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An Alleyway Behind a Proper Veneer

Zhengzhou is where it all started for me, that is, my experience in this country. It has a lot to offer—in a much different way than America “offers.” (Please do not mention the tired old phrase, “the American Dream.”) Ah, but in America, there’s a box of donuts, saying go ahead and eat me (and you eat them). But in China, each doughnut is packaged separately, even if you ask for a dozen. Obviously different countries, different ways of thinking.

Hungry.

I lapsed back into fast food eating —lots of it —when I was back in the United States. The choice is spend a fortune to find what one enjoyed in China, eat healthy but pay a high price for it, or.... eat what is easily available, which is fast food. As I was always in a hurry, often between jobs, hungry, broke, that’s what I did.

Though I often longed for Chinese food in between jobs in America, I was never far away from it for long. Months, but never years, was the length of time between return trips to China. And when I say Chinese food, it’s understood I mean food eaten inside China, not a cuisine genre people in America enjoy. It’s different.

Chinese food could mean one of two things for Americans. It could mean a type of food they have eaten in America and only in America. Or it could be a cuisine they’ve tasted abroad, mainly in China or in one of its outer shires. For the later camp, which I am a member of, the comparison is practically between night and day. If you’re an American and you have ever said, “I love Chinese food,” but have never tried any real Chinese food in or out of the motherland, then you are in for a bit of surprise when you finally do—for better or for worse.

There are more Chinese restaurants in America than there are McDonald’s. Few in number are those individuals who haven’t tried, and enjoyed, Chinese food in America—anywhere in America, from a small country village to big New York City.

That said, I recently stopped at a McDonald’s for breakfast while I was on my way to work. (This is while I am in China.) I looked around for once at what people were really eating. For Chinese customers, the common food item at a Chinese McDonald’s, from my observations, was soup and some kind of vegetable. I noticed perhaps I was the only one in the dining area eating a breakfast sandwich. One lady I observed had a bowl of soup and a cob of corn, something I would never even consider if I had a choice at 7:30 in the morning.

Though there is a commonality of American Chinese food from the west to east coast USA, from the Canadian border to Nogales at the border with Mexico (and half of Nogales *is* Mexico)—all these places still aren’t in China, and never will be.

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Because in China the food is different.
Really!



As for Chinese restaurants themselves in China, food safety is not just a problem for proprietors; patrons spit, blow and wipe their noses into tissues they leave on dirty dishes to be picked up. Smokers sometimes put out their cigs on a plate or drop the butt into a cup or bowl. And then they clear their throats and spit again...on the floor where patrons walk and place their feet.

It's not much better if they chug a loogie into the wastebasket next to the dining table. Someone's hands still have to pick those up.

At the very least, workers should wear safety gloves.

A sink in China is a water tap at best, albeit with a basin. Soap is a rare commodity. And while it is the norm to bring a small square of tissues with you everywhere, carrying a bar of soap or even a soft soap sprayer is not quite feasible or even possible.

What does this mean? Germs. You got it. Lots of them. Everywhere, and on every thing—human or not.



Back in my room after eating outside. Lying awake in bed, eyes wide open.

The wee early morning hours. Still can't get over jet lag. It's only been a few days. I stay wide awake in bed until 5:45, then give it up and go out to the living room and start writing this.

It's hard sometimes. Thoughts languish, sleep beckons.

The sun pokes its head through a cloud of haze, always haze.

Zhengzhou.

This *is* Zhengzhou—where I live.

Any voices you might hear might be true or not true....but does it matter when it comes to fiction?

Other Voices, Other Rooms....

But I'm not writing fiction. And Zhengzhou is not a fictional place. Yet all life, for the common citizens, which means everybody, seems descended from some sort of ancient Chinese mythology. Shaolin is not far from here. Taoism runs deep in Dengfeng. So, while not mythologies, these schools of thought do have variants of ancient religious/mystical affiliations which must embrace some mythical idea to be complete religions. Christianity does this. The Adam and eve "myth," Jonah and the whale, etc.



After traveling in this spaceship of life for some days, I now see some light....

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Months of looking for work. And finally all that stress at least for a while stopped by the end of the job search. Hopefully, the last job search.

But I always got to be thinking about when the gig is up, when this rat race is over. Namely, when I am no longer participating in it because I'm not here, moved on into eternity.

So much can kill you. China could too.

Fixed stares. If looks could kill.....

Whoa!



What you want to say is not always what you say. Take the Chimpanzee for example. It is mobile and intelligent and displays potential for good manual dexterity and motor skills. Yet verbal communication seems a bit far away, off in the horizon if we're referencing the ascent of the evolutionary walk to upright ape.

The ape shows all teeth and barks out a kind of "caw! caw!" as if wanting to say something. But that's the best she can do.

I've felt that way sometimes. I have trouble learning the language. But why Chinese?

There is an in-built, to-be expected communication problem here, not just the language—but in the culture. And China has that added dimension of communist leadership which means knowing Chinese or meeting Chinese people is not like a traditional meeting of cross-cultures as you might expect in other parts of the world. For example, there are no public forums regarding top government behavior. China is thousands of years old, yet governmental communist China officially formed in 1949. Nonetheless, in recent years China seems to have come of age, and it having borne such a really tough history seems deserving of soon being brought into its own—into its world membership at the tops of the mountain peaks of the modern age.



Unlike when I was a janitor working part time to help get me through college, I don't handle teaching at night well after long hours of teaching all day. I'm not that way with all jobs. I worked graveyard, midnight to 8 am doing assembly work for an exercise machine manufacturer, and I actually fell into the robotic pattern of working better during those hours. There's just something about the midnight trance getting one through without facing reality until daybreak.

But teaching is another apple. It doesn't matter if I sleep all day and start teaching at 7 p.m. After an hour I am beat. So it is not the duration of the day, it's just something about teaching at night. I can't quite explain it. I am a night person in some ways, especially when it comes to fun, but even then I want to be home by about nine these days.

I know. It's because I am not nineteen anymore.

I suppose I am sort of like my dad, who somehow with his teaching tenure was able to be home every night by five or so and kept that same

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schedule until the day he retired.

But some things due to cultural differences are also different from my dad's experiences teaching. No, that's not fair. He also came from a different time. And he would have been the first to admit, as a history professor, that what we know about history is subject to change as new information becomes available.

Not only that, but the teaching technology is vastly different from my dad's time. Today everybody, not just institutional professionals, has access to the internet. He might have had access to an overhead projector from 1968 – until 1993 when he retired. But otherwise it would have been the podium and blackboard, was all he used.

But something entirely different I will confess to, only one: My students sometimes loved me to play peek-a-boo with them.

Every lecturer has to have an ice-breaker. That was mine on occasion in China. I know the girls giggled and seemed to love it. I don't know about the boys...but I wasn't looking at the boys.

Never tried it the US, though.

Of course, I wouldn't.

Except with my own children.



I look out the window one morning and I see what looks like hundreds of people walking around like zombies in a bad horror film.

Almost a metaphor for what seems like aimless living here sometimes. People go to work, but many seem to be going around in circles, over and over, repeating the same daily.

Americans tend to walk in a straight line, which follows the conformations of road and path logic, stay to the right, etc. But we are also taught from a longstanding tradition dating back to original western concepts of civility that there are yield rules and rights-of-ways.

But in China, trying to walk in a straight line will probably only get you in a head-on collision, either with a person or a vehicle. So instead of straight forward movement, the pedestrian, and even vehicle, is in search of the approach of least resistance. These are more avoidance and advantage-taking skills rather than pass and yield rules. It's navigation against forward movement in China in order to get somewhere, against obstacles, which people and other vehicles are. Occasionally vehicle drivers forget that policemen are not one of those obstacles who then get struck.

If it means swerving and speeding around something, then there is navigational success achieved to get somewhere by getting around things. In other words, there is no such thing as a straight line for vehicles or pedestrians.

There's steel and glass everywhere in China's cities, but more often rusty iron, which of course does not mean for the beautification of anything civic.

But people in China surely do not walk in a straight line.

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Coming out of the building, after work, I noticed a man I hadn't seen before, a tall western individual with gray hair and wearing a flat brimmed tan hat. He had the build of Ronald Reagan in old age. He walked slowly, with a very pronounced limp in one leg. I wondered who he was but did not approach him. Could he have been a new teacher, a prospective teacher interviewing? Perhaps just a visitor looking around? I may never know.

Whoever he was, he inspired me a little. If here's a teacher who has pushed through the tough chapters of life and challenges afforded by China, I too can do it as well as anybody well into my "old" age.



Back in my room.

This is a hard life for me in more than one respect. One is due to my old western traditional ways: coffee in the morning at a sit-at-the-counter coffee shop. That doesn't happen here. My apartment kitchen is so poorly equipped I can't really cook anything. No fried eggs here, at home....

I'm thinking, thinking. Thinking....

I am thinking about the past, and what I know about how things came to be.



I first came here in 2002, and have seen massive changes. But not everything has changed.

The government, for one. But, speaking objectively and from the government's point of view, some positive changes have been made: loosening restrictions on the one-child policy, internal investigations and punishments of government abuse of power, and better living conditions (housing, civic improvements such as for roads and bridges) are to name a few.

But also abysmal living conditions still exist well into the 21st century. I still see people washing clothes by hand outside while right next door is a dry cleaner, and next to them, apartments that looked built for visiting members of the United Nations.



Faces creeping out of the darkness is not always the scariest part.

Everyday life in China. Well, it becomes everyday life for a non-Chinese citizen when he *lives here*, as opposed to being a visitor.

And when you *live* somewhere, outside of your home country, as opposed to being a tourist (where *staying*— for some time— might be the right word), eating is more the appropriate word than dining which is something that a tourist does.



In China, you may find some things you should not have to put up with. But, in China, sometimes you do . . . sometimes you put up with more often than not.

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When in China, do not expect too many good things to happen to you.
If they do, you are not in China anymore, but must be in heaven.