschool research sites around Nanjing. In the evenings we visited young faculty instructors living in dank dormitories—four to a small room, and had meals with older professors in their shared housing—one family to a room with communal kitchen and bathroom. We enjoyed a banquet in a senior professor’s new three-room apartment, and found department stores full of people buying household electric items—from heaters to TVs. China was on the move.

When we returned to the United States, Joe and I knew we’d learned a lot, though our impressions danced together in ever-

shifting patterns. We kept up contacts. I corresponded with an instructor in Xuzhou [shoo-zho] whose son was learning to read Chinese and with a Nanjing professor writing an English textbook. People in the U.S. were fascinated by our experience, but few had knowledge of China. Rotarians who sponsored visitors from the Chinese mainland, postal workers, teachers, and friends still thought Taiwan was the People’s Republic of China. We needed to help others develop a curiosity and open mindedness about filling this void, but the task seemed daunting.

U.S. criticism of China was rampant. Senators and representatives railed against China, urging that we cut off contact. Although their fervor was fueled by the Tian’an-men Square images, it was grounded in decades of our countries’ isolation from each other and by fear of an unknown culture. Xenophobia solves nothing and creates a shortsighted belief that we’re right and ‘the other’ is wrong and evil. John Dewey once said that to repeat catch-phrases, cant terms, and hackneyed propositions coats the mind with varnish that is waterproof to new ideas. We seemed to be moving in that direction.

I thought back to the early 1960s, when the paranoia of McCarthyism still lingered and I was just out of college. Fascinated by China, the forbidden fruit for Americans, I volunteered to organize conferences for Quaker college students who, like me, wanted to make contact with China. Our government asserted that one-billion people didn’t matter, and that the small island of Taiwan had replaced them. We found it incredible that people could believe this, but they did. We held conferences, got to know most of the China experts in the U.S. who were starved for an audience, and invented convoluted ways to establish links with China. None of us dreamed the solution would be Nixon, ping-pong diplomacy, and

the tenuous language of the Shanghai Accords. Once President Nixon went to China in February 1972, the thaw between our two countries began. As Patrick Tyler, chronicler of these events wrote, it was the ending of an epoch and the “beginning of a new one, however undefined.”

Although wary of my meager knowledge about China, I had discovered in my research that the prewriting (what we call ‘scribble’) of Chinese and U.S. toddlers is startlingly different and began shaping my dissertation around that. In 1991 I returned to China. At the end of a month, 1500 train miles and 147 preschoolers later, an unimagined world had opened to me. I had spent hours watching focused little two- and three-year olds bend into their task of producing their idea of writing (tiny, often minutely detailed marks). I had been rocked to sleep in long-distance trains, had given talks to hordes of university students wanting to hear an American, and had maneuvered bicycles through city traffic. I carried home a passion to return, and a bottomless curiosity for learning from a country that is inexhaustibly welcoming—and incomprehensibly different.

Fifteen years later, I walked along the moon-drenched moat behind the Forbidden City and into Tian’an-men Square, threading my way through thousands of Chinese. “Bu yan, bu yan. Xiexie,” I repeated to vendors offering me candied hawthorn on sticks, Beijing Olympics hats, and postcards. “No thank you.” Mulling over my countless China trips, I recognized that my idealism wasn’t pure in 1989. I’d gone to China because communication with the world’s most populace nation was critical. I’d gone because the invitation had tapped an old dream, and I’d gone because I was curious. Joe and I had talked about carrying a symbolic message of support to Nanjing, but

altruism and selfishness were tangled together in our motives.

I now have many colleagues in China. They tell me how much I know about their culture. “You’re a bridge of cultures,” one said recently. Yet I know my knowledge is paper-thin and can unwittingly lead to arrogance.

As humble as I think I can be in some circumstances, I can be shockingly overbearing in my ethnocentric ways. Yafei [yah-fay] laughed aloud when I told him I’d been analyzing American and Chinese cultural mismatch situations by myself. I laughed with him, hoping he didn’t realize that I had really thought it was all right to probe these cross-cultural misunderstandings only from an American perspective. Recently, I pressured my research partner, Yu [yoo], to finish a paper so we could meet a publishing deadline. I knew his mother had died the previous month, just after he’d begun a new job, and that he was under enormous stress, but I also knew, professionally, he must meet this deadline. What I didn’t realize was that in a few days he and his brother must return to their village when their mother returned to earth for the last time, and he was frustrated that he needed to explain this to me.

I love the unknown of China. I love the stories people tell me, understanding little bits of their lives and trying to fit them into an integrated whole. A talented young English professor confides that she’s learning to play the ‘erhu,’ but swears me to secrecy so others don’t laugh at her; Yu talks of the fresh morning breezes and bird songs in his village; Yayun [yah-yoon] ‘finger writes’ a character in the air, and her friend can read it—backwards. These fragments fit into a slowly developing embroidery for me that when finished in the ideal would be a solid pattern, filled with exotic birds and flowers and lots of leaves of different colors and shapes. I’ll never see the

whole pattern—no outsider will, but I love filling in the pieces.

Since my first trip, I've kept a quote from one of China's most popular novels on my desk, *The Dream of Red Mansions*. It underscores a central theme of the book.

TRUTH BECOMES FICTION WHEN
THE FICTION'S TRUE
REAL BECOMES NOT-REAL WHEN
THE UNREAL'S REAL

A near perfect palindrome in Chinese, I have pondered it over the years, but have never figured out what it means. I had to laugh the other day when a colleague studied it for several minutes and said, "It makes my head hurt." However, for me, that is precisely why I keep it near me. It's a touchstone to the conundrum/enigma/riddle that is China.

Resources

A Great Wall: Six Presidents in China, An Investigative History by Patrick Tyler, former Beijing Bureau Chief of *The New York Times*. Written in 1999, this thick, but very readable book chronicles the complex world events swirling around Nixon's drive to be the one to 'open up' China and Henry Kissinger's complicated negotiations with Russia, India, China, and the forces inside the U.S. working to prevent it.

River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze, by Peter Hessler. This is a very readable book describing his experiences and impressions while teaching English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fuling, a small city on the Yangtze River. If you have already read this, you may enjoy his new book, *The Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present*, that weaves together his interviews, continuing experiences in China, and the lives of several of his Chinese friends. It isn't in paperback yet, but it will be soon as it has been nominated for several book awards.

China: A Century in Revolution. This magnificent set of DVDs should be in your local library if it isn't already! The 3 DVDs—China in Revolution, The Mao Years, and Born under the Flag—include a considerable amount of old newsreel footage and interviews with people from many different walks of life and perspectives. It was originally filmed for public television and is available through Amazon.com or Ambrica productions. I would be glad to loan you my copy if your library doesn't have it.

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