

## FEATURE

# Seeking Balance

By Carson Tavenner



“I have something to ask you,” he humbly offered. “Could you please pay me back the money I’ve spent?”

I was caught off-guard. I probably knit my brow and let my jaw go slack. I couldn’t believe what my friend was dumping on me just now, with less than ten minutes to go before my departure.

“You see, over the past several days, I’ve spent a lot of money on the meals we’ve eaten and the places we’ve gone. More money than I see over several months, actually. And I don’t have that much money, so I need it back. Can you give me the money, please?”

My friend and I were sitting outside the Shanghai rail station, about to separate for who-knows-how-many years after an amazing week of getting to see each other face-to-face for the first time. In 1991 you couldn’t go inside the station without a ticket. I was bound for his parents’ home in Chongqing and he was staying behind to continue studies at Fudan. So there we sat, sadly, on a bench, facing our tough decisions.

“But I’ve been offering to pay and share the costs this whole time,” I replied. “I was sure

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you didn’t have the money, so I was trying to pay, but you kept telling me “no” every time. You assured me you were covering it. So all this time I’ve been trying to give you money for things and you’ve refused...now at the very end, just before I’m getting on the train...you’re asking for it all back?”

I’m certain my voice was a higher pitch and sounding incredulous. I remember feeling quite angry, hurt, and confused. He had basically lied to me about taking on the costs, knowing that he was going to have to ask me for it later. I was good for the money, we both knew it. That wasn’t the problem.

This was the first low tide of my journey through American-Chinese relations, and it wasn’t going to be the last, either.

In the Pacific Northwest we know a lot about tides and we know a lot about American-Chinese relations. That’s because, unlike most Americans or Chinese, we actually experience – not just learn about – them. Hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, they go on; for most of this state’s history, there have been Chinese contributing to its commercial and cultural

lifeblood as regularly as the ebb and flood tides on which many of our earliest industries were based.



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During times of flood tide we have to not grow complacent, remain vigilant to changing currents, and be willing to share the beautiful views with those who seem to show up only during those easier times.

My own American-Chinese relations have manifested many "ebb and flood tides" over time. At several levels of relationship, from personal to national, I've seen a great deal come to pass. In all of it, I have maintained balance in understanding. There is a great, even increasing, need for balance in the dialogue on American-Chinese relations. I've learned by observation and experiences two fundamental practices that establish balance in any community.

Encourage those with balanced voices to become more involved by confronting fear. I have heard many Chinese Americans as well as many Americans in China express balanced views. But their voices are generally either not strong enough or they don't carry much credibility with others. Eric Liu, founder and CEO of Citizen University, has a particularly good message addressing balance as he "explores the universal American question, 'Who is us?'" Chinese Americans are not the only people with

balanced views (and, truth be told, I've discovered nothing at all common among the views of Chinese Americans! Some are unbalanced and will not listen.) I have listened to many inspiring young students and leaders speaking knowledgeably about both the disturbing facts and the inspiring actions taking place every day between our countries. Such knowledge of the positive and the negative is one of the hallmarks of balance. But such people are almost always exceedingly distracted or they are hesitant to speak in mass media. There is a fear in many cases of losing something they value: privacy, time, or maybe a key relationship. We need to help these people understand their fears and get "into the dialogue" more effectively.

I have a sixty-something friend who is doing this. He spent his youthful years as a student during China's Cultural Revolution. Despite our increasingly close friendship, he chooses not to speak of the real history in which he participated in those years. But he is working to understand the fear and loves the hope that our relationship brings. He likes to focus on the positive future ahead which he wishes to build with everyone. By more than words, with his sacrificial deeds, he has spent at least the past ten years helping Americans be introduced to subnational change-makers in China, and he has sought to learn more about the change-making leadership of America. His accepting voice, open mind and rigorous intellect are valued by Chinese and American government officials alike. That is a sign of mutual trust; when he speaks, we should listen.

The second fundamental practice is to understand the existence, nature, and role of 'bias'; knowing where it is in one's own thinking and communication as well as in others.

Time has allowed me to learn how important it is in China to support a visiting guest as a host. This bias of perspective was a big part of Chinese culture influencing him Jun that day outside the Shanghai rail station. Similarly, he had not yet grown to understand how important

sharing and honesty are in American culture. My bias was at work, and it was not wrong as a bias. His bias was at work, and it was not wrong as a bias. Had we not managed to accept these differences and continued to work on our relationship, we might have ended the story there. But only two and a half years later he was standing as one of my groomsmen in my wedding!

Fear and bias are common to man. They are owned neither by American nor by Chinese culture. We face them together. But sometimes we justify our poor responses to fear or bias by standing stubbornly on our cultural values. I would enjoy seeing us all deal with fear and bias in more healthy, productive ways rather than running – as I see so many do – to the defense of culture, invoking histories of pain and blame along the way. There is plenty of pain and blame; we must deal with those. But the right way is through communication, caring for others, healing and reconciliation

When is a cultural value actually a covering over, or justification of, a human behavior we'd rather not admit to doing? When does freedom become licentiousness? When does politeness become lying? These are deep ethical questions our two civilizations should explore openly together. Our various moral dilemmas are not the stuff of theory but the stuff of real life. Where does loyalty give way to integrity, for example? When does a well-intended response to reduce selfishness slip instead into capitulation? How does a desire for family privacy become a dark vault of secrecy?

Valuing virtue is universal to humanity. None of the virtuous behaviors, such as honesty, loyalty, cleanliness, or self-sacrifice are vilified by any civilized humans. Virtue avoids extremes; virtue is balance. On the spectrum of protective behavior, for example, the total absence of it is a defenseless, dangerous condition. On the other extreme, however, is a totalitarian, over-controlled condition. Security is the virtue one finds in the middle, where there is balance.

Culture is not necessarily virtuous. There are many American and Chinese cultural behaviors lacking in virtue. So we cannot stand on the value of our culture alone as the defense mechanism for justifying what we do. We should defend our actions on the basis of their virtuousness, or balance.

I have an eighty-year old friend who has spent the past fourteen years pouring himself physically, financially, emotionally, and spiritually into a loving relationship with Chinese people. He is a retired US Navy officer, veteran of the Cold War. For many years he has served and aided a village outside the city of Taiyuan, solely for the purpose of showing relational love. This village has gained a library through these efforts, something no village in the region has. He was recently thanked officially by ten offices of the local government and party for his lifetime of service there. He is an example of who we should listen to when seeking balance.

Fear and bias are firmly entrenched in the current difficulties facing both militaries in the Pacific Ocean. For years I worked in a world dedicated to understanding and communicating the truth about security conditions in the Pacific. I learned a great deal about fear but also about hope; about bias but also about the removal of bias in critical thinking. I eventually retired with the knowledge that new institutions are needed to make possible the hope that is sought in the military staffs of our countries.

Another American friend and I were having lunch in the Ala Moana food court one afternoon. We were on temporary duty supporting some planning with the United States Pacific Command. An aspiring screen writer, he was listening to me describe my passion for the U.S.-China relationship and how I wished so much to write a book teaching how to understand one another. The problem – I felt at the time and is still true today – is that most of the loudest voices on each side were defensive or reactionary, unable or unwilling to acknowledge their biases; while at the same time too many

leaders with opportunities to build trust and cooperation were not being heard, often because they were not speaking effectively.

“What we need is more balance in the dialogue,” I concluded.

“That’s what you should title your book!” he exclaimed. “That’s a great title: ‘Aiming for Balance’,” he announced satisfactorily.

Going on seven years later, “Aiming for Balance” still isn’t published. Instead, I’m continually learning about the dynamic “ground conditions” of this complex thing called “the U.S.-China relationship.” I’ve continued to meet thousands of others ready to make the most of their knowledge and experiences, so that they might more powerfully affect the outcome of our national relationship.

Though in 2015 many are talking about ebb tide conditions, there are many who can provide another message and teach those whose minds are open. The time is overdue for a balanced education.

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