

## 二十二

The US and China  
were in this together  
a curious friendship  
some interesting weather  
kids all over China  
learned English with zest  
the same was not happening  
here in the West



## Chapter 22 – The Mountain, the Needle, and the Frog

When a foreigner comes to the USA, the expectation of most Americans is that the visitor will make an attempt to learn English and should try to behave appropriately (like an American.) That expectation is magnified if the foreigner takes up residence in the USA – especially if that person goes on to become an American citizen. When a foreigner visits China, the expectation of most Chinese is that the foreign visitor will never learn how to speak Chinese and will not make an attempt to behave appropriately (like a Chinese.) That expectation does not change even when foreigners become long-time residents of China.

Many foreigners I've met in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China have come planning to learn Chinese. In Hong Kong, the majority quickly discover that there is no pressing need to learn Chinese since most Chinese people they interact with in Hong Kong speak English well enough. In mainland China and Taiwan, that's often not the case. Of the foreigners who try to learn Chinese in China, the majority give up rather quickly. Others remind me of 愚公移山 Yúgōng yí shān (The foolish old man who moved a mountain.) Although not directly derived from the Dao De Jing, this Chinese idiom is certainly Daoist in nature and dates back to at least the 5th century BCE.

There was an old man who had spent his life living in a house on the opposite side of a hill from the closest village. Taking the road around the hill to the village would take him at least five hours each way. Having been to the top of the mountain many times, he knew that the distance between his house and the village was much shorter as the crow flies. So, when he grew old and his family no longer needed him to work at home, he decided he would move the mountain. He started digging with a shovel, a bucket, and a hoe, and people wondered what he was doing. When he said he was going to move the mountain, everyone laughed and called him crazy. But the “foolish” old man knew better and kept on digging. He understood that he would never be able to move the mountain by himself. His sons and his daughters would need to continue his work and their sons and daughters as well. It may take several generations, but in the end, the road to the village would be shorter for his progeny.

Growing up in the USA, most people don't have a “move the mountain” mentality. When planting a new lawn, many people want grass that is ready to roll around in, in a few months. Most of my friends and family plant vegetables and fruit with the idea of harvesting at the end of one season, and plant trees that will provide shade within five years. In China, people plant trees and shrubs, and flowers that may take years or sometimes decades to mature.

China is not the mountain, but Chinese language and culture for a foreigner may well be, even though each bucket of earth represents progress. Obstacles and mis-understandings in speaking, writing or culture often keep foreign learners of Chinese from persevering. Instead they put down their shovels and continue to walk around the mountain and leave the translating and interpreting to others.

Actually, learning Chinese is more like “the old woman grinding the iron rod into a needle.” Commitment and patience can eventually get you there. Sometimes you may even feel like “the foolish old man trying to move the mountain,” but that might be because you’re really just content with being “a frog at the bottom of a pretty comfortable well.”

