

# Understanding Interpersonal Relationships in the Chinese Context

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## Abstract

The author draws upon personal experience and written sources to reflect upon the difficulties a Canadian of European extraction encounters when interacting with people of Chinese descent. Four themes are explored: friendship; connections (*guanxi*); personal space and privacy; and altruism.

**Keywords:** China; autoethnography; altruism; friendship; privacy; *guanxi*; interpersonal relationships

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## Introduction

There is a story told of three foreigners who lived in China for differing lengths of time. One, after a stay in China of six months, returned to his homeland and proceeded to write a book about his experiences. The second sojourner resided in China for two years and, after returning to her place of birth, wrote an essay of several pages on what she had seen in China. The third, after returning to his homeland and being asked to expound upon China and the Chinese people, found he could say nothing with certainty and so opted for silence.

When I set out to write of difficulties foreigners face in understanding and adapting to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among those of Chinese ethnicity, I was much like the second of the three people described above, as I had lived in China for close to two years in three different cities. I thought, however, that I had a considerable edge on that woman in that I had had thirty-five years of relatively close exposure through marriage to the Chinese expatriate community in North America. I was soon made aware that I was guilty of a misperception. The experiences I had had that I thought illustrated some truths about Chinese social relationships, I was told by two Chinese friends, were not all that closely related to the truths I thought were there. In fact, they said, even the 'truths' were not so true. The China of 2008, they said, was not that of twenty years ago, nor is the China of today, of which these two are exemplars, what it will be twenty years from now.

What my friends said of China can perhaps be said about many countries, but the case can certainly be made that changes in Chinese society since the Deng Xiaoping initiated 'reform and opening' of the late 1970s have been greater than they have been in most societies on our planet, and the possibility that changes during the next twenty years will be equally dramatic is strong. Thus, to set up a theory or model of what it is to be Chinese at this point in time in history is impossible. The target keeps moving. So, somewhat chastened and with reduced expectations, I decided to limit myself in this essay for the most part to a description of, and reflections on, my own experiences in dealing with Chinese people, experiences that may hold interest for others. I have decided that I cannot claim that any of these experiences illustrate any objective truths, but they may at least raise questions that, while perhaps unable to be answered, give rise to consideration of how people treat one another, both within and without China.

It has been asked of me, "Of what degree of credibility, or even of value, is writing that is somewhat anecdotal and reflective in nature and that is not situated in an experimental framework." For those that have raised this question, I recommend the literature of a branch of anthropology called autoethnography. Autoethnography is discussed creatively and at length in a chapter included in Handbook of Qualitative Research (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and titled "Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as subject" (Ellis & Bochner 2000). It is also described more economically in Hesse-Biber and Leavy's The Practice of Qualitative Research. In this book, the authors situate autoethnography within the larger context of

oral history and, in attempting to define exactly what it is, state that, in autoethnography, the researcher uses his or her own autobiographical data as grist for the research process and acts as narrator of this data. Via this process, the authors conclude, researchers can "...link our own personal stories to the larger society" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006:184). Autoethnography, then, as I understand it, sees personal experience and reflection as having the capability of illustrating or exemplifying constructs that are more than merely personal.

## Friendship

A Chinese social psychologist (Hwang 1986) has divided relationships among Chinese people into three categories: 'affective' (relationships with family members and close friends); 'instrumental' (relationships with parties with whom one deals in order to achieve practical ends); and 'mixed' or 'guanxi' (relationships that have both an affective and instrumental dimension). I will look at mixed or guanxi relationships in the next section of this essay. In this section I want to examine one type of affective relationship, that with close friends.

'Friendship' is a rather nebulous term that defies firm definition. The editor of Friendship: a Philosophical Reader, in remarks concluding an overview of Eurocentric historical thought about friendship, states that, although "...there are broad areas of agreement on, for example, the idea that the primary motivation of the best kind of friendship must be non-instrumental....no account of friendship enjoys universal acceptance." (Badhwar 1993:36) 'Non-instrumental' friendship, Badhwar explains, is friendship based on mutual affection. Desired benefits which may be derived from non-instrumental friendship are not the main factors leading to its formation. (Ibid.:3)

In another book less geographically restricted than that mentioned above, the editors examine friendship from a variety of cultural perspectives. They assert that European Reformation and post-Reformation emphasis on the sanctity of the individual is at the root of a Western notion still in vogue that friendship is a matter of private and personal choice based on sentiment -- like Badhwar's 'non-instrumental' friendship -- and that it somehow remains free from structural constraints imposed by social rights and obligations. They muster considerable evidence from the literature of anthropology to argue that this notion cannot be willy-nilly transported to other parts of the world where individual freedom and autonomy are of less concern than they are in the West. (Bell & Coleman 1999) In fact, they do not even believe that friendship in the West is as much a matter of free choice as we like to think. Economic, social and geographical constraints influence friendship more than we are willing to admit. "Observed as a set of sociological practices rather than as pure ideology", they conclude, "Western friendship may have more affinities than is often assumed with social processes evident in other societies and cultures." (Ibid.:15)

Be that as it may, at an individual, practical level, what constitutes friendship to one person may well not be the same as what constitutes friendship to another. To me, a 'friend' is someone with whom I have had a relationship over time and in whom I have trust. I have come to know something of what that person is through observation and experience. As well, there needs to have been some degree of emotional sharing. I need to have been allowed, on some level, to see that person whom I call 'friend' as what he or she really is. Lastly, there needs to have been elements of shared effort. I recall helping a friend move a few years ago from one Canadian province to another. I never felt as close to him as I did during that time of packing, transporting and unpacking.

I have therefore more than once been taken aback in China when a Chinese person has offered, after very brief acquaintanceship, to 'jiao pengyou' ('make friends'). The first time this occurred was during the course of a bicycle trip in the countryside to the west of Beijing. I had stopped for the night in a village. A young fellow came to the door of my room and said he would like to show me the sights of the village, particularly a small stream that ran through it. I went with him. After we had walked along the bank of the stream for a time, he confided that he was very adept at 'jiao pengyou'. I interpreted this to mean that he was seeking my friendship. I did not at first know what to say back to him, but finally simply said that I would be continuing on my bicycle excursion early the following morning and that I therefore did not have the time for 'making friends'. Although my response to the young chap was certainly true, it wasn't

all the truth. What I did not say to him was that 'let's be friends' or 'let's make friends' was not a phrase I am accustomed to hearing in my adult world in Canada and was one with which I was not particularly comfortable. I also did not say that, in my opinion, friendship did not happen as the result of a sudden decision. On the contrary, it developed slowly over time.

On another occasion, I was shooting baskets on an outdoor basketball court on a university campus in Beijing. A young student came over and asked if he could join me. After we had shot baskets for a few minutes and engaged in some introductory conversation, he asked if I would like to be his friend and meet with him again to practice basketball. This would give him an opportunity, he said, to practice English. Again, I declined, feeling rather ill-at-ease.

I puzzled over these two incidents for several years. What I eventually concluded is that the phrase 'jiao pengyou' is bandied about much more readily in China than is the phrase 'let's make friends' in Canada, at least among adults. Indeed, although I might much admire the innocence of the adult who approached another adult and asked if they could be friends, I do not have the courage to do so myself. Just recently, I recounted these two incidents to a seventeen year old Chinese boy and told him how they had occupied my thoughts. He chided me for taking them too seriously. I also told them to a more mature male, a student from China now studying in Canada, and asked him about the term 'jiao pengyou'. According to him, the word 'pengyou' can connote much more to a Chinese person than does its English translation, 'friend', to a Canadian. There can be many levels of 'pengyou', extending from a relationship based on long shared experience and mutual trust to a relationship with one with whom may share only a single interest which entails meeting on occasion to pursue that interest. By this definition, a person with whom one meets once a month to play bridge, and with whom the only commonality is the playing of bridge, can be considered to be a 'pengyou'. To me, a relationship of the latter sort would be an 'acquaintance' perhaps, but not a friend. The Chinese language does, in fact, have a term, 'xiangshi', that translates into English as 'acquaintance', so I am left wondering about the distinction between 'pengyou' and 'xiangshi'. I have resolved this matter in my own mind by falling back on the notion of affective relationship proffered by Professor Hwang and mentioned above. He includes 'close friends' among those with one whom enjoys affective relationships and, for me, anyone whom I would consider to be a friend would be, ipso facto, a close friend with whom I would enjoy an affective relationship. Thus my 'friend' and Dr. Hwang's 'close friend' are really one and the same. It is with friendship of the affective variety that I will deal in the rest of this section.

Yi Zhongtian, a professor at Fujian University in China, now enjoys a vogue as a commentator on Chinese characteristics. He devotes an entire chapter of one of his recent books to an analysis of friendship ('youyi'). Chinese people, says Dr. Yi, have a high regard for 'youai' ('friendly affection') and 'youqing' (friendly sentiments' or 'friendship'). "Friendly affection and friendly sentiments are probably," he states, "encouraged and praised more in China than any of the other emotions." ("Youai he youqing, dagai shi zai zhongguo zui shou guli he zanmei, tongshi you zui zhencheng zui shenhou de qingyi le.") (Yi 2007:332). He goes on to write that this is so because of the stress placed in China on the collective consciousness ('qunti yishi'). He also claims that, whereas, in the West, love between man and woman is placed on a pedestal, that place in China is reserved for friendship. The reason for this lies, he believes, in the fact that formal relationships (ie. marriage) between men and women in China traditionally had nothing to do with love. The emphasis in Chinese poetry on friendship and its comparative disregard for love also strike him as significant.

It is not surprising that a society that holds close friendship in high regard would also develop a code of conduct to be followed within the realm of friendship. What, then, does it mean to be someone's close friend in China?

In my experience, friendship for Chinese people entails a degree of solicitude greater than does friendship in Canada. I can think of several illustrative examples. In the fall of 1989, a newly arrived university student from China, a Mr. Yang, stayed with my wife and I for a few days in our home while he got his bearings. After he moved to permanent accommodation, he continued to visit us from time to time until he eventually earned a doctoral degree at a Canadian university and took a job first in Calgary and later in Texas. Over time, a friendship sprang up. In 1996, some years after he left my hometown, I went to China for several months, during which time I spent a week in the city of Nanjing. Knowing my plans, my friend, born and raised in Nanjing, contacted a former classmate there and asked if he would

show me around the library of a local university. More importantly, he arranged for me to stay with his parents in their small apartment during my time in Nanjing. I enjoyed food cooked by his mother and even slept in the bed my friend had used as a child. Not many years before, his father told me, I would not have been able to stay in the house of a family in China.

The brother-in-law of the above-mentioned student also came, somewhat later, to Canada to attend university. Through my connection with Mr. Yang, I got to know the brother-in-law and also developed a friendship with him. Years later, it was necessary for me to stay for several days in Ottawa where a close relative was hospitalized. The brother-in-law and his wife, by this time residents of Ottawa, provided me with living quarters in their home during my stay in Ottawa of close to two weeks.

There is yet another friendship with a person from China about which I wish to write. This person, Ms. Tian, spent a year in Canada in the early 1990s before returning to her home in northern China. She lived with my wife and I for a few days at the start of her sojourn abroad and we remained in contact with her in a desultory fashion after she went back to China. Some years later, I was in Beijing for several months. Ms. Tian learned from my wife that I was at that time in Beijing and sent a letter to my Beijing address inviting me to visit her in the city of Hohhot in Inner Mongolia where she lived. I wrote back accepting the invitation, and also asked if she would arrange for me to visit some libraries in Hohhot and interview people holding positions of responsibility in those libraries. This she did. When I reached Hohhot, I discovered that, as there was no room in my friend's small apartment, she had made arrangements for me to stay in the apartment of a close friend who lived nearby with her young son. In order to accommodate me, the friend and her son had gone to stay with the friend's mother for the duration of my stay (about a week). When the time came later for me to leave Beijing and return to Canada, Ms. Tian traveled by train to Beijing, a trip of twelve hours, to see me off and give me a bolt of cloth which she wanted to present to my wife.

Ten years later, I returned to China to observe and write about the north China grasslands. I decided to establish a base in Hohhot, a city just to the south and west of the grasslands, and travel to and from various destinations from that base. I asked Ms Tian if she would arrange for me to stay for six months at my expense in the guesthouse of the university where she taught. When I arrived in Hohhot, however, I discovered that Ms. Tian, believing rental of a room in the guesthouse to be too costly, had arranged for herself to stay with an elderly, retired colleague in the colleague's apartment during my six month stay, leaving her own apartment to the use of her son and myself. Her plan was to sleep in her colleague's apartment at night and return to her own place during the day, where she would provide meals for myself and her son and otherwise care for the two of us. I was taken aback by this, and offered to at least give her some money for room and board. At this she became a little hot under the collar, as I recall, and said huffily that, if I wanted to pay money for a living place, I could go and live in the guesthouse after all. I did not press the issue, but, in order to assuage a slight feeling of guilt, I offered to take her son with me at my expense when I traveled to the northeastern part of Inner Mongolia for two weeks to visit the Hulunbeier Grasslands. This offer she accepted.

Living for free in the home of Ms. Tian and being much in her company was not without its downside. I found her solicitous to the point of being overly protective and overly concerned for my well-being. This was not just with me. She was the same with her son, but he regarded his mother's attentiveness with equanimity. I, on the other hand, just built up resentment. Ms. Tian was, for example, quite concerned about whether I was taking enough heavy clothing to the Hulunbeier Grasslands. She was insistent that I should wear more clothes when I went outside. She was adamant that I should not spend money on a used bicycle. She was adamant that her son and, in particular, me, should take a sleeping car back to Hohhot from the Hulunbeier Grasslands rather than an ordinary coach. I recall vividly one occasion when we returned together to her apartment after a brief outing. As we passed through the front door, she demanded in rapid sequence that I take off my hat, wash my hands and have something to eat. This irked me at the time, although I was also able to inwardly laugh. I was being ordered about like a child, or so I thought at the time.

It is not that Ms. Tian's suggestions or concerns were baseless or that her commands were mean-spirited. It is, rather, that she pressed them to a point beyond which I found acceptable. The more I have reflected upon Ms. Tian's attitude towards me and the more I have read about how Chinese regard close friends, however, the more I have come to realize that expressions of solicitude which I found heavy-handed

were to her just part and parcel of what it means to be a friend. Close observation of one whom one considers to be a friend and active participation in the friend's decision-making are among the responsibilities that friendship brings.

Adaptation to this facet of the Chinese mode of social interaction has proved very difficult for me, much more difficult than adaptation to a different diet or to different standards of hygiene or to different degrees of physical comfort. Perhaps because I was the sole child of my parents and thus did not have to contend with siblings when I was growing up, I learned to be self-reliant and to trust more in myself than in others. This characteristic I still have. I like to do things for myself and make my own decisions without much input from other people. Of course, when decisions need to be made that affect other people, I consult them, but if I need to make a decision that affects only myself, I don't usually seek out the opinions of others and am usually not overly welcoming when those opinions are proffered without being asked for. The decision-making process, I have slowly come to realize, is different among Chinese people, and not only among Chinese people who happen to be living in China. Friends and family members want and feel the need to be involved in one's decisions, even if those decisions do not impact on them. This I have found very difficult to accept.

In a book titled Encountering the Chinese: a Guide for Americans, the authors write the following, "Largely absent from traditional Chinese culture is the notion that a person can expect family members and good friends to refrain from entering [the personal spaces of others] without his or her implicit, if not explicit, permission. Furthermore, each person's time is not assumed to be under his or her exclusive control, to be shared with others or reserved for self as he or she sees fit." (Hu & Grove 1991:44) The following quote, taken from a book that compares Australians and Chinese, says approximately the same thing, "For most Australians, individualism is an unquestioned positive value. Individual self-fulfillment and the maximal realization of individual potential are legitimate and often-expressed aims in life....The individual is held to have legitimate interests and rights that are separate from, and may even be antagonistic to, the interests of other institutions such as the family, the community or the state....This view contrasts sharply with the view of most Chinese, a view grounded in traditional Confucian philosophy. According to this view, the individual exists in and through society. Alone, in isolation, he or she has no meaningful existence....True self-fulfillment for the individual lies in fulfilling social responsibilities to the greatest extent possible" (Brick 1991:131) The authors of both books, then, find the roots of the Chinese propensity to be proactive and forthright in their relationships with friends in culture and tradition and, furthermore, the Chinese who fails to do this is, in fact, shirking social responsibility.

### Connections (Guanxi)

Ms. Tian one time used an aphorism which seemed to me to sum up her attitude to friends. "When you are taking leave of friends, see them to their door", she said, "and, when you assist friends, assist them to the greatest possible extent." ("Song pengyou, song dao ta de jia. Bangzhu pengyou, bangzhu dao di.") I did, however, also hear her once say that "the more friends one has, the more doors are open" ("duo yi ge pengyou, duo yi tiao lu".) I very much like the first aphorism, and think it to be worthy of applicability in my own life. The second, however, strikes me as rather ignoble. If both are honest expressions of Ms. Tian's opinions, how can she reconcile them, I have wondered. Knowledge of the Chinese concept of 'guanxi' or 'connections' has helped me to understand this seeming contradiction.

A very commonly used expression in China, and one with which foreigners become soon accustomed, is 'make use of connections' ('la guanxi'). In fact, the foreigner does not need to live in China for very long before reaching the conclusion that interpersonal connections are the grease that allows the wheels of society to turn smoothly. Much effort is expended to ensure that connections are both established, and also maintained, in anticipation that assistance can be summoned when the need arises. And the need often does arise, for Chinese society does not function on the basis of law or ethics as we in Canada understand these concepts.

'Making use of connections' seems to be nothing more nor less than 'you scratch my back and I will scratch yours', or 'tit for tat', phrases with which English speakers are familiar and which have negative connotations. 'Connections' or 'guanxi' in and of themselves do not need to be seen in a negative light, however, contrary to what I thought until I recently came across the following sentences in Encountering

the Chinese: a Guide for Americans. "Guanxi or 'mixed-tie' relationships are informal and unofficial, but they are not a cold and calculating exchange. The development of guanxi converts a person who was merely an acquaintance into a type of in-group member, then uses the ongoing exchanges of favors as the means of maintaining the relationship. In other words, what is given and received are tokens that the personal side of the relationship is alive and well. A Chinese has guanxi relations with all sorts of people: clerks in local shops, work unit colleagues, subordinates and supervisors, local officials, in-laws and relatives, and foreign colleagues and acquaintances" (p. 62). The words in the above passage that caused me to re-think my previously held opinion are these: "...guanxi...uses the ongoing exchanges of favors as the means of maintaining the relationship". That is to say, the objective of guanxi is not merely personal benefit --- there is also a sense in which guanxi builds relationships and, once built, helps keep them healthy. 'Connections' or 'relationships', as experience shows, have to be fertilized and watered if they are to thrive, and, in China, exchange of favors constitutes the fertilizer and water.

Classmate relationships are particularly strong among Chinese. Just prior to departing from Inner Mongolia for Canada in September of 2007, I discovered that I would have to pay to transport by air a second suitcase and its contents. The friend with whom I was staying in Inner Mongolia stated that she had a classmate from her elementary school days of forty years ago who might be able to assist me in sending the suitcase of personal possessions to Canada without paying. As it happened, the cost of shipping the suitcase was not great by Canadian standards and I was able to convince my friend that there was no need for her to re-connect with the school mate. Still, her willingness to do so even though she had not seen the former classmate since their time together in school impressed upon me the strength of classmate ties and the willingness to make use of those ties when need arises.

During stays in China, I have certainly been the beneficiary of 'making use of connections'. It was my desire while in Inner Mongolia to live with a family of Mongolian herders in order that I could learn about their pastoral life. I had no idea how to go about making arrangements to do so, but my Chinese friend was able to assist. She had a workplace-colleague whose brother had a friend who knew a Mongolian family that was willing to accept me as a guest. There was thus a chain of four intermediaries (friend; friend's workplace-colleague; friend's workplace-colleague's brother; friend's workplace-colleague's brother's friend) between myself and the family with which I was eventually able to stay. In a similar fashion, again by means of connections, I was able to visit a number of libraries in Wuhan, Nanjing, Beijing, Shenyang and Hohhot in 1988-89 and in 1996-97 and interview people in charge of those libraries.

But did my use of connections obligate me in Chinese eyes to, at some unknown time in the future, perform favors for those who had helped me? I have a Chinese relative, a sister-in-law now residing in the United States, who might well answer this question in the affirmative. On one occasion when we were together in China, she said to me, "No breakfast is eaten without charge" ("meiyou yi ge zaocan shi bai chi de"). This is very similar to the North American expression, "There is no free lunch." I find this somewhat cynical, but then, maybe I am too much an idealist. Still, thinking back on those times when connections got me into libraries, I cannot think of any favours I rendered in return to those who made arrangements on my behalf. And the Inner Mongolia friend whose intervention enabled me to visit the Mongolian family has provided me with far more than I have provided her during the twenty years of our friendship, a friendship maintained mostly by letter and e-mail back and forth across the Pacific Ocean.

This is not to say that no Chinese person has attempted to use a connection with me, however tenuous, for personal gain. I have been asked to assist a Beijing opera group to perform in North America, to help students with papers in the English language and to assist students to leave China to study abroad. While staying at Beijing University in 1996-97, I came to know slightly a student from a rural area. Just prior to my return to Canada, I met with the student. His father, dressed in a suit, made a special trip in from the countryside to take part in this meeting. He presented me with a bag of peanuts that he had grown on his farm and then proceeded to inform me that his son wished to go abroad to study. He next inquired if I could use my influence at the Canadian Embassy to assist his son to go to Canada. I was rather flustered by this and had to try to ensure the perhaps skeptical father that I did not have any influence in the Embassy.

The guanxi relationships that have responsibilities clearly stated from the start are the easiest for Canadians and other foreigners to handle. The Inner Mongolia Agricultural University provided me with

official status in China in 2007. During my first meeting with staff of the Foreign Affairs Office of the University, I was told that I would be provided with office space in a certain Faculty building for the duration of my stay and that I would be able to travel with some students to a rural part of Inner Mongolia that I wished to visit. In exchange, I would be responsible for assisting graduate students in the aforementioned Faculty with English-language papers, and for making an oral report concerning my observations of rural Inner Mongolia.

I have a Canadian friend who, on occasion, has contracts to teach for short periods of time in Shijiazhuang, China. He relates the following story. In 2006, while fulfilling one of these contracts, he and his wife decided at one point to visit India. They required tourist visas that would allow them to re-enter China after going to India. My friend inquired at the Foreign Teachers' Office of the university where he was teaching about how to obtain such a visa. As a result, an official of the Office went to the local security bureau and made all arrangements on my friend's behalf. Once this had been accomplished (almost in the same breath, my friend writes), however, the official asked my friend to help the university solve a current problem by taking on some extra teaching duties. This was a clear case of tit for tat. My friend's connection with the Foreign Affairs Office was beneficial in this case, and the Foreign Affairs Office, having rendered him a service, asked that, in return, he render a service to the university of which the Office was a part.

### **Personal Space and Privacy**

It has been said that the Chinese language lacks a word that corresponds in meaning to the English word 'privacy', the implication being that, because the word is absent from the vocabulary, the concept as westerners understand it must likewise be absent. Bonnie McDougall, a China scholar teaching at the University of Edinburgh, in her study of letters exchanged by the writer Lu Xun and his paramour, Xu Guangping, takes issue with this perception, maintaining that "...a sense of privacy is one of the most basic mental capacities of human beings all over the world. The nature, mechanisms, functions, contents, and values of privacy will differ from country to country, culture to culture, and person to person, but a sense of privacy appears to be as universal as the capacity to think and speak." (McDougall 2002a:3) Still, the foreigner in China must, I think, be prepared to encounter what he or she would consider to be transgressions on personal privacy were that foreigner in his or her own country. During my three stays in China over a period of close to twenty years, for example, I have been asked countless times about my age. My beard fools people, I think, for, in China, sprouting a few whiskers has generally been the prerogative of only the elderly. Questions about salary used to be common too, though I was surprised and relieved that, during a stay of several weeks in Hohhot in 2007, I was never once asked how much money I earned.

The foreigner also, I think, becomes aware that physical 'personal space' has a different meaning for Chinese than it does for Canadians. When in Chinese banks for example, I have often seen strangers crowd around a customer engaged in a transaction with a bank employee. I don't think it was so much that the strangers were interested in the details of the transaction – rather, I believe, in a country in which the notion of polite queuing for service has yet to be developed, the strangers wanted to be as close as possible to the employee's wicket in order to ensure that they received service. Even with this knowledge, however, I still found it very disconcerting to myself be in a situation in a bank where I felt my personal space was infringed upon. I was closing out a bank account, all the while being watched by a stranger leaning at close quarters against the counter next to me. Some of the attention that I should have been paying to the woman behind the wicket who was assisting me was diverted by the stranger's proximity, to such a degree that, fearful I would not be able to accomplish the bank transaction satisfactorily, I informed the man that my banking affairs were private matters and that he should back off and give me some room. This he did with a slightly embarrassed laugh.

In early 1997 I traveled from Beijing to Hohhot to visit some libraries in that city. I had plans to stay in the house of a female friend and her young son during the days I would be in Hohhot. Unfortunately, shortly after my arrival in Hohhot, I became ill and decided to cut my stay short and return to my more permanent quarters in Beijing. As I lay in discomfort one afternoon on the bed I was using in my friend's home, she stretched out on the bed beside me, put her head up on one elbow and observed me carefully for what seemed like a long time. Although I was fully aware that she was exhibiting her concern for my health, her near presence on the bed beside me made me quite uncomfortable. I was very relieved when

she arose and left the room. In thinking about this, I conclude that my discomfort was likely rooted in two components: her womanhood, and her physical closeness. She had unwittingly entered personal physical space which I was accustomed to call my own.

When I was an elementary and high school student in Canada, I recall, I more than once watched fights among my school mates, encouraging one or the other as needed. Now, as an adult of sixty-two years of age, however, I would feel a transgressor if I stopped to watch a public quarrel. Such a quarrel would be the private concern of the individuals involved, I would reason, and would thus be none of my business. In China, however, nothing seems to draw a crowd like a good public spat. People like to, as the saying goes, 'kan renao' ('watch the hubbub') I attribute this in part to the fact that life in many parts of China offers many less opportunities for diversion than does life in Canada. Thus public quarrels are a form of entertainment. Going deeper than this, however, I think it is also possible to speculate that lack of a perception that public quarrels are the business of the quarrelers only likely contributes to accumulation of avid onlookers.

While in the city of Wuhan in central China in early 1989, I was once riding my bicycle along a road beside East Lake. A young woman dressed very strangely in shorts and a pink top accosted me. When I stopped to see what she wanted, she approached my bicycle, seized the handlebar, and demanded in English that I take her to Sacramento. I proceeded to explain to her that I was not a citizen of the United States and thus could not take her to Sacramento even if I wanted to. This did not dissuade her. She simply grasped the handlebar more firmly and repeated her demand. Our standoff proceeded for some time, and a crowd gathered. I was concerned that the crowd might think that I was somehow mistreating (or had mistreated) the woman, but, eventually, she made the mistake of grasping my arm rather than the bicycle. This was too much for some people in the crowd, who proceeded to separate the woman and myself, giving me the opportunity to ride off on my bike. A similar episode would, I think, have drawn a much smaller crowd (if any) in any city in Canada, simply because passers-by would have considered the matter to be none of their business.

The Chinese take on privacy may be in part a product of the Maoism that dominated political and social life in China between 1949 and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. The brand of communism proposed by Mao and his followers, Bonnie McDougall maintains, tried to impose the State on the life of the private citizen. Mail was censored. Visitors to home and office were monitored. Various political campaigns demanded both personal confessional reports and reports on friends and colleagues. During the Cultural Revolution, children were encouraged to report on anti-revolutionary activities and tendencies of teachers and parents. The reforms that began in the late 1970s paved the way for a greater degree of privacy, however and, in 1982, certain personal rights and safeguards were incorporated into the new Chinese constitution. These included the sanctity of the home, the right to 'personal dignity', and a degree of right to privacy of correspondence (McDougall 2002b:166-67).

The term now used in China that roughly corresponds to western 'privacy' is 'yinsi'. This term is translated in a recently published Chinese to English dictionary as "private matters one wants to keep to oneself" (Wu 2004). This seems innocuous enough. By way of contrast, an older Chinese to English dictionary published in 1979 renders 'yinsi' as "private matters one wants to hide" (Wu 1979). Obviously the later translation of yinsi is much less burdened with a suggestion of negativity than is the earlier. The concept of what constitutes privacy thus seemed to have evolved in the last 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This makes sense to me. In present day China, many people now live away from their primary groups, just as they do in Canada. People move from their places of birth to other centers to find employment, and settle in those centers for greater or lesser periods of time. Their desire to keep things to themselves would logically increase in such circumstances, as would their ability to do so. The greater degree of economic freedom now available to many Chinese would also logically contribute to change in perception of what privacy connotes. Bonnie McDougall, after travel in China, writes of the communal lavatories once common in residential districts where living quarters did not have their own toilets. Though there were separate facilities for men and women, there was no provision for privacy within them. Even when there were walled compartments in these lavatories, the compartments were without doors. Thus privacy was not possible. Now, however, at least in cities, apartment buildings house most people. These apartments are for individual families and each includes a lavatory. Public lavatories are now much less ubiquitous than they once were. She finds that, although some people talk nostalgically of

the old way of life before people lived in apartments, the nostalgia never extends to singing the praises of the public lavatories (McDougall 2002c:5).

### Altruism

There is a saying in Chinese that, rendered into English, reads as follows, "Each household is responsible for sweeping the snow from its own doorstep. Don't be concerned about the frost on the rooftops of others." ("Ge jia zi sao men qian xue, xiu guan ta ren wa shang shuang"). The implication in this saying seems to clearly be that each person should look after his or her own affairs and stay out of the affairs of others. On one level, this corresponds to the aphorism that most English-speaking people have heard at one time or another, "Don't meddle in other peoples' business." This can be solid advice. On another level, both the English saying and the Chinese discourage the 'helping hand'. Why not assist your neighbor to remove the frost from his roof (or clean his garage; or remove the dead leaves from his eaves trough; or start his car when battery output is low)?

I often wonder if the story of the 'Good Samaritan' could have been written in China, or if altruism, a virtue respected (although not necessarily practiced) by many Canadians has any practical meaning there. The word 'altruism' does have two expressions in Chinese that are roughly equivalent, namely: 'lita zhuyi', 'the doctrine of doing good for others'; and 'she ji wei ren', 'placing the interests of others before one's own'. But the question remains, "Do Chinese people admire and respect 'lita zhuyi', as most Canadians do altruism? A philosopher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lin Yutang, has written that, "The Chinese are a nation of individuals. They are family-minded, not social-minded, and the family mind is only a form of magnified selfishness" (Lin 1938:172), and that, in China, "There is no social mind" (Ibid.:173). This suggests to me that, in Lin's opinion, altruism is not (or, at least was not at the time he writing) a Chinese characteristic, for altruism requires some sort of 'social mind'. China has had its chivalrous characters, Robin Hood – like individuals, who performed good deeds for others, said Lin, but such people were always seen to deviate from the norm.

Lin attributes absence of altruism in China to Confucianism. Indeed, Confucianism maintained that individuals participated in five cardinal social relationships: ruler and ruled; father and son; husband and wife; brother and brother; and friend and friend. Duties and responsibilities were inherent in each of these relationships. Notable in its absence is any relationship between individual and stranger. Thus there are no duties and responsibilities existing between strangers. "The family, with its friends, became a walled castle, ...coldly indifferent toward, and fortified against, the world without," maintained Lin (Ibid.:180).

And yet, I have benefited in China from kindnesses that, at least on the surface, appear to be altruistic in nature. While living on the campus of Beijing University a few years ago, for example, I came to know slightly a Chinese woman, a Ms. Tian Kaifang. She was a librarian by profession, and worked in the Peking University Library. After my return to Canada, I wrote an article about libraries in China. I wanted to include in the article some information that I had found in a certain book in the National Library of China, and thus needed citation information (author, title, and publisher) for the book. This information I had not recorded, although I could recall the contents of the book, its appearance and how I had happened to come across it in the National Library. I contacted Ms. Tian and asked if she would go to the National Library (several kilometers from her dwelling place) and look for it. She did so, and by some miracle (with the scant information with which I was able to provide her), located the book and was able to furnish me with the needed information.

I often wonder why Ms. Tian assisted me on this occasion. Our relationship in Beijing had not been close. We had spoken to each other a few times and had had a meal together on one occasion. We were acquaintances, nothing more. Her assistance could not have been as a result of favours owed. In fact, she did not owe me any favours from my time in Beijing. Nor could she have entertained any hope that I could provide her with favours in the future. So why did she bother to assist me? It is true that she had, at one time, spent seven years in Canada. During those years, had she been infected by some germs of altruism? Or, has China changed since Lin Yutang wrote in 1938 that, in China, "there is no social mind"? Or, was Ms. Tian's act of altruism merely a rare exception to a general rule?

While living for a few weeks in 2007 in Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, I paused one day at a street corner pondering which way to walk to find a store that sold cellular telephones. A young woman, a university student she told me, stopped to ask if I needed some help. I responded in the affirmative, and she proceeded to not only tell me the location of two or three nearby telecommunications shops, but also described for me the relative merits and cost of the various models of cell phones available. On yet another occasion in Hohhot, I went to a banking outlet to exchange some U. S. travelers' checks for Chinese currency. An attendant informed me that I needed to go to a larger bank some distance away to effect the transaction, and described how to get there. As I was a newcomer to Hohhot, however, his directions left me puzzled. As I left the bank and mounted my bicycle, a fellow customer emerged from the bank and offered to guide me to the site of the larger bank. I gratefully accepted, and he made good his offer by accompanying me on his bicycle for twenty minutes or so to my new destination. In both these cases, my benefactors had nothing to gain by assisting me. It is tempting to conclude that both people were acting altruistically.

Chinese have a strong sense of obligation to the 'guest'. The guest is accorded treatment reserved for members of the Chinese individual's four primary groups, Hu and Grove write in Encountering the Chinese: a Guide for Americans, those groups being family, school, work unit and neighbours (p. 1). It is the duty of the Chinese host, they claim, to be "actively and continuously involved in protecting guests from loneliness, harm, embarrassment and the curiosity of outsiders" (Hu & Grove 1991:129). In the two stories related above, is it possible that I, obviously a foreigner in Hohhot, was seen by both of those who rendered me assistance to be a 'guest' and thus worthy of primary group treatment? Was I perceived to be lonely on the Hohhot street or in the Hohhot bank, or in harms way, or suffering from embarrassment at my own ignorance?

How much of North American altruism has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition foreign to China? Are those relatively few people in China who adhere to the Christian faith more altruistic than those who do not? Do their perceived responsibilities extend to those who are not of the primary groups to which they belong? The following story comes to mind. In late 1996, I attended a church service at a Roman Catholic Church in Beijing. A young woman sat beside me. During the service, though my attention was focused on other matters, I noticed her writing. At the conclusion of the service, she handed me a card as she left the pew in which we both sat. Inside the card were the words she had written during the service. In translation, they are, "You are welcome to our midst. We are all God's children. May God's blessing be on those people of all races and countries who seek for and revere him. May our loving hearts be one in Jesus." These words certainly express an inclusiveness that encompasses all people, whether within or without the primary groups enumerated in *Encountering the Chinese: a Guide for Americans*.

The story of the 'Good Samaritan' was supposedly proffered by Jesus of Nazareth in response to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus' response indicates that, in his opinion, not only is the stranger to be considered to be one's neighbour, but so is the stranger for whom one has little regard or towards whom one has ill feelings (citizens of Samaria and Judea had little use for each other). This is certainly a far more encompassing perception of neighbour than is that espoused by Confucius, and even stretches considerably the bounds of neighbourliness as we in Canada usually conceive it. For both ourselves and Confucius, the neighbour is one who lives in one's immediate vicinity, in one's immediate neighborhood, and with whom one is acquainted by virtue of proximity. I have as a close friend a woman who grew up in Taiwan. She has told me that, as a child, her mother would admonish both herself and her brothers and sisters to "run away if you see a fire and take a round-about route if you see a crowd." Disengagement from that which was not of personal concern, from that which did not involve at least the neighbour, was thus a principle invoked by the mother, a principle quite in keeping with the saying concerning sweeping of snow and ignoring of frost mentioned earlier.

I once had occasion to drive with my Taiwan friend to downtown Windsor, Ontario where we parted company, agreeing to meet at the car at a certain time later that afternoon. On my return to the car to keep the appointment, I stopped to assist a drunken man who had collapsed in the middle of one of Windsor's main streets. Another fellow and I got him to his feet and then supported him as he made his unsteady way to a nearby apartment where he lived. All this consumed minutes, and by the time I made my back to the car, it was about an hour after the time established to meet my friend. She was furious, while I, full of self-righteous pride at having done a good deed, thought she should be praising me. We have both

recalled this incident several times since it took place, and we had both concluded without much depth of thought that my friend's anger was brought on by understandable impatience with my tardiness. Only lately has she offered a more nuanced perspective. Her anger, she now believes, might have been due at least in part to the fact that I, in aiding the drunk and forcing her to wait without explanation, had, contrary to the Confucian teaching which she had thoroughly imbibed while growing up in Taiwan, placed the welfare of a stranger above that of a friend, namely herself.

I very recently came across an article that lends credence to this interpretation. In the article, the authors make a distinction between the Chinese individual's 'in groups' ('zijiren') and 'out groups' ('wairen') (Gabrenger & Hwang 1996:311), the in groups roughly corresponding to the 'primary groups' described in *Encountering the Chinese: a Guide for Americans*. In China, friends, the authors of the former article write, "are not only expected to show high levels of courtesy and warmth to each other, but there is an implicit assumption that when one treats strangers in an overly kindly manner, one is devaluing friendship and has misplaced priorities." Thus, if these authors are to be believed, altruism has negative connotations in China, as it is seen to detract from the strength of one's commitment to the members of one's primary or in groups.

In the above-mentioned article, Gabrenger and Hwang briefly discuss the findings of colleagues in the social sciences who have studied the characteristics of Chinese people. One study, they state, posits that, because Chinese lack social norms regulating interaction with members of out groups, they therefore have at their disposal only limited mechanisms for resolving intra-group conflicts. Another study takes this further by linking these limited mechanisms to an apparent Chinese predilection for civil and external wars as evidenced by an examination of the data available in the Human Relations Area Files (Ibid.:317). Both claims certainly suggest that Chinese lack altruism, and have paid for it.

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. As communism was initially the officially approved doctrine, the policies and rhetoric of government leaders in the early years of the Republic fostered ownership in common and servitude to the state, the state being the collective citizenry of China. Altruism was thus to be nurtured and encouraged. Mao Zedong himself, for example, wrote a simple paean to the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune who died in China in 1939 while bringing succour to Chinese soldiers wounded in combat with Japanese troops (Mao 1965). This paean emphasized both Dr. Bethune's dedication to helping people half way around the globe from his own country and also the ultimate sacrifice of his own life to this cause. The story was for many years included in textbooks used in Chinese elementary schools and, even today, Canadians are regarded very favourably in China because they share Bethune's nationality. Yet another person who modeled altruism was Lei Feng, an infantryman who, during a life of only 22 years, supposedly devoted himself to the service of others. Mao exhorted the Chinese people to "learn from Comrade Lei Feng" ("xiang Lei Feng tongzhi xuexi"), and, in fact, Lei Feng was resurrected as an inspirational figure in one guise or another on many occasions in the 1960s through the 1980s (Geist 1990).

During the 1950s, the leadership of the newly formed People's Republic of China established communes in the Chinese countryside. The communes usually consisted of several rural villages and towns, and were much larger than the social and political units that had dominated non-urban China prior to 1949. The communal system thus required that folk who had previously had little or no connection with one another while residents of discrete towns and villages now had to work, if not in a spirit of altruism, at least co-operatively with each other. Given a Confucian paradigm that ignored relationships among those who were not mutually connected, one wonders if introduction of the commune system to China was doomed from the outset, and, in fact, after the system was demolished in the early 1980s, social and political units in the countryside reverted quickly to their pre-1949 pattern.

Yan Yunxiang has documented the social changes he observed over an extended period in a small village in northern China under communist rule, changes he does not believe are atypical. He believes that collectivist policies of the overtly communist state of the 1950s and 1960s and early 1970s led to a demise of traditional ethical principles rooted in Confucianism. Reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and 1980s that moved China from full-blown communism to 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (in fact, full-blown capitalism) resulted in a post-socialist society that lacks both traditional values and socialist morality. Private life, he says, has been transformed in such a way that it is "...characterized by a surge of egotism and the rise of the uncivil individual, who emphasizes the right to

pursue personal interests yet ignores his or her moral obligations to the public and other individuals" (Yan 2003:217). This is particularly noticeable in the young. "...the development of individuality among village youth is incomplete and unbalanced. It is incomplete because most changes are confined to the sphere of private life; it is unbalanced because the emphasis on individual rights is not complemented by equal respect for other individuals and a commitment to civic duty" (Ibid.:228). If Dr. Yan's observations are valid, then the spirit of altruism is indeed absent in present day China, at least in the countryside of north China which he believes to be typified in the village he studied.

And yet, the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province in central China led to an outpouring of financial support from Chinese at home and abroad that suggests altruism. It can certainly be argued that social pressure and consciousness-raising on a mass level by government motivated many people to contribute to relief of the stricken area, but there are also apparently many instances where donations of money were made anonymously, such that the donors could not be accused of contributing only to gain social brownie points. This reminds me of a young Chinese student at the university where I work in Canada. The fellow developed a physical problem of some sort that required expensive medical attention. The university's Chinese Students and Scholars Association mounted a campaign to raise money to help pay his medical bill. Several thousand dollars were collected.

I have a friend who thinks that China, the country of her origin, is in a transition phase. In the economic sense, it is developing too rapidly, she believes, while moral change, though needed, is occurring at an unavoidably much slower pace. Selflessness and self-sacrifice are encouraged now, as they have always been, but the vast majority of people put their faith in money and possessions. She has hope, though, that China will become a nation "where all people feel comfortable and safe, where people do not have to worry about tomorrow all the time while grasping a bunch of cash for security, and where everyone feels peaceful and has a smile every day". The philosopher Mencius, back in the fourth century B. C., told a story of a child who fell into a well. Those who observed the accident went to the aid of the child, not because they hoped to curry favour with the child's parents or because they were seeking the praise of their neighbours, said Mencius, but rather because they felt sympathy for the child. Mencius believed that people were born with innate decency that required nurturing if it was to survive. Perhaps under the benign conditions for which my friend has hope, innate decency will be nurtured and altruism and the benevolence espoused by Mencius will flourish in China in the future.

### **Conclusion**

In a recent article, two speech and communication specialists claim that "understanding between members of different cultures....has never been as important as it is now in the twenty-first century....it is a matter of survival for our species" (Kim & Hubbard 2007:223). And yet, when we read our daily newspaper or weekly newsmagazine or watch the six o'clock report on television, we learn nothing that seems to directly substantiate the specialists' opinion. If asked to name what he or she thinks to be matters which will decide the survival of humankind, Mr. or Ms. Average Citizen might well compose a list that includes climate change, global warming, food and drinking water shortages, ecological degradation, collapse of economic institutions and declining oil reserves. Inter-cultural understanding would most likely be absent from such a list.

Are the two communication experts therefore wrong? I think that, although they exaggerate, their claim is worth considering. Global warming, food, potable water and fuel inadequacies, destruction of human habitat and such effects of climate change as desertification and rising ocean levels are sure to put great strain on nations and societies. These nations and societies will attempt to reduce the strain by negotiation or warfare with other societies and nations. Negotiation between nations with differing cultural backgrounds and customs can only be successful when inter-cultural understanding is present, and mutually intelligible communication, be it verbal or non-verbal, is a prerequisite to such understanding.

The individual has a small part in all this. In multi-ethnic Canada, the opportunity to interact with folk of other cultural backgrounds is available to the resident of any moderately large city. For the most part, however, we seem content to hang out with those people with whom we share common beliefs, habits and modes of communication. Sure it's easier and less challenging, but, at the same time, in opting for

the easy road we deprive ourselves of the inter-cultural knowledge that just might, someday, contribute, if not to species survival, at least to collective harmony and well-being.

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