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A Beautiful China

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Returning to China From a Year at Yale

I

Nearly every time I have a conversation with an American, I ask the same question: What do you think of when you think of China?

A construction worker I met while he was fishing by the side of a river north of New Haven told me that, to him, China meant the Great Wall, Chinese restaurants, and human rights. “Chinese people are very smart,” he said, “but the government isn’t so great.” A Yale University student who’d spent a year living in China told me that China is very crowded and personal space is limited. She mentioned that Chinese were very curious about foreigners and always called her “*laowai*” behind her back. She also said that when she was staying in a hotel in a small town she noticed that the police there seemed to be particularly “on alert” with respect to foreigners.

An American who had spent time teaching English in Liaocheng, Shandong, had some very fond memories of China. He said that there were very few foreigners back then in that small city, so a lot of people came to recognize him and were quite friendly. When we went out to eat he refused to split the bill and insisted on treating me, saying that his students in Liaocheng had often treated him to meals. An eight-year-old girl who was studying Chinese and had visited China told me how she had once called a waiter “*tongzhi*” at a restaurant in Shanghai and noticed the strange look he gave her. I told her that people in China rarely call each other “*tongzhi*”—or “comrade”—anymore and that, in some places, “*tongzhi*” has become a way of referring to homosexuals. She stared at me in shock when I told her this, her mouth agape.

I was rather surprised by the response I got from a university student of Chinese descent. He was born in the United States, and his parents both came from Hong Kong and still work most of the time in Shanghai. We met while sharing the same table as we had lunch at the airport in Chicago. Looking across the table at his Asian features I felt a kind of closeness and thought he would be very willing to talk about China. I didn't expect it when he replied: "I don't really know much about your country. After all, I'm American." I can't really blame him, I thought. So I was especially surprised when a Swiss-born girl of Chinese descent told me that she not only could speak Chinese fluently but could also recite a large number of ancient Chinese poems. As she began telling me her life story, the first thing she said was: "I'm Chinese, of course."

The man who drove me from New York to New Haven complained that everywhere you turned in the United States you found Chinese-made products and that many Americans had lost their jobs as a result. When he was young, he said, there had been many small factories in Connecticut, but they were later all bought up by large corporations and the manufacturing jobs went overseas, especially to China. I told him that there were many poor people in China and that the social welfare system was quite inadequate. For many, it would be hard to imagine what their lives would be like if they lost their jobs, and so they perhaps needed those job opportunities even more.

II

I spent July in New York City. I liked to go to Times Square and just observe. I would find a set of steps by the side of the street and sit and watch the people walking by under the busy glow of the neon lights. Manhattan is such a fertile piece of land that people of all colors from all over the planet are able to come here and set down roots. In just two centuries, this place had produced so many of humanity's stories. Fresh and lively faces of all different hues streamed along these narrow streets, in the shadow of tall buildings that blocked out most of the sky. They passed right before my eyes but yet were distant, because I was merely an observer, someone who didn't belong to this land.

I liked to walk the streets of New York's Chinatown. I didn't necessarily want to buy anything, but I still liked to window-shop. Later, it became a habit, and whenever I passed through New York and didn't have anything urgent planned I would stop and make a trip to Chinatown so that I could just stroll around for a while.

My first visit to Chinatown was probably three days after I first arrived in the United States. New York's mess of a subway system can really make things difficult for people who aren't familiar with it. I lost my sense of direction as I exited the station, and I was trying to figure out which way to go when I suddenly saw a familiar sign off in the distance: McDonald's. So I thought maybe I should grab something to eat first while I got my bearings.

I thought the food at this McDonald's wasn't as good as at the ones in Beijing. I inadvertently noticed that there were auspicious Chinese characters covering the walls and felt rather confused. I exited the restaurant and asked someone on the street how to get to Chinatown. He answered, "You're already here."

As I neared the back of the Confucius Plaza housing projects, I began to feel that I was really in Chinatown. Everywhere you looked the signs were in Chinese and the streets were filled with people with the same dark eyes and skin tones I saw back in China. People set up stalls on both sides of the street, selling fruit, vegetables, and all sorts of small items for daily use. The shop windows carried posters advertising the Miss Chinatown beauty pageant. The restaurants sold Erguotou liquor for \$10 a bottle and Wuliangye for \$35. Vegetables were rather expensive, though—especially the Chinese celery, which was \$4 per pound. I found a busy Sichuan restaurant where you could get a decent bowl of noodles for \$5, though I found it wasn't spicy enough.

The next day there was going to be a big anti-war demonstration to protest the Republican National Convention that was meeting in New York to nominate George W. Bush for a second term as president. I decided to spend the night, but I couldn't find a hotel. I'd heard there were lots of small hotels in Chinatown, so why was I having such a hard time finding one? It was nearly midnight when I had the good fortune to run into a Hunanese man who brought me to a small hotel, where I got a room in the basement for \$15 a night. Later I realized that most of the Chinese-run hotels didn't advertise with signs on the street because they were operating illegally.

III

As the school year began in September, the population of New Haven suddenly swelled. I'd originally planned to immerse myself in a totally English-speaking environment, but later I came to realize that this wasn't very practical. Every Tuesday afternoon, there was a course on Chinese legal reform at the Yale Law School's China Law Center. Even though the course was conducted in English, it was an opportunity for all of the visiting scholars to get together. After class,

we'd often find an excuse to go out for a meal together and have a nice, satisfying discussion in Chinese.

One place where Prof. Wang Liming and I would often go to enjoy a free meal and carry on boisterous discussions was a house on the south side of campus that four Chinese had rented. Wang Jiancheng was a professor of criminal procedure at PKU Law School and a visiting scholar at the Yale Law School. Peng Ya'nán was a PhD student in constitutional law at Yale Law School, a devout Christian, and a strong supporter of President Bush. Wang Ting, who had moved to the United States from Beijing at the age of eight and graduated from Harvard, was a JD student at Yale and a staunch opponent of President Bush. Ge Yunsong was an assistant professor of civil law at PKU Law School, an LLM student at Yale, and an extremely intelligent and cultivated scholar. The four of them lived a happy, communal life arguing over whose turn it was to carry out the daily chores like cooking, washing dishes, or sweeping up.

Wang Jiancheng, the house elder, looked more like a gangster than a professor. He was a cool customer, even when playing shoot-'em-up video games, and he had an air of confidence, believing that even if he went back home to raise pigs he would still be more successful than anyone else. He had a knack for cooking, and you risked offending him if you didn't try his dishes. Of course, the most unforgettable meal for Prof. Wang Liming was the fish that Chef Wang caught from the river north of the city.

IV

At the beginning of October, Yale received a visit from the president of China's Supreme People's Court, Xiao Yang. Everyone at the China Law Center was busy preparing to welcome this distinguished visitor. He had originally planned to give a public speech at the Law School, but the location was changed and the number of attendees narrowed at the last minute. I heard it was because of fears that human rights organizations might use the occasion to carry out protests.

President Xiao discussed the judicial reforms that China was then undertaking and spoke of the efforts the SPC was making to professionalize and protect human rights. He expressed hope that in one or two years there would be further reforms to China's criminal procedure and said he hoped China's procuratorates would cooperate in pushing for these changes. His talk was chaired by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor from the US Supreme Court, whose appointment by President Reagan as the first woman on the court had had a deep impact on American society. They discussed the differences in their

respective responsibilities, and the audience showed its appreciation for the talk with enthusiastic laughter and applause.

During the question period, a few professors asked some insightful questions. Prof. G asked how judicial reform would handle the relationship between legal institutions and other organs of state power. Xiao Yang answered by talking about the problem of local protectionism, but it was clear that his answer wasn't satisfactory. As the head of China's highest court, there was no way that he was going to be able to give a full answer to the question, because everyone present knew that the crux of the issue was the relationship between the legal system and the Communist Party.

Prof. Hecht asked how the SPC planned to use the judicial process to safeguard constitutional rights. Xiao Yang replied that according to Chinese law, the power to interpret the constitution rested with the National People's Congress Standing Committee. The SPC didn't have the power to interpret the constitution and could not conduct constitutional review. But he noted that there had been a trend toward giving increased consideration to constitutional rights and that there would likely be more litigation concerning constitutional rights in the future.

The conversation continued at a small dinner held after the talk. I told Xiao Yang about the Chen Guoqing case that we were working on at the time and criticized the bureaucratic way that the Hebei High People's Court had handled the case. Perhaps he wouldn't recall our conversation, but in any case I came away feeling respect for this senior judge who was starting to reform the Chinese judicial system in seemingly minor, but important, ways, such as replacing the military-style headgear judges had been required to wear with judicial robes.

V

The trees began turning color throughout New England. Autumn turned New Haven into a gorgeous oil painting, with the stately old gray stone buildings of Yale University sitting under deep blue skies.

In the fall, Yale held many commemorative events to mark the 150th anniversary of the graduation of its first Asian student, a Chinese man named Yung Wing. Unfortunately, it was only after I'd attended these commemorative ceremonies that I began to have a little understanding of who this great and respected Chinese person was.

In 1847, Yung Wing set sail from China on a ship that was carrying tea destined for sale in the United States. Together with an American teacher, he spent 98 days at sea before reaching port. He then went to study at Monson Academy in Massachusetts before entering Yale in 1850.

As a student at Yale, Yung Wing still dressed in the long scholar's gown and wore his hair in the queue that marked him as a subject of the Qing empire. Later in life, he recalled:

Before the close of my last year in college I had already sketched out what I should do. I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful. To accomplish that object became the guiding star of my ambition. (Note: This is a direct quote from original text: *My Life in China and America*, p. 41)

After graduation, Yung Wing returned to China. From 1872 to 1875, he arranged for four groups of 120 young Chinese boys to study in America. Many of these exceptional students went on to play important roles in the history of modern China. At the unveiling of a statue of Yung Wing on the Yale campus, the university vice-president noted in her remarks that Yung Wing had been an extremely accomplished student, even winning a prize for English composition. Through what became known as the Chinese Education Mission, he supported and encouraged the education of many of China's outstanding future leaders. After graduation, he had made the decision to serve society and his country. His spirit was a valuable treasure of Yale University.

Yung Wing spent his life working toward the cultural progress and strength of his homeland. But the China of a century ago was not a very hospitable place for people like him. Because of his support for political reformers during the "Hundred Days Reform" in 1898, at the age of 73 Yung Wing had a ransom put out on his head by the Qing court and had to flee the country. He said: "I'm prepared to die for China at any moment, as long as my death is worthwhile."

I felt no pride as I stood before the statue of this ancestor. All I could do is ask myself why our country continues to face the same kinds of problems a century later.

VI

At the beginning of December, Prof. Edward Friedman invited me to visit frigid

Madison and give a lecture at the University of Wisconsin. I spent the night at his home, where we discussed many issues concerning rural China. He had previously spent many years living in Chinese villages and was keenly aware of the ways that China's grassroots bureaucracy would create and intensify social conflict. He couldn't see any signs of reform on the horizon and was deeply worried about China's future. I was worried, too, but I still believed that China was undergoing a transformation and that there was reason to hope that change was coming soon.

Prof. Friedman kept refilling my glass with *baijiu* liquor, saying that when he'd lived in Ding County the villagers had always toasted him with lots of the local specialty. That night I had too much to drink, but I was fortunately able to keep my emotions under control. The next morning, he drove me to the airport. As we parted, he said quietly, "Take care of yourself. I hope that China's future will be as optimistic as you believe it will be."

While I was at Prof. Friedman's, I learned that the respected journalist Liu Binyan was sick with cancer. When I was in high school, I considered Liu's reportage literature to be a window through which I could learn about my own country. Now, he was in his seventies and had just finished a painful course of chemotherapy a couple months earlier.

After hesitating for a long time, I finally decided to go pay my respects. I decided I couldn't abandon my conscience out of fear that visiting him might be considered politically sensitive. (I had already abandoned a great deal.) The whole afternoon on the day we met, he listened with rapt attention as I told him about the changes that were occurring in China. I told him stories of how in recent years people were becoming increasingly prosperous and more and more people were moving to the cities from the countryside. People's consciousness of their rights was growing stronger, and society was much more open than before. With deep feeling, Liu recalled his home in Beijing and the names of the surrounding neighborhoods. Beginning in the 1950s, he was labeled a rightist. After 1988, he was never again able to return to his homeland.

As we parted, Liu accompanied me outside. He told me how unusual it was for him to go the entire afternoon without feeling any discomfort. On the train back to New Haven, I wondered what I could do for him. Perhaps the only thing I could ever possibly do for him was to give him a happy afternoon like this one.

Just think how many political exiles our country has produced over the past century!

VII

Prof. G asked me if I wanted to extend my stay, as he hoped to arrange a visit to California for me in January. I told him that I wanted to go home.

Prof. G was a teacher and friend with whom I could discuss almost anything, and I felt a great sense of gratitude for all he'd done. But there was one small thing I've never felt able to discuss with him, something that has left one of the deepest impressions on me about my time in the United States. It was such a minor incident, though, that I'm sure he would have a difficult time remembering it. It's quite possible that he'd have no memory of it having occurred at all.

One day in September, Prof. G invited me to his home, which was located just outside a small town in eastern New York. This was the famous "backyard" of New York City, where stately homes were nestled among the great forests and green fields. That evening, I watched a movie called *The Blue Kite* with Prof. G and his two children, who were studying Chinese at the time. I'd heard of this movie many years earlier but had never seen it before, as it had been banned in China.

Told from the point of view of a young boy, the movie portrays how one Chinese family was affected by the difficult history of the 1950s and 1960s. The boy's father was branded a rightist during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and died in a labor camp. One after another, two stepfathers also died under unjust circumstances. In the end, the boy's mother was sent to prison during the Cultural Revolution.

In one scene, the boy's sick stepfather is shown at home, lying on his deathbed, the boy's mother seated by his side with tears streaming down her face. Suddenly, Prof. G's eight-year-old child asked why they didn't just bring him to a doctor. Prof. G stared at the screen as if in thought and said, quietly, "Because it's a poor country."

Instantly, as if a switch had been thrown, I felt deep sadness. Yes, China is a poor country. Many years later, the muddy dirt roads and frigid winters of my home village are still just as I remember them. For the family living in that old cave in the area around Gansu's Huining County, a stove, an old table, and an earthen *kang* bed were their sole possessions. Then there was the dilapidated house with the anti-drug slogan painted on it in that poor mountain village beside the railroad tracks in Guizhou. There was the man dying of AIDS I met in

northwest Hubei who managed to squeeze out a grim smile despite the hopelessness of his situation. And there's so much more. Those distant memories of all the villages I've passed through suddenly became much clearer to me while I was in someone else's country. I realized that I was born in that kind of a poor country, and all of that poverty and suffering is a part of me as well.

I realize that the movie only depicts a small part of China's history. And I know that Prof. G had no intention of looking down on China. But that's my country and I feel very sensitive about it. This poverty pains me, just like injustice pains me. The poverty and suffering caused me to reflect on the path I'd taken in the past. It's led me to continually question myself: Have my actions been too radical, or have they in fact been too timid?

VIII

As everyone busily prepares for Christmas, I'm counting the days until my return to China. There's still a week left before I head back to Beijing, but I'm already too excited to do anything. I know that I'll miss Yale's beautiful campus and the sound of the bells as they ring throughout New Haven. I'll miss bustling Times Square and the comfortable apartment where I've spent nearly the past six months. But this isn't my country; it belongs to someone else. I know I'm being too sensitive, but I simply can't shake this feeling.

I came here to study elections and constitutional issues and then go back to my own land. I can't stop thinking of those bygone eras and those cries for change that have been made for more than a century. Li Hongzhang was insulted in Japan. Ji Hongchang was forced to wear a sign saying "I am a Chinese." Soong May-ling went to speak before the US Congress in order to seek "this great nation's friendship" and aid in fighting the Japanese. Why, after more than a century of continuous suffering, has China still failed to become a modern nation? Is it because our country is too large, our history too ancient?

Today, that mournful history is all long past. But as a Chinese person I have not completely lost my forebears' sense of dignity or their sensitivity. When I see posters on campus concerning China's human rights problems or someone asks me how elections were held in China, no matter how well-intentioned they might be, I still feel a deep sense of hurt.

Who knows how many letters seeking help I'll have to face when I get back to China or how many hopeful faces will come looking for me with expectations?

Who knows how much more guilt and anxiety, misgivings and reproach, or even loss of freedom I'll have to confront? China needs to develop its economy further, but it also needs social justice. On the one side is an illegitimate elite, and on the other side are the weak and disadvantaged who are being deprived. Those who have experienced injustice have no place to seek a remedy or lodge a complaint. When the minority among them who can take no more go to the nation's capital to seek justice, they are dragged back home and locked up in all different kinds of "education centers" where they suffer humiliation and abuse. What can we do? Maybe there's nothing we can do, but I'm genuinely worried that our nation cannot have a prosperous future when a minority is forced to endure such brutal suffering. I worry that this country will be forced to face retribution.

I'm going back to China, my home. It's a place that has suffered a century of upheaval and suffering, a place that has yet to eliminate poverty and despotism, a place where the people are working very hard to catch up with the rest of civilization, and a place that is full of hopes and dreams. There's a solemn responsibility there, suffering that must be borne, and a life of happiness and pride.

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