

Rob Merritt

Upstream Against Forgetting

Li Bai (701-762), one of the greatest Chinese poets, who according to Ezra Pound drowned drunk when he tried to embrace the moon in the Yellow River, once spent time in Nanjing.

I spent time in Nanjing in 2010, and now, returned home 10,953 miles away, I am nervous that all of the energy, information, and history that jolted my attention over there will dissipate like peach blossoms down the Yangtze.

Can Li Bai help me? I could read a poem a day for the rest of my life. Is the Chinese sensibility too alien for me, professor of western literature, to sustain? The power of forgetting is relentless—memories will deteriorate until my walking along Beijing Road toward the bridge over Qinhuai River in the gray-skied May beside the streams of taxis, buses, scooters, bicycles, and pedestrians contracts into “I went to China once.”

I always carried a pocket notebook.

Li Bai:
Parting at A Wine-Shop In Nanjing

A wind, bringing willow-cotton, sweetens the shop,
And a girl from Wu, pouring wine, urges me to share it
With my comrades of the city who are here to see me off;
And as each of them drains his cup, I say to him in parting,
Oh, go and ask this river running to the east
If it can travel farther than a friend's love!

Wind. Wine. Friendship. River. Something I can bring with me to the hills of West Virginia. “The wise delight in water; the humane delight in the hills” (in Ezra Pound’s version of Confucius’ *Analects*)—hills where I have been able to read Pound’s edition of Confucius after the book has sat on my shelf for 25 years. I am looking at several books I bought decades ago: *I Ching*, *Confucius*, *The Cantos*, *The Metamorphoses*, *Tang Poets*, and remembering.

I refuse to allow the small-town ennui to settle back in. I could carry my notebook when I walk my dog down my oak-shaded sidewalk, just as I did along the stone path beside the river in Nanjing,

under the weeping willows, lantern boats bobbing at the dock, Ming wall ruins in the distance. I brought back music, photos, my notebook (“Ask for help and stay calm”; “Hard-boiled eggs and corn for breakfast—archetypes of fertility unique to no culture”); green tea (“NOT last year’s”); and books by Lu Xin and Lin Yutang. In Bluefield, I don’t want to go back to being nervous and anxious about obligations. I need to keep the river of curiosity flowing inside me as I row upstream against the current of forgetting. I must not fail to remember my friend and fellow teacher Du Yiqun.

We walked toward the Qinhuai River. “The Chinese accept; we do not get agitated about situations,” Du Yiqun told me as we walked along Beijing Road. “I don’t want a car; there is no place to park it, and the traffic. . . . Taxis are cheap.” Although she usually liked to take a bus or taxi no matter how short the distance, we walked, passing underneath the ever-present laundry fluttering before apartment windows (and workshirts hanging outside of scooter repair shops)—underwear, quilts, pants, vestiges of private lives drying in the warm haze. “We want fresh air on our clothes,” she said, walking briskly under her parasol. “We don’t want dryers; we can afford them. Why pay for energy? *We* are the energy of China.” Living purposefully means laundering a few shirts each day. Hard to explain the satisfaction I felt before going to sleep as I hung at my hotel window shirt and socks I had just washed in my sink.

I met Yiqun in America when she came to teach at my college; then I traveled to teach American poetry at Jiangsu Institute of Education where I showed slides of Frost’s New England stone wall to the country of the great wall. The students understood, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out.” However, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, / That wants it down. I could say ‘Elves’ to him,” was another matter. In a country suckled upon the pragmatic (no creation myths with deities, but legends of men who forged a culture), where in poetry, just say it (as in Li Bai’s wineshop), small mischief-makers with pointed ears would be difficult to comprehend. But, in the end, we all knew wall-builders.

I loved walking the streets of Nanjing with a native—I could not even order tea without her, though I did figure out how to ride the bus alone. This native loved English. She studied TV shows like “Friends” to get the idioms. She wanted her students to get interested in English via culture. One of my students said, “It would be great to live in America—sit in soft chairs, drink coffee, and have friends.” Yiqun (her “English name” was Dora, which never seemed to me to fit) loved the challenge of trying to figure out English. “How can you say,

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‘Welcome to China’ and ‘Welcome to Rob Merritt’? Same phrase for opposite meanings.” I pondered prepositions and elliptical expressions. I was beginning to notice every day’s flow within which people hang their lives upon window sills every morning, individual energies focused upon the living day.

She said, looking over a poem that I had written, “I would think without English, I wouldn’t have met you and had you as my best friend in the U.S. and beyond. So, do you think the English language serves as a go-between?” Yes, English underpins our 10,953-mile bridge. Language is always “go-between,” but just English is one-way. She gets English from me, but what do I get from her land? I struggled with the Chinese language; even if I knew the words, I could seldom say the tones so that I could be understood.

I started to notice the interpenetration of cultures. I lived in a hotel on the campus, the Bai Cao Yuan: “garden of hundreds of kinds of grasses.” Lu Xin once wrote an article recalling his life as a child with the title “From Bai Cao Yuan to San Wei Shu Wu,” about the bamboo garden in Shaoxing, in the coal region where he was born. Coal miners inhabit my culture and theirs. From the hotel, I could wander down to the Qinhuai River, which flows through Nanjing. It became sort of a focus for me as I tried to negotiate the city. I could rejuvenate in its quietness near my school. It flows into the grand Yangtze and on to Shanghai, city of skyscrapers where I drank a beer at a German brewhouse in the French Concession and watched Arabs walk down the evening cobblestones toward Xin Tian Di (“cinema” and mall). Hundreds of kinds of grasses.

The Qinhuai runs by and through the Confucian Temple, an enormous shopping bazaar around a compound where Confucius established a school at which students prepared for the exams that would determine their careers. They studied the Confucian Canon: *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine Of The Mean*, and The Five Classics: *The Book of Historical Records*, *The Book of Odes*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. Then, learning and writing ability were the talents that society prized. I went to the Confucian Temple with Yiqun at night; we saw the famous lantern boats glide beneath bridges, light upon “the life-blood of the city,” flowing around the ancient architecture, Las Vegas-esque. She said not to trust the jade—too dark.

We strolled into the temple; tourists did not go there—they’d rather bargain in the shops outside. It seemed like a holy place, yet I have never decided whether Confucianism is philosophy, political

science, or religion (and neither has Barnes & Noble). We saw giant jade bas-reliefs showing the life of Confucius—how he brought the great learning to China 500 years before Christ.

I leaf through Pound's *Confucius*: "Study with the seasons winging past, is this not pleasant? To have friends coming in from far quarters, not a delight?" In his introduction to *The Analects*, Pound said, "Points define a periphery. What the reader can find here is a set of measures whereby at the end of the day, to learn whether the day has been worth living." Decades ago, I could not get excited about this common sense advice about how to manage personal, familial, and national ethical lives which Pound somehow thought he could get Mussolini to implement. No sublime, no transcendental nature in Confucius. Now, however, I have seen how Confucius, though changed and commercialized, still broods over the country. The exams still control students' destinies. And Pound did uncover lyricism inherent in teaching and learning, in *Canto XIII* for example:

Kung walked
by the dynastic temple
and into the cedar grove,
...
And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;
And if a man have not order within him
His family will not act with due order;
And if the prince have not order within him
He can not put order in his dominions.
And Kung gave the words "order"
and "brotherly deference"
And said nothing of the "life after death."

A text I studied thirty years ago resonates now. I had a vision of China back then that, unacknowledged, has been preceding my journey (to China and back). *Canto XIII*, hibernating in my unconscious, has sprung forth amid my recollections of recent walking in "the dynastic temple" with a fellow teacher in the memorial to teaching, me, "from far quarters," refreshed by no talk of life after death, a prevalent theme in West Virginia.

I pay tribute to all that I have forgotten. Even though some of my history is reasserting itself, I am scared I will stop thinking about China in spite of my souvenirs, photos and pocket notebook. After teaching my last class in Nanjing, waiting to go to a dumpling party

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my students had organized to say good-bye, I sat in an empty classroom of fixed desks and looked at the console where I had just been talking about Sandra Cisneros' "My Name"—Esperanza, "It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine." And my students wrote about their names: English they had christened themselves ("Armada," "Lemon," "Echo," "Rose") or Chinese (familial or "courage" or "hope") and through the power of their names, they revered their ancestors, they revered the qualities they should keep before them as they lived. They sincerely geared up not to forget. Confucius venerated sincerity (ideogram of man standing beside ideogram of word).

I watched the black curtain moving in the hot June wind, the campus a converted office complex of Russian/Maoist industrial architecture, square and gray, with a duck pond beyond and a little village where we had eaten a "cheap and delicious" meal in a tiny café, reminding me of a taco cantina in Juarez. I had forgotten Juarez.

Now, in West Virginia, I turn to the *I Ching* looking for a link between now and then the way that ancient book of oracles links individual decisions to cosmic principles. My faded book bought in 1972, the year Nixon re-opened the door of China and invited pandas to Washington, D.C.

I tossed three coins to find hexagrams of my answer in *The Book of Changes*. The questions, of course, are: "How do I keep China with me?" and "How do I tell my story?" My first hexagram is Ching (a well—trigram of water over trigram of wood): water, a pit, danger above; sun, winds, gentle, wood, penetration below. The site of a town may change. A well never changes. The water does not increase. "A well supplies nourishment and is not exhausted. ... The drawing is nearly accomplished, but the rope has not yet reached the water of the well."

The water is the Qinhuai? China is my well that cannot be exhausted? "Those who come and those who go can draw and enjoy the benefit." Via memory, I can haul up more meaning than when I was actually there (walking beside the river). Emotion recollected in tranquility. Memory can hold, like the bucket coming up from the well. "A well supplies nourishment, and is not (itself) exhausted." The power of forgetting gets stymied when I go back to interpret with new eye honed by the Chinese *I Ching*, which I did not have with me in China.

My second hexagram is Chin (progress—trigram of fire above trigram of earth): "He advances like a marmot; however firm

and correct he may be, his position is one of peril.” What is my peril? That you will not understand? That I am creating a story not true to memory? That one year from today the quotidian will have subdued me? Now I write here and lay down sentences, bricking in the 10,953 mile-long-poem between Bluefield and Nanjing, a word at a time. “Chin denotes advancing. In Chin we have the bright sun appearing above the earth.” I am beginning to feel exhilaration in my advancing: fire, brightness, beauty appearing above the (female/receptive) earth. Primal elements—fire, earth, the water of the well—illustrate something I underlined in the book in 1972: “The picture of the world laid down by *The Book of Changes* is that each questioner and each oracle with which he is answered have been preceded by a coherent and purposeful cosmos. The *I Ching* translates this ordered universe into a system of parallel symbols.” Cohere means “stick together.” China and West Virginia are points of the periphery of a purposeful cosmos. Here words can be the “stick” that does not let me unfasten from that Chinese perspicacity.

That China-Appalachia work is already being done. West Virginian Kirk Judd (“Tao Billy”) shuffling through Pearl Buck manuscripts, plans a reading by Chinese poets at her birthplace in Pocahontas County, near Droop Mountain battlefield, near the Snowshoe Resort.

And Tennessee poet Danny Marion creates the persona of the Chinese poet in, for example, “Searching the Back Roads for Enlightenment the Chinese Poet Discovers the Pumpkin”:

Buddha of the cornfield
you squat among foddershocks
listening to the light
within.

And writing in the shadow of Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia, Charles Wright infuses that landscape with hue of China. “Portrait of the Artist with Li Po”:

He liked flowers and water most.
Everyone knows the true story of how he would write his
verses and float them,
Like paper boats, downstream
just to watch them drift away.

...
Over a thousand years later, I write out one of his lines in
a notebook,

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The peach blossom follows the moving water,
And watch the October darkness gather against the hills.

And Yiqun knows the words are the 10,953-mile go-between. The purposeful cosmos asserts itself as I watch the rain falling on the trees surrounding my room, hear the cawing crows and drink green tea she gave me the day before I left, grown by her sister. Our latitudes are only 5 degrees different.

Here in West Virginia, I can draw from the well with the *I Ching* I bought in college; Li Bai is still speaking. My ability to pay attention has been enhanced after living there, where everything, every street corner and conversation, was new. I am nourished here by the squirrels leaping among the trees after a morning rain, or refinishing my kitchen table, or an email from Yiqun saying, "The year 1981 was the fifth year when we resumed the system of the college examination in our country. Actually I was kind of lucky. If I were born a few years earlier, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to go to college."

And the *I Ching* beside Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on my table. Change beside change. "I want to speak," begins Ovid, "about bodies changed into new forms. You, gods, since you are the ones who alter these, and all other things, inspire my attempt, and spin out a continuous thread of words." I want to speak of my body changed into a new form when I lower my bucket into the Chinese sensibility, no longer alien; the "well that stays the same as the city changes." The still temple amid the bazaar; the river moving with lantern boats is full of light.

China is too big to have a singular ethnic or even geographical identity. Chinatowns abound all over the world. Historically, the Asian people living within the boundaries of the empire associated themselves with the ruling dynasty, as many today call themselves "Han" after that dynasty. "Zhonggou" (Middle Kingdom) is the current Chinese word for "China." Shared identity comes from shared rituals based on Confucius' ideas of order and education leading to creating the wise person of integrity. I share rituals as I drink the green tea, "study with the white wings of time passing" the *I Ching*, and listen to the birds in the morning. Yiqun is studying English, maybe pondering my poems; the current is running both ways. Rituals maintain memory.

"Not to know the rites is to be without means to construct. Not to know words is to be without the fluid needful to understand men," says Pound in his rendition of James Legge's translation: "Without an acquaintance with the rules of Propriety, it is impossible for the

character to be established. Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.”

The force of words cannot subdue the force of forgetting—unless someone in far quarters is listening to the harmonies of parallel change.

Points define a periphery. On the outside edge, Yiqun and I are friends from far quarters determining that the day has been worth living. With Confucius, Ezra Pound, *Metamorphoses*, and the *I Ching*, I am here and there. The cosmos is coherent. I carry a notebook on my walk in Bluefield this afternoon. “Let your hook always be cast,” Ovid says. “Actively investigating” says Confucius. Pay attention to how the four elements move about you and within you as you move about today. And the primary of those is water. I am rowing upstream against the power of forgetting. Ancient Chinese poets put poems into wine cups upon trays which floated downstream to readers. Go to the source (upstream) and send back the information (downstream), illustrating the yin and yang of the flow. Pour green tea. Define the periphery with the assistance of friends from far quarters. In China, I asked for help—I had to—something I am usually not very good at: scared of the vulnerability of dependence. Humanness. Coherence. “The wise delight in water; the humane delight in the hills.” The rain here traveled across the Pacific Ocean and the continent of North America. Yiqun and I are working from our ends of the 10,953 miles, following the ritual of language. Is it not pleasant?

