东北

Dōngběi Eastnorth

Source
Deborah Fallows (2010)
Dreaming in Chinese

Chapter 7

Finding your way in China – the semantics of time and place

FROM OUR 22ND-FLOOR apartment in Shanghai, I could peer down at the troupes of early risers practising tai chi in the park. I studied them with my binoculars each morning for several weeks, searching for a small group that looked like they might be sympathetic to my stepping in alongside them.

I spied one possibility: a cluster of about ten men and women who, like most who practise tai chi, looked to be in their seventies and who somehow struck me as accepting. This was their daily ritual: one thin man, clearly their leader, rode up on his Flying Pigeon bicycle. He took his old-fashioned tape player from the bike basket and placed it on the low wall of the small esplanade. The others slowly gathered around chatting

for a few moments. Then the thin man took out his tape, put it in the machine and clicked play. On that signal, everyone claimed a spot and the practice began.

One morning as the sun rose, I drew moral support from a friend visiting from New York, and together we gingerly approached them. They figured out our intentions right away. A very tiny woman beckoned us over with a little downward wave of her palm, and that was the beginning of my long relationship. I realised my only mistake had been waiting so long to make an approach. For the next five months, until hard winter set in, my new friends tucked me into their ranks, making sure I was always in eyeshot of someone to follow, and they gently bossed me around, all in the name of improvement.

Our tai chi corner of the park was not a street but served as a thoroughfare of sorts for morning commuters. Bicycles regularly threaded through our lines, often between our "high pat the horse" move and "kick to the left". An occasional motor scooter did the same, its driver revving the limp little motor and leaning on the piercing horn. A certain salaryman in his dark blue pants and white shirt, carrying his worn briefcase, marched through our ranks every day as he headed for work. He walked facing backwards, and at a brisk pace. No one batted an eye at his backwards gait, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I hid my astonishment, both at him and at the absence of interest from anyone else in my group.

Early-morning tai chi in Shanghai's People's Park

For me, this was the moment I started to realise there is a gap between my western perspective toward the physical world – order, place, direction, and even time – and that of the Chinese.

Take reading and writing, for example. If you ask a Westerner about reading, you're likely to get a rigid sense of direction and order: left to right, top row to bottom, just like you are reading right now. Chinese orientation is less predictable. Traditionally, Chinese was read in vertical columns, from top to bottom, and from right to left.

Familiarity with western languages and modern technologies changed that, and the Chinese now generally

他她

Wǒ, Nǐ, Tā, Tā, Tā I, You, He, She, It,

Chapter 8

Disappearing pronouns and the sense of self

THE VILLAGE OF Xizhou is nestled in a verdant strip of land in China's southwestern Yunnan Province. To the east lies Erhai Lake, where cormorants play. To the west, hills rise to the Tibetan Plateau, where herders graze their yaks. During World War II, Xizhou offered a first contact point for the Flying Tigers as they flew over the "Hump" of the Himalayas, laden with supplies for Chiang Kai-shek's army in Chungking (now Chongqing, by some measures China's most populous metropolitan area). The American military set up a radar and radio station for the fliers in the attic room of a Xizhou village elder's farmhouse.

That farmer's son still lives in the same small house. His dog yapped when he heard us knocking at the gate, and his daughter invited us to look around, and later for tea. There were few signs of events in what

we considered the historic past, but the old man, who witnessed the excitement as a little boy, conjured up images for us of soldiers pacing and smoking in the yard, and parking their shiny automobiles behind the outbuildings where empty fields now stand. We looked around the attic and peeked into some old storage barrels, hoping to find a cast-off bit of hardware or a little writing scratched on the wall somewhere. But there was nothing, not a remnant left.

Xizhou, which means something like "happy land", is blessed with many gifts of nature – rice paddies, elegant hills, a temperate climate and the clearest skies we saw in all our years in China. Xizhou saved itself by its own charms during the Cultural Revolution. Troops from the People's Liberation Army decided to quarter there. Their presence protected the buildings from the predations of the Red Guards, who roamed the country and wreaked havoc with abandon. Townspeople buried their treasures and heirlooms for safekeeping in the fields around their houses; now they will sell some of what they have unearthed to visitors and tourists. I bought a small teapot and a few mirrors from someone's attic.

The town looks prosperous compared with many we saw in China. Farmers are busy in their lush paddies. The forward-minded town authorities are helping restore old houses. Xizhou kids ride bikes and wear nice shoes. When school was letting out one afternoon, we saw three or four kids pause their bikes at the snack

shop by the main square, furtively buy two cans of the weak local beer, zip them quickly into their backpacks and ride off.

On Saturday evenings in Xizhou, there is an "English-corner" for informal conversation, in one of the village play yards. It was started by some American friends of ours, who opened a small cultural centre and inn in the village. About a dozen kids showed up the evening we were there, to play games and practise their English with any English speakers who might show up. A few curious parents hovered around the edges of the group, and a few more sat in the circle among the children to absorb what they could.

In between singing and dancing the hokey-cokey and some other favourites we dredged up from our own school days, we enticed the kids with a circle game into a bit of an English pronoun lesson. Each one had to tell the age of the kid sitting next to him: "This is Ming. She is twelve years old." Or "This is Liang. He is eleven years old." The kids caught on right away, but when one would confuse "he" and "she", the rest, like vultures, would home in screaming mercilessly "HE! HE!!" or "SHE! SHE!!"

Mixing up he and she in English is a classic error among the Chinese. I came to expect that even the most fluent Chinese speakers of English would eventually say something like "Your son looks just like your husband; she is tall and handsome!"