

KARTIKA REVIEW

QIHUA'S OXEN
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I wish I could claim to be from a mountain village in Southern Hubei, but given my name and the language I'm writing in, that would take some fairly brazen imposture. I would have to move now or a dozen years ago to Chenzhou, study a no-doubt-incomprehensible dialect and settle in as a crazy old white man, one would get older earlier there, and all without a lick of farming skills. All I could hope for would be that with time the people there would take pity on me, feed me, talk to me, accept me, if only as an oddity. Though even under ideal circumstances the authorities would never give me a proper visa for such dubious, unprofitable pursuits, would eventually properly deport me, a kook, likely just as I was beginning to master colorful idioms.

And so, exceptionally, I won't lie, I'll assume no one's identity, I'll tell the truth, or something close to it (I already changed his name, just out of respect, not that I think it likely the story will get back to him or that you couldn't render the Romanization into dozens of different character combinations, or that by simply suppressing the surname I couldn't be referring to literally thousands of people from Southern Hubei), because I am not from near Chenzhou and never have been. But Qihua told me things worth retelling, and I swear solemnly—I have nothing more solemn than my word, devout little agnostic that I am—that if I ever receive a few pennies for these lines, which I won't, but if I did, then I would try to go find Qihua in his cousin's tea shop and give him half of what he deserves for the story, if it's a story. After all, I did the typing.

It came to pass as follows: I was walking down a street in central Shanghai when it occurred to me that I would soon fly home and should probably piece together some all-sorts Christmas Chinesery for the folks back home. Being Shanghai, there were (even at ten o'clock in the evening) various places where some convincingly gift-like articles could be procured. One shop had a few teapots in the display window, among which a fascinatingly ugly pink thing with a spout so large it looked like it might have been crossed with a bong. This was more than enough to pique my interest and when on top of it I saw Qihua behind the desk, sipping tea and reading a magazine and looking bored out of his skull and friendly, I decided to go in.

The ceramic toad on the shelf proved an excellent icebreaker. The meaning of this article had previously been explained to me by other teashop owners and attendants, but my memory is weak and there is no end to the questions one can ask about a toad, explanations may vary on account of region or level of expertise, which is nice because erroneous or mutated information is often more fruitful. Qihua rose at my toad-question and began to answer it, hasty and eager and faltering and revolving the clay amphibian in his hands.

He was smiling, indeed he was one of those young men who never leave off smiling, whenever I meet such a person I wonder if this is some kind of defense mechanism or if it is genuine bliss, a permanent high for the winners of some neurochemical lottery. Can there really be people whose happiness is without derivation or deviation? Can it last? Old men who smile all the time would perforce seem more calculating. But youth can convincingly be, or at least appear, gormless, artless and carefree.

Qihua explained, dialectally lisping all the way, that this was a “golden toad,” which eats but doesn’t excrete (he glanced down in embarrassment here; excretion is presumably the furthest degree of his indiscretion), Converting the food instead into money. It was made of Yixing clay, but he thought these dots on the back might be copper, and I saw no reason to disagree with his diagnosis. And, ooh, did I see the Big Dipper in the pattern of toad spots? I didn’t but said I did, it seemed tactful, the idea had just occurred to him and it was obvious that it struck him as delightful. And why not agree? What dots can you fail to imagine a Big Dipper out of? Some of the spots were raised more highly than others, and we ran our fingers over its back, taking turns, in joint awe at small things, at textures and toads and tea and random encounters.

Qihua’s smile broadened again, like the toad was a precious pet he had personally trained. Just how had Qihua ended up in Shanghai? Or, more to the point, how had he remained as nice, as patient, quiet and forthcoming as he was, in Shanghai? He said he had been there only a month, and that was half an explanation. His cousin had summoned him to come from Chenzhou.

So he was from Chenzhou?

Yes, he was from Chenzhou. Well, from a county belonging to Chenzhou. No, not the county seat. From a town. A mountain village, really. Yes, the dialect was quite different. Oh, no—not interesting at all—embarrassingly vulgar. He clearly did *not* think that each dialect had its special charm, but also considered it rude to contradict me point-blank. He had never been to

Shanghai before his cousin had sent for him. Nor to any other big city. He had been to Chenzhou, but what was there in Chenzhou? I mentioned a theatre I knew of there, but this he didn't know, though he smiled and nodded as if he thought it very likely there was one. Some mountains there were very famous, and these I didn't know. Surely I had heard of Suxian Mountain? No? Well, I should go. It had been designated a scenic spot, by the government.

But the fifteen hours on the train had not been pleasant. Yes, even a little bit hard; he was willing to go that far, though even the word "hard" was delivered with real cheer. How did he find Shanghai? He found Shanghai big. He cooked at home and lived around the corner. I asked about a restaurant I had heard of, very nearby, but he couldn't give me directions to the street; he looked slightly abashed, and I realized he might not have got around much in the city. Without spending money, Shanghai or anywhere else must easily shrink to a few stores, to a block or two, to the people from Chenzhou your cousin knows. I suppose New York had been like that once for my ancestors when they got off Ellis Island speaking only Swedish or Yiddish or whatnot and settled in hardscrabble language islands of a few blocks squared. Perhaps I was smack in the middle of the Shanghai Chenzhou enclave and didn't even know it.

Was I thinking of the toad for a Christmas present? Well, maybe for my sister. She might like it. A knickknack to place on her college dorm desk in Sackville, New Brunswick. Would it become the first, the only golden toad of Sackville? I wondered, but then decided I was overcrediting uniqueness. After all, many Sackvillers have been to China, and in China many of them must have entered teashops. Qihua quite agreed with me. He seemed pleased with himself for making the connection between December, a foreigner, a purchase and Christmas. For piecing it all together.

Did people give Christmas presents in China nowadays? Oh, yes. Not just in Shanghai? Oh no, at his boarding school in Chenzhou City—there had been no high school in the village—the boys hung their smelly socks on the bedposts for each other to put presents in. What kind of things? Little diaries, stationery, comic books, that kind of thing. Oh, yes, Qihua had both received and given such gifts.

Winter was cold and often they had to sleep together to keep warm. It was too far south for heating in the dorms. There was no weirdness. He laughed at the mere idea of weirdness. But they loved snow there, because there was never snow; people love the rare, also the missing altogether. He told me, correctly, that I did not love snow. Meanwhile, I couldn't get over the smelly

socks, and went into little conniptions of laughter at the idea of the ersatz Santa Clauses and the fetid stockings.

Qihua was astonished to learn that in my home we didn't have stockings at all. It was nothing deliberate, I assured him, it is always unpleasant to disillusion, but we didn't have a fireplace and it had never occurred to anyone to fake it. That's what I told him; actually, it was a fib. We have always had stockings with our names threaded in or written in gilt pen, hung in front of the fireplace which my parents use every winter. I don't quite know why I lied—perhaps that small shameless need to spur conversation or take on preeminence by surprising and countering and arrogating. And of course it's true that many people don't have stockings; at least I claimed something credible. Though untrue.

It did look for a second like Qihua thought I was trying to pull his leg, but then his natural trust and goodness won out, and he smiled, I suppose he rearranged his thinking very slightly on the matter. If I insisted, he was perfectly happy to believe in stockingless Christmases. Who knew what other wonders nature concealed? I felt a disproportionate shame. In any case, his socks persisted. Nothing I could say could negate the existence or recollection of his Christmas socks.

Did he work the day also? No, his cousin's wife and his cousin worked until nine, and then he came in and stayed as long as he liked. It was not hard work. Not many people buy teapots at midnight, even in Shanghai, and that's why he liked my company. No, no, certainly not, I wasn't deterring business by sitting there and chatting with him. His cousin said it was good for business just to stay open. Good for the business to get some air. Good for him to get some experience. He poured more tea into our tiny cups. He repositioned the toad on the tea tray.

Was he a second son? No, no, the only. Then wasn't he needed at home? Well, his father was healthy, and wanted his son to see the city, and give it a try. His family had land? Yes, of course, what had I thought? The question authentically astonished him. Maybe where he was from it was unclear what a landless person would do, what a landless person might be. No doubt some kind of sorry non-entity. I suppose land is still a pretty basic prerequisite in some places.

Was planting and reaping mechanized? Oh no, they had oxen. Did their oxen have names? No. No? Then how could they be told apart? Well, there's the yellow male, and the spotted female, and the little one that they think is their offspring. Don't they know? Of course they knew about the mother, ha ha; the

father was more of a surmise. The oxen roam. It could in principle be some other male. Isn't there a danger of roaming oxen being stolen? Well, there aren't that many people on the mountain. And it didn't happen, ox-theft? Never? Well, not usually. So it had happened once!

It had happened, once. They hadn't figured out who had done it? No, no. It wasn't reported. Why not? Qihua quoted a proverb I didn't know. He had to write it down before I understood. Losing property allows you to avoid disaster. At least there's a superstition to that effect, he explained apologetically. You say that whenever you lose something; that way you don't feel bad about it. That's why they never reported the loss of the ox. It would have been bad luck. That was all? That was all. Surely they guessed who had done it? Well, haha, in any case they hadn't reported it. I waited for elucidation, but that was the end of the story.

And I felt frustrated and gratified that I would never come closer to a story of ox-theft than what he had just told me. I would never climb into the mind of a person who thought it would be bad luck to report the theft of an ox. I could spend a year in his mountain village and never find out more about it and be foolish for wanting to know. I could write a dissertation about oxen-theft in Chenzhou, or a novel about a family feud, played out in cattle-rustling and slaughter, and I was grateful that I was old enough now that I wouldn't have to, that I could let it go at that, to leave Chenzhou to the secrets it didn't think were secrets.

Chenzhou seemed a thousand miles away. I wonder what they sang there? And what stories did they tell? If I went there, it would be cold in winter without heating, and the comparatively wealthy people would have televisions and watch them and the less affluent people would gossip about people I wouldn't know, in dialect, and the old folks would say—my *father* could have told you a story to blow your mind; my *aunt* was a singer they came from four counties to hear. People all over the world now have become the children and nieces of old traditions, we only have the listeners left, old children who might still recognize and appreciate things, but can no longer perform them or speak them. Soon our generation will accede, to become these wistful old people, our minds full of things that were around when we were young.

So he would need to go home someday? To take over the land? Well, maybe. He wouldn't have to go home if he made a great great deal of money. He smiled, and for some reason that made the blow harder to take.

A great great deal of money. Oh Qihua, Qihua! I wish I had some real power, that anyone did, that you could remain as you are, that your vague illusions wouldn't need to be broken down by the elements and the harshness of human nature and the cutthroat geography of Shanghai and the experience of your cousin and the modest value of Yixing clay. I would hate to see bitter lines form around your mouth or cynicism to creep into your eyes. I know you are likely not innocent in the old boring ways—I think the girls will have fallen all over you already—spiky hair, melting eyes, shy manner, generous nature—but inside, *that* is the real and valuable innocence, the total lack of coarseness or malice, the unwillingness to be disobliging, the belief in a world where there is no contradiction in wishing everyone well. There ought to be some place where you might be protected and maintained and not forced to age. And it's an old and impossible desire, I know, but it broke my sentimental muscle to hear of the great, great money you will one day earn, even though you need neither my pity nor my affection nor my ridiculous dreamy arrogance and it perhaps is enough that you were once the way you are now, for another young man will come to Shanghai when we are both old men and he will come just as you are, touched only by an ambition too hopefully vague to be culpable of anything. For now you are whole and you bid me goodbye and to come back often and in my heart of hearts I know there are only so many stories about dorm socks and oxen that I will care to hear and really neither of us knows much about tea. But you've got to think these are the high points, at least for me they are, Qihua probably goes right back to work, doing nothing in particular, reading a magazine and pouring himself more Pu'er tea, forgetting about me right away, and perhaps *I* am the innocent, innocence backwards, so jaded I am naïve again, blind to the fact signs he may indeed one day be a great businessman. After all, I bought the toad, didn't I? Yes, I bought a coin-clamping little toad, which promised to turn dung to gold. Take that, philosopher's stone.

And a couple days later it occurred to me that the word probably means, in Hubei province, not oxen but buffalo. Maybe. Water buffalo, and not oxen at all.



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