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The art of travel

Abstract:

This story is an extract from a chapter of the same name in *Permission to Speak: An Australian Student in China, 1979-1983*, a memoir that explores the continuing process of personal transformation sparked by living among Chinese people and students from different countries in early post-Mao China. As she studies modern Chinese literature at Nanjing University, the narrator acquires a growing appreciation for Chinese poetics, inflected with a western Anglophone feminist sensibility and further re-shaped by limited Chinese linguistic and cultural proficiency. 'The Art of Travel' is a transcultural rumination on the purpose and aesthetics of travel, and on different ways of seeing. It identifies travel as the juxtaposition of moments of intense realisation and discovery with those of extreme tedium, irritation and incomprehensibility. It explores the workings of resonance as a Sinophone sensibility in an Anglophone memoir genre.

Biographical Note:

Jennifer Anderson is an academic language and learning adviser, and has studied and worked in China, Cambodia and Vietnam. Her memoir *Permission to Speak: An Australian Student in China 1979-1983* is being completed as part of a PhD in Creative Writing at Monash University, Melbourne. Previous published work includes *Chinese Women Writers*: *A Collection of Short Stories from Chinese Women Writers of the 1920s and 30s* (HK: Joint Publishing, 1985), translated in collaboration with Theresa Munford.

Key words:

Memoir – Chinese poetics – transcultural intersubjectivity – resonance (感应 *ganying*)

The *waiban* has issued permissions for friend Catherine and I to travel to sacred Tai Shan. It's a welcome relief from the hothouse of university life. Retired teacher and friend Ding Hao will also accompany us. Ding's fragile health gives him an excuse to ascend the mountain by bus, but Catherine and I feel obliged to climb the ten thousand steps, indented and polished by the footsteps of countless supplicants and scholars. We admire the pines clinging to rocky outcrops, and the *jingshen* of the porters bearing bags of cement up to the site of a new shrine. In the autumnal light the shaved heads of the monks and nuns are burnished gold.

As we reach the summit, Ding Hao *laoshi* appears as a welcoming spirit through the failing light. Once the simple dinner of noodle soup is over, he disappears to that mysterious place where Chinese companions go to seek repose. We understand this separation to mean that foreign guests are rich and can pay more for 'superior accommodation'. Some official even told me that his countrymen like to share accommodation so they don't feel lonely. I think this is an excuse.

Anyway, I shudder for Ding when I see what our fancy foreigner accommodation has to offer. It's a grim room with three wooden beds and whitewashed walls marked with dirt and grime. Pipes protrude from gaping holes in the plaster, some plugged with grey felt. I draw the green curtain across the filthy windowpane, my fingers shrinking from the dust of ages. Not particularly fastidious at the best of times, even I am reluctant to enter the bathroom with its leaking taps, rust stains in the sink, and mouldy grouting. Perhaps it's because I have my period and I'm bloated and a bit sooky. At least the angry red pimple on my chin is just a blur in the worn bathroom mirror. For comfort, I wear my new Friendship Store maroon cashmere sweater beneath the bedcovers, while Catherine places her lovely new white one at the foot of her bed.

At 5 a.m. there's a knock on the door and voices calling "*Qilai! Qilai!"* along the corridors. It's time to head to the dawn-viewing rock to watch the sun rise through the 'cloud sea'. A sharp cry of revulsion from Catherine brings me to full wakefulness.

"Oh, my new sweater! Ugh, disgusting!"

Two ragged holes now mar her spotless jumper. We visualise a gigantic rat padding into the room though a crevice in the wall, scurrying up the leg of Catherine's bed and silently ripping into her sweater while we both sleep the sleep of the well-exercised. When did it happen? Just a minute ago? Was it disturbed by the knocking? Ugh! I look at my sweater, which has kept me cozy and quiet all night, and I shudder.

"What is it with rats and cashmere?" I ask. "Is it a matter of taste?"

Catherine giggles, a little hysterically, "You mean a gourmand rat with a Michelin-star hat?"

That feeling of violation is soon swept aside by irritation as I approach the dawn-viewing rock. I cannot stand these cheerful early-risers with their neat pigtails giggling and jostling each other, quoting lines about Mount Tai. The leader screeches into her megaphone, "Attention everybody. Our Chairman Mao came to Mount Tai and said 'The East is Red'. 咋们唱吧!"

The group breaks into a rousing rendition of the national anthem. I cannot stand the group fun thing. And I cannot stand these outbursts of patriotism. I know, I know. It's cultural or something. It just annoys the shit out of me, all that collective norming. Yes, I know I've got my period.

I have a flash memory of a guided tour I took in the summer of 1980 to Inner Mongolia. Out there in a boundless sea of grass, we stopped at a hut. I was surprised, expecting to visit a yurt. A mother and her daughter offered us tea and fed us their cured goats cheese. The guide insulted their home, their way of life, their eating habits, their open hearth. I was appalled. There I was, sitting on the warm *kang* with sunlight streaming through the window, wanting to stay indefinitely, and there was the guide egging on my fellow tourists from Hong Kong to respond, "Yes, ha ha, barbarians."

I felt that my hosts accepted the racism as a legitimate response to their poverty, their 'minority' status. I wished it were otherwise; that they would plot revenge, at the very least feed the tour guide with their dried goat cheese trailed through turds. All that open space beckoning a wide and open state of mind, and I end up being herded like a goat.

Ms Grumpy is almost pleased that the sunrise is obscured by a blanket of grey. There'll be no magical ascension through rosy suffusion today. "Suffer!" I mutter to myself, "I've seen the sea cloud performance before in Taiwan, and it was *much* better than this!"

Catherine smiles sweetly into my pinched face. "A bit of breakfast will do us the world of good."

And she's right. You can't beat an egg for comfort and the rebalancing of *yin-yang* and the five elements. Ding Hao arches an eyebrow at me as I offer my first smile of the day. His behaviour is restrained, so different from when we're at his place eating rice together with a few stiff shots of *baijiu*. Then his sardonic wit and demonstrative gestures are given free rein. Of course, he's in public with a couple of foreign women, and that's reason enough to be cautious.

Figure 1: Bloated sheepish Jen with acquaintances, Tai Shan, 1983 (Image of the author)

We go wandering around the shrines in the courtyard of the *Bi Xia Ci*, which I translate literally as Jade Rosy Clouds Temple with the help of Ding Hao. I watch women in black jackets bow their heads, and earnestly *baibai* their sticks of incense before shrines of greater and lesser adornment. I make assumptions that sons, educational prowess, good health, financial plenitude and family harmony must be big on the wish list. I read unhappiness and desperation in their devotion. Like many young intellectuals I know, I understand little about religious practices in China, in part because they've been repressed until recently, and in part

because they're so damned complicated. I can't distinguish between Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist and other folk practices, because in many temples or shrines all are represented with equal enthusiasm.

Ding Hao sheds some light, and I translate for Catherine whose lack of Chinese language is made up for by a potent sensory connection with her Chinese friends: "Many emperors have visited the mountain early in their reign, seeking the Heavenly mandate to rule. You saw that temple at the top, the temple of the Jade Emperor? Over there is the Confucius temple. But the name of this temple, *Bi Xia Ci*, suggests that it's Daoist."

I think, 'Yeah. Funky and colourful – Jade Rosy Clouds – a bit hippy crazy – that sounds like the Daoists.'

I continue to translate: "The temple is umm maybe dedicated to Bi Xia somebody, a Daoist goddess. She's also called Tai Shan Sacred Mother. She's special to women and children, and they say she'll give you whatever you ask for. Ding says the shrine over there belongs to Eyesight *niangniang*, and he recommends I offer her some incense and prayers and maybe I can throw away my specs; and over there is the shrine of *Songzi niangniang*, who manages fertility and female problems. Maybe we'd never have to use contraception again."

"You wish."

"No, *you* wish. I'm a virgin scholar, remember? Ding *laoshi*, 娘娘是什么意思？是老婆的意思吗？"

"娘娘是旧社会老百姓对皇后或妃嫔表示尊敬的称呼，比如那位最有名的杨贵妃可以被称为娘娘，明白吗？"

"明白."

"有些女神也被叫做娘娘，象这两位."

"What are you talking about?" Catherine asks.

"I was asking Ding about the meaning of *niangniang*. He says it's a polite way of referring to an empress or a concubine or, in this case, these two handy guardian spirits for women. Funny, 'cause I was thinking *niangniang* sounds like a homely woman in slippers, with a pair of knitting needles clacking away on a fat ball of wool."

"Eating something sticky." We grin.

Catherine sighs. "Just wait another year for the market economy to gear up and these simple statues will be smothered in gilt. There's already a few people here putting money into collection boxes."

"Yeah, so different to only two years ago. The 'opium of the masses' is back on the market. It's sad, isn't it, watching these women mumbling desperate prayers before inanimate objects?"

"Oh, I don't know. No sadder than sitting at home and sighing. At least it's halfway proactive."

Ding Hao urges us towards the rock gallery of inscriptions. In our teacher's company, my irritation with what I tend to see as the wanton destruction of natural phenomena has turned into grudging admiration. I'm impressed with the fortitude it has taken to carve these slabs of rock with beautiful calligraphy. I'm curious about Ding's interaction with the mountain and its messages. I imagine him simultaneously processing multiple symbols to create a cosmographic collage of classical philosophy, history, poetry, calligraphy and art. My ability to know what this might look like is limited by lack of knowledge. What I do know is that the pines growing out of the rock suggest longevity, evergreen success, and jade's durability. And I'm sure Ding can't forget the party borrowed the pine as its symbol of rectitude and upward progress towards the sun, that same party that condoned his beating.

Figure 2 Tai Shan pine (image from the author)

He suddenly turns, arms folded behind his back like a gowned scholar appreciating nature in a Song dynasty painting, and quotes: "*Songshu qiannian zhongshi xiu, jinhua yiri ziwei rong*."[1]

I translate: "Pine tree year before last finally corrupt, some kind of flower one day regards itself glorious."

Catherine looks at me curiously. Ding's ears have pricked up at my translation, and he corrects me, drawing the homophone character on his palm, "不是**前**年而是**千**年. "

"Sorry, Catherine. Same sound, different words! I mean one thousand years, not the year before last. Ding Hao, help me."

"你妈妈肯定会了解这两行诗。我还记得她说她虽然和你爸爸在一起时间不长，但是你爸爸还是给了你妈妈一辈子的幸福了."

My eyes widen with admiration. He has recalled a conversation with my mum that took place two years ago, a single moment in an action-packed afternoon. I am touched by this intimate gesture.

"He says my mum would understand. He remembers her saying that even though the time with my dad was short, it has given her a lifetime of happiness."

[1] '松树千年终是朽，槿花一日自为荣'， Bai Juyi (白居易), Tang Dynasty poet and government official, 772-846. Extract from《放言五首》, fifth poem in his series "Free the Voice".

Catherine says, "Ah, that's so lovely. So death is inevitable; but while the pine might take a long time to die, for the flower its one day of luminescence suits just as well."

We three smile at each other in mutual admiration: we've just enhanced both the poetry *and* mother Maggie's life now lived in comfortable solitude.

As we wander past the inscriptions by famous calligraphers, emperors and literati, I'm thinking: "Dear Ding, how does that line resonate with you personally? Your love life has hardly been charmed, married off to your calligraphy teacher's daughter, and savage to each other until the divorce. That terrible beating you received from a colleague during the Cultural Revolution. Who has given *you* a day of happiness?"

Our teacher meanwhile is drawn to Emperor Kangxi's simple and eloquent carving of two characters, *guoran* (果然), meaning 'just so'. The way he pauses and tilts his head suggests another lesson. He's asking us to notice that many inscriptions are a response to a summons we may or may not be privy to. So I stare at the two lovely characters, and my facetious spirit conjures up the Emperor's statesman briefing him on his upcoming trip: "Wow, Son of Heaven, it's like mind-expanding! There's this amazing temple on the summit, private entry to Your Magnificence only. From there the Emperor can gaze upon all under Heaven. Early prayers will allow The Totally Unifying Personage to observe the sun rising through a sea of clouds making them blush in a swirl of red and rose. It's like a paradise for poetry and meditation, for understanding the workings of Heaven and Earth and Man in between. Yeah. It's a must-do thing."

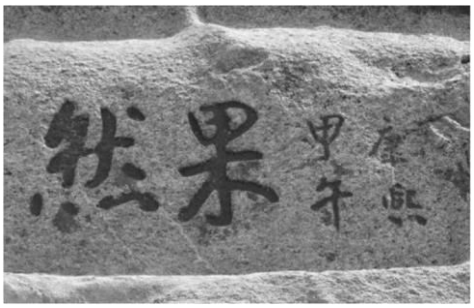

Figure 3: Emperor Kangxi's calligraphy *Guoran,* on Tai Shan (Image from the author)

Being an interpreter is exhausting, especially a challenged one. And on top of this, random characters in the inscriptions also compete for attention: "Read *me; understand* me" they wheedle and cajole. But so much of it is out of my reach. This happens with the second character meaning 'high peak' in the four-character phrase on the summit, "五嶽獨尊", "Supreme among the five highest peaks":

嶽

I try deconstructing it: on the top is the character for mountain —seems rational; and in the middle is the radical for 'speech/voice/language' —lovely to think of the mountain as a sacred place of entreaty that listens and speaks to the human heart; but what are the dog representations doing on both sides of the speech radical? Two dogs discoursing under a

mountain? Not a bad way to remember the character, but why dogs? Are they like guardians of the mountain? Guardians of the sacred conversation? But wouldn't they be the dog-lions with a different ideographic representation? Do dogs have a sacred function in Chinese, like Cerberus in Greek mythology?

"Ding *laoshi*," I call, and catch up to him and Catherine. "Ah, Ding…" but they are in deep communion, heads leaning towards each other, Ding's signature long fringe falling over his face and Catherine's signature beatific smile in place, and so I put on hold the curiosity, let it pass. I might remember that character, but I'll probably never use it.

I chide, "You could have chosen something more useful to deconstruct, Jen." But it's not entirely up to this 'me', it seems. Another inner me yells, "You are *so* bloody cerebral. Why does everything have to *mean* something?"

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Research statement

Research background

In its blending of language and cultural perspective, this creative project promotes a transcultural (Welsch) and cosmopolitan (Appiah) sensibility through an aesthetic appreciation of the classical Chinese concept of 'the complementarity of opposites', activated through resonance (*ganying*) and interaction to bring about transformation (Jia, Sundararajan). It further applies Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and heteroglossia to analyse the dialogic voices of the writer-narrator and her cast of 'real' characters (*Dialogic Imagination*).

Research contribution

Theft implies an illicit act, but ideas and language are of their nature unconsciously and consciously appropriated, shared and tinkered with. David Shields asks 'Can you copyright reality?...Is art theft?' Chinese poetic traditions embrace conscious creative borrowing and iteration as acts of resonance and layered interaction between past writers and their texts, the writer in action, and contemporary and future readers.

Research significance

This extract is taken from a PhD (creative writing) project *Permission to Speak,* a 'fictionalised' memoir composed of stories and poems that explore intercultural intersubjectivity and relationality in the early post Mao period. A 'cosmopolitan' approach seeks to counter global uniformity and fearful nation states turned inward-looking, xenophobic and detached from the lessons of history. Acknowledgement of an inclusive worldview that embraces resonance and interaction between contradictions and oppositions may be vital to positive change.

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