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A Call to China

Daoism in Modern American Fiction

JEFFREY MEYER

I began graduate studies at University of Chicago in 1966, in theology. By the end of the first year I decided against theology and joined the field called History of Religions, studying with Mircea Eliade, Charles Long, and Joseph Kitagawa. Deciding that Chinese religions was my first interest, I began taking classes in Classical Chinese, learning the language in the backwards fashion championed by H. G. Creel. I studied the first year with a disciple of his, then under Edwin Kracke for the second year. Finally, in the third year, I began to learn spoken Mandarin.

After finishing basic class work, I left for Taiwan in 1971 to study at the Stanford Center in Taipei until the end of 1972. I completed my dissertation and graduated in fall of 1973, beginning at the same time my teaching career at University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

I did research in visual aspects of Buddhism, studied a sectarian group in Taiwan that practiced spirit-writing, and continued my work on Beijing as a sacred city. Already in the 1980s I had the desire to work on a subject that would be of interest to ordinary Chinese people, so I changed my focus to investigating how Chinese were attempting to carry on their ancient moral tradition in public schools, first in Taiwan, then in the PRC. It worked. While left speechless by the sacred city ideas, almost everyone I talked to was eager to discuss the (Confucian) morality as it was presented in textbooks and classrooms.

In the early 1990s, I was asked to be chair of the department, so I gathered a lot of research material, mostly mountain histories of Wutai-

shan, which had become the focus of my interest. I worked on that material as much as I could during the next three or four years, enjoying especially the numinous interventions and miraculous stories sections of the histories. In 1996 I was diagnosed with emphysema, and I realized that I would never be able to actually go to Wutaishan. That ended my interest in pursuing the research. I found I couldn't do it as purely bookish endeavor.

I had expanded my dissertation on Beijing a few years earlier, and this work was published as *Dragons of Tian'anmen* by the University of South Carolina Press in 1991. A few years later, I chanced to meet Jane Freundel Levey in Washington, the editor of the journal *Washington History*. She had spent some years in China, and we talked about the similarities between the two capitals, Washington and Beijing. She wanted a comparative article on the subject, which I wrote, and this work led me eventually to publish, in 2001, *Myths in Stone*, a study of the symbolism of architecture and planning of our capital.

I retired from teaching in 2008, having had, in retrospect, a rather scattershot career in all sorts of subjects. I thought about continuing in one or another of those fields, but eventually realized that, because of the limitations in the academic study of religions, I felt led to try fiction instead. I have loved every minute of it, feeling engaged in a way that I had not felt before, a work that engaged my heart as well as my mind. The result is this novel, *A Call to China*.

The Novel

The beginnings of this novel go back to 1988, when my wife and I began to discuss the possibility of adopting a child. I was uncertain about it until we thought about a Chinese child and the rightness of it struck me suddenly and powerfully. Of course! It was not the result of a rational process but an intuitive "given." That realization helped me to understand that my love for China couldn't be completely described through academic and scholarly endeavors, but needed a more emotional expression. So we did adopt Julia, now 28, shown below at age 16, with me before a portrait of Mao at Tian'anmen. And although I was not able to write fiction until I retired, I have been happily doing so ever since.

Summary and Plot

A Call to China tells the story of a missionary family that goes to China in 1935—Harold and Adele Wayman and their recently born daughter Victoria. In 1940 they visit the colorful and chaotic New Year festival at White Cloud Temple in Beijing. Victoria is kidnapped by a sectarian group called *Siyishe*, the FourOnes, and she is never found. The following year a second daughter, Olivia, is born. After Pearl Harbor, the Japanese occupiers force Americans and Europeans into the Weixian detention camp, where tensions between Harold and Adele begin to signal the end of their marriage. After the war, Harold remains in Beijing, Adele takes Olivia back to the States and the little girl conceives, in a childish way, the idea of returning to China to find her missing sister.

The novel is a *Bildungsroman*, the story of the growth, education and maturing of the two sisters, Victoria (given the name Bu'er by the FourOnes) in rural China, Livia in urban America. Bu'er's challenge is to

find a true leadership role among the FourOnes. Livia becomes a teacher, an anthropologist, focusing on women's religious leadership, which she begins to study in Taiwan. After much procrastination, Livia finally determines that she will return to China with the explicit aim of searching for her lost sister. The final part of the novel follows her attempt to find Victoria, and becomes for both sisters a spiritual quest, a kind of pilgrimage which ends at Wutaishan, the northern mountains sacred to Buddhists.

Below, to provide a taste, is a reprint of chapter 24. I picked it because of its Daoist content. The FourOnes are a sectarian group modeled on the Celestial Masters tradition. The first part of the reading is meant to evoke Zhuangzi, his irony and gentle humor, his frequent use of animals—fish, butterflies, sea birds, roosters, etc.—as pointers to wisdom. The second part uses the yin/yang paradigm to interpret the fate of the FourOnes in eloquent terms that win the respect of Bu'er's sectarian followers.

Chapter 24: Finding a Teacher

Shanxi. Spring 1983.

Bu'er's day was taken up with visiting some of her patients in the vicinity of Old Stonebridge. Along with other techniques learned during her training as a Barefoot Doctor, she had become a skilled bonesetter. On a windy and warm day in late May, she borrowed Heiyan's rusty bicycle to go see a patient. Old Mrs. Chin's place was a farm on the eastern edge of town, north of the road which followed the course of the Dasha River. The old lady was almost eighty, still in good health, but had fallen on a stone path above the farm two weeks ago and broken her tibia. Bu'er had set the bone and promised to return to check it.

As her bicycle bumped along the dusty road, Bu'er was aware of certain public improvements in the town. Mayor Ma had managed to hire some rural laborers to scrape and level the main street, filling the ruts and potholes that had made bicycle travel nearly impossible. Now it was possible. She noticed the earthen walls of many of the homes had been recently repaired, bricks inserted, and new mud spread over the holes and gaps where the old ones had fallen out.

The Jin family had opened a small noodle factory in the middle of town, and the Zheng family had started a knitting shop that produced multicolored hats and scarves. Some were kept for the local market, but most were boxed and shipped to Datong or Beijing for sale to tourists. As their business increased, the Zhengs had hired five elderly women from the village who were skilled knitters. There was talk that their increased production might allow them to expand to foreign markets, such as Japan. These were signs of a new prosperity under the "reform and opening" program of Deng Xiaoping.

Bu'er pedaled across the old bridge at the town center, glancing out at the muddy Dasha River that flowed by. A hazy sun was reflecting off its yellow waters. The location was now famous as the place where Mayor Ma had stood up to the rogue Red Guard brigade during the last days of the Cultural Revolution. Her own part in the event was conveniently forgotten.

The Stonebridge Party Committee had proposed a modest plaque to commemorate the event, over the objections of Mayor Ma, who warned of the dangers of a "personality cult." She knew that he also hated being reminded of this ugly chapter in his life. In the end, there was a compromise and a small plaque placed there which said merely *Bridge of Courage*, without mentioning the event or any names.

Bu'er continued on the road past the bridge, following the course of the river toward the east, until she came to the last house where Mrs. Chin lived and raised her pigs with spectacular success. Bu'er stopped and leaned her bicycle against the shoulder-high earthen wall, peering over at an enormous sow lying on the ground with distended teats nurturing nine or ten eagerly sucking piglets. She had to smile at the sight.

"Ai!" cried Grandma Chin when Bu'er touched the bruised skin above her cast. "You need to help me get on my feet, not poke at my sore spots."

"I've been told that before . . . I have a lot of unruly patients. You are doing well, but you should not try to go back to work. Use your cane and you can get around, but no heavy lifting. You are old now, Grandma, and your bones are not so strong anymore. They will be slow to mend."

"I have my business to keep up," complained the old lady. "I've had to hire Erdong, my niece's son. He's a strong fellow but I can't afford

to pay him much longer or he will eat up my profits, like the pigs gobble up their fodder."

"Your prospects are bright. From what I just saw, I can predict a nine- or tenfold increase in the near future." The old lady smiled proudly. Since old man Chin had died three years earlier, the pig business had got better, an unexpected improvement that puzzled her neighbors, who thought that Mrs. Chin, without a man's management skills, would have to sell her farm.

"Erdong," she shouted, "make some tea for the doctor and me. Bring the good cups." She turned her piercing eyes toward Bu'er and got back to the point. "How long till I'm up?"

"Perhaps six more weeks. I will come and check you every week. Maybe, if you have to let go of Erdong, I could find someone of the FourOnes to help you."

"Your people are kind, but I don't believe all that stuff about the gods and spirits speaking through old Granny Guzhi . . . have they started talking to you yet?"

Bu'er wasn't sure whether the old lady was being ironical, but she thought not. She sensed behind the question a sincere interest. "Grandma," she said, "that is a troublesome question." She paused briefly, swirling the tea leaves in her cup to make them sink. With her new prosperity, Granny Chin was now drinking a good grade of Iron Guanyin tea.

"The FourOnes have expected me to become one of their leaders for many years, but I do not often hear the voices. I have some understanding of things, but I do not know if that knowledge would be helpful to the FourOnes. The one thing I can do well is to diagnose and heal. I understand herbs and methods of treatment, as I have been taught by my teacher, Mingling. You know her. She has treated your husband. Guzhi has tried to teach me how to go to the spirits, but unlike the art of healing, I do not believe that can be taught."

Mrs. Chin look at her intensely and Bu'er was reminded of the beady eyes of a crane looking for frogs at the river's edge. "Maybe you have not found the right teacher."

"What do you mean? Are you saying that you could be my teacher?"

"Ha!" cackled the old lady. "I could teach you only about pigs . . . but there are many sorts of teachers under heaven and they do not all walk on two feet! My teachers are right outside the door."

"Who do you mean? Your neighbors?"

"No, the neighbors are the ones my late husband listened to. The things he learned were useful but they are not enough. When the neighbors were our teachers, we survived, but just barely. Now with my new teachers, my pigs have truly flourished and I have prospered."

"I see you are being deliberately mysterious. You want me to ask you—who are these teachers?"

"It's the pigs themselves. They are my teachers." Bu'er looked at the old lady's face more carefully, expecting her to laugh at her own joke, but she didn't. Was she becoming senile? "After old Chin died and I knew the responsibility was mine, I went to the pigs and asked them: 'What do you want, what makes you happy and fertile pigs?'"

"So you don't believe that Guzhi can talk to the spirits but think you can talk to the pigs!" she observed.

"I'm not an idiot. Of course, the pigs don't speak our language, so I took my time and observed them carefully. I watched them for hours and days at a time, listening to the sounds they made, their oinks and grunts, watching them look for water, for food, and a place of protection from the sun. I listened to their every sound, watched their every movement, and slow though I am, I finally learned from them. If you doubt this, look for yourself. The pigs are happy and fat, with many piglets. And I no longer just survive. My purse is getting fatter. I'd get fatter myself if I didn't have to work so hard."

"A wonderful story, but how does it apply to my situation?"

"That part is not so easy," she said, her arthritic fingers clasped around the rustic tea cup. "You must find your own teachers. You must think about your own needs and observe things carefully. Then you will find them and you will learn something."

Bu'er left Mrs. Chin, having promised to return the following week. As she rode the bicycle back toward the western part of the village, thinking over what the old lady had said, she began to consider the possibility that there was some reason in her crazy ramblings. She began to see some similarities between her words and what Mingling had taught her, years ago, about the virtue that resides in every creature, if you ob-

serve it carefully. But you must look beyond the humans, she thought, who have so many conflicting points of view: Confucians, Daoists, Buddhists, Communists, and Capitalists. Instead of studying these, she thought, you must study the other creatures who are always there, always the same, the creatures with legs, wings, fins, and even those who live but do not move, like herbs, grasses, and trees.

Bu'er, Heiyan, and Guzhi had gone to a farmhouse on the southern edge of a small town called Zhongduzhuang, some twenty miles west of Old Stonebridge. Government agents had been investigating them, so they moved their meetings from one home to another in different towns near the northeastern border of Shanxi Province. Traveling was a hardship, but better a moving target than a sitting duck.

The land around Zhongduzhuang was hilly and dry, the clay earth full of stones, very hard to farm successfully, so the enterprising townsfolk had taken up brickmaking, and stacks of crudely made bricks stood next to a kiln on the eastern edge of town. The first signs of prosperity had appeared, but the town was still too small to attract much attention and was a safe place for the Four Ones to meet. So they met in the home of one of the town's prosperous farmers.

A local member began by complaining to Heiyan. "The government has been harassing us, on and off, for many years, so we are always feeling anxiety. We do not receive clear directions from the spirits. You, our leaders, are getting old. You say that sister Bu'er will be our leader, but she brings us few messages from the spirits. Where do we go from here?"

Heiyan responded rather formally, intending to address the concerns of all those who had gathered. "Your questions are on the mark. I have given much thought to them myself, over the last years, especially since the death of Long Nail. I would summarize our situation as follows," he said, speaking in a voice loud enough to reach those crowded into the back of the room.

"We have made gains. We have created a network of members in six or seven counties, some here in Shanxi, some in western Hebei. Many

people have been drawn to the rules we live by," he said in a louder voice, fearing that some could not hear him.

"We respect the mountains, the waters, the land, and all growing things. We acknowledge with gratitude the gifts of Heaven and Earth. We do not seek riches. We do not seek power over others. Both men and women can be leaders among us. We do not harm humans or animals. We see all religions as ways to the same goal. We respect our ancestors and the great spirits. We follow their instructions. All these beautiful ideals have been heard and accepted by the people who have joined with us.

"But there have been serious losses, too. Three years ago, the Long Nail incident almost destroyed us. If Mayor Ma had not quickly shipped his body back to Fuping and declared him a suicide, we would have had the Shanxi provincial police or the People's Liberation Army on our backs. And worse by far than that were the wounds to our own society. We don't keep exact numbers but I think we lost half of our members because of his death. Many lost faith in our leadership and in our ability to contact the spirits, and we have not yet regained the number of those lost."

The heads of many of the listeners were nodding in agreement.

"Then there is the continuing problem that we cannot practice our principles openly. To speak the truth, we are like barren mules. We can pull our loads, but we are infertile and unable to reproduce ourselves. We exist only in the homes and hearts of our members. To obey the will of the spirits and to be really successful we must establish beautiful villages and towns that will create communities of harmony and peace."

Guzhi spoke up. "We have met so many obstacles over the years. First there were the war years, then there was the Great Leap Forward and the starvation, then the Cultural Revolution and the chaos. Then Long Nail. If the spirits want us to openly establish communities of peace," she asked Heiyan, "why have they not made it possible for us to do so?"

Heiyan answered in the simple way he usually did. "We must have faith."

Guzhi just shook her head. "We have been practicing faith and patience for a long time."

As the discussion continued, Bu'er listened carefully but did not speak, sensing that they were approaching a crisis.

"And now," Guzhi was saying, "the government is again seeking to destroy us."

"This has happened before. We must remain faithful through all the tribulation," suggested Heiyan, "leaving the time of our success to the decision of the spirits."

"Those are the sentiments of a young man," said Guzhi. "You may have years left to go through yet another affliction and strength to continue the work. But I do not. I am almost eighty." Some of the older leaders shook their heads in agreement, as though some general spirit of weariness had descended upon them all.

"Hardly a young man," Heiyan responded. "I am seventy years from my mother's womb. I too wonder when the time will come . . . But what are we to do now? We have asked the ancestors and the spirits and their answers have not been clear." A silence fell over the room.

Finally, Bu'er spoke. "Mingling," she began, "although she is not a member of our family, has taught me much."

"Mingling is not one of us," Guzhi said in her typically abrupt fashion. "She is a good person, but she does not understand our ways and has not joined our society. I do not think she has answers for us."

"She has been my teacher for so many years," said Bu'er, undeterred by the criticism, "as have you and Heiyan. But you are right, she does not see herself as belonging to any group. The nuns of Yindong'an thought she would join them and she did not. We have hoped she would join us, but she has not. What I can say is that she is committed to the people and the cause of their health, and that is no small thing. It is just that now the Barefoot Doctors are no longer needed, so her service takes a different form."

"I sometimes think," sighed Guzhi, "that Mingling is the only true communist left in China!"

Heiyan gave a rare laugh. "You had better not let that opinion get back to the comrades in Beijing." There were general chuckles among those present.

"I will continue my thought," said Bu'er, bringing them back to the issue at hand. "Mingling is wise about the world. She has opened my eyes, and taught me to learn from the creatures around us. . . We live in a

vast world, all of Heaven and Earth and everything they embrace. We humans are only one of the legions of creatures that dwell in them. We say that we follow the Way, but it was Mingling who taught me how to discern it.

"You look at a humble thing like a cicada, or a garlic plant, or any growing thing. Your eyes tend to pass over them so quickly, and you dismiss them as just an insect, just a clump of grass. But if you look closely, you see that each is a world in itself. You look carefully at the wings of that cicada and see a fabric translucent like glass, more delicate and more beautiful than any human embroidery.

"You look at a bird's egg and you see a vessel more perfect than the finest Song dynasty porcelain. What I see most clearly, among all living things, is an order and a pattern."

The members of FourOnes listed to Bu'er in wonder, for they had never heard her speak at such length and with such eloquence before.

"Cycles of yin and yang," she continued, "growth and decline. Our society has had its cycles, too. We must observe them carefully. We have grown and been diminished, and now begin to grow again. It would be all too human to assume that this growth is destined to continue without pause. But the law of life around us is one of cycles, of growth and decay, expansion and contraction, life and death.

"The recent changes in our nation are astonishing. Who knows how far they may go? Perhaps, for the good of the FourOnes, we must begin to think in longer spans of time. We must accept that now is not time for advance but retreat, to hide ourselves once again among the people until the time is right.

"A few years, one way or the other, is nothing. Larval insects dig their way under the ground, to rest, to wait, to gain strength, some for a year's time, some for many years. Like the cicada, when the time is right, they will emerge, with wings! The garlic plant withers and retreats into the bulb that is protected by the soil from the winter cold, so that it can grow more strongly in the spring. Is this not the message for our society as well? The cycles of increase and decrease, activity and rest, growth and decline, will continue all around us, each according to its own nature. Are we alone exempt from the Way?"

The FourOnes present were stunned. When Bu'er had ceased speaking, there was a respectful silence that held as the group looked at her

with new eyes. In a way, she was affirming the advice of Heiyan, but she did it with eloquence and was able to relate it to realities all around them.

"I do not mean to be so formal," she added, almost apologetically. "What I am trying to say applies to everything, even the humblest of things. It applies even to raising pigs, as I have recently learned from Granny Chin, but I will spare you the lecture on pigs."

In her own heart Bu'er knew that although the spirits had not spoken to her directly, the words she had said came to her lips without any effort on her part. She did not have to think what to say.

Guzhi looked at her, and sensed a confidence that she had never seen before. She was moved, feeling a smarting in her eyes. Was she about to weep or was that just the pain of tired eyes? The older she got, the more easily she wept. She thought of the little foreign ghost they had taken from her parents many years ago, so fragile yet so strong.

They had tried to protect her, to nourish her as a gift from the spirits, the one who was to be their leader. It was as if this long history, with all its ups and downs, was pointing to this very moment. The time of her leadership was near, and she would awaken something new in their hearts and minds. She could feel it. Bu'er had faced down the Red Guards at Old Stonebridge, and now she had begun to speak to the FourOnes with understanding and authority.