

Cuttled Chicken in Shanghai

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Preface

Sometimes I am a storyteller, and the tales my listeners enjoy the most are real-life stories. Some of their favorite tales are about the years I lived in Shanghai, China, from 1997 until 1999. When my listeners requested real-life stories they could read in a book, especially about my life in Shanghai, the time had come for me to write *Cuttled Chicken in Shanghai*.

I kept a journal while I lived in Shanghai and used this narrative to create a mythical window into the life I lived there. I threw this window open and watched once again the happenings that made me laugh or wonder. I even leaned out this window and yelled hello and *nihao* to the people who had crossed my path, and they waved back to me.

To read *Cuttled Chicken in Shanghai* is to sit with me on this window ledge and look out at the landscape of the Middle Kingdom. I can point out where I lived and the things I did and the people—they are the most interesting of all.

When my American friends ask me about China, a few stories cannot tell the tale. But perhaps this book can describe my life in Shanghai and the difficult, inspiring, and funny experiences I had, which I now pass on with this book.

In order to give the reader a sense of what it is like to speak and read Mandarin, I have included some pinyin, Chinese characters, and translations of Chinese into English. Pinyin is the phonetic spelling of Chinese characters using the Latin alphabet, and I have left off the tone marks for the most part. The italicized sentences, and in quotation marks, are translations of spoken Chinese into English.

When I was president of New Mexico Mensa, I wrote a column as well as stories for the organizational newsletter, *The New Mensican*, and this book includes some of these stories. Writing contributions made to the *MENSA BULLETIN: The Magazine of American MENSA* and *The Rodent Reader Quarterly* have also been included.

A Dirty Chinese Dragon

Because I am missing that shopping-gathering gene many women have, I have never cared for shopping in the States, but as I cross the ocean to Shanghai, something has caused me to love shopping in China. So, it isn't my fault that there has been a slight rise in the economy of Shanghai because of my new spending habits.

I usually bargain for what I want, and one of my favorite places to shop is the Sunday Market. The permanent vendors on the first and second floors have seen me many times and use Mandarin when they speak to me, but the temporary vendors on the third and fourth floors think of me as a dumb blonde foreigner.

Now that my Chinese is passable, I enjoy listening to Chinese people talk about me, and I can keep a straight face, too, as I listen to what they have to say. My blonde

hair and green eyes are a curiosity, and according to Chinese mythology, a woman with green eyes is the daughter of a goddess. Chinese people have put their face right in front of mine to look at my eyes, and sometimes they even touch my hair. While annoying, I'm getting used to this kind of behavior.

The Chinese assume all foreigners love old stuff, and one of the things they do to give something an antique look is to bury it in dirt for a month or two. When a seller says to me in English, "This old, very old," sometimes, just for fun, I say, "*Lao de bu hao*," which means *old is not good*. One Chinese guy once replied to my *lao de bu hao* with, "*It isn't too old. Do you like it?*"

Another one of their favorite sayings in English is, "This only one. No more." When I turn my back, another object just like the one I bought pops into place. Sometimes they also bark out, "This cheap," or, my favorite, "Good quality."

Bargaining is entertainment for the Chinese, and I have learned to keep my sense of humor and to never be so attached to something that I must have it at any price. Also, if I even ask the price of something, and nothing is marked with a price in a flea market, the bargaining must begin and go to the end when I either purchase or forgo.

Before I start to bargain, I decide how much I am willing to pay for something, and I don't go above that price, no matter what. The Chinese think every foreigner is rich and will throw away money on just about anything. Chinese retailers are amazed at what a foreigner will buy. Even I, at times, am amazed at what some foreigners will buy and how much they are willing to pay.

Because Jin can't find a parking spot, he drops me off in front of the Sunday Market. The first and second floors of this market are open all week long, but the third and fourth floors are only open on the weekend. Today is Sunday afternoon, and the merchants on these two temporary floors will soon return to the countryside with their wares, and whatever they have for sale today, I might never see again.

I walk up to the fourth floor and see a twenty-four inch high dragon covered in a beige dirty film. He beckons me. I want him. With a good shower back at the apartment, he will be as good as new, and I'm willing to pay three hundred yuan for this dragon and not one yuan more. I look at the vendor and say in English, "How much?"



A dirty Chinese dragon

In his best English, he says, “This three thousand yuan. Very good price.”

Three thousand? As I tap my finger on the head of this dragon and try to figure out what kind of material is beneath the dirt, Dragon Vendor says, “This very old.”

I look at him, and he stares at my eyes. Most likely, he has noticed that my eyes are dark green. I say in English, “This is very dirty.” He doesn’t understand me, and then I say, “Three hundred yuan.”

Dragon Vendor turns away from me and calls out to the other vendors, “*Ha! This door scratcher is so cheap . . . she would take the shirt off my back and pay me nothing.*” His fellow merchants guffaw and point at me as if I can’t see them. I keep a straight face and don’t let on that I have understood every word he has said . . . and . . . that he has called me a door scratcher, which is quite an insult. A door scratcher is so cheap she won’t buy a door handle for her own door. She scratches on her door until someone lets her in.

His fellow vendors move in closer to see this door scratching woman. This is Chinese theater. The devoted Rascal in me awakens and gets comfortable on my shoulder. He never lets me down. No one can see him.

I take out my calculator, punch in three hundred, and pass my calculator to him. He punches in twenty-five hundred. I type in three hundred. He types in two thousand. I type in three hundred. He punches in eighteen hundred. I type in three hundred. He punches in fifteen hundred. I type in three hundred. His fellow merchants laugh nervously as they watch the calculator flying back and forth and back and forth like a tennis ball.

When he types in one thousand, I type in three hundred, and he turns away from me again, and as he tugs at his shirt he yells out, “*You see, I told you. This door scratcher wants the shirt off my back for nothing. What am I to do with her?*” They nod in sympathy and give out a chortling kind of laughter as they chatter among themselves and point to me as if I can’t see them.

Dragon Vendor turns back toward me and throws up his hands in defeat. “OK, OK. Three hundred . . . three hundred.” My Rascal is already tittering because he and I know that Dragon Vendor will remember this day.

Everyone’s eyes watch my hands as I slowly count out three hundred yuan into Dragon Vendor’s hand. Then, it is my turn to look into his eyes. I give him a gleeful smile, and with a voice loud enough to be heard in this Chinese theater, I say, “*Hao a! Xianzai ni keyi ba ni de chenshan gei wo le ba.*” “Good! Now you can give me your shirt, too.”

His eyes pop. His mouth drops. The eruption of laughter is heard on every floor of the market as he stands there and sucks air. I wish I had a picture of his face when he realized I wasn’t a typical foreigner . . . but he should have known that when he saw my dark green eyes.

Sacred String

There is a flea market in Shanghai, a four-story building called the Sunday Market, which is only open on the weekends. New and old things can be found there as well as a nearly blind old woman who sits by her goods in a dusty corner of the second-floor stairwell landing. She used to sell sheets of sandpaper, which I would buy, and now she sells string in red, black, and turquoise.

I have found various uses for this string. No use, however, is more special than as a reminder of her sweet face and its map of wrinkles. I wonder what her life was like when Mao was alive, and does she have a family? I would love to see a picture of her as a young woman.

Every time I go to this flea market, I look for her, and when I find her, we act out this same play. Act I begins when I address her with the respectful hello, which is *ninhao*, instead of the *nihao* I use with everyone else. I begin with my first line and say, “*Ninhao.*” I point to a piece of string, forgetting she can barely see through graying cataracts. “*How much is this?*” I say.

People begin to gather around us. She nods her head to my question and holds up one finger, which means *one yuan*.

“*Good,*” I say. I pick up a wad of the strings and ask, “*How many are here?*” I know her answer by heart, but I must say my part.

She smiles a near toothless smile. She knows who is talking to her, and she knows her part, too. She makes a cross with her index fingers because this is the Chinese character, 十, for the number ten.

Act II begins and more people gather as our performance continues. They have seen this acted out many times before, and they never tire of watching.

The permanent Chinese vendors on the first two floors of the market know I live in Shanghai, know I study Chinese at Fudan University, and know I drive a hard bargain. What happens next, therefore, is perplexing to them.

I reach for the string for which I have no need and say, “*I will buy these, OK?*” I am politely asking her permission to buy at the first asking price.

She peers through foggy eyes and, with the deliberate nod of an empress, she grants my request. Perhaps she can see some colors and knows I have blonde hair.

Act III begins when I place a bill worth one hundred yuan into her outstretched hand. She puts the money one inch from her left eye. Everyone looks from me to her, from me to her. This is the audience’s favorite part, and they must wonder if I will ever change the script, which I won’t. Our math tells us that the total cost is ten yuan for ten pieces of string.

As she slowly moves her right hand to give me change for one hundred yuan, which I know she doesn’t have, I say, “*Zaijian.*” “See you again.” I hastily leave and go about my business. I know she will soon get up and return home. I am happy to give her this pleasure of leaving work early.

The look on everyone’s face says—how does this old woman do this? Do I feel sorry for her? No. I admire her greatly and, when I hold her string in my hand, I see her face and whisper to myself—a great woman held this string before me.

When life is difficult, I imagine being in this woman’s arms and as she holds me, she says, “*Mei guanxi. Dou hao.*” “It doesn’t matter, never mind. Everything is all right,” and I think . . . she should know.

The Whisker of a Tigress

Jin drove to Old City. I wanted to shop at the flea market in the basement of the Hua Bao Lou Building. Because Jin couldn't find a place to park, he dropped me off as close to the building as he could.

When I step down the stairs leading to the basement market, it smells musty as usual. I walk down the first aisle on my right, only because I hadn't been down this aisle for some time. When I am almost to the end of the aisle, there is a little shop with two sales counters pushed together. These counters are set three-feet away from the wall. On one of the counters, there is a six-inch high statue of a young man standing with his hand on the neck of a tiger. On the forehead of the tiger is the Chinese character of *Wang*, 王, which is a family name and means *royal*. I assume that the statue refers to a Chinese myth.

The merchant sees me admiring the statue, and in heavily accented English, he says, "You like?"

I look at his kind eyes and rest my forearms on his counter. I decide to skip the game of pretending that I don't speak Chinese and say, "*What is the story of this statue.*"

He says, "*If I tell you the story, will you buy it?*" Standing behind his high counter, he smiles at me.

"*If I like the story, I will like the statue,*" I say.

He leans on his counter with both of his forearms, too, as if to settle in for a long conversation with a friend. A few Chinese people gather around us. They are amused that I speak Chinese and have blonde hair. The merchant looks at my eyes. "*You have dark green eyes. Very beautiful. Very rare. Your mother is a goddess, right?*"

I am pretty sure that he isn't asking me a serious question, but I answer him anyway. "*Thank you for the compliment. No, no. My mother is not a goddess.*" Some of the people in the gathering crowd want to see my eyes, but he waves them off so they won't bother me.

"*Please tell me the story of this statue,*" I say.

He closes his eyes to search his memory and says, "*The man in the statue loves the most beautiful girl in the village. Actually, this girl, Song, is the most beautiful girl to have ever been born. Of course, all the young men in the village want to marry her, but none of them dare to ask for her to be his wife, except for one young man. His name is Qian.*"

"*When Qian is of marrying age, he asks his father to arrange a marriage for him with Song. His father tells him, 'Qian, you don't have what it takes to be married to Song. Let her be.'*"

"*Qian tells his father, 'If Song cannot be my wife, I will marry no one and die of a broken heart.' What else can a father do but see if a marriage can be arranged?*"

"*Qian's father knocks on the door where Song lives and asks to speak to Song's father. Song's father invites him into his home and pours some tea for him. After some polite conversation, Qian's father says, 'My son would like to marry your beautiful daughter. He tells me that he will have no one else for a wife. If he does not marry your daughter then I am afraid he will die of a broken heart.'*"

"*Song's father says, 'I am sorry to hear of your son's determination because there is no young man who has what it takes to be with her. Song would only give your son heartache.' But after much discussion, Song's father relents and allows the marriage*"

to take place.

Song is indeed most beautiful with long black hair, green eyes, a beautiful shape, and a graceful walk. The villagers say that she can heal someone with her smile—if she chooses to smile.

“The day of the wedding arrives, and Song becomes Qian’s wife. Qian takes his bride to a little house on the edge of the village, and as the sky darkens, he lies down on their bed and says, ‘Song, come to bed now.’ Song sits in a chair, unmoved and unsmiling. Qian hopes he will have better luck tomorrow night.

“On the following evening, when Qian lies down on their bed, he says, ‘Song, come to bed.’ Song rises from her chair. She warms water on the kitchen fire and fills a large wooden bath bowl. Her dress drops from her shoulders. She steps into the large bowl, and as she stands there, she pours water over her hair as Qian watches from their wedding bed. Qian hopes he will have better luck tomorrow night.

“The following evening, Qian lies down on their bed and says, ‘Please, Song, come to bed with your husband.’ Song gets up from her chair and opens the front door. She goes over to the bed, plucks Qian up by the collar of his nightshirt with one hand and grabs his shoes with the other. She throws the shoes and Qian out the door. She shuts the door with a slam.

“Qian walks to his parents’ house and knocks on the door. Qian’s father greets his son at the door. Over tea, Qian tells his father what has happened and says, ‘Father, I don’t know what to do.’

“Qian’s father pours more tea into his son’s cup, and with a weary sigh, he says, ‘My son, you don’t have what it takes to be with her, but perhaps there is one thing you can do. When it is daylight, go to the Buddhist monk who lives at the foot of Tiger Mountain. Perhaps he can advise you.’

“After Qian has walked for several hours, a wooden shack comes into view. Qian knocks on the door several times. When no one answers, he peers inside. With a prayer mala in his hand, the monk is sitting in front of his fire pit, meditating and levitating a few inches off the floor. Qian sits across from the monk and waits for him to open his eyes.

“The monk’s body levels to the floor. ‘Qian, what do you want?’

“‘I have come for your advice. I have taken a wife, and she hates me.’

“‘Ah, yes. The beautiful Song with the dark green eyes. She does not hate you.’ The monk puts his finger to the side of his nose. ‘The problem is . . . you do not have what it takes to be with her.’

“Qian’s body slumps. ‘I know this now, but what can I do?’

“The monk again puts his finger to the side of his nose. ‘You must go up Tiger Mountain and find the she-tiger who rules the mountain. Bring back one of her whiskers without harming her.’

“Qian’s eyes show fear, and he says, ‘But the she-tiger has eaten many villagers.’ The monk shrugs his shoulders, picks up his prayer mala, and begins to chant.

“Qian searches and searches for the she-tiger—until one day—he sees her. He watches her as she pounces on her prey and tears it to bits. From this day on, he follows her wherever she goes, and then one afternoon, during the heat of the day, he stands only a foot away from her. His heart is beating so hard that he can hear pounding in his ears.

“The she-tiger sniffs him. While fearing for his life, he puts out his hand and

touches her head. As he feels the softness of her fur, she begins to chuff. Then she pushes her head hard against him, lies down at his feet, and takes a nap.

Qian pets her tummy while she sleeps and whispers sweet words in her ear. The she-tiger's paws are as large as platters, and her claws, which she flexes in her sleep, are as long as chopsticks.

"From this day on, Qian stays by the she-tiger's side while she takes her nap. He strokes her fur and whispers in her ear. He tells her how much he admires her, how beautiful she is . . . and how much he loves her.

"Then one day, Qian reminds himself that he must have one of her whiskers, and on this day, as she sleeps, he whispers in her ear, 'My dearest beauty, may I cut off one of your whiskers?' She opens one eye. She closes one eye. Qian takes out his knife and cuts off one of her whiskers. The she-tiger opens one eye. She closes one eye. Qian secures her precious whisker in his pocket.

"He remains by her side, strokes her face and her ears, touches her foreleg, and lifts her heavy paw. As he is petting her tummy for the last time, he whispers in her ear, 'My magnificent she-tiger, you are beautiful. I love you, and now I must leave you.'

"As Qian stands up to leave, she awakens and begins chuffing. Qian stokes her face and her ears. He puts his hands on the sides of her head and smooths his palms over her eyes. She closes her eyes, twitches her whiskers, and chuffs. She does this when she especially likes something Qian does.

"He puts his arm around her neck, kisses her forehead, and turns away from her. She is still chuffing as he begins to walk. Tears that are like rocks on his heart flow out his eyes—eyes that have seen her for the last time. He wonders if she watching him as he walks away. He sees her face and her eyes in his mind.

"After walking for several hours, he reaches the monk's door and knocks and knocks and knocks. Finally, Qian pokes his head through the doorway. The monk is in front of his fire, meditating and levitating. Qian sits across from the monk and waits.

"When the monk opens his eyes, he says, 'Do you have something for me?' Qian gives the whisker to the monk who examines the whisker and throws it in the fire. The monk says, 'Return to your wife. Now you have what it takes to be with her.'"