

八十二

From Hai Kou to Hong Kong
the angels were sleeping
on board Hong Kong Air
no cell phones were beeping
I pondered our journey
the things we had shared
we'd seen most of China
but was I in error?



Chapter 82 – Gatekeepers

In extended school trips with kids, beginnings are mostly about relationships. At the start of every school trip is excitement. We're starting off on an adventure where we only have a rough idea of what awaits us. Instead of traveling with the familiar family and close friends, we are with people we barely know or don't know at all – and we're going to be together with these same kids 24/7 for the next 14 days. Combined with the excitement is the anxiety. Whenever we crossed the border into China, we knew we weren't in Kansas anymore. In the 1980's in Xiamen, that meant the only western item we could find was Coca-Cola in the Friendship store. In 2020, it meant we couldn't access Facebook or use Google unless we had a VPN.

Endings are easier than beginnings. I rarely slept on the plane rides back home. It was my time to reflect on the "middle". Did the kids have fun? What did they learn? Did we do everything we said we would do? What was the frosting on the cake?

Thomas Merton, in his interpretation of Zhuangzi cautions us "to be on our guard" in regards to what we think we understand. In his preface to "The Way of Chuang Tzu," Merton expands by saying, ". . . tasting is one thing and swallowing is another, especially when, having only tasted, one proceeds to identify the thing tasted with something else which it seems to resemble."

We'd seen much of China. But, what did it mean to "see" China and how should we interpret what we had seen? Who were our guides, docents, ferrymen, and gatekeepers?

Most times gatekeepers are ignored once one passes through the gate – never a thought that they may have been the ones who created the gate in the first place. Such a gatekeeper was Dr. Lin Yutang (林語堂 Lín yǔ táng.) Born in 1895, in the southern province of Fujian, son of a Presbyterian minister during the closing years of the Qing Dynasty, Lin Yu Tang was educated at St. John's College in Shanghai and from there he studied for a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature at Harvard University in Boston. Lin went on to earn his Doctorate in Linguistics from Leipzig University in Germany.

Lin Yutang was the first academic that I know of who, urged by author Pearl Buck, made a concerted attempt to explain China to the West in his book, *My Country, My People*, first published in 1935. At the time of its publication, most Westerners based their understanding of China and the Chinese on biased news reporting based on insufficient research and comprehension and misinterpretation of what they were seeing. Lin Yutang had lived almost half of his life in China. Few doubt his understanding of things Chinese. His book was loved in the USA, reprinted 7 times in the first four months of its publication.



In *My Country, My People*, Lin divided his book into two main parts which he called *Bases* and *Life*. In “*Bases*”, Lin talked about Chinese people, the characteristics of the people, the Chinese mind and Ideals of Life. In reading this, one has to consider that it was published in 1935 and may not describe modern characteristics of Chinese people. Still Lin opens a window for us to look at Chinese characteristics circa 1935, In “*Life*”, Lin discussed ways women were perceived. Even though footbinding was outlawed in 1912, it was still being practiced in rural parts of China. Lin also discussed social and political life, literature, art, and the art of living. In a particularly touching quote from the book, Lin Yutang said, “When one is in China, one is compelled to think about her, with compassion always, with despair sometimes, and with discrimination and understanding very rarely.” He concluded his last chapter by saying, China “enables us to see life steadily and see life whole, with no great distortions of values. It taught us some simple wisdom, like respect for old age and the joys of domestic life, acceptance of life, of sex, and of sorrow. It made us lay emphasis on certain common virtues like endurance, industry, thrift, moderation, and pacifism.” I have strong doubts that Chinese would characterize themselves by using the same words today, but would Westerners in the year 2020 use the same vocabulary and same expressions to characterize themselves as those that might have been used in 1935? Very unlikely. We certainly had not seen most of China. We’d barely scratched the surface.

Did I misinterpret some of what I saw? I’m sure I did. But I like to consider myself at the autumn of my studies of China where Lin suggested “its leaves are a little yellow, its tones mellower, its colors richer, and it is tinged with a little sorrow . . .” Fortunately, I had a Chinese friend and colleague at my side when I was traveling with students in China. She, like Lin, had spent her early life in China. Although I had some knowledge and opinions, I would almost always defer to her when it came to understanding the contexts of what we were seeing and experiencing.