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An Accidental Passage to China

Was Confucius (551 – 459 B.C.) right? Is there a Chinese secret? A mind too clever to be true! Traveling alone in China. “Give us this day our daily bread!” Fears and wounds. The Moon Festival. Lost in translation. The Prophecy. Leaving China.

At first, one might hallucinate that the West moved to China; later on, the same person might think that China wants to become America, for some reason. Beijing, Shanghai—each of them with a population of 23 million people—Xian, Guilin display skyscrapers reminding me of the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center, megastores that resemble Bloomingdale’s and Macy’s; skyways; museums akin to my Guggenheim or Metropolitan; clone airports of JFK; streets signs with fonts and colors as the ones in the United States; movie remakes with actors looking like the American ones to detail; Starbucks, McDonalds, KFCs, Pizza Hut; stores from Old Navy, Gap, Chanel, and H&M to Louis Vuitton, Zara, and Burberry, on main streets looking like 5th Avenue in New York City.

Is this for real? After a few more days spent in China, it would become evident that the transplant of Western architecture and of the Western corporate mind was little more than a business gimmick. The average tourist applying for a visa can sense that something is not right. On the aforementioned form there are questions about the job of the applicant such as: “Staff of media”, “Former/incumbent member of parliament/position”, “Former/incumbent government official/position”, “Entertainer”, “Religious personnel”. Could it be that the government wants a proper surveillance of the above? Obviously, this country’s establishment doesn’t like visitors that might see what is not meant to be seen.

As I started my trip in Beijing on September 7, I also knew there were still people in “arbitrary detention” (i) with no formal arrest, presentation of charges, and access to lawyers. They were guilty of

being “troublemakers” who might “disturb order” at anniversaries of the Cultural Revolution (50th anniversary on May 2016), Tiananmen massacre (27th anniversary this June 2016), or the G20 summit in Hangzhou in 4-5 September 2016. On the surface, the central government directive to the Chinese people is to learn English, love America, copy anything American, and bring anything advanced from America back home to clone it. Meanwhile, at the deepest levels of society, everything should stay unaffected. Stalkers, surveillance people planted all over, video cameras placed on every possible corner, and high-tech equipment present in any imaginable place have the task to report the unusual and thus preserve the status quo. The Communist establishment rules the country with an iron fist; every move and every word are watched, reported, noted. The IT makes this scrutiny possible to the finest details. A colleague from NYU Shanghai invited me to have lunch with his Chinese family, but he soon canceled the invitation; his family was worried that inviting a foreigner in their home would bring unpleasant consequences. Some freedom in lifestyle seems accessible to the rich working for Western companies, to those having their own successful businesses, and to the Communist Party nomenclature—the seven percent of the population (roughly 97 million members) that rules the other 93 percent.

Was Confucius (551 – 459 B.C.) right? “Our greatest glory is not in ever failing, but in rising every time we fall,” Confucius said in *Analects (Ethics)*. These books contain his teachings in the form of dialogs written down by his disciples. From what I’ve seen, today’s Chinese Communism has a Confucian face, and that’s why it is powerful; the Confucian Canon has been ingrained in the lives of China’s people for 25 centuries.

The continuous building of a Great China over five thousand years has been a central dogma propagated by ancient emperors through modern times, a time measured not by decades or even centuries but by

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dynasties such as the Xia (Hsia, 2100-1600 BC), Qin (Ch'in (221-206 BC), Han (206 BC-220 AD), Tang (618-906), Song (960-1279), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (Ch'ing, 1644-1912). Today's China lives in what I would call The Mao Dynasty which started with the 1927 revolution when the Communist Party under Mao's leadership began fighting over the control of China. The bloodline rule to the empire's throne succession is very much alive today as in ancient times. The current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, the offspring of the first revolutionary generation, runs the country as part of its communist aristocracy. The imperial "bloodline" survives. (ii)

To talk about democracy in a country that has lived in regimes led by totalitarian rule, corruption, choice privileges for the powerful, and poverty for the others feels unbecoming. Clans, aristocratic families have been always there, as they are today under a different name. This has been normal in China. Our legal concepts could hardly get equivalents in the Chinese legal order or they simply don't exist. Human rights, for example, are equivalent to people's right to have food and shelter, while the freedom of speech is an unknown notion. The freedom of gathering never existed; Tiananmen Square is still guarded by police barricades and armored military cars. The government forbids any exhibitions and talks at national level about the Tiananmen Square massacre and about the Cultural Revolution afraid that many involved in those tragic events, still on high seats, might be recognized. The secret police files are sealed to stop any revelations that would bring justice. Locals are not seen in Tiananmen Square. To get in, the foreign visitor goes through three airport-style checkpoints. Serenity and order mask deep seated tensions. The freedom of movement is also regulated by powerful laws. If a villager wants to move to a city, he or she will not have health insurance, the right to rent a place, or the right to send his children to the city's schools for 5 years. In other words, to move from a place to another is almost impossible. To make the move to cities less appealing, the Communist Party recently decided to wave all the farmers' taxes.

The government controls anything it wishes. While there, I read an article in *China Daily* about a new Central Government directive that would allow pharmacists to override doctors' prescriptions. The

government was not happy with too many prescribed antibiotics and cancer drugs. So now the pharmacists have the task to direct people to traditional cures using acupuncture and herbs. The article was not available in the electronic editions of the paper; the government didn't want it widespread outside China. Also, while in China, I was able to access my NYU's Google-based email only through the powerful VPN connection of NYU Shanghai because Google and YouTube are blocked, as perhaps are other internet sites.

Yet, how was the extraordinary leap of China toward West possible in less than three decades? My answer is because of the features of the Chinese mind that I have met all over: sharp, fast, precise, perfectionist, detailed, diligent, willing to clone anything, yet also submissive to the central power. In its entire history China went through less than twenty uprisings.

Tiananmen Square



Is there a Chinese secret? The uniqueness of today's China resides not only in the steady, fast adoption of the Western world in business and architecture, but in the way the past rules the present. This process goes along with what the Chinese mind has conceived over time for the country's defense—the Great Wall—and for its emperors, such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, and the grand tombs. For ordinary citizens there was the hutong, and for pleasure and art—calligraphy, the design and painting on rice paper and porcelain, cloisonné, silk artifacts, and fireworks.

Since time immemorial, what mattered has been the overall benefit for the Great China, for its emperors, but not the common individuals.

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The Great Wall took millions of lives until completion. The Forbidden City gathered incommensurable resources and talent for the benefit of a single family. The Summer Palace in Beijing has as center piece an artificial manmade lake built under three emperors who wanted to enjoy freshness. The mountains were but a few miles away, nonetheless they preferred to bring them closer. Artificial hills, forests, and a lake were crafted (today, to walk along the lake, the locals have to pay \$4 each). Over centuries, the original lake's spring dried up, and today the water comes to the lake from the city's tap water reservoir. It means the lake's water flows through the city's pipes and faucets. But it doesn't matter. The past merges into the present at any cost.

Emperor tombs display the same limitless grandeur and depletion of human resources; one emperor sited in Xian, Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor that unified China in 279 BC at the age of 39, wanted with him in the afterlife his entire army. He was perhaps scared to face alone, in the underworld, those he had killed. His generals overheard his intentions and, afraid of a riot, an identical army of thousands of soldiers, weapons and horses was built in terracotta. Recent archaeological discoveries suggest that the famous Terracotta Warriors may have been made with the help of the Greeks. (iii)



In villages, thatched roof houses are made from same bricks of clay (adobe) as in ancient times; in cities, the hutong (which in Mongolian means “by the water”) was the typical house. The hutongs, very narrow alleys surrounded by tiny family houses without baths and toilets, are eagerly being replaced by skyscrapers and modern condominiums. The typical hutong family used a public bath. For defecation and urination, the family had a pot placed in the

morning outside the main door. For a small amount of money, a person would come to the hutong and collect, empty, clean them, and place the pots back, one by one.

Because time belonged to the Emperor (the Son of Heaven, responsible for maintaining harmony between the human sphere and Heaven), it was mandatory to be measured by devices produced for the Son of Heaven. The imposing Bell Towers and Drum Towers, built by emperors, announced the time for the commoners during mornings and respectively evenings by the closing city gates.

In art, the supreme virtuosity was considered the mastering of variants of past famous works. In the National Museum in Shanghai and the school of calligraphy in Xian (*Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum Museum School of Display and Exhibition History*) the same bamboo depicted ad nauseam hung on walls; copycat animal representations were on the shelves of all jade factories and stores I visited. They didn't impress me too much, but for sure they did the Chinese mind akin to details, symbols, and subtlety. The original Jade Buddha and its copy in the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai looked like carbon copies to my westernized mind.

The silk—I have been in Suzhou, the city where Marco Polo lived—preserves its own legend. It is said that an empress was dinking tea under a mulberry tree when a caterpillar cocoon fell into her hot cup. She saw a sheer thread coming out from that cocoon and she started pulling it, but it was as if the thread had no end. Amazed by that fine, yet solid thread, she asked her maids to gather more and weave a robe for the emperor, who loved it.

As for calligraphy, any traditional Chinese house in the village displays a calligraphic inscription on the front door even today, while much more inside adorn the walls. Crafted beautifully, their message is about peace, prosperity, health. And some other strange things are as follows: it is believed that a mirror above the house door would keep the ghosts away for ghosts don't like to look in mirrors and see their ghostly faces; all thresholds in palaces and houses are unusually high because ghosts, having no knees in Chinese tradition, cannot pass over it; it is bad luck to trip on the threshold, etc.

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A mind too clever to be true! While climbing the “J” section of the Great Wall, something was not right. I am much taller than the average Chinese man, and I couldn’t grasp how Chinese soldiers, less tall than me, and equipped with armors and weapons, hiked thousands of high steps in old times; why did the architect intend these stairs so abrupt and high? The distance between each step is so big that my long legs were hardly able to cope with them; and the angle of the stairs’ pathway was so steep that it was dangerous to look back while climbing. I pitied the soldiers fighting with the hordes coming from the Mongolian steppes.



Great Wall Stairs

The descend was harsher. The distance between steps, their unusual height, and the steep angle of the path made the return a more difficult adventure. I stopped many times afraid I would break my legs. And then, a sort of epiphany unraveled the mystery: those stairs were meant for the invaders, and not for the Chinese soldiers. If the Mongolian riders attacked a wall post, while rushing down the stairs they would have for sure broken their necks and legs. Then, from that steep height of the Great Wall built on the Greater and Lesser Jinshan “Gold Mountain” ranges, I felt as if being in my ridged Carpathians with the same pine trees, poplars, maple trees, and pure air; isn’t it true that wherever we go we see our native land?

The portion of the Great Wall I was staying on went left and right for about a total of three thousand kilometers. This detail reminded me one more time of the human specie’s indifference for individual life in antiquity. The Pyramids and the Great Wall are scars left on humanity’s destiny; millions of lives were

wasted on building walls and tombs. Why had this changed in the recent past centuries? Could it be that the human specie realized that humanity would not survive if individual life is not cherished but wasted in megalomaniac projects and wars without mercy? I was thinking of all these questions in a country where the rulers’ megalomania is still in place. Three weeks before the G20 summit in Hangzhou at the beginning of September 2016, the government shut down the country’s polluting industry in order to offer fresh air to its guests. By sheer chance, over several days in Beijing I enjoyed an azure sky and clean, unpolluted air.

Traveling alone in China. Ancient customs related to the safety of guests and especially women are still in place there. That’s why I made it after the guided tour ended; I was the subject of many acts of kindness for which I am grateful. Traveling alone in China without speaking Chinese is not easy. However, despite language barriers, I was helped, understood, and I overcame hardships.

A source of kindness could be that for the Chinese we are the big noses, something every Chinese would like to become. They love blond hair and the fact that we are tall, and they are fascinated by the shape of our eyes; surgeries lately are making more and more Chinese look Caucasian. Because they abandoned the vegetable and rice menus and eat more meat, this generation is taller and men even have hair on their arms and chest, something unheard of in the past. What has remained unchanged in the rules is the color of a woman face: it should be pale and white, reminding of a pearl; girls with darker skin are not making it to the list of top beauties.



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Modesty is another feature of these people who live with so little. One day, during my lunch in Guilin, where I went for a cruise on the famous Li River, I noticed three ladies at a nearby table, obviously a mother with two daughters in their late thirties. One of the young ladies helped me communicate with the waiter; she intervened here and there with fragments of English words. I was fascinated looking at the way those ladies ate. They had a bowl of rice in the middle of the table—very quickly emptied—and a plate of transparent vegetables; on a full spoon of rice they nicely placed one with the chopsticks and graciously swallowed it. I felt like Pantagruel; my table was full of dishes and I was still hungry. I didn't know that when we don't eat the food we are used to we feel hungry all the time. I told the young lady, who volunteered to be my translator, that I would love to buy for her mother whatever dish she would like to have. I explained that I would do that in memory of my mother. They refused. I insisted three times, a ritual valid in Romanian politeness too. Then I received the answer: her mom wished to have a bowl of rice.

Fears and wounds. Deep scars and scares show in unexpected ways in this world obsessed with dragons, longevity, and procreation, which are the marks of a world frightened of whatever unexpectedly comes from the outside, of a humanity with a short life span, and procreation issues, and which should be true for a population living on rice and vegetables from time immemorial—a paradox of China's overpopulation.

Day after day, I felt suffocated by the presence of countless symbols of any object, thing, design, animal, plant, or gesture around me. Everything is codified, even numerals and colors. If number 4 is bad luck, number 8 means good luck and happiness; red is celebrated as the color of happiness, health, prosperity, etc. This ancient humanity has created a comfortable net for the common man. You obey it—you are safe. You don't—you vanish.

Going West to Suzhou, the place of the finest silk in China and the city of the finest gardens, such as the *Master of the Nets Garden*, I cruised over old canals bordered on both side by old houses eaten by mold and decay, not far away from state-of-the-art compounds belonging to Singapore businesses. It is said that Suzhou was the city with the most beautiful girls in China, the place from where emperors' most

concubines came. It was and it seems it still is celebrated as the land of "rice and fish" (the Chinese equivalent for "the land of milk and honey").



Mirela Roznoveanu in authentic Chinese Empress costume.

China is a world of nuances, of subtleties, of tireless reinterpretations of the past, of refining whatever was made, said, written, or painted to a more overwhelming extent than anything I've read before in books. In sumptuous residences of aristocrats, such as the one in the *Yu Garden* in Shanghai and the *Master of the Nets Garden* in Suzhou, I lingered within hidden and bare corners creating a delicate void, around venerated stones with big holes and strange shapes. Windows with mullions (vertical elements that form a division between units of a window, door), lattices (strips of wood crossed and fastened together with square or diamond-shaped spaces left between), and oblique grids displayed animals, flowers, and words with auspicious meanings, such as storks, deer, peonies, and *Fú* (福) (the Chinese character for happiness), all symbolizing

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longevity, good health, and wealth. The carved-in wood windows and doors, those interlaces of holes, hollows, gaps, a sort of eyelet stitch embroidery, were covered with rice paper during harsh weather. In my past reincarnations there, I had died many times at early ages, for sure; how could one survive in those houses exposed to cold winters, hot summers, typhoons, and humidity? How could rice paper insulate against them? The braziers here and there were insignificant for those open spaces. How did they actually survive? In a room called “The Meditation Study,” the following was written: “Tao is in agreement with the void. The Meditation Study is a place for the garden owner to cultivate the mind and to attain a state of absolute blessedness and serenity free from secular concerns.”

“Give us this day our daily bread!” I searched for McDonalds and KFCs hoping to find bread. The cheeseburger bun was nowhere close to the one I knew. Comparing one with the other, Chinese food in New York City has little in common with that in the Mainland. One day, the concierge of the hotel I was staying in directed me to the Ichido store down in the Shanghai’s subway, full of police checking IDs here and there. Ichido’s bread was sweet, filled with walnuts, almond, pistachio, and raisins. Bread for them is a sort of desert. That’s why after three weeks on rice and transparent threads of meat I felt as if I was dying, craving for a piece of real bread and meat; in those moments I understood the magnitude of vampires’ craving for blood. In a building close to the Nanjing Road market in Shanghai, on the 20th floor, I found an Italian restaurant and I ordered an iced tea and a steak straight away. To my immense happiness, the waiter brought real bread and butter to the table; I devoured them on the spot. The same with the steak. It was the most expensive lunch of my life: 85 USD.

The Moon Festival. It is for China what Thanksgiving is for America. Shows celebrated the September 15th event on all TV channels. Songs with lyrics about Tang and Song dynasties, about the Red Army marching over the mountains and preserving a smile even in frozen conditions, a lot of red flags and lotuses, and Hollywood like super-productions of historical dramas took over the screens. If the establishment placed communism on the history line of dynasties that made

China great, the Red Army was part of those armies in ancient times making China great. The Red Army crimes were forgiven the same way as the crimes of past emperors’ armies. The Communist Dynasty, as great as the Song, Tang, and Qi, reared the same ideal—something I wouldn’t have understood if I hadn’t been there. Is it China’s way of relieving the past through the present, or the other way around? The past was present at such a degree that a rock band performed a song about how great life was in Tang and how the Moon shone the same now as then. Thankfully, one of the CCTV channels had English translations.



Master of the Nets Garden.

Lost in translation. I came across many wrong translations from the English to the Chinese. So when I read “soup of beef balls” on a restaurant menu, I thought they left out “meat” in translation, and ordered it. It was beef after all. However, those balls in the soup looked nothing close to meatballs. The waitress showed on her iPhone—an English translation of the Chinese menu—that she brought me what I ordered. The liquid of the soup was good, but I couldn’t swallow more than two or three meatballs. By the time I left the restaurant, I realized something totally unexpected: in the big pot in front of me sailed the balls of real bulls for sure, of a few of them, but not meatballs.

The Prophecy. In my childhood, in Romania, I heard an old prophecy about the future of the earth belonging to the yellow race, meaning China. I couldn’t

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find any trace of it in the *Bible*, but it seems that Nostradamus mentioned something alike. Could it be true? From my point of view, China cannot make it without America; at least in this century, because China breathes through an American umbilical cord. I am not sure how it is going to progress, but I think the future will not belong to China. In the worst case scenario, the future would probably be a symbiosis of both.

China's civilization, more than five millennia old, could be a means of transport: a way to transfer, to carry on the values of the western civilization, only two and a half millennia old and still vulnerable. This course may take place with difficult adjustments on both sides, ruled by both worlds, one being unable to survive without the other, and later on perhaps branded under one name. Too bad I will not be alive 300 years from now to see if I am right or wrong. What we know is that the Chinese civilization strongly faced invaders and the rebellious insiders, and did not favor foreign influences. Despite wars, occupations, and internal struggles, it preserved its culture and values; but at the end of the 20th century, it opened to the western civilization in its own way, that of incorporating the past into the daily life.



Wisdom Exchange

Leaving China. Even though Chinese people are kind, leaving the country is nowhere as hospitable as entering it. Huge lines form at the exit of the country's immigration booths, dwindling the arrivals. Even Buddha had to stay in line. Pelerines carrying on display Buddhist relics received no special treatment. By the time my flight was supposed to leave within 40 minutes, I lucklessly asked an officer on duty to allow me to get in front. The message was staunchly clear: nobody gets in front except the handicapped. After nine checkpoints (three in Shanghai and six in Beijing, where I changed the flight), I was exhausted. One-and-a-half hours in the Beijing airport weren't enough to go through all formalities. I cursed the moment I decided to visit China. For me, having lived more than half of my life under a communist dictatorship, the decision to visit China hadn't been an easy one. While preparing for this trip, I repeated to myself that I had to focus only on the history which hadn't been possible, and once again, I blamed myself. I boarded the plane 10 minutes before takeoff; a good-hearted warden secretly pushed me to the speedy line at the final checkpoint. I was sweating from head to toes. Once inside, I changed my clothes in the lavatory, ruminating China's clear message: China loves America and the Chinese want to be American—but in their own terms.

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Notes:

- i. Yang Zhanqing, "China: A Life in Detention", NYRB Daily, October 06, 2016.
- ii. Ian Johnson, "China: The Virtues of the Awful Convulsion", NYRB, October 26, 2016.
- iii. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/12/famed-chinese-terracotta-warriors-could-have-been-made-with-the/>