

the right direction. During the first week of class, Adam had his students introduce themselves, and a girl named Keller stood up. She told the name of her hometown, and she explained that she had chosen her English name in honor of Helen Keller. This was a common pattern; some of them had taken their names from people they admired, which explained why we had a Barbara (from Barbara Bush), an Armstrong (Neil Armstrong), and an idealistic second-year student called Marx. A few had translated their Chinese names directly—House, Yellow, North. There was one boy whose English name was Lazy. “My name is Lazy,” he said, on the first day of class. “I am very lazy. I do not like to play basketball or football or do many things. My hobbies are sleeping.”

Other names made less sense. There was a Soddy, a Sanlee, a Ker. Some were simply unfortunate: a very small boy called Pen, a very pretty girl named Coconut. One boy was called Daisy, a name that greatly dismayed Dean Fu. The dean was a handsome man with blue-black hair, and he was our main liaison with the English department—a position whose weight of responsibility often gave him a mournful air. He seemed particularly morose when he called me into his office to talk about Daisy.

“That’s a girl’s name, isn’t it?” Dean Fu asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Except now in America even girls don’t like that name.”

“I remember it from *The Great Gatsby*,” Dean Fu said, smiling sadly. As a student his specialty had been American literature, and he was familiar with virtually all of the great twentieth-century novelists. He sighed and shook his head.

“Last year that student had a boy’s name,” said the dean. “He changed it over the summer. I don’t know why.”

I didn’t know either—I never talked with Daisy about it. He wasn’t easy to speak with, and all I ever learned about him was that his lifelong goal of being a soldier had been crushed when the People’s Liberation Army turned him down because of bad eyesight. This was a failure that illuminated the mystery of Daisy’s existence; he was a tall, taciturn boy with an air of deep sadness, and every day he wore a full camouflage uniform to class. Whether it was consolation or a form of self-punishment, I never knew. I simply liked having a tall camouflaged boy named Daisy sitting in the back of my class, and I never

would have asked him to change either his name or his uniform. I didn't tell that to Dean Fu, of course.

But Keller's name was very straightforward. Helen Keller was a common heroine among the students—even some of the boys listed her as a role model, partly because she had had Communist sympathies. On the day that Keller introduced herself, she explained the reasons for her name, and then she smiled.

"Thank you," Adam said. "You have very nice freckles, Keller."

The classroom suddenly became very still. Keller's face fell and she sat down quickly. In the awkward silence Adam floundered for a moment, and then he hurriedly explained that in America freckles are considered attractive. Which, it turned out, is not the case in China—his compliment was like saying "You have a nice birthmark." But there was nothing to do except continue the lesson, and in a few minutes the awkwardness had passed.

But it wasn't forgotten. A week later two students mentioned the incident in their journals, trying, in the Chinese way, to communicate the message indirectly:

I have heard of that there are so many American women have freckles on their faces. In China, women especially girls who have freckles on their faces do not like other people to mention it. It's bad manner. I want to know what do the American women who have freckles think of it?

Some of their [the foreign teachers'] teaching methods are acceptable. . . . We should affirm their achievements. But sometimes they also make some students embarrassed due to their absence of Chinese custom. We Chinese have our own taboos. We never make frivolous remarks about people's appearance. But one of these two American teachers broke this taboo once in class. But I think, with the time on, up their knowledge of Chinese daily life, would some embarrassments be avoided.

AND SO WE BUMBLED ON. We were naive, of course—we trusted good intentions and hard work, and we thought that soon we would slip into the routines of the city without much problem. But like most

parts of the country, Fuling had a complicated past, and I had no real understanding of this history, regardless of how many books I had read about the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

More specifically, I didn't recognize what it meant for this particular part of China to finally have American residents. Later I would learn that much of the local industry had been moved here from Shanghai as a direct result of the American nuclear threat in the 1950s and 1960s, when Mao Zedong dispersed China's military factories throughout the remote mountains of the southwest. It was inevitable that such a past would have some effect on the way locals viewed us, but we knew nothing about this chapter in history.

Probably it would have been harder if we had known more. One of my favorite students was a girl named Anne, whose family lived on the ground floor of our building. Her father was a math professor, the highest-ranking faculty member on campus, and this was an honor that had earned him a place in our exclusive building. It had also earned him a job in a remote Sichuan coal mine for eight years of the Cultural Revolution. Like so many other talented Chinese, he had been banished as an intellectual, or *chou laoju*, "the Old Stinking Ninth", the lowest of the low, the ones who could be saved only by the basest and most tedious labor.

Those years seemed to sit lightly on Professor Liang—he was a cheerful man, undoubtedly happy to have been politically rehabilitated. Even in the coal mine he had made the best of the situation, winning the locals' admiration by showing them how to balance their accounts. But I thought that perhaps the past had somehow affected his daughter more, even though she had not lived through his experience. She was one of the brightest students in the class, and also one of the few who stood apart. Her ideas were different—she liked being alone, and she made up her own mind; she was capable of veering away from the political cant that most of them rehashed. Of all my students, I expected her to be the most open-minded to me as a foreigner. And yet after her graduation she wrote a letter and explained honestly how it had been at the beginning:

Not long after you became my teacher, I read a piece of old news comment that said Mr. Clinton took presidency, one of the reasons

[why the Americans had elected him] was that he would take stronger measure on China. Those days, I hated to see you and Mr. Meier.

In the first few months I never would have guessed that such feelings were so strong, although there were occasional signs that my students still viewed the outside world with mistrust. I treated these moments as isolated incidents—I responded, usually gently, and then I tried to think no more about it. One day a female student named Catherine wrote about the differences between women in the East and the West:

People in the west like the girl who is elegant or the girl who is sexuality? But I always heard a view that girl in the east is famous for her elegance and the girl in the west is famous for her sexuality.

The girls in China, most of them are elegant, refined, and kind. They always do something following rules. It's the Chinese tradition.

But the girls in the west are very open to outside. They can marry anyone and get divorced whenever. Don't mind the appraise of others. They can do everything that she wants to do, not concern about whether it's wrong or right. They lead a loose life.

I think I like the statue and virtue of the girl in the east. They are elegant, refined.

Catherine was a lovely girl, a quiet student with eager eyes and a friendly smile, and I couldn't be harsh. Below her journal entry, I simply wrote that in America I had three sisters—and I left it at that. In Fuling that sort of communication was enough; a day later she apologized.

She wrote about being "open," which was a watershed issue for the people in Fuling, and, in turn, for all of China. People everywhere talked about *Gaige Kaifang*, Reform and Opening, which included both increased contact with the outside world and the Capitalist-style economic reforms that Deng Xiaoping had initiated in 1978. To a certain degree, Reform and Opening was similar to the Russian concepts of Perestroika and Glasnost, with one critical difference: the Chinese term lacked an explicit political component, as the country's leaders had no intention of opening the political system in the manner of Gorbachev. Nevertheless, Reform and Opening resulted in massive social changes, ranging from increased mobility between regions to

new styles and attitudes that were influenced by foreign cultures. Most Chinese people saw these as positive developments, because they were accompanied by rising living standards, but there were still quiet fears that lurked in people's minds. And simply having the first American teachers in Fuling was enough to trigger these uncertainties.

I was too overwhelmed to dwell on such matters during that first semester. I was studying Chinese, preparing lessons, and writing in my journal; I didn't have time to worry about the political implications of our arrival. But still there were moments that shook me—like the time I read part of an entry in a student journal, three short sentences that echoed in my mind long after the grading was finished:

Today's China has been opened to the foreign countries. The criminals have been increased. It's important to maintain public order.

NONE OF THAT seemed too important in the early months. I copied the interesting remarks in my journal, and then I moved on. I sensed that I simply couldn't judge the students for anything they thought, at least in the beginning. Their backgrounds were too far removed from what I had known before coming to Fuling, and, like all young Chinese, they were surrounded by the aura of a troubled past. It was easy to forget this—it was easy to laugh at their ridiculous names, or smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I had never imagined. Even if appearances were deceiving, the truth always came through in the way they wrote about their homes and families:

In real life, I think my father is a hero. Once he told us his past. When he was about ten years old, his elder brother and sisters had been married and worked far from home. At that time, China was following a road of collectivization, and people were taking a collective productive labour. They couldn't have their own property.

Before those days, my grandparents made a lot of property through hard work, but when the collective productive labour began, the

property of my family were all destroyed by the “revolution group.” They said all things belonged to the public, then they took some good things away. My grandma wanted to stop them, but failed. They hanged up and beat her and refused to give her something to eat. Later she died from starving, then they forced my father to weed in water field in winter. My father didn’t complain, just worked hard.

Most of their grandmothers had had bound feet; few of their grandfathers had been able to read. Their parents had come of age during one of the most horrible periods in Chinese history. All of this affected my students and shaped who they were, but at the same time they were something entirely different. They were educated, and although few of them had much money, they weren’t desperately poor. They could buy things—fashionable clothes, books, radios. They went to college. They had studied English for seven years. They had seen great changes, both political and economic. Perhaps by my standards they were politically brainwashed, but compared to the past they were remarkably free.

They were a watershed generation, in the same way that “opening” was a watershed issue for China. I sensed that a great deal depended on the people of this age group—in some ways it was like the American generation of my parents, who grew up on stories of the Depression and World War II, and who built the America of today, for better or worse. There was the same sense of future glory in China, but the past was far more brutal than anything that had ever happened in America, which complicated things. My students had difficulty criticizing anything Chinese, and this was not surprising, because they were constantly being indoctrinated by the Communist Party. Occasionally some of my better students wrote about China with a mixture of cool accuracy and blind optimism that gave me some sense of how wonderful and difficult it was to be a young Chinese:

I think, in the history of the People’s Republic of China, there are two great men: Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. We should mention the two men if we want to point out the difference between two generations’ views on China.

When my parents were at my age, China wasn’t rich. Even the people couldn’t live the type of dressing warmly and eating there fill. The

situation was very hard at that time. Because of lack of experience, the leaders of China didn't solve some questions very well. Maybe, that period was the hardest within the progress of China. But, there is a fact that is beyond all question: it was Mao Zedong and his comrades that founded the People's Republic of China, and brought the Chinese people independence and democracy which is a long cherished goal for the Chinese. So, people admired him from the bottom of their heart. This kind of admiration led to people's profound love to China to a great extent. My parents did the same. It was the Great Cultural Revolution then; there were many wrong things in life. But they thought China was the best and perfect country and had splendid position. In their minds, China would reach its great goal only by performing planned economy because it was a socialist country. Anything about market economy was Right deviation. My parents only did what they were ordered to do and didn't consider whether they were true or false.

Today, when we see those days with our own sight, we'll feel our parents' thoughts and actions are somewhat blind and fanatical. But if we consider that time objectly, I think, we should understand and can understand them. Each generation has its own happiness and sadness. To younger generation, the important thing is understanding instead of criticising. Our elder generation was unlucky; they didn't own a good chance and circumstances to realize their value. But, their spirit, their love to our country set a good example for us.

IT WAS HARD for me to imagine a better job. My students were eager and respectful, and they were bright. The college was not prestigious, but in China less than 2 percent of the population attend any schooling beyond high school, which meant that even Fuling's students were a very select group. In fact I was glad to be at a lower-level school, because there was an unpolished quality to the students that I had never seen before. Everywhere else I had been, education rounded off the edges much earlier—in America, even high school students were cagey, cynical, suspicious. Education was a game and students played it, but in Fuling they hadn't yet reached that point. Their intelligence was still raw—it smelled of the countryside, of sweat and muck, of

night soil and ripening rapeseed and everything else that composed the Sichuanese farmland. And in their thoughts were flashes of the land, glimpses of the same sort of hard beauty that surrounded the teachers college, where the campus ended in terraced fields that ran steep up the side of Raise the Flag Mountain.

It shone through brightly in some of them. We had one student named Ker—like so many of the students' English names, his was a puzzle. He was one of the quietest boys in class and he looked like a middle-aged peasant: short, stocky, his face tanned and weathered by the Sichuan sun. He had a peasant's quiet smile, and a peasant's modest politeness, and he had been a peasant until the day the government sent a letter informing him that his examination scores had won him admission to Fuling Teachers College. Now he was twenty-one years old, the youngest student in his section, and one day Adam assigned a fifteen-minute free writing. Ker put his head down and wrote:

I'm working in the fields. The ox suddenly becomes a machine with an ox head. So I finish my task ahead of time. Because of that I am recommended to be the leader of our town. Then I go to Beijing by air to report my deeds to President Jiang Zemin. He doesn't believe it's true, because he's never seen a machine with an ox head. He orders that I be sent to prison. On my way to prison, my ox appears. It becomes a train with an ox head and . . .

My fortune and my changing ox is closely connected.

Fortunately I get back with the help of the train-like ox. I go into the town government office. The ox, now it is really an ox, follows me and murmurs something. I can't catch what it said. It turns into a computer which looks like an ox head. The screen shows: My young master, you are not suitable for politics. What you should do now is to go to school to learn more knowledge. Especial your English is too poor. Only in this way can you do your job better and live a more happy life . . . .

Perhaps for the ox's advice I will abandoned farmwork for study.

There was a great deal of Sichuan in those two hundred words, and yet it seemed so effortless—but of course there was more to it than met the eye. The first time Adam had assigned a free writing, it had



not gone according to plan. He explained to the class that they would have fifteen minutes, and then he told them to "write about anything you want."

The students wrote. At the end of the hour Adam collected their papers. They had written about anything they wanted, and what he had was forty-five shopping lists. I want a new TV, a new dress, a new radio. I want more grammar books. I want my own room. I want a beeper and a cell phone and a car. I want a good job. Some of the students had lists a full page long, every entry numbered and prioritized.

It wasn't exactly what Adam had intended, but nevertheless there was a great deal of Sichuan in those lists as well. The next time, Adam explained very carefully that they should "write about any subject you want to write about."

That worked better. Ker put his head down and wrote. And Adam and I kept plugging away, learning from our mistakes and trying to fit into the local routines.

# 城市

## THE CITY

THERE ARE NO BICYCLES in Fuling. Otherwise it is similar to any other small Chinese city—loud, busy, dirty, crowded; the traffic twisted, the pedestrians jostling each other; shops overstaffed and full of goods, streets covered with propaganda signs; no traffic lights, drivers honking constantly; televisions blaring, people bickering over prices; and along the main streets rows of frightened-looking trees, their leaves gray with coal dust, the same gray dust that covers everything in the city.

There are no bicycles because Fuling is full of steps, and the city is full of steps because it is squeezed close on the mountains that press against the junction of the Wu and Yangtze Rivers. Narrow streets also rise from the riverbanks, switchbacking up the hills, but they are cramped and indirect and too steep for bicycles. Automobile traffic tangles on the sharp corners. And so the long stone staircases are the true boulevards of Fuling, carrying most of its traffic—shoppers descending the stairs, pausing to browse in stores; porters climbing up, shoulders bowed under the weight of crates and bundles.

Virtually every necessary good or service can be found along these stairways and their landings. There are shops and restaurants, cobblers and barbers. One of the lower stairways is lined with Daoist fortune-tellers. Another staircase is home to a group of three dentists who work at a table covered with rusty tools, syringes in mysterious fluids, and pans of cruelly defeated teeth—a sort of crude advertisement. Sometimes a peasant will stop to have his tooth pulled, after haggling over the price, and a crowd will gather to watch. Everything is public. A haircut comes with an audience. The price of any purchase is com-