

Dragons and Phoenixes: The Changing Face of China

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Once upon a time, in the very beginning, all was chaos. A black cosmic egg emerged out of the darkness, containing Pangu curled up inside. Eventually Pangu awoke from his deep slumber, stretched out his limbs and cracked open the egg. The light part of the egg floated upwards and became the heavens. The heavier half of the egg, the yolk, remained below and formed the earth. Pangu stood in between, the top of his head gracing the heavens, legs astride, his sturdy feet placed firmly on the earth. Every day, Pangu grew ten feet for 18,000 years, keeping the sky and earth apart with his body, now 9 million *lǐ in height (30,000 miles apart) so that they would never join again.

Pangu's life was very long but he finally died, lying with his head to the east, feet to the west horizon. His head is now the territory of the impressive Shandong Taishan Mountain; his toes overturned is now the peak of Huashan Mountain in Shaanxi Province; his belly up tall is now the peak of Songshan Mountain in Henan Province; his left arm in the south is now the territory of the Hengshan mountain ranges in Hunan Province; his right arm in the north side of the body is now the Northern Hengshan mountain in Shanxi Province.

The sun and the moon were born from his two eyes. Roads lacing across the land grew from his veins and his muscles became fertile land. His long beard produced numerous stars to light up the sky. His skin, hair and fine body hairs were changed into the land of trees and flowers. Jade and pearls came from his marrow. Sweat from his brow, of all his labours turned to fine rain and morning dew that nurtured the plants and insects. Tears of joy flowed into the rivers and the radiance and brightness of his eyes turned into thunder and lightning. The sun shone brightly when he was happy, but black clouds hung in the sky when he was angry. Some say he is still responsible for the weather, which changes according to his mood. The parasites on his body, the lice and the fleas, fertilized by the wind, became the ancestors of human beings.

It is said that Pangu's image can still be seen in a cave cherished by the Miao tribe in the Mountains of Kuangsi

中国

“Expect a son to be a dragon, a daughter to be a phoenix”
(Wang zi cheng long, wang nu cheng feng 望子成龙, 望女成凤))

China is full of myths and legends. This ancient culture has much symbology and modern China is rich with it on many levels. In Suzhou on the new university science campus, the library the largest in China, is designed in the shape of a huge lotus blossom, an ancient symbol of purity. The lotus roots and stem are mired in the mud, but the flower emerges on the surface of the water to bloom in all its glory. The sturdy stem will bend, but will not break. The lotus is one of eight auspicious symbols in Buddhism. Near the campus they are building a new direct road to Suzhou city and two arches stretch across, flashing at night, one larger than the other symbolizing the sun and the moon. Everything has

meaning.

Sons are born to be dragons, daughters to be phoenixes. The dragon is a powerful symbol in China and represents the Emperor. The Chinese believe that they are descendants of the dragon and people whose last name is *Long* meaning dragon, are very proud of such a name. Legends tell that the dragon hibernates in the ocean in autumn but travels up to the sky in spring, bringing beneficial rains. Dragons thus bear rain to cultivate the crops. Dragons carved on the eaves of houses and temples are also water bearers to put out any fires. It is considered an auspicious creature that brings forth blessings, festivity, and happiness, to benefit everything on earth. In the West, dragons breathe fire and are enemies and predators. We call on our knights to slay the dragon and rescue the maiden in distress. In England, St. George, the dragon slayer, is the patron saint.

The fact that the Chinese year denotes a particular animal also relates to how animals are viewed in China. 2008 was the Year of the Rat, an animal not viewed so positively in the West. However, the rat in China is hard working, creative, charming and sociable and during the Year of the Rat it is said that one can expect many opportunities and good prospects. The Chinese calendar has a twelve year cycle and each year in the Chinese calendar is named after a particular animal. I arrived in China during the Year of the Dog, stayed during the Year of the Pig and left during the Year of the Rat. People born in each of these years are said to have certain characteristics of that animal. 2009 (year 4707 on the Chinese calendar) was the Year of the Ox. People born in the Year of the Ox are said to be dependable, patient, methodical and calm, hardworking, materialistic, and ambitious. Ox people are born to lead, the horoscopes tell us. They are self-assured, able to inspire confidence in others, use their concise words well and possess a strong physical stamina. Barack Obama was born in the Year of the Ox. 2010 was the Year of the Tiger, 2011, the Year of the Rabbit and now 2012 is the year of the Dragon – expect an increase in births for that auspicious year.

Families and friends gather together for this Chinese New Year or Spring holiday, eat lots of food, watch television, eat more food and snacks and play mahjong and other games. Shops close, or they used to according to my friends, so people go to a lot of trouble to stock up on food supplies. There is an old tradition that for the first three days of the festival you cannot use a knife (*daizu*) or scissors, or you may cut off your good luck or your fortune. Therefore having a haircut and cooking has to be done ahead of time; food is frozen and then heated in the microwave. However, this old custom is now not often adhered to. In olden times, people were poor so a feast was considered a major indulgence; nonetheless with China's amazing growth, people have become more affluent and a lot of Chinese students complain that the Spring Festival is boring,

"There's nothing to do except eat!" groused one student. The economic boon has meant that even money gifts are not so attractive to Chinese and the so-called 'Me Generation.'

Suzhou, is one of the oldest cities lying in the Yangtze basin. Capitol of the Wu Kingdom from the 12th to the 4th century BC, the city is famous for its culture and learning. It has produced more than 2000 of China's greatest scholars. The city is also an ancient water-town, along with its famous classical gardens of rocks, greenery, water and trees. Today education in Suzhou, this ancient seat of learning, offers free admission to children of immigrant workers or workers who don't possess the local residential registration or *hukou*. All students attending public schools pay no tuition, textbooks are supplied free of charge and students have free access to multimedia classrooms with broadband connections. In 2006, Suzhou became the first Chinese city to provide twelve years of free education for all children. The central government provides nine years of free education. The remaining years of education are paid by parents – if they can afford it. The result of this approach in Suzhou has meant high attendance (93.4%) and more than fifty percent of high school graduates go on to colleges and

universities.

The city also has a large manufacturing base and Soochow University's new science campus, is built in the Suzhou Industrial Park on the shores of Dushu Lake. Much of the education in this area has focused on global markets and technological expertise. Suzhou has fifty-eight vocational schools and students are trained to meet the diverse growing demands of the marketplace. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has donated money into educating students in state of the art computer skills. Suzhou has thus become a center for vocational education and has attracted national attention.

According to a Chinese proverb, frequently quoted at you:

"In heaven there is paradise. On earth there are Suzhou and Hangzhou."

The Medical School Chinese graduate students from other towns, rolling their eyes, told me that the women of Suzhou are supposedly the most beautiful in China. This ancient city with its canals, narrow stone bridges, small white washed houses with black tiled curved roofs and the many classical gardens all add to this paradise on earth. Although the rapidly developing miles of apartment house towers, all with solar hot water heaters on the roof, surround and encroach on the city and the increase in automobiles of first time car owners clogging the streets may destroy that image.

The Medical School took a trip to West Lake or *Xi Hu*, a famous beauty spot. All other West Lakes in China are named after the Hangzhou West Lake, thirty six of them at last count. West Lake is regarded as a pearl in paradise city and there are many folk tales of its origins. A popular version is that once upon a time, a snow white jade Dragon lived in a cave east of the Milky Way. West of the Milky Way lived a beautiful golden Phoenix. One day in a forest, the Phoenix and the Dragon found a shiny pebble on a fairy islet. They were quite intrigued and decided to polish it into a pearl (*zhēn zhū*). After many years and much polishing, the pebble was turned into a large pearl. The Dragon sprayed crystal clear water on the pearl and the Phoenix bathed the pearl in glittering dew and so the pearl shone brightly all around and where that light fell, grew rich foliage and trees, bountiful crops and exotic flowers on the green mountains and in the clear waters.

The Heavenly Queen Mother in the Celestial Palace heard about this wondrous pearl and became jealous. So, she sent her soldiers and generals to steal the pearl. Once it was in her possession, she couldn't resist showing it off to all the fairies at the Grand Banquet for Immortals and where peaches of longevity were offered. In the palace taking the nine keys from her belt, she unlocked the nine doors to where the pearl was hidden. Placing the gleaming pearl on a golden tray she took it into the banquet hall. The pearl's light shone brightly and lit up even the dark recesses of the hall to the delight of all. A loud gasp went up from the guests.

Meanwhile the Dragon and the Phoenix desperately trying to find the pearl were attracted to the Queen's palace by the sudden bright light. They accosted the Queen and demanded that it be returned. She set the soldiers on the Dragon and Phoenix and reached to pick up the pearl. A big battle occurred between the two sides and in the midst of the melee, the pearl fell from the palace to earth. Dragon and Phoenix followed in quick pursuit and their flying maneuvers slowed the pearl's fall to earth. Finally, the pearl landed on earth and became a beautiful green lake with shimmering waves. As the Dragon and Phoenix didn't want to leave their precious pearl behind, they turned themselves into hills to safeguard their treasure. Since that time, both Phoenix Hill and Dragon Hill have been standing there keeping guard over their precious pearl.

The area is rich in myths and legends. Two of the four major folk romances occurred in Hangzhōu. One of the most famous is that of the Butterfly Lovers (*Liang Shānbo yǔ Zhu Yīngtai*).

Once upon a time, they say that about 1,400 years ago a girl, Zhu Yingtai, persuaded her father to let her study in Hangzhōu. She dressed herself as a boy and set off. At the foot of Phoenix Hill, she met a male student called Liang Shanbo and they became sworn “brothers.” They studied at the Myriad Pine Academy for three years and of course they fell in love. However, Zhu's parents betrothed her to Ma Wen Cai, the son of a rich family and she had to go home. When Liang heard this, he was devastated and died of a broken heart. On Zhu's wedding day, the bridal procession was halted by a whirlwind just as they walked past the tomb where Liang lay. Loud cracks of thunder rent the air and the tomb opened up. Immediately, Zhu tore off her wedding gown and threw herself into Liang's tomb, encasing her inside the grave, while the wedding party stood there in astonishment and dismay. Then, from the tomb, a pair of beautiful butterflies emerged and flew up into the brightening blue sky.

It is said that the love story appeared as early as the 3rd to 5th centuries but the Pine Academy wasn't built until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), but as my Chinese friend would say, “No matter.”

This story of the butterfly lovers was often performed on campus in English, everyone knew of this myth and it was very popular with all the students. China's Romeo and Juliet.

“Chris, this legend is really about gays, as they fell in love when Zhu Yingtai, the female, was dressed as a male,” related a gay friend.

“But what happened when Liang Shanbo found out that Zhu Yingtai was a female?”

“No problem, but everyone knows this is a gay story.”

Chinese students have a reputation for hard work and indeed they do. Every morning early, when I would walk across campus to get breakfast before heading to my office, many students would be outside, standing, sitting or in a crouch, beside the waterways and bridges, reading aloud, usually from an English textbook, totally engrossed. Every evening when I walked back across campus to my room, all the class rooms were packed, full of students studying. They seem to work 24/7. In darkened doorways I would also see a few couples in a loving embrace. They have nowhere else to go. There is no student union, no place to hang out, only the classrooms and their dorms.

Dorm rooms are pretty basic, four bunk beds covered in mosquito netting, with desks and cupboards below and four kindergarten-size wooden stools. No small refrigerators, microwaves, popcorn poppers, televisions, DVD players, or all the baggage that American students bring with them – everything in fact but the kitchen sink. These items are not allowed and there is nowhere to put them anyway.

Possibly a laptop and that is it. Some of the classrooms are heated so there is a migration to these favored places to study, but although heat is offered in the dorms it is never switched on. Heat is expensive at 1,200 Yuan/year (US\$167), too much for many students who are all supported by their parents, so they go without. There are no separate bathrooms, only communal showers in the basement where hot water is available only at certain hours, from 4.30-9:00pm. There are no student loans or grants so if your family can't pay, you don't go to university.

“My parents send me 500 Yuan (US\$69) a month,” remarked one student, one day over lunch, “but it's not enough, so I sometimes go without food for my education.”

Sometimes students can earn some extra money and one of the graduate students gave English lessons to some young Korean children, but that's unusual.

The medical students I taught were from abroad, but the Chinese students whom I did not teach, became my good friends. One day, when I went into the microbiology lab, one student was washing her hair under the hot water tap in the lab sink and two students with feet encased in cosy red and blue slippers, were hunched over the computer, trying to buy something on line.

“What are you guys trying to buy?”

“Oh we want to buy a Swatch watch. We have a credit card, so we're trying to decide.”

“But how do you know if it's a real Swatch. There are lots of fakes out there.”

“Oh we know it is real by the high price.”

One of the students was getting ready to go home for a friend's wedding. Her friend was marrying a wealthy guy who works for his father, a successful factory owner. The girl has no job.

“She does nothing,” she said to loud groans from the other students and raised eyebrows, “but she is marrying a wealthy man!”

After high school her friend went to Japan to study for two years but gave it all up to get married. Her father is also very wealthy. There will be about 200 guests at the wedding and the dinner will be held at the very best restaurant in town.

In ancient times in China, the bride would wear a traditional red dress and she would be carried from her village in a covered sedan chair, known as the bridal chair with the character for double happiness (*shuāngxǐ*) embroidered on it, to the bridegroom's village. However, in modern China, the bridegroom has to carry the bride on his back from her apartment to the ground floor. Her feet should not touch the ground. The bride in this case lives on the fourth floor not the twenty-fourth floor, so it shouldn't be too bad for the groom. She will also be wearing a traditional dress. From there the couple travel by car around the city to several beauty spots to have their photographs taken. Dinner in the evening is accompanied by various speeches before the dinner by their fathers and their best friends. Afterwards they will take off for a honeymoon in Europe.

The majority of Chinese families choose their wedding date according to the lunar calendar. Red is the predominant “lucky” colour which stands for happiness, from the bride's dress to the wedding invitation and small traditional red envelopes (*hongbāo*) for a gift of money. All for good luck, a long life together and good fortune. When I was out wandering the city, near the Suzhou Museum, I stopped at a small store to admire the rich red and yellow silk cushion covers. Several of them bore a dragon (*long*) and a phoenix (*feng*) embroidered on the cover. They are also associated with goodness and prosperity and often given as wedding gifts. Other cushion covers had lots of small children embroidered on them and are also typical wedding gifts wishing the happy couple fertility and a healthy child. This is the start of their life together.

Chinese weddings bear many images of the dragon and phoenix indicating a marriage blessed with greatness and children. The dragon is the male symbol of authority and dignity, while the phoenix, the female symbol, represents love and beauty. *Long feng cheng xiang* – means "happy and fortunate combination of the dragon with the phoenix" – basically, sincere wishes for a good life together.

I was curious about the end of life and the Chinese way of death and asked some friends to take me to their city graveyard. They were extremely reluctant and started muttering about ghosts. Clearly they did not want to go. However, I persuaded them and told them they did not even have to enter the graveyard, but could wait outside for me, which they did, still looking rather alarmed and fearful. All the old graves were on a fairly steep hillside and were wonderful. Circular in shape, some with surrounding stone walls, others were grassy mounds, similar to Native American conical mounds, with vertical stone slabs covered in Chinese characters and etched drawings of phoenixes, dragons, lotus flowers and people in traditional Chinese clothes. Growing amidst the graves were corn plants, green vegetables, eggplants, flowers and all manner of produce tended by a few peasants. Inside one of the stone walls enclosing the grave, a family were picnicking, although the Qingming Festival, or tomb sweeping day, early in April (150th day after the winter solstice) is a holiday all across China, where people commemorate their ancestors. If the family plays homage and respect to their ancestors, they

will have good fortune. Photographs of their ancestors are usually prominently and proudly displayed in their apartments.

On a second visit to see my friends, their father had recently died, so we went to a new graveyard and this time the family walked amongst the graves. The city had decreed that all the gravestones be placed closer together on the hillside and they are all burials, although many large Chinese cities now demand cremations to save land space. When traveling by train, if you look at the land carefully, one can spot ancient grave mounds with stone doors, interspersed among the crops. This new graveyard for the town was terraced with rows and rows of flat gravestones, set in pairs, one with a dragon carved on top and the other with the phoenix, male and female respectively. We climbed up and up the mountain-side looking at all the graves. In some cases the stone on one grave was raised, empty below waiting for its inhabitant, while the other was closed. My friends had paid a lot of money for their father's resting place as he was high up on the mountain-top with a superb view. The graves looked over the city far below in the valley, but in the distance were many green purplish peaks shrouded in thin layers of mist. Not a building in sight on these slopes. The family had consulted a fortune teller for the most auspicious time for him to be buried. Next to his grave were remnants of firecrackers and paper wreaths, wine and a packet of cigarettes for the afterlife, as like his son he was a smoker. It was a very beautiful place, all the dragons and phoenixes resting in the rich yellow soil.

Later we visited Phoenix Town, *Fenghuang*, in Hunan Province, an ancient town, 1,316 years old, lying alongside the Tuo river (*Tuo Jiang*), one of the four tributaries of the Yangtze and connected by a variety of bridges.

Once upon a time, according to Chinese legend, two beautiful phoenix birds flew over this town and were so awed with its natural beauty that they hovered there in the breeze, reluctant to leave, thus giving the town its name, Phoenix Town (Fenghuang Cheng).

The phoenix, a mythical bird of good omen and longevity, never dies, but when consumed by fire it rises from the ashes. This striking bird possesses the head of the golden pheasant, a parrot beak, the body of the mandarin duck, wings of the roc, peacock feathers and legs of the crane. An early phoenix design was found on a silk painting in a tomb (475-221 BC) near Changsha, Hunan Province. Chinese literature describes the phoenix as having the beak of a rooster, the face of a swallow, the neck of a snake, the back of a tortoise, the tail of a fish and feathers of five colours, blue, white, red, black and yellow. Daughters are born to be phoenixes.

One Chinese friend had never been to Fenghuang but he described it to me as,
“a beautiful and mysterious town in China. But do you know about the *wutong* tree?”
“No, sorry, never heard of it.”

“Well, the *wutong* tree (*Firmiana platanifolia*) has a very straight trunk and is a beautiful green. It is the only tree the phoenix will rest on. It's called the Phoenix Tree or Parasol Tree.”

He grinned. He was a consummate bird lover.

Li Yin chimed in, “Five thousand years ago, Fu Xi, one of the originators of Chinese people, chose the *wutong* tree to make the very first musical instrument. As the phoenix will only rest on this tree, it must be a good tree to choose. From the trunk he built the *guqin* and put five strings representing metal, wood, water, fire and soil. Around the 11th century BC, King Wen's son died so the Emperor added a sixth string to mourn him. The sixth string has a sorrowful sound. During the Zhou Dynasty, they increased the strings to seven, added by King Wu to inspire his soldiers during war. The sound of this string is very strong. The *guqin* is a really ancient Chinese instrument.”

My friend, a Miao, loved music, dance and song, although he was studying science.

There are other aspects of China's oldest stringed instrument which measures 3' 6.5" (Chinese feet and inches), to symbolize the 365 days of the year. The upper rounded surface is symbolic of the sky, while the flat bottom symbolizes the earth. In America in 1977, the spaceship "Voyager" was launched, but on board was a golden CD to introduce the music of Earth to the rest of the universe. The *guqin* piece, "Flowing water" was included as representative of the world's music. The thirteen mother-of-pearl inlays along the outer edge represent the thirteen months of the lunar year.

On the university campus I ate with the Chinese students in the various dining halls. All meals were served in compartmentalized metal trays. Rice was always in abundance and clear soup in metal bowls – as much as you want. So for two to four Yuan (25-50c) I get a substantial meal, charged off my meal card. The food servers always wear masks and are pretty friendly, often suggesting various vegetable dishes for me to try. I use chopsticks (*kuaizi*) to eat but most of the Chinese students eat with a spoon and I would tease them,

“How come you guys don’t use chopsticks – you’re Chinese (*Zhōngguoren*)?”

“Oh, but it’s so much easier to eat with a spoon.”

They would laugh at me while shoveling in huge spoonfuls of pork and greens.

The students drink Coca Cola and bottles of orange drink and this seems to be more and more frequent. I also see the Chinese drinking a lot of milk with their meals. Four or five years ago, I didn’t see any milk drunk by students. The closest milk product was a liquid soybean drink (*dou nǎi*) that tasted like yoghurt, delivered to our university apartment for breakfast. However, roughly eighty-five percent of Chinese are lactose intolerant. They have a deficiency of lactase, the enzyme needed to break down the lactose in milk.

Everywhere I traveled in China, dessert was always fresh slices of watermelon. No sweet cream pies, ice cream, whipped cream, rich sugared pastries or chocolate puddings. Sweet does not go over well. One time in Changsha, Hunan Province, I brought Chinese middle school students a big bag of candy corn from the States. The treat was met with grimaces and much spitting out,

“Ugh, this is too sweet. We can’t eat this.”

I threw the bag away. For snacks, these kids would buy spicy dried seaweed from the school snack shop – melt in your mouth, delicious.

Unfortunately, Western style snacks are now making inroads into the market place. While traveling with a Chinese family one day, the mother bought her rather plump six-year old daughter a bag of US “Bugles.” The kid proceeded to eat the entire bag. Her mother told me with exasperation, “These American snacks are opium for Chinese children!”

During my recent visit to China, I’ve been surprised to see so much meat being eaten. Regional differences may also play a role, but China changes quickly. Four years ago when I was in southern China, a family would eat a dish containing strips of a pig’s ear cooked with green vegetables, along with other plates of pumpkin, spicy aubergine or eggplant, bok choy, bitter melon, green beans and lots of chopped garlic cloves, etc. Today there are now many pieces of meat, chicken legs, pork, beef, even hotdogs sold on sticks that are readily available for students on campus, although the students are not overweight. No pig’s ear dishes in sight though. Over a three month period I only saw five really overweight people, four of them were Westerners!

A China Daily article reported that over the last two decades (1982-2002), animal fat intake in China has doubled and meat consumption increased from 8.9 kilograms per capita in 1978 to 53 kilograms today. Current data now shows that about 30 million Chinese are obese with an

accompanying eighteen percent increase in adult diabetes. Meanwhile, in rural areas – about 23.65 million people are suffering from malnutrition. The dichotomy of modern day China. The newspaper article then quoted Laozi, from the 6th Century BC, the first Chinese philosopher of Daoism, to the effect that it is the rule of nature to make up for the insufficient while never indulging in the excessive consumption of the sufficient. How many Western newspapers quote ancient philosophers?

The Chinese are the biggest snackers I have ever seen – they are voracious! I thought Americans were pretty bad; having been brought up with the English philosophy that you don't eat between meals, it's no surprise to me that American snacks – which are essentially junk food – contribute to the obesity problem. However, Chinese snackers are somewhat different. After breakfast, lunch or dinner, I am immediately offered something to eat. I'm pretty full and decline but then my Chinese hosts may eat several oranges (*ju zi*), some nuts, a grapefruit (*you zi*) - a very large one the size of a small football. The Chinese eat and eat (*chi*), constantly, between meals and of course never put on any weight. The living-room coffee table is usually piled high with snacks. Nuts of all kinds – pistachio, macadamia nuts, pine nuts, almonds, sunflower seeds are offered. Also a favourite, Dragon Eyes or Longans, a mildly sweet white fruit with black seeds spat out and green-brown skin peeled off. There are apples, small crisp pears, a small red triangular fruit from Taiwan with very small seeds and bright yellow star fruit. The variety of oranges are amazing, some I had never seen before. Penggan is an orange that is special to Jishou in Hunan Province in that it is sweeter and keeps longer. There is also a marble-sized orange that I bought on campus, rather like a gob stopper. The entire orange is eaten, peel and all and there are many other oranges of differing shapes and flavours. That wonderful poignant song by Leonard Cohen comes to mind,

“And she feeds him tea and oranges that come all the way from China...”

The one child policy continues to facilitate a certain amount of indulgence on the part of parents. One evening before dinner, some friends and I were wandering the streets of a small river town. Many vendors and stalls were selling their wares along with the usual street food. To my amazement, whatever the daughter wanted her parents bought for her, even though we were about to eat in half an hour. She ate spicy tofu on sticks, strips of pork on sticks, some nuts and some small dumplings – a specialty of her home-town and she continued to snack after dinner too, but I must say, it was all healthy food.

National Women's Day, March 8th, was celebrated in China, so everyone got a half-day holiday designated by the Chinese Government. The Medical School sponsored a Women's Day celebration in honour of our work. Mao Zedong (1968) famously remarked that, “*Women hold up half the sky.*” Mao was basically saying that without the emancipation of women, half of society, and without their participation, there could be no emancipation for humanity. The university women's day celebration was in Suzhou City and started at 9.30am. In fact it was a typical Chinese snackers' day. People arrived at a very nice selected teahouse and just ate – and ate, all day! It was not just lunch, but breakfast, snacks, lunch, snacks, dinner and more snacks. The serving staff passed around various hot dishes from time to time that had just been prepared. All the Medical School women were there with their children, people were drinking different teas, playing cards, laughing and joking, etc.

The way women are perceived in Chinese society is quite different from the initial impression. Women have to retire at fifty-five years and men at sixty years. A Westerner would say this is sexist and discriminatory. However, the Chinese perspective is that it is the women who have raised the children, cooked, washed and worked and they deserve a rest. Women's liberation indeed.

It was Confucius who said, “*Harmony is something to be cherished.*” In 2005, President Hu Jintao,

quoted Confucius and laid out plans to build a “*harmonious society*.” He also remarked, “*Scientific development and social harmony are integral to each other and neither is possible without the other.*”

The emphasis that Confucius placed on education and the family, respect for the elderly and a particular code of ethics on human relationships, honesty, harmony and goodwill permeates modern day China. Once when I was in Xi'an to see the terracotta warriors, I was buying some street food, spicy tofu on a stick, from a small stand. The vendor charged me five Yuan, about sixty cents. A passer-by stopped, listened to the exchange and then proceeded to yell at the vendor, waving his arms and pointing at me.

“He is charging you too much,” he told me. “You should pay him only three Yuan.”

He stayed there to ensure I only paid three Yuan (US\$0.41).

However, in order to gain a place at university, high school students must take the *Gaokao* or high test. This annual rite of passage, the big, life changing exam for Chinese students, the National College Entrance Examination celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary in June 2012. For 50 + million applicants it's their only opportunity to get a college education. In 2010, over 10 million hopefuls took the *Gaokao*, competing for 6.6 million university places. Some of the students I knew would joke that it takes twelve years of study to take the *Gaokao*. The exam, graded on a scale from 100 to 900 points, depending on the province, always takes place in June and all high school students across the country take the examination at the same time. The *Gaokao* is described as, “*thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of horses across a single log bridge.*” The pressure is enormous but students are given helpful encouragement by their relatives, such as, “*If you do badly, your mother will die in a pauper's grave.*”

Chinese universities didn't enroll students from 1966 to 1976 due to the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. During this time, Mao Zedong sent millions of young people, high school students, academics and intellectuals into the countryside to work alongside the farmers in the fields. A lost generation. The intellectuals were badmouthed and slandered by the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution as the “*stinking Number Nine*” (*choulaojiu*). They were placed in the ninth category, after landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, renegades, enemy agents and capitalist roaders.

In 1977 Deng Xiaoping restored the traditional examination, based on academics, not party affiliation or class background. The National College Entrance Examination – *Gaokao*, was reborn, revised and approximately 5.7 million people competed for 270,000 university places across China. Deng Xiaoping stated that, “*without grasping science and education, the Four Modernizations would have no hope.*” The restored college entrance exam was also dramatically described as like an “*atom bomb*” especially among the generation sent out to the countryside. Deng Xiaoping's goals for modernizations were to strengthen agriculture, industry, science and national defense. In order to accomplish this, China needed an educated workforce and the universities were an essential part of this movement. They now had to be rebuilt.

The first *Gaokao* in 1977 was indeed a historic event. There were no age or educational background restrictions. All those individuals deprived during the Cultural Revolution came to try their luck for a better future. The youngest were mere teenagers and the oldest were in their thirties. *Gaokao* exam questions were designed by the individual provinces but in 1978, the exam was the same across China with questions set by the Ministry of Education. Today, exam questions are designed by the various provinces. The *Gaokao* exam offers an equal opportunity to get an education and a good job, but in 2010 the number of college graduates entering the work force was 6.3 million and despite their

prestigious university education, 1.5 million university graduates were unable to find a job after graduation, intensifying the pressure.

The efforts undergone to ensure the best possible atmosphere to take the *Gaokao* are intense. Confucius made his mark on modern day China by parental commitment to the education of their children but parents have gone overboard with the *Gaokao*. One city shut down the airport so the noise of planes taking off wouldn't disturb the students. Nearby construction was halted. In Xuzhou City, in east China's Jiangsu Province, one devout father of a *Gaokao* candidate tried to drive cicadas from the trees outside the school to keep the classrooms quiet. Police lined the roads with instructions to pick up students who may be late and to deliver them to the exam door. Anxious parents packed the streets outside the exam rooms keeping a silent vigil. Parents reserved hotel rooms near the examination center, so their children would get a good night's sleep. "No honk" signs are displayed near test centers. Birth control pills are prescribed for female students to ensure menstrual cycles don't interfere at exam time. Sometimes parents with money, will move abroad to Vietnam, India, Singapore as students taking the exam abroad do not have the same stringent requirements. The year the earthquake occurred in Yunnan Province affected the exam takers and the province offered free psychological consultations.

Students I talked to about the *Gaokao* would roll their eyes, grimace and complain, but these kids passed the exam and were at a good university. One student, attending business school on the old campus in Suzhou, laughingly told me he only got a mark of 300 (out of 900) on the *Gaokao*. This is really low. A score above 500 usually secures a university place. In his case, his parents have money so they pay large tuition fees for him to attend a four-year university program. For two years in China, he will study English and business. If he does well he can finish the remaining two years of his degree at a Canadian University, graduating with a degree from Canada. His goal, though, is to be a pop star and he belted out a song for me in English, although I'm not sure this is where his best talent lies.

Currently in China they are reforming the exam contents in order to intensify international exposure. In today's world it is much easier for Chinese students to go abroad to study. Consequently, the Chinese authorities realize that the system needs radical transformation. The focus is on core subjects such as maths, English, Chinese, physics and chemistry. Every province has a different system. In Henan Province students in the second year of high school have to decide whether to study arts or sciences. A friend chose the sciences and studied six subjects, Chinese, English, chemistry, biology, maths and physics. When the student takes the *Gaokao* he can only write in those six subjects. However, he still had to study history, politics and geography but no exams in those subjects.

A student has to estimate his/her *Gaokao* marks and apply to certain universities based on this estimate. One friend scored a really high mark and could have attended the cream of the crop of Chinese Universities, but he had to attend the university selected before his official marks came out. That could not be changed. In this case he attended Soochow University, an excellent university, but not of the top rank. A bright student, he did well and is now abroad in graduate school.

There are other issues in competitive Chinese academics. Zhou Ming, a pretty girl, with excellent English wanted to talk to me. She had many concerns.

"My parents want me to be the best, but some of my University friends make comments about my studying and some nasty remarks. It is very difficult. I feel very alone."

She shares a tiny dorm room with three other students, but two of her dorm mates have boyfriends and they text each other at night when she wants to sleep. Fortunately, the lights go out for all dorms at

11.00 pm.

“Next year, we have to move to the old campus in the city of Suzhou with eight girls to a dorm room. Do you know the story of the carrot, the egg and the coffee bean?” she asked.

“This is a story that I often think about. When you put a carrot in boiling water, the shape remains the same but it gets soft. When you place an egg in boiling water it is still the same shape but remains fragile. However the coffee beans change the water.”

Zhou Ming clearly wanted to be a coffee bean, but she was feeling frustrated. The competition is so fierce and people do attempt to sabotage your efforts by their comments. She had passed her essential College English Test (CET4), but only 50% of her class had passed. The English Test is a requirement for all Chinese college students in order to get their degree. The exam tests reading, writing and listening, but no speaking skills. She had done well, her marks were over 540, which meant she was eligible to take the interpreter’s exam and possibly change the water.

Chinese students, dragons and phoenixes are quite romantic. On one trip to the Shaolin Temple several large birds flew across the fields, their distinctive black and white plumage and long tails contrasting with the dark green fields and red earth.

“*Que*, - magpies!” said Lei Lei, ever the wildlife biologist and bird lover.

“Do you know the famous love story about magpies? I think it is from the Jin Dynasty (256-420 AD) “No, do tell,” uttered one of the Indian students, leaning forward, her eyes shining.

“Once upon a time, Zhi Nu (Weaving Girl) fell in love with a poor young orphan cowherd called Niu Lang. Zhi Nu was an immortal and the youngest of seven daughters of the Queen of Heaven. Her job and that of her sisters was to weave the clouds together in the sky. On earth, a young cowherd, Niu Lang, a mortal, was lonely and wanted a wife. One evening, with instructions from his magical cow, he went to the river where the seven immortal daughters of the Queen of Heaven left their palace in the sky to bathe. While the beautiful immortals were bathing in the river, Niu Lang took one of the silk dresses left behind on the riverbank. After their bath, the youngest of the seven sisters couldn’t find her clothes, so she was left behind, while her sisters returned to the heavens. The cowherd, Niu Lang emerged with her silken dress and he and Zhi Nu fell madly in love and married, although the law forbids any relationship between mortals and immortals. Time is of a different dimension on earth and they had two children before the Queen of Heaven discovered what had happened. She was furious when she discovered this liaison and forced Zhi Nu to return to heaven, never to see her lover again. Niu Lang was desperate. Not to be thwarted, again with the help of his magical cow who offered him a special cowhide, he flew up into the sky to meet his beloved Zhi Nu. The Immortal Queen saw what was happening and with her hairpin quickly drew the Milky Way across the night sky.

The lovers could not meet, so there they remain separated by the Milky Way. Touched by their devotion, the Queen of Heaven did eventually take pity on them. They are separated for 364 days, but on the 365th day, Chinese Valentine’s Day, the Queen sends a flock of magpies to construct a bridge with their black and white wings, so the lovers can be reunited for a moment in time. Valentine’s Day (*Qixin Jie*) in China occurs on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month (August) known as double seven.

In the night sky on Valentine’s night, the Cowherd, a bright star in the constellation Aquila, west of the Milky Way and Weaving Girl, the star Vega, east of the Milky Way, are closer together than any other time of the year. Also, no magpies can be seen on earth on that particular day as they are up in the evening sky busy forming a bridge so the lovers can meet. On this night, we Chinese will often contemplate the heavens to look for the cowherd and weaving girl on the magpie bridge.”

One of the lyrical Song Dynasty poets, Qin Guan (1049-1100), wrote a famous poem about the lovers:

Immortals at the Magpie Bridge

“Clouds float like works of art;
Stars shoot with grief at heart,
Across the Milky Way the Cowherd meets the Maid
When Autumn’s Golden Wind embraces Dew of Jade,
All the love scenes on earth, however many, fade.
Their tender love flows like a stream;
This happy date seems but a dream.
How can they bear a separate homeward way?
If love between both sides can last for aye,
Why need they stay together night and day?”

300 Song Lyrics (1992)

In the Medical School I was often invited to be an adjudicate for Chinese students studying English who regularly put on plays in English. They sent a wonderful invitation on a red card – all printed out – very formal. There were five of us judges placed on the front row in the auditorium of Medical Sciences, all supplied with a bottle of water and ten sheets of paper to mark the plays. The judge sitting next to me introduced herself. She taught English at the old campus in Suzhou.

“I am very concerned about the students' creativity,” she told me, “I really like them to produce and perform these dramas and shows.”

One group wanted to do a musical, “The Sound of Music” to their teacher's dismay, as she felt they should speak the words. Other selections included “Cinderella” and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The students were very innovative and they had gone to a lot of trouble to get the right computer aided backdrop and music selections. Some of the plays had a lot of creative leeway with good comedy. The wicked Queen in “Snow White” was played by a male student – and the mirror had wonderful voice effects. Smoke or fog effects haphazardly appeared on stage during several scenes, sometimes obliterating the actors in a thick haze, while on the front row the judges started coughing and spluttering. Lots of excitement and an eager audience ready to cheer them all on.

Later that week they had the semi-finals. One group performed "Swan Lake" complete with a male group as swans – all in white t-shirts dancing an elegant ballet. Another performance known as *shan dong*, is usually two guys who create their own script-story. In this story, the student tellers told this tale with great animation:

“Once upon a time, two guys were picking mushrooms in the woods. They gave some to their cat and all was OK, so they cooked up the mushrooms in their wok and ate them for dinner. Then, suddenly a friend rushes in announcing that the cat has just died!”

Even though I was on a science campus, I felt surrounded by the riches of the arts in theatre, music, dance, painting and poetry. All those are dragons and phoenixes.

中国

Notes:

*The *lǐ* (里), a traditional Chinese unit of distance, has varied considerably over time but now has a standardized length of 500 meters or half a kilometer (approximately 1640 feet).

The character 里 combines characters for field (田 *tian*) and earth (土 *tǔ*), as it was considered to be about the length of a single village. The lǐ, like the majority of traditional Chinese measurements, was established by the Yellow Emperor at the founding of Chinese civilization (2600 BC).

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*[in depth coverage of Chinese culture, history, art, museums, mountains, temples, etc.]