China and its Others

Packing My Dichotomies

After two years of preparation, and decades of interest, I was in the Tokyo airport boarding a plane for China. I w as a member of an education delegation from Missouri. I boarded as one of 32 other educators, administrators, and staff from Missouri community colleges. The tour was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Missouri Community College Association (MCCA), and Moberly Area CC, the school where I taught. The purpose was to immerse ourselves in Chinese culture with the expectation that we would then infuse our institutions with a global perspective.

I read frequently that in social and economic terms East was opposite West: collective vs. individual, communist vs. capitalist. Furthermore, polar opposites seemed to be at the heart of the China I studied: earth/heaven, Yin/Yang, proletariat/landlord. Antithetical couplets are a basic element in traditional poetry. Two part allegorical aphorisms are part of folk knowledge, education, and sloganeering.

My own presence on the tour was dichotomous. I would be flying from one end of the cultural pole to the other -- a conspicuous tourist in the land of the Oriental other. True, I had done my homework, but there was bound to be significant difference between the China I studied and the People's Republic of China (PRC) I was visiting -- the Western orientalist fantasy confronts the material reality of the socialist revolution.

Flying over the East China Sea, it dawned on me that there was one more dichotomy to inventory. I was an individual not particularly adept at circumstantial social relations. In the Missouri Education Collective, I would be the exile.

I carried these oppositions with me as we disembarked in Shanghai. In all of them I was either displaced or displacing, estranged or making strange. On Chinese soil, I was either the

other, or the one whose oneness made others the other.

Yangtze Cruise as an example

In Chongqing we boarded a ship for a three day cruise down the Yangtze through the Three Gorges area. Each gorge is a narrow passage through enormous limestone cliffs which grow dizzyingly steep as you move between them.

The Yangtze is a symbol of China and the Three Gorges area is significant in mythology, history, and art. Numerous poets wrote of this stretch of river, among them the Tang Dynasty masters Li Po and Tu Fu. It was frequently the subject of landscape painting. You could stand on the deck any moment and observe a scene from such a painting. Sharp escarpments hung with green and deeper green vegetation. The white mist playing against graying skies and yellow rock. River flow measured against landmarks passing. A farmer's bent back, diminutive against the mountain terraces that bent it. A flat-bottom fishing boat with bamboo canopy lagging behind the ship's wake.

The cruise offered us a generous amount of free time, and I spent much of it alone on the deck. I wondered how to take the landscape in, how to bring it home. In my grant application I pledged to write a poem a day while in China. The scenery, continuous and compelling, rich in detail and history, defied my attempts at rendering. I was not able to capture the China of it. In another sense, I experienced the alienation of the modern subject from the natural object -- consciousness as estrangement from the phenomenal world. I was in the scene, but not of it.

This alienation was akin to the social separation I felt from the group identity as the MCCA Delegation to China. It was impossible, though, not to see this alienation as a privilege of the privileged tourist. There I was, on someone else's dime, feeling keen alienation on a luxurious cruise ship. I was educated, and free to make my perception an ontological and social problem.

My position was much different from the farmer who daily carried on his back bundles of firewood. Much different from the vendors who were everywhere we were -- hawking wares for a few Juan profit a day. Much different from the crew whose narrow, crowded quarters we passed through when leaving for excursions, the same crew who would line the passage to the gangplank on our return and repeat with a forced smile, "Welcome back. Watch your step."

My position was much different from those who are oppressed by material circumstance in America.

It was this alienation that the people's revolution meant to eliminate through class struggle. A series of lectures had been organized and one of them concerned the Proletarian Cultural Revolution -- the violent upheaval organized by Mao and allies between 1966-76 to ensure that the PRC remained revolutionary. After the failure of his experiment in collectivism, "The Great Leap Forward," in which tens of millions starved to death, Mao lost control of the day to day operations of the PRC. Mao blamed the reactionary party structure. Bureaucrats, technocrats, and the intelligentsia within the party had exercised their power and expertise as a privilege of class. They were on the road to capitalism.

Mao's group, with the support of the People's Liberation Army, encouraged widespread ad hoc revolution. The Red Guard, the cult of Mao, made that revolution happen. The goal was to get rid of the "Four Olds": old custom old culture old habits old ideas. The goal was to wrench the PRC from China.

The education system collapsed as students denounced teachers and administrators as reactionaries. They were sent out into the country for reeducation as peasants. Many were killed. Many committed suicide. We heard harrowing accounts of Cultural Revolution, though each was careful to remind us that Mao's life work had been, on balance, good for China.

One described how her parents, medical doctors, were driven into the countryside to work in the fields with peasants. She was derided out of her school by her revolutionary

classmates in the second grade. Another, an actor in traditional chinese opera, was imprisoned for being an actor in traditional Chinese opera. Many people lost their lives, or a large part of their lives, to the Cultural Revolution. There was an unspoken recognition in the lecture room that we all would have been identified as reactionaries. We were the disseminators of custom, culture, habit and ideas.

The prescription for literature espoused during the Cultural Revolution had its genesis in a series of talks Mao gave in Yenan in 1942, "Talks at the Yenan Forum in Literature and Art." Literature, he said, "should help them [the masses] to unite, to make progress, to press ahead with one heart and one mind, to discard what is backward and develop what is revolutionary" (73). The only correct art was revolutionary art, "through the creative labour of revolutionary writers and artists, the raw materials found in the life of the people are shaped into the ideological form of literature and art serving the masses of the people" (85).

Modernist literature was singled out for censure for being a product of bourgeoisie thinking. Its alienated, individual subject had no place in a revolutionary culture. The displaced "I" of the bourgeoisie poet was to be reformed by the material displacement of the "I" into the countryside where, through reeducation, the "I" became "we."

As a poet who had grown up on Modernism, this was provocative. I had learned early from Eliot that the "I" must be eliminated in the name of traditional high culture. Alienation occurs in Eliot's Modernism where the subject is disconnected from the culture which gives its subject value and orientation. Without that connection, the self, "should have been a pair of ragged claws/scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

As my poetic practice developed, I began relentless experimentation with form using opaque language and frequently coining neologisms. Mao says, "many writers and artists stand aloof from the masses and lead empty lives, naturally they are unfamiliar with the language of the people. Accordingly, their works are not only insipid in language but often contain

nondescript expressions of their own coining which run counter to popular usage" (73). That would be me.

One could say that Mao began the Cultural Revolution with a swim across the Yangtze River in 1966. With that swim, at the age of 73, he reasserted his virility and mastery over China.

Mao previously swam the Yangtze in 1956 and his most widely read poem is an account of that swim:

> I have just drunk the waters of Changsha
> And come to eat the fish of Wuchang.
> Now I am swimming across the great Yangtze,
> Looking afar to the open sky of Chu.
> Let the wind blow and the waves beat,
> Better far than idly strolling in a courtyard.
> Today I am at ease.
> "It was by this stream that the Master said --
> 'Thus do things flow away!'"
>
> Sails move with the wind
> Tortoise and Snake still.
> Great plans are afoot;
> A bridge will fly to span north and south,
> Turning a deep chasm into a thoroughfare;
> Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west
> To hold back Wushan's cloud and rain
> Till smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.
> The mountain goddess if she is still there
> Will marvel at a world so changed.

Here, Mao figures himself as no idle Emperor but the elemental force of China itself -- the spirit of the river, moving past Snake Hill and Tortoise Hill, envisioning a China greater than mythological China. The daughter of the Heavenly Mother, the Goddess of Wu Mountain would be amazed at the changes wrought by the PRC under Mao's leadership.

Mao's vision included a dam on the Yangtze to control flooding and provide electrical power. The PRC began construction in 1994; it is scheduled to be completed by 2014. The level

of the Yangtze in the Three Gorges has already risen significantly, submerging many of its legendary sites and disturbing its ecosystem. Before the dam is complete, over one million people will have been relocated. The party line, as espoused by numerous guides on the cruise, is "the young people are happy to move because they are getting better housing. The old are not happy because they don't want to leave their home."

Later in the cruise, as we approached the locks near the Three Gorges Dam, we heard a lecture by the ship's artist, Deng Sao Yi. One of Sao Yi's most famous works was painted early in the Cultural Revolution. The title is "Chairman Mao is Coming for a Visit." It looks like a Norman Rockwell. Young vibrant Red Guard members, dressed in Maoist scout uniforms, happily clutch a telegram with the news. A later piece that earned him fame is entitled, "We Have Met Chairman Mao."

Sao Yi's lecture focused on his current work in the traditional style, ink and color on silk and paper. He has abandoned socialist realism, and mostly paints the river now. As is the custom, many include, as a visual element, traditional poems on the Yangtze. The calligraphy balances the stylized images -- as if the poems are part of the landscape. Just like the huge white characters we saw painted on the sides of cliffs which extol dam workers to be conscientious, safe, and selfless.

The major piece of Sao Yi was too big to be shown in the lecture room . He brought us into the corridor and rolled it out on the carpet. It was over ten feet long: a panorama of our cruise landscape with the most famous Yangtze poems. Sao Yi's brochure notes he has, "extensively sketched and painted Three Gorges Scenery for primarily western buyers...He has sold over 800 works during that time."

Looking at the art, I realized I stood on common ground with Sao Yi, even though I had finished only 12 lines on the Yangtze. We were both on the road of capitalism. He sold traditional art to Western consumers while I exercised my bourgeoisie privilege to create art that

no one consumed.

The boat neared the dam Mao envisioned. Certainly Mao would marvel at a China so changed. The cruise had come to its end. Thus do things flow away.

The Wrong Shirt as an example

After the cruise down the Yangtze river, our group was to make a short visit to a local museum in Yi Chang, have lunch, then board a train bound for Zhangjiajie. After three days in Zhangjiajie, we would proceed to Changsha. In Changsha, our identity as the MCCA Delegation was paramount. A number of official events were planned in concert with Hunan Normal University -- lectures, discussions with students and teachers, dinner with a family in their home. The evening of the first night was a formal welcoming banquet with the mayor of Changsha.

Although Changsha was still three days away, I was anxious about the itinerary. I had packed lightly, t-shirts and shorts, underwear and socks, one pair of trail shoes, one pair of pants, one fading red collared shirt. During the cruise I noticed everyone in the group had clothes that could pass muster on an occasion presided over by the mayor of a city with eight million citizens. I didn't.

The privilege of alienation is being able to stay on the periphery. Being one slob out of 33 well dressed American educators wouldn't afford me the anonymity periphery demands. I needed to go shopping.

As the bus drove through the center of town toward the museum, I saw a department store and began drawing a mental map from the department store to the museum. If we had any free time, I thought, I could run to the department store, buy something quickly, and be back to the bus in time.

I was distracted in the museum, checking my watch and redrawing the map.

When the museum tour was over, the group leader announced we had 20 free minutes in

Yi Chang before lunch. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, I took off.

The streets were crowded with a midday throng. I dodged around old couples, bolted between vending carts, and was aggressive as I could be when crossing streets. My aggression, though, was cautious. I watched our bus drivers work the narrow lanes of traffic. Transportation is one continuous close call. Even though busses, bicycles, motorcycles, cars, pedestrians and cart-pulling vendors shared the same road, it was impossible to say who had the right of way.

I sprinted up the flying crossover, a giant four legged pedestrian walkway that straddled the main intersection. I was sweating and the back of my throat stung from the heavy, chemical air. When I reached the department store, I checked my watch -- I was past my turn around time.

There had been a general disapprobation for late arrivals thus far on the trip, reprimands, hisses, snarkiness, jokes. Ha ha. It ranged in intensity and length, depending on the number of transgressors and the consequence of delay. Didn't want to be on either end of that. I was sweating in downtown Yi Chang, with eight minutes to make a twelve minute run, because I didn't want any of that.

I ran back to the museum empty-handed, and made it soaked, seared, wild-eyed and five minutes late. I climbed the stairs on the bus as the 33th member of the MCCA Delegation to China. I looked up at the censure from the 32 of 33 who had been waiting on me.

Germs as an example

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) offer a number of recommendations for a trip to China. Our group was particularly sensitive to health issues because the tour had been delayed for a year due to the outbreak of SARS. In the months preceding the trip, I kept my eye on health news from the orient, particularly the incidence of Avian Influenza, which had been reported.

Consulting the CDC and WHO's guidelines, I learned of multitudinous dangers:

uncooked food, food from the street, unwashed fruit and vegetables, washed fruits and vegetables, tapwater, dogs, wild animals, prostitutes, mosquitos. Buy bottle water, they recommended. Do not drink anything with ice cubes. Stay away from dogs. Take a shower with your mouth closed. Don't use tapwater to brush your teeth. Watch carefully what you eat. Always use a condom.

I made a visit to the county health department and received vaccinations for typhoid, diphtheria, tetanus and hepatitis. I received prescriptions for anti-malarial Mefloquine, Ambien, a sleep aid to prevent jetlag, and Ciprofloxacin, for cholera and other serious intestinal infections. It was ironic that I usually eschewed pharmaceuticals except for aspirin, and now had all these strains of manmade pathogens coursing through my body as I prepared to leave. I was poisoning myself for a visit to a country that, if you believed the warnings, was extremely contagious.

Mefloquine, the anti-malarial drug, was a particularly vexing case. Malaria is a dangerous and miserable disease. A parasite hijacks a mosquito which passes the hijacker on to us. Who wants that in a body?

The travel consult asked if I was troubled by vivid dreams. "On the contrary," I said, "I love them."

"Well you shouldn't have a problem. Mefloquine has been known to introduce vivid dreams as a side effect." That wasn't the half of it. When I got home, I read the warnings that came with the prescription:

> *Less common side-effects include neuropsychiatric reactions (including sensory and motor neuropathies, tremor, ataxia, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, agitation, hallucinations, psychosis, convulsions), tinnitus and vestibular disorders, visual disturbances, circulatory disorders (hypotension and hypertension), chest pain, tachycardia, bradycardia, cardiac conduction disorders, dyspnoea, muscle weakness, myalgia, arthralgia, rash, urticaria, pruritus, alopecia, asthenia, malaise, fatigue, fever, loss of appetite, leucopenia or leucocytosis, thrombocytopenia; rarely, Stevens-Johnson syndrome, AV block, encephalopathy and anaphylaxis.*

The cure that kills, I thought, as I washed down the initial dose with a swig of cold beer.

I saw my first mosquito in Chongqing.

We had flown there from Shanghai. Chongqing is located at the confluence of the Jialing and Yangtze Rivers. We had half a day before the cruise down the Yangtze. The area around Chongqing was marked in the CDC map as malarial.

One of the stops on the tour was Eling Park, a merchant's estate perched on a hill. It was restored as a city park and now held a nine story tower overlooking the river. The local guide was describing the critical role Chongqing played in World War II when I noticed many in the group were distracted. There were mosquitoes everywhere. As the guide continued, people were fidgeting, swatting, moving around. I looked to a companion, "Mosquitoes," I said.

"That means malaria," he said, as he moved away from the tower and started to back down the hill.

By the end of the first week in China, other illnesses were closer at hand than malaria. Several members of the delegation had developed intestinal problems and a flu was circulating the tour bus.

By the time we reached Zhangjiajie, one of our members was feverish and feeling very poorly. I was down in the lobby at night when I ran into the national guide, Jinyuan. "I'm going to a traditional pharmacy," he said. "Would you like to come along?"

"Of course," I replied. Nothing better than being a come-along buddy in China.

Jinyuan explained, "We would say she is suffering from too much heat within her and she needs medicine to push the heat out."

The pharmacy was an enormous room behind a chicken wire cage. Shelf after shelf after shelf of white and green containers.

After haggling over the price of three small packages, Jinyuan motioned it was time to

go. On the way back to the hotel, he asked "Would you like to see real nightlife in China? All you Americans do is sit down at the bar and drink. You need to see how we do it."

"Of course," I replied.

"Ask your roommate and meet me in the lobby in a half an hour."

We joined Jinyuan in the lobby with two other members of our group.

Our destination was a downtown karaoke club, a four story building with hostess and manager on the first floor. The manager led us up the stairs. There were a series of rooms along each side of the corridor. Each had a uniformed waiter or waitress outside.

We were shown to a room and Jinyuan told us how this evening would play out. We order a case of beer; the waiter attends us, and we sing. We would split the bill at the end of the night.

The Tsingtao beer was brought out warm, so the waiter put ice in all five glasses and began to pour beer. The CDC had warned about ice cubes. "What about the ice cubes?" one of our group asked. He looked at me nervously.

"It's fine, fine," said Jinyuan.

We raised our glasses, "Gan Bei," and sucked down the ice cube soaked beer.

We sang timid renditions of classic rock. The images on the karaoke machine looked pirated from a Florida vacation home video. Our performance was pitiful and Jinyuan sniffed a bit in amused contempt. His attitude was correct considering where we were. Zhangjiajie is home to the Tujia, one of the 55 ethnic minorities officially recognized by the PRC. Singing has a central role in Tujian culture. We were told a man needs a strong voice to sing across a mountain in order to court a woman. When we arrived at the train station in Zhangjiajie, we were greeted by traditionally-clothed Tujiu playing long brass trumpets and singing folk songs. The next day, a Tujia sang a plaintive tune as she led us on a tour of Hunaglong Cave. The tones echoed hauntingly off the limestone walls.

Now it was Jinyuan's turn to sing; he stood erect and sang a folk song in a strong and clear voice. He ended his performance with an emphatic stamp of his heel on the floor.

When the applause ended, there was a knock on the door. A young man entered smiling, late twenties, flat black hair with bottle-round glasses. He and Jinyuan had a brief conversation and Jinyuan introduced us to his friend, Bowles. I never saw Bowles' name written, but imagined a teacher had named him after the author of *The Sheltering Sky*. Apparently, English teachers in China give each student an English name and many of those names are literary allusions.

Bowles shook our hands then disappeared for a few minutes. He came back with dice and a cup and initiated a Chinese version of "liar's dice." When you lost, you drank. When you won, you chose who drank. Although I swore off drinking games freshman year in college, I figured watered-down beer couldn't do too much damage.

After a number of rounds, Bowles brought three other players into the room: A friend from Zhangjiajie, a local hotel administrator, and a stately woman from Hong Kong who was in the city looking for investment opportunities.

The game changed and I wasn't sure of the rules. The room was chaotic. I stayed in the background. The foreground was the din of activity: Chinese and English, music, bottle on glass, guttural shouts, dice and cup, table claps.

Through the smoke haze and noise haze, I didn't understand how the dice worked, but understood how the drinking worked -- there was one glass that the winner would fill to his or her specifications, then designate who was to drink. I did a little math. Nine people + ice cubes + a petri dish of a glass = ten thousand ten thousand germs. As I considered the contagion, I noticed the focus was on me. Bowles had a full glass in hand -- backwash of backwash of backwash. It was my turn to drink.

I put the glass in my hand and saw it as a biohazard. Then I had a revelation I had had

before and I would have again and again during the tour, "Goddamn, I really am in China."

I lifted the glass to my lips and in one swallow drained a healthy draught of collectivism.

Jingshan Park as an example

Jingshan Park is a former imperial park just north of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It was developed in the 12th century for the Jin emperor. In the center of the park is a man-made hill, Jingshan Hill, which has five peaks, each the site of a pavilion which once held a copper Buddha. The uppermost pavilion, Wanchun, looks out from what used to be the highest point in Beijing.

The view of the Forbidden City is comprehensive from there, a grid of gold and rust red roofs emerging from Beijing smog. From there, the north gate divides the buildings into a grid, where the variation in buildings reinforces their repetition. Jingshan Park is a deep breath from the intense formal isolation of the Forbidden City. As you walk north within the City, you move from the outer courts to the inner courts. The last building before the Imperial Garden adjacent to the north gate, the Hall of Earthly Peace, is entirely private, the bridal chamber.

The 57 cultivated acres of Jingshan Park, and all the other imperial parks in Beijing, were reserved for the emperor and his retinue, though I imagine Chinese citizens always found a way to make space public space. I got a glimpse of that practice when the bus took us from Zhangjiajie to Mount Tianzi in the Zhangjiajie National Park. Fairly early in the morning we merged onto a highway in the direction of the park entrance. In the small triangular median formed by the merge lane and highway, there was a table with chairs. Four women were playing cards. When we returned in the early evening, the table was still occupied with card-playing women. The only difference was that the guard rails were now covered with drying clothes.

In the PRC, Jingshan Park is public. Nearly every square foot on the paths that wind through the park is occupied. On either side of the small black iron fence are those exercising.

The middle lane is open for those in transit: brisk walkers, backward walkers, walkers shouting, walkers slapping their limbs, walkers rowing their way along the path. Those lined along the fences practice tai chi, or qi gong, or any number of exercises requiring someone to lead, or initiate movement. Each plaza is occupied by groups moving in unison. I saw one group rehearsing sword movements, another practicing aerobics, led by a young woman clad in a black and yellow spandex outfit. The stereo was beating, "boomboomboom I just want to dance all night/boomboomboomI just want to dance all night/boomboomboom." This is China -- collective exercise. The breath, the body, the community, moving in synch. There were no practitioners of falun gong, though. The PRC understands recreation as political and exercises its interests in the people's calisthenics.

I had arrived in the park early and alone. I took a day off from the official itinerary. My intention was to walk up Jingshan Hill and listen. The local tour guide indicated that people have been known to practice opera on the hill, or recite poetry. If I heard recitations, I planned to recite myself. Although I heard yells and primal, amplified grunts that were occasionally reechoed from below, I heard no words, so I kept my poems to myself.

At the east foot of the hill is a Chinese Scholartree, a replica of the "Guilty Scholartree." In 1644 the Ming Emperor Chongzhen hung himself from that tree. The Ming Dynasty, which instituted such ferocious control over the populace, had declined to the point that it was facing threats from multiple actors. A peasant revolt led by Li Zicheng had successfully taken Beijing; soon thereafter Li Zecheng would lose Beijing to the Manchus (descendants of the Jurchens who founded the Jin Dynasty and built the park 500 years earlier). When the rebels were inside the Forbidden City, Chongzhen became crazed and demanded that his Empress commit suicide. When she did, Chongzhen killed his concubines and princesses in the Hall of Earthly Peace and fled to Jingshan Park. There, beneath the Scholartree, Chongzhen lamented that no subordinates cared enough to remain with him, then hung himself.

The tree is a replica because the original was uprooted during the Cultural Revolution. Old custom old culture old habits old ideas. Old Dynasty, Old Chongzhen, Old Scholartree, Old Jingshan Park.

I sat on the edge of a plaza 30 yards or so from the hill. As I sat, the plaza came to life. A woman in white pants and a tight purple shirt is looking in the dingy window of a small building, watching her white-gloved hands turn up as she stretches her arms out. More people gather. Some watch their reflections, others turn circles and sweep their feet formally across the concrete tiles. Some dance together, female and female, female and male; some dance alone. One man, 60 or so with a slight limp, looks awkward as he dances by himself. The women outnumber the men, and most men have been dancing with different women. But not him, he came by himself and remains by himself.

Soon a tall older gentleman arrives with a large duffel bag. He looks at me sitting at a small stone table and says, "Sorry" twice before I understand and slide off my seat and sit on the ground. Within minutes he's got a stereo set up on the table; it's plugged into an improvised generator run on dry cell batteries. He plugs a mic into the stereo and before he speaks, the people organize themselves into three lines of six or so. Each spreads out arms parallel to the ground to create the minimal private space.

He barks some instructions, turns on a taped waltz, and instantly everyone is dancing, one arm out holding an imaginary hand, the other in front, holding an imaginary waist.

"Yee ur sahn, ur ur sahn, " he says, "Yee ur sahn, ur ur sahn," and they shuffle, slide their feet, turn on code.

The awkward man is awkward no more. Now that he is in the group, his moves are one of many. Seen in the many and not the one. As the violins lead the way, he smiles. He is serene and healthy as he dances, together and alone, on an early morning plaza in Jingshan Park.

Li Po and Tu Fu as an example

I brought a digital recorder with me. Poetry fieldwork. I wanted to record people reciting poetry. Again and again, the people I encountered would quote lines from the Tang period, most often the poems of Li Po and Tu Fu.

In Changsha, three of our group had dinner at a local family's apartment. After a meal where everyone leapt over language barriers to make connections, I pulled out the recorder and asked if the host family would recite poems. The daughter of the house, twelve year old Sophie, went into her room and retrieved her primer. She recited two poems by Li Po. Sophie passed the primer to her mother and she recited a poem. The uncle recited Li Po as well. Apparently, literacy means being able to read and speak Li Po.

The Tang Dynasty during the first half of the eighth century is considered the high point of dynastic culture. The borders were relatively secure; the emperor Xuanzong instituted successful reforms of the state apparatus; literature and painting flourished. Li Po and Tu Fu are considered the greatest of the Tang poets and the greatest Chinese poets of all time.

The biographies of Li Po and Tu Fu are similar, scholars with tenuous connections to the official bureaucracy. Li Po, eleven years older, was famous in his lifetime, but never passed the examinations necessary for official procurement. Tu Fu passed the exam later in his life after having failed twice. Both wandered all their lives. For the most part, it seems to have been intentional on the part of Li Po (though he was banished to the southwestern wastes later in his life for having supported a rebellious prince). Tu Fu, on the other hand, after a peripatetic youth, was driven all over China by historical circumstance -- barbarian armies, or enemies in court. The second half of their lives saw the weakening, and dissolution of the Tang Dynasty -- from internal dissension and external pressure from border tribes.

In many of Li Po's poems, exile is liberty. He is a Taoist who gives up mundane affairs to commune with the divine in nature:

He asks why I perch in the green jade hills.
I smile and do not answer. My heart is
comfortable and at peace.
Fallen peach flowers spread out widely, widely
over the water.
It is another sky and earth, not the world of man.
("A Reply" trans. by Robert Lowell)

Li Po finds antithesis between the civilized world of society and natural world.

Li Po writes in "To See Secretary Shu-Yün Off at the Hsieh T'iao Tower at Hsüan-Ch'eng,", "I hold up my drink to quench my sorrow: sorrow, sorrow still goes./Man living in this world is always at odds with it./Tomorrow morning: unloose our hair and go a-boating" (trans. by Wai-Lim Yip). The problem of being in the world and not of it is to leave the world you're in. Climb a mountain. Go drifting down the Yangtze.

Tu Fu finds anxiety and disappointment in separation from society. It's akin to a primal estrangement from being:

By bent grasses
in a gentle wind
Under straight mast
I'm alone tonight,

And the stars hang
above the broad plain
But moon's afloat
in this Great River:

Oh where's my name
among the poets?
Official rank?
"Retired for ill-health."

Drifting, drifting,
what am I more than
A single gull
between sky and earth?
(trans. by Arthur Cooper)

Drifting once again down the Yangtze, there is no consolation for Tu Fu in being separate from the world of men. He finds himself between Heaven and Earth, Ch'ien and K'un, and having a place in neither.

Tu Fu's poems are often dramatic monologues in which the narrator is estranged by history -- soldiers trudging to defend borders, wives and children who await their return, starving peasants, exiled officials. Tu Fu speaks for himself in "Moonlit Night Thinking of My Brothers":

> Warning drums have ended all travel.
> A lone goose cries across autumn
> Borderlands. White Dew begins tonight,
> This bright moon bright there, over
>
> My old village. My scattered brothers --
> And no home to ask *Are they alive or dead*?
> Letters never arrive. War comes
> And goes -- then comes like this again.
> (trans. by David Hinton)

Tu Fu is often exiled, estranged from his relations, family and otherwise. Without ecstasy to cast him out, Tu Fu is the voice of the solitary subject -- the naked human voice.

Tu Fu is no less the poet for this. His good will is evident in his poetry, his expansive imagination, his sensitivity to the humanity in others.

Although they met only briefly, Li Po's mystical figure remained in Tu Fu's consciousness:

> Floating clouds travel all day long.
> The wanderer has not returned.
> Three nights on end I dreamt of you.
> Such affection you have shown.
> Always in haste you said: I'm going.
> Sorrowfully you said: "Difficult to come!
> High waves upon seas and rivers!
> And fear falling off from the boat!"
> Out of the gate, you scratched your white hair
> As if burdened by your whole life's will.

Successful officials all over the Capital.
You alone are pressed and depressed.
Who says the meshes of justice are wide?
Aging like this, you got involved.
Name for a thousand a million years?
After this body is gone, lonely only lonely...
(trans. by Wai-Lim Yip)

It can be instructive to view Li Po and Tu Fu as occupying opposite borders of a "collectivist" society. Li Po, in the tradition of religious recluses, divorces himself from society because it does not hold the cosmic truth he seeks. Tu Fu, on the other hand, grieves over separation that history imposes on people who long to remain connected. Tu Fu is a poet of human relation and its estrangements. The mystic Li Po, dances with the moon and forms, though ephemeral, cosmic relations.

Amongst the flowers I
am alone with my pot of wine
drinking by myself; then lifting
my cup I asked the moon
to drink with me, its reflection
and mine in the wine cup, just
the three of us; then I sigh
for the moon cannot drink,
and my shadow goes emptily along
with me never saying a word;
with no other friends here, I can
but use these two for company;
in the time of happiness, I
too must be happy with all
around me; I sit and sing
and it is as if the moon
accompanies me; then if I
dance, it is my shadow that
dances along with me; while
still not drunk, I am glad
to make the moon and my shadow
into friends, but then when
I have drunk too much, we
all part; yet these are
friends I can always count on

these who have no emotion
whatsoever; I hope that one day
we three will meet again,
deep in the Milky Way.
("Alone and Drinking under the Moon" trans. by Rewi Alley)

Unpacking My Dichotomies

I walked around Beijing airport looking to spend my last few yuan. I felt like I was in nowhere land; 33 hours lay between East and West. It was good fortune to come upon a bookstore. I bought *Journey to the West*, a classic of Chinese literature. *Journey to the West* chronicles the adventures of Sanzang, a Chinese monk traveling to India in order to fetch the sutras of Buddha. He brings along three supernatural creatures, Pig, Friar Sand, and the Monkey King, also known as Sun Wu Kong, Mind-Ape, Great Sage Equaling Heaven, curséd gibbon.

Sun Wu Kong was an ideal traveling companion. I flew through Sun Wu Kong's experiences -- folk tale, martial art display, poetry, slapstick, theology. I flew through the Chinese landscape, alive with the spirits gathered over millennia. The novel is picaresque -- episodes that test Monkey King's ability to settle relations among humans, demons and gods. He is a trickster with the power to transform himself 72 ways. Each scene is an iteration of Sun Wu Kong's improvisational genius. A couplet in the novel notes that transformation is inferior to improvisation:

great are the powers of the 72 transformations
greatest of all is the art of improvisation

Even though I had figured the trip as a site of grand dichotomies, Monkey King showed me otherwise. Monkey King changes to master experience. If I stood on one end of a dichotomy, experience moved me. Dichotomies could not account for my experience. I found China. I found the PRC. I found CNN going blank when the West's news of the East began. I found old customs old habits old culture old ideas. I found Mao on a watch telling time over

Tiananmen Square. I found poems and songs, cheap beer and pesky amoebas. I found myself happy in the company of the MCCA collective.

Jinyuan had told me again and again, "In China, it's all about relations. You can have money and ambition. It doesn't mean anything in China if you don't cultivate relations wherever you go." Jinyuan was right. The dichotomies I carried with me had not synthesized into a unifying third, but had diffused into myriad relations. I had not mastered them like Monkey King, but at least I didn't resist when relations happened to me.

Certainly the cultivation of relations doesn't erase difference or alienation. How much of the tour was orientalist fantasy? An open question. And I see a struggle between classes, in China and at home, because some relations remain oppositional. This is not even to speak of the primary relation to being an individual must settle with only a lifetime to negotiate. Yet these unresolved matters are relations before they are unresolved. Take estrangement, for example: it's real, but relation is its necessary condition. Another example would be me in China -- I was in it but not of it. Nevertheless, I was grateful for experience that encompassed both connection and alienation. I was grateful that the China I carried home included its others.

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