

FEATURE

"Opening the Window"

—It's a huge, amazing, and mostly friendly world out there—

By Judy Highfill

When I was a little girl (of German descent), growing up in the U.S., I thought that if you dug a hole in the earth all the way through the planet, you'd be in China! I'm almost 60 now, and earlier this year I was fortunate to finally get to make the trip—not by going underground, of course, but by flying (almost as much a miracle, but one which now we take for granted). While in Shanghai, I met a teacher whose 14-year-old student recently wrote to me about finding her an American pen pal. I was both amused and astonished at the words in her letter: "Before I have learnt American geographical position, I think America is under China. That is funny, isn't it! If I dig a hall, I can see America clearly.. ..So I hope there is an American friend to help me open the window of America."

I'm enchanted by her idea of digging a "hall" instead of a hole, so she can see America clearly through a "window." The world does seem to consider us "Americans," as a whole, a very "transparent" people, quite different from the stereotypically "inscrutable" Orientals, which is one of the reasons I've always wanted to see China with my own eyes.

Before the trip, our group of about 30 community college students, teachers and others was given some background on China and Chinese culture, including a list of personality traits typical of Easterners vs. Westerners. We were told by our Chinese-American tour-leader that of all the people in the world we might meet in our world travels, the Chinese were probably the most opposite of Americans. Also, having worked over three decades for a multinational corporation in international business, I remembered having taken a workshop on Chinese language and culture well over a decade ago

when China opened its doors to the outside world, and when I checked back on my notes, those same cultural differences were emphasized.

Personally, I've always appreciated the universality of humanity—what people have in common—more than their differences, although I am interested in learning more about other cultures. But both of these studies stated that Westerners are likely to be more individualistic, egalitarian, youth-oriented and blunt in their speech than Easterners, who are typically more group-oriented, hierarchical, respectful of the past, and face-saving in communication. However, having befriended a number of Bosnian refugees (reputed to number over 30,000 now), who relocated to the city I now call home, St. Louis, MO, I know that particular ethnic characteristics assigned to various groups do not necessarily reflect distinguishing ethnic differences. Once one knows a number of individuals of any ethnic background, one finds that individuals in every society exemplify the entire range of personality traits found throughout the world.

Before traveling to China, I had had no firsthand experience of Chinese culture, but I had experienced it vicariously in three ways. First, in high school I had read Pearl Buck's The Good Earth*, about life in rural, pre-industrialized China, before Europeans and Americans came to China and thoroughly changed their world. Having grown up in a small Midwestern town, and having had grandparents, great-grandparents, and German ancestors who were all farmers (and grew up here speaking German at home, rather than English), I identified with the bucolic way of life that the book described, including the paradigm shift at the end, signaling

a vast change in the way of life of the ordinary Chinese people, which was also reflected in the great changes between my parents' life (before World War II) and mine as a post-WW-II baby-boomer.

Second, in community college I read the philosophy/poetry of Lao Tzu, *The Tao Te Ching*. ** (written perhaps as long ago as 600 B.C.E.) which seemed to me not opposite, but totally true to my life experience as a young woman, and an eloquent rendering of the yin/yang idea explaining the world. Some time later when I was introduced to the "12 Step Program" used by AA and Al-Anon, I found a sympathetic synchronicity between this way of life (to "let go and let God") and "wu-wei," the (non-doing) way of the Tao. Later, at the university, I studied Asian Philosophy and read the works of Joseph Needham, who wrote *Science and Civilisation in China*.*** in which I learned more about Taoism, and about the "middle way" of Buddhism, which was brought to China from India. In class I also read about Confucianism, and its deep imprint on the Chinese way of governing, which (to me, as a woman) seemed similar to the (masculine?) hierarchical way of the military industrial (corporate) complex, which did not seem to me as holistic or friendly to women and the powerless as I understood the Way of the Tao.

And third, I worked for several years with a Chinese-Portuguese American woman, who had fled mainland China as a girl in the 1940's. I saw, from her way of thinking, how she pursued these seemingly contradictory ways of "doing life," combining her belief in ancient Chinese medicine and folklore with her Catholicism. From knowing her, I learned that just as the symbol of the yin/yang seems to be expressing direct opposites, the gray in the middle, as the dark and light blended gradually and harmoniously into one another, seemed to connect all people in many more ways than they were different.

Our tour members who joined the recent trip to China also exemplified this blend of seemingly different people and cultures. Our group included Americans of African, Vietnamese, Indian, Panamanian, Albanian, Jewish, and European origins. from young college students to middle-aged instructors to people who were retired—including a former administrator, an artist, and a number of instructors teaching a variety of subjects. It was fun and educational to be traveling with such an interesting group representing our country, and our diversity made it pretty obvious to most Chinese citizens that we were from the U.S., and brought us an extra bit of attention wherever we went.

As you probably know, like the U.S., China is a multi-ethnic nation. It has about 56 ethnic groups and a total population of about 1.3 billion, 1/5 of the world's population (6 billion people), but with a large majority (92%) Han Chinese. The other 8% are minorities who live mostly in the north, south, and west, in less populated areas including (according to the Chinese government) Tibet and Taiwan.

Since our trip only lasted 10 days, unfortunately we were unable to visit these more rural areas. But we did hit the high spots of Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou (the "Garden City"), and Xian. (It was kind of like coming to the U.S. and spending only a couple of days each visiting Washington, D.C, New York City, New Jersey (the "Garden State"), and St. Louis or Kansas City in the Midwest. The biggest difference I noticed, between China and the U.S., however, was the dynamic spirit evident everywhere we went—the seemingly frantic (in time for the Olympics?) day-and-night building of the new, which required the ubiquitous destruction of the old, and the resulting juxtaposition of seeing both happening at once everywhere in the process. (If you've been to New York or Washington, D.C, or any big city, try to imagine building construction projects going on everywhere in the city simultaneously...over a period of several years!)

Most of us were from the St. Louis area and flew through Minneapolis to China. After almost 30 hours total in the air, we found ourselves in Beijing, with time turned on end—14 hours off from body-clock time. During our stay there, we visited Tian 'an Men (The Gate of Heavenly Peace) Square, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven, the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, Buddhist temples, silk and pearl markets, and the Peking Opera. (We had no time to waste!) At Tian 'an Men Square, we saw the formality of the guards whose presence was quite formidable. Later, we marveled at being allowed to visit the Forbidden City, once forbidden to commoners like ourselves, with courtyards that went on and on and on.

Climbing the Great Wall, a few miles beyond the city, was a definite "high point" of the trip, as this wall is one of the few man-made structures which can be seen from outer space. You could tell by the faces of the Chinese children whose parents were taking their photos on the steps that this was an important national monument and they were proud of this heritage. The wall was begun by the Qin emperor, the first emperor who united China, unified weights and measures, and had the many terra cotta sculptures built and buried near him, which were discovered by farmers in 1976 in Xian. One small sign of the recent evolution from Communism to capitalism I experienced was when I wandered into a Buddhist temple near the wall; the half dozen men sitting inside knew only one word of English: "Money."

At the pearl market I had a short conversation with a young woman helping me. I asked how she liked her job and she said she had wanted to be a doctor, but her test scores were not good enough, so she was working in the tourist shop, selling pearls. I wished her well, but felt her disappointment, knowing how much more difficult and competitive it is, around the world vs. in the U.S., to get an education because there are so many people competing and so few opportunities available. I heard later that, as in

Japan, sometimes students commit suicide or even murder their parents before killing themselves rather than lose face for not getting into college. It made me feel so sad that so many people around the world have such difficult lives and so few options.

When we visited Xian, I was surprised to see how populous it was (in the millions), as are so many Chinese cities, but I felt more at home there, being in the Chinese "Midwest," a little out of the mainstream, the pace a little less frantic than in Beijing and Shanghai. And like my hometown St. Louis, called "The Gateway to the West," Xian was the beginning of the Silk Road, the trading route westward which has existed for centuries. I'd heard of the 8,000 sculptures of soldiers discovered in 1976, but had not previously known that Xian had been a major capital city and the home of many emperors from the time of the first dynasty (221-207 B.C.). The first Emperor Qin was a ruthless ruler. Though he centralized the state and regulated handwriting into one script, he bankrupted his country to build extravagant palaces and had buried alive or drowned many Confucian scholars who refused to burn sacred texts, not to mention having killed the artisans who built the tomb for him, which is why his tomb stayed secret for so long. Although he spent his reign searching for the elixir of immortality, he died of work holism at the age of 50, his empire lasting only 15 years, after which his bankrupt policies imploded in a peasant rebellion.

The last major city we visited was Shanghai, the most dynamic city of all, a major seaport and trading center throughout China's history. The joke often made was that the "national bird" of China was the "crane"—not the bird-like crane, but the building/ construction crane! Though the traffic was wild (by St. Louis standards), I learned that the number of cars was regulated here, unlike in Beijing, although I think the number of bicycles was not!...not to mention the trucks, buses, rickshaws, motor scooters, motor-cycles, etc.

Shanghai had another attribute that made me feel at home. It had eight rivers, and one of my most pleasant experiences there was walking along the Bund, not unlike our familiar Mississippi River, seeing crowds out relaxing, enjoying the scenery, amid a harbor full of boats of all descriptions, with a modernistic cityscape in the background that looked futuristic—like science fiction almost—with many skyscrapers and towers. We had ice cream snacks and walked in the mild spring air, enjoying fountains and statues, and occasionally speaking to someone we happened to meet—such as the young Chinese teacher I encountered, whose student hopes I will help her find "an American friend.. .to open the window of America."

And that is my hope for you, that this brief record of my short visit might, in some small way, have opened the window on the new China at least a little bit for you. It's a huge, amazing, and mostly friendly world out there, from both ends of the "hall." And the distance to the other side of the earth, even "as the crow flies," is not so very far.

Footnotes:

***Pearl Buck** grew up in China, the child of Christian missionaries, and was the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1938, later becoming an activist for China in its opposition to Japanese invasion and for African-American civil rights and the Equal Rights Amendment for women {still not a part of our Constitution, though we made the Japanese make it a part of theirs), and for a nuclear test ban. In 1949 she founded Welcome House

which has found homes for thousands of mixed-race children father by Americans in Asia, and established the Pearl S. Buck Foundation to provide foster care for children who could not be adopted, which continued its work throughout the Vietnam era of the 60's. She died in 1973 at the age of 80, and is buried in bucks County, Pennsylvania, beneath a tombstone upon which her name is inscribed in Chinese characters.

****Tao Te Ching**, an English translation from 1972 by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English.

*****Joseph Needham**, FRS, biochemist at Cambridge in England, with research assistance from Wang Ling, PhD, Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote Science and Civilisation in China. I read Vol. 2, "History of Scientific Thought" which was published in 1956. These very interesting 131 pages on Taoism was extremely enlightening and one of the few sources available in English when I wrote a paper on Taoism at the University of Missouri.

Judy Highfill grew up in a small town in Missouri (Union, MO, pop. 5000, about one hour's drive from St Louis). She has worked in International Customer Service for Monsanto Company in St. Louis (retired two years ago after 37 years working there).

Her original interest in China was through Chinese philosophy, which she studied at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where she went to night school for 13 years, while working full-time and raising two sons. She majored in English and received both bachelor's and master's degrees there. An earlier English teacher had introduced her to the poetry and philosophy of Lao Tzu, and she immediately identified with the love of nature and humility of the "feminine" side of the yin/yang principle of Taoism.