Terracotta Typewriter

A literary journal
with Chinese characteristics

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Terracotta Typewriter

A cultural revolution of literature

Unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed throughout the year.

Terracotta Typewriter seeks submissions of literary works with a connection to China. The definition of "connection to China" can be stretched as much as an author sees fit. For example, expatriate writers living in China or who have lived in China, Chinese writers writing in English, translators of Chinese writing, works that are set in China, manuscripts covered in Chinese food (General Tso's chicken doesn't count), or anything else a creative mind can imagine as a connection to China.

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William Doreski

Mei Yo Ch'en

The same crooked moon dangles,
Snagged on a corner of my house.
I howl like Robert Frost, howl
For the losses bundled like fasces.
Spirits, actually flying squirrels,
Crouch in the pines and regard me
With murmurs as subtle as wind
Blowing when there's not the slightest breeze.

Chu Hsi

On a day of wine and cheese
I step out to smell the landfill
Weeping beside the Contoocook.
Sullen and distraught, I face the breeze
That's lathering my sour mood.
Everywhere the season recoils
From itself in shades of puce and mauve
And a million jangly purples.

Su Tung P'o

The room expects me, wheezing
Of loveless sex. I close the shade
And close myself against the flowered
Yellow wallpaper, the tattered
Bedspread, the sweaty old sheets.
The curtains billow like cumuli.
I dream I'm no one and wake that way,
The window having opened itself
On a seascape, a picture hanging
Crooked in the cusp of the moon.

Xujun Eberlein

The Wall of the Paris Commune

It was my elderly father who reminded me of it.

On a June morning in 2004, as my husband, daughter and I prepared to leave Boston for our Paris vacation, in the mid-mess of my last-minute packing I managed to make a long distance call to China. Across oceans, my parents picked up the other end of the line. My mother asked me – not without envy—to send photos. My father, 78 years old and normally quiet on the phone, interrupted in a serious tone:

"Pay respect to the Wall of the Paris Commune for us."

I paused before saying "okay"—I hadn't thought of that. I had forgotten the once sacred name of my childhood that symbolized the beginning of Communism, like an ex-Christian forgetting the Crucifixion.

But not my father, despite his memory loss—both long and short term - had picked up speed after he turned 70. A few years ago when he visited Boston and spent a Thanksgiving with us, my husband roasted a turkey. My father and I watched him wrap the bird in foil and put it in the oven, before Bob went back to his study and my father sat down to watch a Chinese TV show. Hours later, I heard Bob say, "Oh shit!" and I rushed to the kitchen to see the two men standing gasping. The oven was cold, and the turkey was as raw as when Bob had put it in. My father, as it turned out, had seen

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A slightly different version of this essay is published in Divide, fall 2005.

the red light on the oven and turned it off, shortly after we left the kitchen. He thought Bob had forgotten to turn the oven off after cooking something else.

As recently as a few months ago, in the spring, I talked with my parents after they returned home from a trip to my father's hometown to sweep his ancestors' tombs. What they did was news to me. I asked my father on the phone what his grandfather's name was, and he fell into a long silence. I could picture the vexed expression on his face as he struggled for the name. After a while he said, "Don't remember." I wondered whether he had never known the name or had forgotten. To this question again he said, "Don't remember."

Curiously, the one thing my father does not forget is Taiji. And it is not the 24-movement set, or even the 36-movement set. What he does is the longest one with 72-movements, and he never has had any problem memorizing the complex, slow moves—"grasping the bird's tail," "cloud hand," "strumming the lute backward,". . . as if these were part of himself.

And now this Wall.

*

I told Bob about my father's wish. My American husband said, "Interesting notion. What is it?"

His words caught me completely by surprise. "You don't know about the Paris Commune?" This seemed improbable, given that Bob is well read and had studied Karl Marx when he did his Ph.D. in economics, and the Paris Commune was rudimentary knowledge for every single person in China, from elementary school children to white-haired grandmothers.

"I've heard about a commune in England," he said.

As irrelevant as wind, horse and cow (so goes the Chi-

nese adage).

I asked Bob if he knew the song "The International." He said, "That I know. A famous Communist song." Did he know who wrote it? "Someone during the French Revolution in 1793," he suggested.

He was only off by a century. I told Bob, and our daughter Mulberry, that even a 7-year-old in China knew it was written by a Paris Commune member named Eugène Pottier, after escaping his condemnation to death.

I began to educate my American family further about the Paris Commune, as well as the Wall, but Mulberry blurted out her teen-jargon: "That's so *random*. I don't want to see it."

I told her we had to see it for Grandpa, who's old and in China, unlikely to have the opportunity that he had pined for since his youth. My daughter, 15 years old and tall like her dad, made a moue of discontent, "Whatever floats your boat…"

My boat. When I was her age, I had been struggling to stay on the boat of "qualified revolutionary successors," otherwise I would have drowned. Mulberry doesn't see how fortunate she is, born with the freedom to not be on any boat.

*

Toward the end of our busy week in Paris, on Friday afternoon, after the Louvre, the Champs-Elysees, and the Eiffel Tower we went to Père Lachaise Cemetery to look for the Wall of the Paris Commune. When we arrived, it was already 6:00 p.m. Our sweet-talk with the door guard, in both English and broken French, received only impatient, incomprehensible French yelling, and the heavy gate was closed in my face. Mulberry, who was studying French in high school, had dallied aside and said nothing at first; now she turned toward

the Metro station with a grunt.

I stood there and didn't want to leave. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to convince my daughter to come again the next day, which would be the last day of our stay and was fully scheduled, a big disappointment suddenly jammed my chest. Later I would ask myself why this visit had such a sudden importance and urgency to me. It was not because the cemetery includes such famous graves as Balzac's and Chopin's. It was not really because of my father either—I had frequently made fun of the old man's blind fealty. So it must have been me, myself. I had to see the Wall that I worshipped in my childhood, and part of my youth. But the imperishable revolutionary belief possessed by my father was the result of him, as an adult, seeking it out before *liberation*, while it was imposed on me as a child by him (and society). It was only logical that I abandon such belief on growing up. So why, really? Might this be analogous to an atheist being attracted to evidence of Jesus?

The gate opened a crack and a string of tourists came out. I stopped a young couple and asked in English if they knew where the Wall of the Paris Commune was. Both shook their heads with an apologetic smile. Bob tried to ask the guard the same question and received only a stern face.

The Wall, or the Paris Commune for that matter, was not mentioned in any of our tour guide books, which was another surprise to me, but I remembered a Chinese friend who had said that the Wall is actually outside of the cemetery. So I dragged Bob and Mulberry along, scouring the perimeter of the cemetery, unsure if I would be able to recognize the Wall when I saw it. I had a vague memory of a picture—a relief sculpture of a group of figures on a huge wall.

Père Lachaise Cemetery is the largest and most fa-

mous in Paris, with some 105 acres. After 20 minutes of walking counter-clockwise along its southeast wall and seeing nothing close to what I was looking for, Mulberry's miserable face eventually stopped me. I had asked several people along the way, passers-by, shop workers, hotel receptionists and the like; no one knew about such a wall. No one had even heard about the Paris Commune. One woman asked me if that was a restaurant's name. How strange, I thought, a whole country of Chinese people had worshipped a thing that did not really exist?

*

On Saturday morning, our last day in Paris, I took the train to Père Lachaise Cemetery again, this time alone. For this I had to give up the Orsay Museum, an Impressionist exhibition my daughter insisted on seeing and which I would have very much liked to accompany her to. Instead I asked Bob to take her there.

The same southwest gate of the cemetery, on Boulevard de Ménilmontant, was now open wide. Under the bright June sun, a tall man in a red-collared winter jacket was selling the cemetery maps for two Euros. I bought one and scanned the list of monuments. Again I did not find the Wall of the Paris Commune. I turned around and asked the map seller who spoke unexpectedly fluent English.

"Most Chinese come to see this wall, outside," he smiled at me knowingly, pointing to a red mark "24" on the map; "And this wall, inside," his fingers moved up to the northeast corner of the map, stopping at a red "17" in Division 76.

"This is a beautiful monument," he added, his fingers quickly sliding back to monument 24.

My relief turned into confusion. Two walls? Not just

one? And they were so far apart? I read the names of the two monuments on the map. Neither mentioned the Paris Commune:

17: Murdes Fédérés
24: Victimes des révolutions

*

"Victimes des révolutions" is located on Avenue Gambetta, in a belt shaped public garden bordering the west wall of the cemetery. Had we walked clockwise from where we started the scouring yesterday, we would have reached it in two minutes—it might have saved me today's trip, or so I thought.

I ran into no one on the peaceful garden path, except a man calmly urinating on the sidewalk near the entrance. And I recognized the relief sculpture right away: a goddess like woman, being shot in the chest, falling backward with open arms, protecting the men behind her from bullets. The picture aroused my remote childhood memory with such clarity that I was perplexed, one thing wasn't right: the wall, a piece separate from and parallel to the cemetery wall, was small, not huge as I remembered. A thin bouquet of blue lavender flowers lay in front. An artistic-looking man came with a complex camera. He took photos of the woman on the relief from several angles. I asked him if this monument was for the Paris Commune.

"No, no," he said in crude English, "it is for victims of revolutions. No Paris Commune."

The way he said it, it was unclear if he even knew about the Paris Commune. I remembered my father's request and took a photo of the sculpture as well before going into the cemetery for the other wall.

After a 15-minute stroll on cobblestone paths criss-

crossing fields of tombstones, I reached Monument 17 in a triangular corner. A large sign on the inside surface of the cemetery wall read:

AUX MORTS
DE LA COMMMUNE
21-28 MAI 1871

Nothing there other than this plain sign—so simple it was almost disappointing. No flowers either.

But the dates erased any doubt in my mind: the foul wind and rain of blood in that May week 133 years ago played between the lines of Karl Marx's *The Civil War in France*, a book forever standing on my father's shelf in a small study in southwest China. After France's defeat and subsequent surrender in the war with Prussia, the new government in Versailles led by Thiers set out to disarm the National Guards in Paris as the patriotic Parisians refused Prussia's victory. An international war turned into a civil war, and the uprising working class, many of whom were the National Guards, took decisions into their own hands. "On the dawn of March 18, Paris arose to the thunder-burst of 'Vive la Commune!'" Marx wrote (a passionate line teachers had read many times during my school years in China. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, my older sister, born on March 18, 1953, seriously considered changing her name to the Chinese equivalent of "Paris Commune" to mark her birthday). The Paris Commune, the first government of the working class, held out against Versailles for two months. But on May 21, the Versailles troops entered Paris. There followed a week of bloody street fighting and 30,000 Parisians were killed, far more than the casualties in the French-Prussian war. The last battle, before the Commune's complete collapse on May 28, took place in Père Lachaise Ceme-

tery, where about 200 Commune members fought hand to hand in the mud while heavy rain pounded the tombs. A third died in the fighting and those who survived were executed against a wall in the eastern corner of the cemetery.

So this was the actual Wall. But why, for so many years, had we been told it was the other one, the sculpted wall? Because an effective propaganda needs pretty decoration and evocative images?

I stared at the plain sign. A middle-aged French couple walked by, their eyes followed my eyes, and they stopped beside me. The man asked me a question in French. From his expression I gathered the question must have been either "What do you think this is for?" or "Why are you so interested in this?"

"Paris Commune," I said in discrete English, "Karl Marx. Communism."

The man and woman looked at each other in a baffled expression, and both shook their heads. Then the man protested in mixed French and English:

"This is no Communism! No Karl Marx! This is the Fédérés!"

Without speaking French, I didn't know how to explain that the Paris Commune, according to Chinese textbooks, was the first proletarian dictatorship governmental power in the world, the pioneer of all Communist countries. Karl Marx himself drafted the Commune's proclamation.

"It was the start," I wrote the word "start" on my map and showed it to the man, "start of Communism."

They kept saying "No." There was no way to continue the conversation with their halting English and my stillborn French. So after I repeated my claim two more times I said goodbye. A few steps away I looked back, they smiled at me,

still shaking their heads, but a bit more reluctantly now.

*

Back at the hotel, Bob and Mulberry were waiting for me. I told Bob about the cemetery and he opened the map I bought. On the back of the map he found a short introduction in 5 languages: French, English, German, Spanish, and Japanese, that I had overlooked earlier. The very end of the introduction read:

"The visitor will surely be moved by the memory of the 'Fédérés' of the Paris Commune (1871), whose graves are on the spot where they were actually shot. In this little corner of history one can almost hear the message of their faith in the future."

This was yet another surprise: the Paris Commune was so emotionally, emphatically introduced by the official guide of Père Lachaise Cemetery, however no one living or working around it heard about it.

I wondered what to tell my father. That almost no French person I talked to knew about the Paris Commune, the cornerstone of his revolutionary belief? That the wall he knew the picture of was a stealthy replacement of the actual, plain wall, and the famous sculpture has nothing to do with the Commune? That for the few people who happened to notice the actual Wall, the Paris Commune had nothing to do with Communism?

I did not know.

*

Upon returning to Boston, my research on the sculpture "Victimes des révolutions" found that it was designed by Paul Moreau-Vauthier (1871-1936) in 1900, and was built in 1909. Several resources noted an inscription at the bottom of the sculpture, though I did not see it when I was there:

What We Want of the Future
What We Want of It Is Justice—
That Is Not Vengeance.
- Victor Hugo

Interestingly, the website of the University of New South Wales in Australia, www.arts.unsw.edu.au/pariscommune claimed that though "today the wall named Le Mur des Fédérés in Division 76 at Père-Lachaise Cemetery remains the site of numerous pilgrimages, it has only a symbolic relation to the actual incident and can in no way be the actual wall of the time since it was built after the Commune. Pauper's corner where the last 147 federalists were shot was razed when Avenue Gambetta was built. A monument built with the stones of the old wall stands on the exact place where the mass execution had taken place. The monument's moving sculpture (was) designed by Paul Moreau-Vauthier."

This claim, however, contradicts not only the statement on Père-Lachaise Cemetery's official map, but also its own argument, as the monument designed by Paul Moreau-Vauthier was built after the Commune as well, in fact 38 years after.

Because my research in English uncovered little more information than this, I performed an internet search in Chinese. The result: someone else had worked this puzzle, though with a different motivation.

In the fall of 1972, a Chinese scholar and French expert Shen Dali (now a professor of Beijing Foreign Language Institute) visited Paris and Père-Lachaise Cemetery for the first time. For him, as it had been for me, the sculpted wall with the goddess-like woman was the symbol of the Paris Com-

mune. However, standing in front of the revered wall, the plural word "revolutions" in the title of the sculpture made him suspicious. A closer look at the figures behind the woman on the sculpture increased his suspicion: some of the figures seemed to dress like the soldiers of Versailles (how amazing Professor Shen could tell this!). And, unlike me, he saw the inscribed lines of Hugo's poem, and frowned at the refusal of vengeance which he thought inconsistent with the Commune's spirit.

Shen subsequently spent considerable time in libraries and the town hall of Paris researching this sculpture and its artist. His conclusion: Paul Moreau-Vauthier was a "fanatical Chauvinist." Though a son of a Commune member, Moreau-Vauthier's opinions had nothing in common with the Paris Commune. His sculpture was designed for all killed in each and every revolution.

In a conversation with Jean Braire, then Secretary-General of the Association of Friends of the Paris Commune, Shen was told the sculptor reconciled all deaths without distinguishing revolutionary from reactionary, including all Parisians and Versailles killed in the engagement, and that the survivors of the Commune always refused this sculpted wall. Jean Braire, believing this wall an insult to the Commune, also told Shen that the Soviet Union and many other countries mistook this monument as the actual Commune's Wall. Poland even printed it on their new currency note. "I wrote to the Poland Consular in France and requested a timely correction," Braire was quoted as saying. It is unclear when this conversation had taken place.

As it turned out, when I asked, none of my Chinese friends had heard about Shen's discovery 32 years before. For

whatever reasons, the very effective official media channels in China never mentioned a word about it.

*

I found all kinds of excuses to delay the phone call to China, until ten days after my return from Paris. My mother answered the phone, and as always she shouted at my father to pick up another receiver, so they could both talk with me. In the middle of my chat with my mother about how beautiful the Provence rural area was, my quiet father stepped in and asked if I had seen the Wall of the Paris Commune.

"Yes," I said without providing details, and quite unwisely, I added in an attempt to branch off the conversation, "not only that, I have seen the graves of Balzac and Chopin." The truth is, I didn't have the time to find Chopin's grave.

My father said, "What have Balzac or Chopin to do with the Paris Commune?"

It took me a few moments to realize my father had thought the entire Père Lachaise Cemetery was devoted to the Commune members. After all, 30,000 of them were killed in the bloodstained May of 1871. I shouldn't have been surprised, given my own false impression of a huge, sculpted cemetery wall. But I was.

I explained to my father the place where the Commune members fought to their death was already a cemetery long before the revolution. I didn't know if he understood, or was willing to understand, because he said nothing. I heard my mother shouting in the background, something about taking his vitamins, but he did not answer her. After some silence my father asked, "What did you feel there?"

He meant the Wall. All the while as I was talking to him, my mind had focused on the picture of the plain sign,

the simple, real Wall. At his questioning, the picture flashed back to the beautiful sculpture. I said, “I liked it very much.”

“Like?”

Apparently I had used the wrong verb. I could almost hear the churning heart of my short, old father, to whom the Wall of the Paris Commune remained a sacred place.

I glanced at our refrigerator, which was next to the phone. Held by a magnet to the door was a paper recently handed out by my primary physician: “Dr Pugh’s Pointers for General Health and Safety.” Among the pointers were:

- *If you have a DOG, you will live, on average, TWO years longer than non-dog owners.*
- *If you have a SPOUSE, you will live, on average, FIVE years longer than single people.*
- *If you go to CHURCH regularly you will live, on average, SEVEN years longer than other people.*

How ironical.

Whoever this Dr. Pugh is, he was pointing to me that health and truth don’t reconcile.

In the end, I did not tell my father what I'd found.

Doug Johnson

Basalt Cliff Blues

Here breathing goes astray.
Pause. Confirm feet.

Step. Crowding city thoughts
threaten foothold.

Confirm hips. Lean into cliff.
Kick pebbles to muffled shore.

River absorbs breathing.
Balance right foot to left hand.

Exhale Han Shan
Still unclear about cause and effect

Listen to fingertips
Confirm feet.

Decorum

These glimpses of decorum in my early life
have fitted me for success. My manners,
my neat handkerchief, and my tame haircut
have seen me through everyday encounters with society.
–William Stafford

It is everyday greetings that frighten most.
Convict baldness soothes. Safe distance.
Sergeant Father taught the Windsor knot
Polished his shoes. Stood up straight.

Mozart isn't for monkeys. Dabbing the
corners of their mouths with napkins silently
forbear the intrusion. Plaid skirts circle wagons.
Hide money in the sugar bowl.

The china locked in the cabinet. Laughing on cue
they glance at the glass. He isn't supposed to watch
their reflection in the rose pattern. He questions

Lao Tzu's parable. The bird fears pine boughs
with no food. The bird fears cages well fed.
He dies here staring at K-Mart lace.
Serving soup. Smiling.

Books

—Song 128, Han Shan

A courteous young man
well versed in Latin and Mandarin texts
people call him *Sir*
villagers call him a scholar
but he has no position
he does not know how to farm
in winter he wears a tattered jacket
this is how books fool us

Translated from English by Sun Qixia & Doug Johnson

书

一个有礼貌的年轻人
人们叫他先生
但他没有位置
在冬天他穿着一件被撕碎的夹克
熟练拉丁文和普通话
村民叫他学者
他不会种田
书就是这样唬弄我们

Gale Acuff

Lullaby

Before I was born I was my parents,
lodged within their two halves somehow, until
they splashed me together and here I am,
though a larger version of what I was,
which means I look like both of them now, how

they would appear if they were each other.
I've seen baby pictures of my mother
and my father—they favor me. Each gazes
at the camera but it's really me
they don't know they're figuring. Father's dead
but he's still looking for me. I hear him
calling: *Tiger? Boy? Son? Where have you gone?*
Are you there? What are you up to? He finds
me—finds part of himself, part of Mother.

Oh, I just wondered where you were.
Nothing important. Sometimes you're so quiet.
Thought maybe you were sleeping or had gone
somewhere. Forget it. Reading? What you got?
You Can't Go Home Again—*I know that's right.*

Mother's pushing eighty. She lives alone
and writes stories she sends to *The New Yorker*
and receives some excellent rejections.
One day she'll disappear to what we are.

I'm sitting in a pizza restaurant
in Haikou, China. The Muzak
hums *Strangers in the Night* and I begin
to sing along. The Chinese diners smile.
When I start to cry some of them join me.
Ever since that night, we've been together,
Lovers at first sight, in love forever,
spaghetti-soft, like my first solid food.
It wasn't my parents' song but it's ours
now. I will go to bed tonight, together,

lie on my back as they placed me before,
puzzle up the ceiling and the faces
watching over me and making me smile,
smile. I can't make them out but they seem kind,

don't know what they say but must be music.

Caroline Monday

A Language In Common

"I think we've got the whole family in here," I said to Ashley, my Golden Week traveling companion, as we began to realize changing our sleeping arrangements would not be possible. We would be spending the 25-hour train ride from Sichuan to Hunan in separate cabins.

"Yes, it's the whole family," my teenaged cabin mate said, catching me off guard. I had been speaking at a normal speed, paying little attention to clarity and enunciation – a trick that usually keeps us native speakers from being understood by all but the most advanced English-speaking Chinese. I was not expecting anyone on the train, much less a boy the same age as many of my own students at Hengyang Number One Middle School, to be capable of listening in.

Almost everyone in China aged 30 years or younger has studied at least some English. However, most speakers here do not understand things said quickly and using phrases not found in that quintessential textbook, *Advance With English*.

While it is very easy to avoid being understood, communicating effectively can be quite a bit more difficult. This task requires a mixture of simple English, even simpler Chinese and very complicated gesturing. If not leading to full comprehension, this method at least gives my listeners the general idea of what I am trying to say, and a good show. It is an exhausting way to communicate but on any given Chinese train, bus or sidewalk one can find a whole slew of lo-

cals eager to tirelessly give it a go.

Teenagers are the most eager of them all. If they do not approach foreigners on their own volition, their parents will urge them on, encouraging the children to further their education by practicing their English on this complete stranger. In the United States, parents tell their children to stay away from adults they don't know. Perhaps Chinese parents also say, "Don't talk to strangers," just adding the disclaimer, "unless they look like they might be native English speakers."

While I'm sure the family on the train was very pleased with their son's opportunity to speak to Ashley and me, his excitement in meeting us seemed to stem not so much from a desire to practice is oral English, but rather from a wish to exchange ideas with two people who had chosen to leave their homeland to live in his.

He understood most of what we said, even when speaking at normal speed and while using a standard vocabulary. We learned he was accustomed to speaking with native speakers, as the special international school he attended in Guangzhou employed several foreign teachers. The three of us spent the first half hour of the train ride sitting on the lower bunk the soft-sleeper cabin talking, while his parents listened without understanding—all the while smiling at their son's abilities. Despite my limited knowledge of the Chinese educational system, I realized how much money those skills had cost them.

Even with his excellent vocabulary and pronunciation, the boy asked us about many of the things it seems all of China's 1.3 billion people what to know of any foreigner who enters their country. "Where are you from?" The United

States. “How long have you been in China?” At that point, about two months. “What are you doing here?” Teaching oral English to high school students. “Why did you decide to come to China?”

When asked this last question, I usually say I came out of a desire to learn more about Chinese culture and to visit some of the country’s many places of interest. This answer it true, but it is far from comprehensive. The complete answer is, naturally, more complicated. It is too lengthy and complex for the very basic exchanges I have with most people I meet in China. That I am interested in China and its culture is the safe and easy-to-understand answer. It never fails to satisfy whoever is asking, leading them to follow up with an inquiry into my thoughts on Michael Phelps and the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The teenager on the train and I did not get around to discussing the Olympics. When he asked me my reasons for coming to China I gave him the safe answer, very nearly leaving it at that. But then, urged on I suppose by this rare opportunity to more fully explain myself, I added that I had also come in order to gain a different point of view, to learn new ways of thinking about life and the world. The response was still far from complete, but I found saying it gratifying. He seemed to understand – both the words and the sentiment.

He then asked us how long we would be staying in China, another standard question. The complete answer to this one is simple: one year. He told us one year was not long enough to see and learn about all the different parts of China, which is true. However, it occurred to me that one year was already proving to be plenty of time for my home country to

change in ways that might make it difficult for me to support myself when I returned.

Just that afternoon we had learned that the stock market had taken an unprecedented plunge, forecasting a grim future for the U.S. economy. While my plan had been to reenter the "real world" after a year in China, I could not help but wonder if, come the end of that year, my job prospects would be better if I stayed. A worrisome study of online news gave phrases like "sub-prime lending," "bail-out package" and "recession" a prominent position at the front of my thoughts.

I confessed some of these thoughts to our new acquaintance. He was familiar with what was happening in the U.S., suggesting that if presidential hopeful Barack Obama was elected he could fix everything. "He's just one man," Ashley said. "He's not a magician."

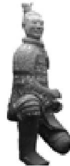
The boy also recognized China's position to eventually replace the U.S. as the world's largest economy and thus the world's largest influence. "There will soon be a new world leader," he said, more pleased with the prospect than Ashley and I.

The next day, in the privacy of the dining car and once again surrounded by people who could not understand what we said, Ashley commented on the boy's remarks. "It was just so Chinese," she said. The idea that a politician, even a president, could or should have enough power to single-handedly pull a country out of a recession seems far-fetched to most Americans. And while we were familiar with China's desire to establish itself on the global stage we had never heard those sentiments voiced so directly and in our native tongue.

Yes, but we are all products of our society, I reminded

her, noting something I had said myself. The boy had asked us how we felt about freedom. He said people in China tend to think it is worth it to lack some freedoms if it leads to material gain. I admit even now I don't know exactly what he was asking. But I remember what I said; I told him people should be free to the extent that they do not keep others from being free as well. I might as well have been reading directly from the "How to Walk, Talk and Look Like an American" handbook.

This Chinese teenager and I had found a common language, but the experience taught me it takes more than a mutual knowledge of English for people to understand each other. As Ashley and I sat in the dining car, feigning ignorance when the waitress told us we could not stay without buying food, I imagine the boy was back in the cabin saying to his parents, "And then she said something that was just so American…"



Jim Shelley

Visiting My Tibetan Students' Homes: Mary in Henan

I taught in Tongren, Qinghai, a full semester before visiting any of my students--it was a busy first semester without time or opportunity to see much beyond the town. Shortly before the winter vacation in January 2005, my student Mary approached me and asked if I would like to visit her home during the upcoming holiday. Mary was a fairly quiet student who smiled a lot--her English ability was among that of the weaker students in the class. She was a Tibetan-speaking Mongolian, one of four students in the class from Henan Mongolian Autonomous County, the southernmost of the four counties in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. I told Mary that I would be away for most of the holiday but would give her a call upon my return. When I came back in late February, I did just that.

There was no bus to Henan that cold morning when I embarked on my visit, so I got on a bus to Zeku town instead, from which Henan was not far. Climbing on the bus, I saw that I was definitely headed to a place only Tibetans go--I was surrounded by dark, hard-faced, long-haired, often mustachioed nomads in long coats and with daggers on their hips. It was my first time to go anywhere beyond Tongren by myself--the only language used now was Amdo Tibetan, of which I only knew how to count to thirty and say a few phrases. I managed to convey where I was going and pay my fare. South from Tongren, the brown mountains turned to evergreen forest, with occasional Tibetan prayer flags strung

up along the road, and then we began climbing in altitude up onto a hilly plateau. Yak and cattle grazed the pastureland around us as we entered Zeku two hours later. I quickly found a bus to Henan, and after another hour and a leveling-off of the hilly countryside, I reached my destination. Henan struck me as a rugged frontier town--there was really nothing south of here but miles upon miles of grassland and scattered nomad tents. Lots of guys wearing expressionless faces were cruising the streets on motorcycles and occasionally on horseback. The street signs showed Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian.

I called Mary, who quickly came to meet me and take me to her nearby home. Her house was typical of ones sometimes seen in that area of northwest China--the front porch was enclosed all in windows to allow sunlight in for heat (the sun gets quite intense at Henan's 4000-meter elevation). They were a family of seven, with Mary the third of five children. Her father was a recently retired school teacher which afforded the family a comfortable situation, and their house seemed fairly large. I presented them with a gift of a white Tibetan scarf, a brick of tea, and some fruit, and they sat me down in the living room for a bowl of milk tea, the usual fare in that region--hot milk with big chunks of what appears to be dried grass floating in it, usually consumed together with coarse bread. I took in my surroundings: a large living room with an L-shaped sofa along the wall and an iron cast stove in the middle for heat; posters of various Buddhist deities and lamas decorating the walls; several orange cabinets with ornately-painted patterns very similar to ones I had seen on a trip to Mongolia a couple years prior. Mary busied herself with chores while I rested--she filled up a bin by the stove

with dried sheep dung for burning--and then we went off to see a nearby Buddhist monastery.

I asked her about her holiday as we walked along the dirt road, she said she had mainly been studying--her older sister had been tutoring her in math. She asked me about a few English words she had looked up--the type of daily life words which Tibetan students tend to ask--stupa, Mani beads, circumambulate… Once at the monastery, we had a look around. One particular stupa had a number of pilgrims circling it repeatedly. Mary told me that walking around that stupa 10,000 times per year would ensure good luck, hence the crowd. As we finished, I pulled out my camera to take a snapshot of the monastery, but perhaps out of politeness or shyness, Mary declined my request to be in the photo. This discouraged me from taking additional photos during the visit.

Back at their house, I was returned to my place on the sofa, where I would remain for the afternoon and evening--and most of the rest of my stay. I quickly realized that, as a guest in their home, I was not sure what I was supposed to do. Of course I did not expect to be continuously entertained, but I also did not want to be impolite or antisocial, so I stayed attentive while I sat to see if I was expected to participate or help with anything. Everybody went back and forth doing chores and speaking Tibetan, and I remained clueless. I certainly was being supervised anyway--any time I got up, somebody ran to fetch Mary, who would run in and ask what I needed, making me a little tense. When I perceived that nothing was expected of me and it was okay, I started reading a book. Then after a while, the father came and sat near me, and I put my book down. We made some small talk in

Chinese while he smoked a pipe. He had a friendly face and a wandering left eye, which stared aloofly while we chatted. The small talk stopped, he relit his pipe, and I reopened my book. He offered me some *baijiu*, pouring me a bowl and sticking a dollop of butter on one edge. Was I to lick the butter while I drank? I had no idea. So I just took safe sips and kept reading my book, while he puffed away on his pipe.

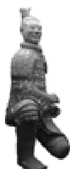
Everyone else prepared for dinner--the mother cooked over the iron-cast stove while the children ran to and fro helping. Soon enough, dinner was served--a small table was set in front of me and another in front of the father, while the mother and children ate separately at a table across the room. The segregation did not really help me feel any more at ease, but I suppose I was in the place of honor. We ate what I call Tibetan-style Chinese food--thick, oily dishes of meat and green peppers and onions with rice. I ate my fill and thanked my hosts, and everybody cleaned up. Mary's sister emptied water from the eight cups set in front of the room's alter--they would be refilled in the morning. After another hour of sitting, reading, and butter-*baijiu* sipping, I was led to another room to a bed heated by an electric blanket. In the darkness about ten minutes after I settled into bed, somebody crawled into the room's adjoining bed. Was it Mary? She was the only one I could really communicate with--would they put her in the same room with me thinking that I might wake up and need something during the night? I drifted off to sleep wondering.

The other bed was empty as I arose the next morning, so my question would go unanswered. I went out and was given a basin of warm water with which to wash my face. It had snowed the previous evening, turning everything white.

My stomach felt a bit uncomfortable, and I found my way out to the outhouse at the front of the yard. After squatting to relieve myself, I stood and looked down the deep hole at my feet: the solid, almost black pile at the bottom was now adorned by my fresh, yellow-brown splashes. There was no hiding that, even with toilet paper (which I also noticed the hole was absent of, save mine). They mixed me some *tsampa* for breakfast, and then Mary and I set off to see her former primary and middle schools. Along the road, I asked about the Mongolian on signs. Could she read it? No, everybody around Henan only knew Tibetan. Why did they write it on the signs then? Perhaps to reinforce their identity, I contemplated. We had a brief look around the schools, searched around for an earring Mary dropped in the snow, and an hour later I was back in my special spot on the sofa. My book and I passed the time together. At one point, Mary and her siblings asked me how to say some words in English, and I likewise asked them words in Tibetan… "The food is delicious" = "*Sama shimguh*"… I planned to tell the mother, to whom I had been unable to communicate anything up to that point. We took an hour and watched a locally-produced VCD featuring the previous year's Naadam festival celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County--it was an interesting mix of Chinese military processions, Tibetan dances, and Mongolian sports competitions. By afternoon, the hot sun had removed all hints of snow, and the open fields out the window were calling me to walk through them. I decided to make a break from my confinement while nobody was looking, but was not two minutes out the door when the younger brother came running up to bring my coat and accompany me--it had been a

short-lived escape. That evening though, we all overcame some of our awkwardness around each other by means of the family's karaoke system: the children each sang a few songs (the younger brother particularly demonstrated his ability to ham it up on the microphone), and I in turn sang some English songs a cappella. We laughed and loosened up a bit. Climbing into bed that night, I felt a little more at ease--and this time nobody crawled into the bed beside me.

The next morning, I got my things together to catch the bus back to Tongren. I wanted to get a family photo and catch everybody in Tibetan-style dress before I left--especially as the older brother had an amazing-looking leopard-skin-border coat--but as I got ready, only Mary and her mother were to be found, so I got a shy photo of the three of us together. "*Sama shimguh*," I called out to the mother as I was walking away towards the bus station, which earned me a gracious smile. Mary made sure I was set for a bus ticket, and then I was on my own again, headed back to Tongren. My ears popped severely as we dropped in elevation on the return trip, and the subsequent pain the rest of the week kept the trip fresh in my mind. It had been an experience—not always smooth, but satisfactory overall—certainly a decent first try. Mary's family would greet me with far less reserved smiles when I returned to their home again several months later.



Andrea DeAngelis

Drinking Wine

This house stood fleshy and unruptured
by the neighing coughs of horses
by the rusty crawls of carriages
How can this be?
How can this house be anywhere
I can feel?
This heart goes further than this house
This house stands in one here
In one place of skin and stone
but the heart breathes,
beats in many chambers.
You can't touch
you can't taste
you can't stand within.
This heart's spirit reaches far away
And this place, this house
is left alone – isolated.
Picking chrysanthemums
along the Eastern Hedge
sloping down,
slowly life emerges
the clouds blow mist
and we sink into seeing
the Southern Mountain.
Daylight makes dreams of beauty
birds fly home after another
searching for truth

Contributor Notes

Gale Acuff has had poetry published in *Ascent*, *Ohio Journal*, *Descant*, *Maryland Poetry Review*, *Adirondack Review*, Worcester *Review*, *Florida Review*, *South Carolina Review*, Santa *Barbara Review*, and other journals. He has authored three books of poetry: *Buffalo Nickel* (BrickHouse, 2004), *The Weight of the World* (BrickHouse, 2006), and *The Story of My Lives* (BrickHouse, 2009). He taught university English in the U.S., China and the Palestinian West Bank.

Andrea DeAngelis' writing has appeared in *Salome Magazine, Flutter Poetry Journal, Mad Swirl* and *Gloom Cupboard* and is forthcoming in *Word Riot*. She is working on her first novel. Andrea also sings and plays guitar in an indie rock band called MAKAR (www.makarmusic.com). MAKAR is currently recording their second album, *Funeral Genius*.

William Doreski teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire. His most recent collection of poetry is *Waiting for the Angel* (2009). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review, Notre Dame Review, The Alembic, New England Quarterly, Harvard Review, Modern Philology, Antioch Review, Natural Bridge*.

Xujun Eberlein grew up in Chongqing, China, and moved to the United States in the summer of 1988. After receiving a Ph.D. from MIT in the spring of 1995, and winning an award for her dissertation, she joined a high tech company. On Thanksgiving 2003, she gave up algorithms for writing. Her

stories and personal essays have been published in the United States, Canada, England, Kenya, and Hong Kong, in *AGNI, Walrus, PRISM International, StoryQuarterly, Stand and Kwani* and others. Her debut story collection *Apologies Forthcoming* won the 2007 Tartt Fiction Award and was published in June 2008. She is the recipient of a 2008 artist fellowship in fiction/creative nonfiction from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Doug Johnson is the founder of Cave Moon Press, a non-profit dedicated to bridging global and local issues through literary arts. He publishes a monthly poetry e-zine dedicated to emerging poets. His original books include, *Ten Years to Hold your Breath, Home on the Range, Frank's Diary, and Black Mountain Whispers: A tribute to Raymond Carver.* He teaches English at the high school where Raymond Carver graduated in Yakima Washington. His photos have appeared in various literary arts journals in the United States. His drawings entitled the *Cracked Pot series* of drawings appeared in part in the *Houston Literary Review* and Gallery of Thum as a featured artist. He won "Best Letter Press Design" from *Bumbershoot Arts Festival* in Seattle in 1998. Please contact him at www.cavemoonpress.org about future projects.

Caroline Monday is a recovering newspaper reporter teaching English in Hunan Province. She writes nonfiction essays about her life and her observations of the world around her. Check out more of her work at carolinemonday.com

Jim Shelley is currently in Guangzhou, China, teaching English and pursuing a distance-study master's degree in International Development. You can see photos from his travels at http://thejimshelley.worldzonepro.com.

Sun Qixia was born in Henan, China. She earned her master's degree in sociology at Birmingham University in UK and now teaches English in China.