

CHINA, or There and Back Again

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‘What can China give me that my soul hasn’t already given me? And if my soul can’t give it to me, how will China give it to me? For it’s with my soul that I’ll see China, if I ever see it.’

(Fernando Pessoa)

In April 2011, I spent two weeks in China. I was part of a small group in London that practises *tai chi*, *qi going*, and *tui shou* (pushing hands). Led by our teacher B. together with a translator-guide, we stayed in three cities: Beijing, Xi’an and Handan. This is a purely personal and impressionistic account of that trip.

Home to about 20 million people, nearly three times that of London, Beijing *feels* big. There is very little of old Beijing left; the dominant assumption seems to be old = bad and new (‘modern’) = good. Quite apart from the grim aesthetics – if the two really can be separated – this strikes me as a serious long-term cultural mistake. Maybe there’s a Maoist element to it, too: that revolutionary itch to start again from Year Zero, which always requires getting rid of the old and awkward.

In any case, the old city has not been renovated but knocked down and replaced with the grey 60s-style apartment blocks, school of neo-Brutalism, that march in endless rows everywhere in China. (But people have to live somewhere, and I saw almost none homeless). These are joined, in Beijing, by lots of giant shiny money-boxes and shopping malls, connected with roads often large enough to be motorways. There’s clearly big money washing around, if very unevenly. A clean and efficient underground system, with many signs in English, remains from the Olympics. Very little English is spoken, though, even in hotels.

First random note: here’s how you cross a busy main road in Beijing. First, walk out into the road in the first possible break of traffic *in the lane closest to the pavement*, and stop on the white line separating it from the next lane. Then repeat the process for as many lanes as necessary until you get to the strip separating one side of the road from other, whereupon you start all over again. Look out for speeding cars – they give no quarter and won’t stop, even at what look like zebra crossings – madly swerving bicycles and other pedestrians. Good luck!

The first whole day, we left Beijing to find and climb a portion (tiny overall, big enough for my legs) of the Great Wall. Suddenly, I realise I am Somewhere Else, and specifically, definitely, *China*...

Our first session of pushing hands is with Master L., in a corner of the grounds of our hotel. Doing it here, closer to the source of our practice, *in* the source, so to speak, feels qualitatively different, and I realise with a thrill that what I am seeing and hearing, as Master L. teaches, is pure Daoism. (We have an excellent interpreter in T., himself also a martial artist.) The ideas, certainly, but not as words in a book; they are realised in his very person.

Tiananman Square was dripping with fear, paranoia and militant nationalism, and crawling with police and soldiers. Everybody is either watching or being watched. I had already decided (rightly, I still feel) not to separate myself from the others as someone too moral to be there; later, it turned out I was not the only one with misgivings. Our local guide, a different one, is defensive: ‘Yes, some bad things

happened here, but there are two sides to every story...’ And to every massacre? The giant portrait of Mao, who was responsible for more deaths in the twentieth century than any other single person, after all, is equally hard to take.

Directly adjacent to Tiananmen is the Forbidden City, created in the Ming Dynasty. It too is huge – the Chinese are very into huge, in a way that reminds me oddly of America – but what is most striking is the continuity. One place is secular, shorn of the other’s cosmological and geomantic (*feng shui*) concerns, but both are fundamentally massive architectural statements of power, domination and authority. Conversely, neither one manifests any concern with the Daoism, or even much of Confucianism, that I have always admired and considered, understandably enough, as distinctively Chinese.

It was then I started to realise that *both are equally Chinese*. Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu, in the 4th-5th C. BCE, were already voices in the wilderness of the Warring States, and Daoists have always been marginal in China itself, oppressed by the very same sort of people and institutions ruling today. On the other hand, impressively, their work has also survived the mainstream madness, re-emerging irrepressibly if erratically to refresh the culture. And, in various forms and a thousand translations, other cultures.

In short, any view of China as ‘really’ either one *or* the other – ancient and subtle wisdom, or autocratic and bureaucratic power – is terminally one-sided. This is unsurprising if you remember that the first victims of the Industrial Revolution were the *English* poor, women, children and animals, and English too was the first resistance to it. And so on...

Generalising is both unavoidable and tricky, but it doesn’t seem very daring to say that the Chinese people as a whole seem self-confident, direct, and informal. Each attribute can be unpacked further. ‘Self-confident’ includes the unspoken but distinct sense that collectively and, for the most part, I guess, individually, they couldn’t care less what anyone else thinks of them or what they are doing. (I’m not at all optimistic about the potential of international opinion to influence the Chinese government on Tibet, or any other issue.) ‘Direct’ shades into brash, and from there pretty easily, on occasion, into downright rude. (Queuing seems to consist of pushing directly in front of whoever is next at the window.) ‘Informal’ points to a positive aspect of the same package. No beating about the bush or dissimulation; what you see is what you get!

Isn’t this, at least in part, a mentality resulting from being part of a Middle Kingdom that has for so long been the centre of the world – only their world, of course, but when there are 1.3 billion of you, that might seem a quibble – and all others distant, curious and, except for the embarrassing interlude in the nineteenth century, neither forgotten nor forgiven, unimportant barbarians? It would hardly be surprising.

The Japanese, in nationalist mode, share the same reflex toward foreigners, but in every other respect the contrast with the Chinese could not be more striking. The Japanese ‘package’ seems to be just the reverse: formality, courtesy, and an intense awareness of hierarchy and etiquette, as well as grounds for suspecting that you might have to wait a very long time, or get to know an individual very well, before you would find out what they actually think or feel. There is a deeply-ingrained distinction in Japanese culture between *tatema*, one’s public face, and *honne*, or private feelings.

In this, the Japanese much more closely resemble the English, another island race, than the Chinese. Or rather, the English as some like to think of themselves, and as many, in fact, still were at the time of Orwell’s essay on the subject, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). But for better and for worse, and even if not entirely, we’ve changed.

One more thing on this topic. A Dublin cab-driver once had the Northern Protestant preacher and politician Ian Paisley for a fare, and when asked what he thought of the Reverend, he replied, ‘He’s a very decibellous man.’ The Chinese are very decibellous people. What strikes me, semi-literally, as a shout seems the normal interpersonal volume. Given, in addition, all the drivers leaning on their horns, I took to wearing earplugs as matter of course.

The *I Ching* is an ancient divinatory text which is at the root of Chinese philosophy, both Daoist and Confucian. Divination with the *I* is a central part of my spiritual practice or simply, better, way of life, and preparing for this trip, I remembered that I had once read the *Odyssey* on a Greek island and fancied it acquired a particular depth and meaning thereby; so I was keen to reacquaint myself with the commentaries that form the central part of the translation of the *I* by Richard Wilhelm that has been a companion for more than forty years. (My, how the numbers do add up!)

It was indeed a rich experience reading them, but I also conducted a dialogue with the *I* throughout the trip. For example, we were to climb Hua Shan (*shan* = mountain), one of the five sacred Daoist mountains, and the tallest. For B., this was part of a personal pilgrimage, and something that I too very much wanted to do. But I was also worried as to whether I would be up to it. (My soul may possibly be immortal but my legs and lungs are sixty.) Some of the images on Google and YouTube are alarming, and so were the local guides, who seemed determined to put us off.

Initially the *I* simply reflected my own divided state of mind, but as I gradually resolved to do it, unless I was definitely warned off, the readings settled down into 29/ *The Abysmal*, which advises that in a situation of objective danger, ‘all that counts is really carrying out all that has to be done – thoroughness – and going forward, in order not to perish through tarrying in the danger’ – and 32/ *Duration*, which maintains that ‘It furthers one to have somewhere to go.’ *Duration* is the *I*’s version of ‘Keep calm and carry on’.

Later, I realised with a slight shock that the dance of the oracle and myself, the enquirer, was very like that of the two partners in pushing hands, each one feeling what the other is doing and responding accordingly: an embodied hermeneutic circle that ends only when one party or the other breaks off, and begins when one rejoins it. But what the *I* and I are working out together, jointly, is my fate. (The idea of fate as something wholly externally imposed or absolutely pre-determined could not be more mistaken.)

In the event, dear reader – summoning all my nerve to get started, and with the kind help of B. and a kind young Frenchwoman in our group – I did it. It was indeed hard going (stairs upon stairs, sometimes nearly vertical, with chains alongside to pull yourself up) but extraordinary: as if we were ascending a mountain *in* a landscape painting from the Northern Song dynasty... Those paintings were no fantasies.

There were Daoist temples at the start and occasionally along the way. However recently they may have been rebuilt, they felt so old, indigenous and indifferent to outsiders that in comparison, the Buddhist temples we had seen in Beijing seemed like a recent foreign import. (Which, taking the long view, they are; or were.)

After about seven hours of walking and climbing my legs were finished, so I took the cable-car down. It took 10 minutes and was far scarier than anything climbing up.

By the way, Mark Twain’s adage is out-of-date. There are now three certainties: death, taxes, and bad music piped into public places. Even sacred mountains.

Whatever the difficulties for a traveller here (or at least, one like myself), they fall short of India's. Or so P., an experienced traveller in both places, assures me, and I believe her.

Speaking of which, let me tell you about *breakfast*.

1. It's the most sacred meal of the day.
2. Food consumed for breakfast should be distinctive (i.e., not identical with what might be had for lunch or dinner).
3. It must include:
 - a. strong Indian (or at a pinch, Ceylonese) tea;
 - b. toast; and more negotiably,
 - c. an egg or two.
 - d. Porridge is also acceptable. (Unless it's made from rice, that is.)

Anything else is not breakfast. And so, of course, cannot be eaten, by anyone who is at all sound on the subject, either in the morning or as the first meal of the day. (Morning: any time of the day before 12 noon, and the closer to it the better.)

No prizes for guessing one problem I had in China, then. Still, the other meals weren't bad at all. And I did lose a bit of weight.

In addition to being a very good teacher, B. is brilliant with people. I think the key to it, or one, anyway, is that he is genuinely *glad to be alive*, and his enjoyment of embodied life – bodies, babies, movement, music, food, love and all – communicates itself to others and brings it out in them.

Of course, skill is involved too. Once, at a grey provincial railway station where we were waiting late at night, bored and tired, for an interminably delayed train, he jumped up and started wordlessly acting out a film title, and within a few minutes all of us (with a dumbfounded local audience) were enthusiastically playing charades.

In Xi'an, a former capital (population about the same as London), we hired bicycles and rode around the restored city wall, dating from the Ming dynasty, more than eight miles long and forty feet wide. I ride a bike in London to get around but here, doing it for pleasure with friends and T.'s children, I felt like a kid myself again.

Xi'an is also home to a big Buddhist temple, the Wild Goose Pagoda. It was satisfyingly exotic and the giant statues of the Buddha and various bodhisattvas impressive. Like some other Buddhist sites we visited, however, it seemed more tolerated by the state as a tourist site than it did a place of living, or lived, religion.

Not far away are the famous Terracotta Warriors. I will only say that they are indeed impressive, especially en masse, in a spooky sort of way. I felt we were disturbing their long, silent wait in the dark. (They have been beautifully and sensitively excavated and shown, though.)

In Handan, another big city and provincial capital, we spent a day and a half with the large and enthusiastic local contingent of martial artists, led by an elderly grandmaster and his successor. They were curious about the English visitors, and once they realised B. was our teacher and the best of us, they lined up to put him to the test. B. took it in unflinching good humour (and energy) and acquitted himself well, but the baseline standard of pushing hands in China is obviously much higher than in Europe and, I assume, America. Not surprising, when it is so much more an old and central part of the culture.

They didn't just engage with him, however. Everyone on both sides got stuck in, and as the day wore on there was a spirit of give-and-take – international cultural

exchange, by god – that was quite moving. And the next morning, in a large park with many of the same people plus random members of the public, was a delight.

It's clear that despite intermittent suppression, the Chinese martial arts here are a living and continuous tradition. There is an unselfconscious vigour and apparently casual self-assurance about them, which no tradition that has been extinguished, and later reassembled from distant reports and guesswork, can match. (I'm reminded, however elliptically, of traditional music in Ireland compared to England.)

A key part of this tradition and how it lives is the nature of the teaching. In the first place, everyone, no matter how senior and revered, not only had but usually still has a teacher themselves; so lineages stay alive. Second, everyone has a legitimate place in the network of teaching and learning, which is loosely but flexibly hierarchical: again, very different from the Japanese, I would guess. That network is modelled on an extended family, with grandparents, parents, and 'older' and 'younger' brothers and sisters. Then there are various 'families', each with their own overlapping but distinctive style. No one form is necessarily entirely 'right', and there is always room to learn, change and grow.

Come to think of it, the pro-democracy students and intellectuals seem no more aware of Daoist or even Confucian principles than does the state. I have no wish whatsoever to blame the victims of 1989 and since, but the following warning from the *Ta Chuan* ('Great Treatise', quoting Confucius, p. 343 of Wilhelm) seems strikingly apt:

If a man is brusque in his movements, others will not cooperate. If he is agitated in his words, they will awaken no echo in others. If he asks for something without having first established relations, it will not be given to him. If no one is with him, those who would harm him draw near.

I also brought to read a short selection of essays by George Orwell: brilliant and, in the case of the one on totalitarianism and art, 'The Prevention of Literature', entirely apt. But a passage from 'Such, Such Were the Joys' also got me thinking. It concerns 'the sheer vulgar fatness of wealth, without any kind of aristocratic elegance to redeem it...in those years before 1914.' Orwell didn't live to see the ugly recrudescence of just that at home in the 1980s, of course. And now it's arrived in China. Beijing is home to fleets of sleek black Mercedes 4x4s, driven by hard-faced men and women, bullying their way through the masses in cheap cars and on bicycles or foot. This was kicked off by Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s. How different is 'To get rich is glorious' from 'Greed is good'? Any nuance is trivial against Honoré de Balzac's pointed truth: 'Behind every great fortune there is a forgotten crime.'

In any case, in China the totalitarianism state and private capital now dine together, and so far as I can tell only a few middle-class young and professional people seem to mind. They are unlikely to be joined in any great number any time soon, for two reasons, I think. One is the Chinese government's relative success in reducing poverty, which it would be unfair as well as untruthful to deny. I'm not in a position to state the facts of the matter, but I do know that in the three cities we visited, we saw virtually no abject poverty, beggars or homeless. (Of course, the situation in the countryside, or in other cities, or even elsewhere in the three we saw, could be very different.) At the same time, that success coexists with the social, cultural and spiritual damage caused by modernism/ modernization, which is also clearly evident, and the lack of freedom to dissent or even criticize. But as usual with anything important, it's not either-or; both things are the case.

The other reason, closely connected, is that relative material progress, and just as importantly, the plausible promise of continuing and more material wealth, buys public acquiescence. (That is hardly something limited to China; governments in modern democracies everywhere depend on it to get re-elected. Truth is the first casualty of politics, not just war.)

The effect, as Orwell noted, is that where liberty is concerned, ‘The big public do not care about the matter one or the other. They are not in favour of persecuting the heretic, and they will not exert themselves to defend him.’ Although this remains the case in the ‘West’ too, when read in contemporary China these seem the words of a prophet. There won’t be any public protests – no attempted public protests, even – about the dissident artist Ai Weiwei, abducted by the government five weeks ago.

If the promise of a glorious material future starts to wear thin, however, other discontents could quickly gather pace. That is why the integrity of so-called ‘ecosystem services’ (as if they exist only to serve humans) upon which every economy and society depends, and at the roots of which capitalism, whether ‘state’ or ‘private’, is fast eating away, is now the biggest, deepest and most unforgiving challenge to the powers-that-be, both in China and elsewhere. And it won’t be solved by solar panels, non-CFC fridges and electric cars, no matter how many.

In their absence, I became sharply aware of three aspects of my ancestry and formation. Proceeding psycho-archaeologically, the most recent first: I am used to living in a social democracy, broadly speaking, where agents of the state cannot simply do anything they want, and there is at least some public accountability. I’m aware that such limitations have long been resented by American rulers from at least Nixon and Reagan to Bush Jr. Nor do I completely discount conspiracy theories about what happens in the ‘West’, but that’s just the point: the police, or whoever it, must *conspire*. They don’t have to bother with that here, and I won’t hear nostrums like ‘China has a lawful constitution which enshrines the right to protest’. (Very like ‘Islam is really a religion of peace and love’. On which ideal planet?). Unless they’re enforced on the ground, laws don’t mean a thing.

Second, I became aware, almost as one would of someone else in the room, of the way I take for granted the value, perhaps even sanctity, of the individual *as such*. Now this may sound abstract, but it’s quite real. My initial assumption is that individual x is valuable, and no matter how often I am disillusioned in practice, in almost any encounter I tend to proceed from that starting-point. I also realized that the principal formative impetus of this phenomenon was almost certainly Christianity, with its strong emphasis on salvation of the individual soul. I am no theist, and the crimes resulting from ‘saving’ souls regardless of their own views cannot be discounted (‘This is for your own good’). Even so, how could I have missed such an obvious point?

I’ll go farther. The Christian concern with souls morphed, in Protestantism, into an emphasis on a personal and relatively unmediated relationship with God that surely opened a big door to secular human rights. Hear Hubert Butler, the great Anglo-Irish essayist:

The Reformation had many aspects, good and bad. Its most precious legacy, perhaps, is our belief that authoritarianism in spiritual matters is an evil far greater than the disorders to which the abuse of private judgment has often led.... There is no human society to which a man can unreservedly surrender his conscience or his will or his passions.

That last sentence could equally have been written by Orwell.

So the struggle of individual human rights to make much headway in China starts to make even more sense. But granted that Chinese culture has always valued the collective (family, community, state) over the individual, what about the anti-social behavior I saw in China – not to us, but to each other? (To pick just one example, the whole time I was there, including much travel by bus and taxi, I saw precisely one driver voluntarily give way to another. The local version of ‘queueing’ is cut from the same cloth.) Is there a paradox here? No. They are only anti-social in our particular sense of the word, that is, anti-individual.

None of this is to underplay the ills that assault us in the ‘West’ from hyper-individualism: alienation, isolation, and vulnerability to the fraudulent ‘communities’ on offer, for a price, from commodity capitalism. It is to say that problems are universal but can significantly differ. And that one’s own heritage, in any honest and fair view, is almost certainly never all bad.

My third little enlightenment was both the most immediate and material and the farthest back in time. Through the food in China – not just the absence of dairy foods, but of any significant place for them in the culture – I became strangely aware of my semi-nomadic ancestors who herded semi-domesticated animals, made clothes of their fur and skins, milked them and made from the milk butter (oh, the glory of good butter) and cheese, and yes, ate some of them. Even now, at such a remove and a longtime non-meat-eater, I felt such affection towards them!

One winter, years ago, I took my young daughter to visit the only large herd of semi-wild reindeer in the British Isles, living in the Cairngorms in Scotland. I fell in love with them – such wonderful beasts – and now I wonder if that’s why.

I might add that the lack of good bread (*toast*) was hard, too: wheat, in other words (notwithstanding what I suspect is a lot of faddish nonsense, mixed up with a grain of truth, about the effects of gluten), and oats, too. Yet I felt that absence less keenly, maybe on account of the ubiquitous rice and noodles.

Back in Beijing, our last couple of days there, we studied the broadsword form with Professor L. As a complete beginner I was more-or-less completely at sea, yet no less cognizant for that of how lucky I am, and all of us there are, to have had such a teacher.

Our last evening, we caught a show by the Beijing Opera. The story of a scholar who wins the heart of a celestial nymph (why do I feel this might have been written for by a scholars?), who then rescues him from the celestial king’s thugs. It was exotic, even alien, but charming. Dinner followed in one of the remaining old lanes at a Sino-Islamic café, sitting outside eating a strange but wonderful array of dishes in the company of the People. Our host was B.s’ friend G., one of the first and few Westerners to be accepted by the Beijing Opera. A longtime resident of the city, he appears to be the very incarnation of the Monkey King, with remarkable stories to tell. My aching legs are forgotten.

China took me well outside my comfort zone – not difficult to do for this honorary hobbit – so what was I doing there? Partly, accepting the challenge for fear of growing old too soon. (With fourteen years on me, P., the experienced traveler mentioned earlier, puts me to shame.) Partly, taking the chance to be there with a great group of people, deepening both friendships and practice. But underlying it all, I realized, life had once again taken an avowal of mine seriously, raised the stakes, and

made me an offer very hard to decline, if only for my self-respect. ‘So, I hear you’re into Chinese religion, philosophy and culture... *How serious are you?*’ This has happened a few times before, and I’m getting to know the feeling now. (‘Life’ will have to do. ‘God’ has too much baggage of a kind I don’t want.)

On the plane back, I sat next to a student aged twenty-two who was on his way to Vienna to study with a famous violinist there for the next four or five years. He was very excited, and proud of being her first Chinese student... Globalization or what?

That young man is starting the adventure of adult life: a great thing. Compared to him, my options are narrowing, although (and this makes all the difference) through some combination of perseverance and good fortune they still feature things, notably learning and writing, that I love and respect; and people I do, too. But it’s slightly shocking to realize the extent to which I am still living out values and concerns whose seeds were sown at his age and even earlier: the impact of (my version of) the 1960s, when I was sixteen through twenty-one, plus a childhood of reading and thinking, escaping from a hostile world ‘out there’ and being enchanted by the ‘inner’ worlds I found instead.

It’s also dismaying to think about those whom I have hurt along the way, to say no more. I remembered that the *I Ching* lays some stress on the value of remorse as an awareness of having left, and a desire to return to, the right path. The path of righteousness, even. So, humbly asking the *I* for its opinion, I opened it to the fifth line of line 49/ *Revolution*: ‘The great man changes like a tiger. Even before he questions the oracle, he is believed’. In other words, in this matter there is no need to consult the oracle, because to understand the path in this way is already to *be* on the path. The same hexagram then concludes, ‘Remorse [!] disappears’, before changing to 55/ *Abundance*:

Abundance has success.
The king attains abundance.
Be not sad.
Be like the sun at midday.

In other words, be glad, and shine like the sun at noon, even though it is starting its descent... So I have asked, and been honored with the most precise and personal answer. And is the *I Ching*, my respondent, Chinese, human, or cosmic? Yes, it is.