

Something Like a Stone Inside

The library at Beijing Normal University, Bei Shi Da, is cold, crowded, damp, and dark. The students go early in the evenings to claim a seat and work elbow to elbow. In the language building, graduate students have access to a small library at the end of the hall, where my friend Zhang Li Xin is a librarian. Her name, which means “stand up new,” was given to her during the Cultural Revolution by parents caught up in the fever of those days, which she recalls as a time of play. The adults didn’t have much time for discipline then, and as the teachers were ridiculed as perpetrators of the old, school was effectively out of session. Zhang Li Xin sits at her desk with a jar of tea and reads the paper, or does her heart’s work, coordinating women’s studies conferences for the students. I call her Zhang Daifu, Dr. Zhang, because when I am sick, she dispenses yellow mountain flowers or bitter black balls to cure a cough or a sore throat.

Li Xin treats me to tales of her grandmother’s lost money and Kuomintang loyalties that divided the family when she takes me around Beijing, a city she knows well. But my students, the few who studied hard enough to be chosen from their small counties to attend the university in the capital, are proud and afraid. Most of them rarely cross the campus gates. So I should not be surprised when, the second week of classes, wanting them to have access to so much more than they do, I drag them across town to the American Center library on the 28th floor of the Jianguo Hotel, by bus, then subway, then another bus, and learn that one of the students has never been on an escalator. The other students hold her hand. They want to please me—it is an ancient pact in their country between teacher and student. Though they are hungry and tired, not one of them complains.

I want to please them too. It’s out of fashion to encourage a teacher’s love for her students if they are not children. It’s dangerous to want what’s best for them, better to simply follow the curriculum. This is true for East and West—this need to heed precedents, this paltriness of risk. We are so terrified of being vulnerable, and yet this is what we must be to learn, about ourselves,

about another. We must be brave enough to be afraid. I know a high school biology teacher who tattooed a double helix strand on her ankle, opening her body to her subject. When she shows the tattoo to her class, she opens herself to her students. She loves her students enough to be human in front of them. She is not interested in authority.

At one of Li Xin's conferences, I sat in a group with some of my students, facilitating an exercise in which we told the stories of our first menstruation.

"I was fifteen, the last one among my friends," I said. "It was like a gift." It was Thanksgiving day and my relatives were over.

When I looked into the eyes of my shy student Helen, the one who'd never ridden the escalator, she said, "I worried. I was first. I didn't know what it was."

Though our experiences were different, we shared something common to women, and like magic the screen between us lifted.

Since I teach at a teaching college, my classes are mostly made up of women, teaching being predominantly a female profession in China. Despite this, the women defer to the men in class, and the young men are permitted to catch and hold the teacher's attention—a story we recognize. One of my students, whose English name is Magic Stone, is the only male in a class of six. He has written a novel in English, and was admitted to the graduate school without examination, by virtue of the recommendations of his teachers. Magic Stone is shy, but he does not have a shy mind. When he speaks about *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *Waiting for Godot*, his female classmates listen, yet it's less a matter of sex than of fluency.

Then there is Bao Huai, who is even less typical. He wears braces and an Iron Maiden black leather jacket and is president of the China branch of the Madonna fan club. He's a self-professed cultural and literary phenomenon, a snob, and an amateur Peking Opera performer. Bao Huai is less surprising to me, though, than the way he is affectionately tolerated, for in China, social consensus is like a reflex—as instinctual as pulling one's hand away from a burn or catching oneself in a fall. It's as if Bao Huai is such an exaggeration, such a dramatization, that he simply isn't threatening.

“I know more Emily Dickinson poems than most Americans,” he brags.

He recites a poem in the middle of my living room where his classmates and I sit around a small table strewn with dishes of shrimp creole and plates of cone-shaped steamed cornbread. The poem is Bao Huai’s own; he’s testing me. The students eat everything, to my surprise, and after dinner, Bao Huai puts on his opera robes, lapis silk sequined with a silver dragon, and performs a traditional opera piece, accompanied by a tape he brought. He goes into the hallway with Jimmy, his older roommate, to change into costume. Like most people with braces, Bao Huai is a bit shy about the mouth, but this fits the role he plays, a young, flirtatious maiden who’s just fallen in love. As he sings, the other students translate the lyrics. Bao Huai won’t let me take any photographs of him, but afterwards we all put on the robe and accept his instruction in the traditional gestures of the eyes and hands that indicate timidity, sadness, and love.

Bao Huai’s class is more balanced: three males and three females. Aside from Jimmy and Bao Huai, there is the rambling, confused Alexander; Cindy, always sick, who once passed me a note at the beginning of class that said “I’m sorry I cannot talk today. I’m suffering from massive internal heat and mouth ulcers”; Susan, married, common-sensed, and diligent; and Elizabeth, the most reticent and intelligent, who once accompanied me to a tailor for translation and ended up taking my measurements as I lifted my skirt behind the counter.

Bao Huai almost never speaks in class, but frequently passes notes to Cindy, or Susan if Cindy isn’t there. I don’t say anything, though the note-writing bothers me. I know the trauma of public reproach is graver for him than the distraction is for me. And I have always valued presence in teaching more than authority. I have wanted to be the kind of teacher whose life is so enriched by some particular knowledge that that knowledge becomes something to be coveted, to be obeyed.

In China, the teacher is expected to have an influence that extends far outside of the classroom. Part of the teacher’s responsibilities as mandated by the State Bureau of Education and understood by the culture, is social instruction. Students consult their teachers for advice about matters personal and private, such as love or problems of character. But foreign teachers,

with foreign ideas, are held in check. If students want to throw a Christmas party, a foreign teacher must be present, since Chinese are not supposed to be Christian. And a Chinese teacher is always present, to chaperone our intimacy.

The format of a Chinese gathering is a circle, either a table, or an arrangement of chairs, and everyone is expected to take a turn entertaining the group—singing, dancing, telling a joke, or reciting a poem. It doesn't matter if your voice is torturous, or if you are paralyzed by shyness; you will be called upon to do your duty. I once sang "I've Been Working On The Railroad," disappointing the students, who wanted Whitney Houston or Michael Bolton—songs they know. At a restaurant, I sang "Jingle Bells" with my students, who read the lyrics scrolling over a sunny beach backdrop on a karaoke screen. At one party, an elder pair of professors waltzed, and a teacher's daughter stood on her hands. The group need for cohesion dominates in play just as it does in study. In one undergraduate class, I can feel the class's impatience with one student's questions, too much a selfish assertion of her own need to understand. Similarly, to assert one's own desires at a gathering—to refuse food because one is not hungry, to refuse to sing because one doesn't enjoy it—is to offend the other guests and the host, causing a loss of face, what Lin Yutang calls "the hollow thing which men in China live by."

At a Chinese celebration, there is much formula and gesture. Even the eating seems to be done more out of cheerful habit than hunger. Yutang's claim that "you cannot go into Chinese homes, eat in Chinese restaurants...and believe that a national or world disaster is coming" suggests the self-containment of celebration. In the same way that a night at the theater is a retreat from the world—we come out of the dark blinking, our eyes adjusting to the light—the occasion for a party or a meal is an extraction from ordinary time. American gatherings, built on conversation and casual intimacy, perhaps with strangers, would be unbearable to a Chinese. A Chinese party is a dance, highly choreographed. An American party is backstage, the stagehands swapping stories in the wings.

Dance is an appropriate metaphor because the Chinese love to dance, both publicly and in private, at dawn in the park, at six p.m. on Friday on the second floor of the library. I once

glimpsed two women waltzing together in a noodle restaurant late at night from my taxi on the third ring road.

In dance, there is choreography to adhere to. There are marked positions for lifts or turns, lines on the stage hidden from the audience that the dancer obeys. Where there are lines on the dance floor, there are corresponding cues in language learning: Instead of having conversations, Chinese students recite passages from their English textbooks. In literary education, they learn how to use the “beautiful sentences” of others, not to risk their own. The lesson is that there is one correct way to say things, and imagining otherwise is suspect, if not criminal.

The dance is an ideal, a metaphor for peace and understanding, a vision embraced by those who need it most, as in South African playwright Athol Fugard’s *Master Harold and the Boys*. In China, we read an earlier Athol Fugard play in class, *The Island*. The story of two men imprisoned for political offenses against apartheid, the play brought a subtext of Tiananmen to the table. We never named it directly, but we danced around it. I was there, said one student, and we all knew what he meant. I don’t have any beliefs, said another. Here, in the classroom, with the whiteboard and dusty tables, this would have to be enough because safety, when you have not had it, is more believable than belief itself. Who was I to say in what way they should open?

When I went to China, I did not yet understand how powerful the ego’s dances can be, how the moves are tattooed onto our skin, and keep us from knowing each other. We are bound by what we don’t know and what we know. Bound by an image of ourselves and a fear of losing track of it. In China, I had the kind of abundant attention everyday that makes celebrities mean, and yet I was so lonely. My students were curious about America, but they never asked questions about me. I wanted to be known, but the dance prevented it, favoring order over one heart’s desire.

There will be a dance when we return from China too: we should tell a happy story. People expect you to know and love a place you have chosen to be for so long, not that your heart might ache.

Still, dancers never dance the same dance twice. My students, on occasion when their guard was down, said the most touching things. One student described the fallow fields of his home in a dry province as “begging for rain.” Another admitted, “Maybe I am an only child.” When I played Stevie Ray Vaughn’s blues ballad for his wife, “Lenny,” and asked my students to close their eyes for the duration of the song and write about what they’d heard in the silence after, a student wrote, “He has something like a stone inside him.” Yes, I had to agree. Vaughn died crashing into a mountain, but she didn’t know this. She was speaking of the round, tethering weight of the self.