

THE BIRDS OF NANJING

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I arrive midafternoon at Nanjing Airport. It is December, 1991, but the airport has yet to modernise. Just like Hobart Airport was – well after 1991, I fear – you snatch your bag from a trolley and stroll 50 metres or so to the gate. I hear a faintly remembered buzz overhead ... what, surely not a Tiger Moth? No, but something similar: a large, heavy biplane is flying low and slow, any slower and it would drop. In the 1990s, we oldies always got a touch of *déjà vu* in China: the hotel rooms with heavy drab furnishings, nib pen with inkwell, a feeling wartime austerity, recalling the era of the biplanes. The large cities – and Nanjing is a large city – are very different now, nearly twenty years later (see ‘Shanghai and Thereabouts’).



We are taken by bus to Nanjing Normal University. It is near the centre of town, but the roads are under repair, we drive carefully, dodging road-works and large puddles. As we approach the campus, we see a large banner strung across the street, making a statement in English and in Chinese: *Nanjing Normal University Gives a Very Warm Welcome to our Distinguished International Visiting Scholars!* A street food stall is opposite the campus gates,

We check in at the campus accommodation for nonChinese visitors. Basic, okay, but US\$10 more per night than the original brochure indicated. Ah well, Hong Kong U is paying for it and it's still only \$A45 or so.

We have the usual ten or dozen course banquet. Student waiters bring endless bottles of passable beer to help it all down. I am delighted to see my old friend, Robbie Case from OISE, in Toronto, Canada and friendly enemies, John and Daphne Keats, now both retired from Newcastle University. We catch up over several beers.

But not too many; I need to return to my room and read the conference materials. There's a knock on the door. I open it to find a girl standing there. She has an attractive face, large tilted eyes, a lightly freckled nose, a wave of hair with the two tails trailing below her shoulders.

‘I am a translator,’ she says in excellent English. ‘I wish to discuss your paper? Very urgent. Tomorrow I translate for you.’

¹ Regrettably, I did not bring my usual camera and did not take many photographs relevant to the story.

This disturbing girl and I sit on my bed. We discuss how to translate some technical terms she hadn't understood. But another quite different thought occurs at this unusual visit. Could she be another Dr. Fung? This is more like it, if so! My juices rush for an instant. But hey, what a disaster if she's not and I, er...² This is the highly moralistic PRC, after all.

Out of the question.

The papers next morning are all in Chinese. I and two others are the only nonChinese present at this session. There are three translators, as pictured, including my visitor of last night. The Chairman decides that instead of the usual procedure of alternating Putonghua and English, the translators whisper the English translation into our ears.



My visitor of last night, smelling faintly of garlic and a tantalising fragrance I can't name, whispers closely into my ear. She asks questions, ensuring I have understood. The papers are excruciatingly boring.



But I am enthralled.

* * *

A few months earlier at Hong Kong U, I had had a courtesy visit from a Professor Wu, Vice President of Nanjing Normal University. He was drumming up enthusiasm for an International Conference on Educational Measurement they were hosting in December. Would I come and give a paper?

'Sorry, not my field,' I replied. I'd already seen the flier and decided I didn't want to go.

He nodded, as if to say that was fine by him. 'Now I would like to discuss your work.'

Visitors from the Mainland like to keep up with what their colleagues in Hong Kong might be doing. I tell him about the SOLO Taxonomy, how we are using it to structure the assessment of different secondary school subjects.³ When we'd finished, he returned to the subject of the Conference.

² See 'The Generosity of Dr. Fung' on 'Traveller' page of this website

³ Click 'SOLO Taxonomy' on the 'Academic' page of this website.

‘If we arranged a workshop on the SOLO Taxonomy, in several secondary subjects of your choosing, involving curriculum officers and teachers, would you be interested then? Nanjing could become the Chinese Centre for your work!’

Well, well. That *does* tip the balance! ‘In that case, yes, I would be very interested. Perhaps my conference paper could be compulsory background for the attending teachers... It would be helpful if they could be released to attend my paper, if that is possible.’

‘Yes, yes, of course!’

‘And we could do the workshop immediately following the Conference itself, while I am still there and it is all fresh in their minds.’

So it was agreed.

* * *

The second night is the conference dinner, followed by a concert given by the music students of the University. The dinner is an even splendid banquet than last night’s; interesting food, different from Cantonese, full flavoured, oily, some spice but not as blasting as Szechuan. Never ending bottles of beer vie with a wonderful rice wine of hideous strength. John Keats and I drink copiously to old times. Once seriously in competition, we are this evening the best of friends. Suddenly the organisers appear: ‘The concert! You must leave for the concert. Special for you.’

Given my recent intake of this very pissable beer, with no time for easing the pressure, I decide to sit in the back row of the concert hall so I can sneak out quietly for the pee that is due any moment.

‘No, you sit in front!’ Professor Wu comes up to me, and seizing my arm, he drags me to the front. ‘You distinguished visitor. We have armchair here for you.’ I am steered forcefully into an armchair in the very front row, with nice lace doilies draped on the arms. I am hemmed in to the bitter end.

The concert, given by the Music School, treats us to some traditional Chinese music, some Western. The singers of Western music are mainly tenors and sopranos and marvellous voices they are too; they’d win a place in any opera company. The programme looks interestingly different. There is an aria called ‘Puccini’, composed by a Nessun Dorma; another is called ‘Verdi’, by D. Quella Pira.

But within minutes my attention is diverted from the music to the hydraulic pressures building rapidly from within. To leave would be a grave solecism. After one hour, I’m in pain; after two, I’m in agony. But we’re onto the last item, so I boil it still further. At the final

round of applause, to hell with protocol or polite thank yous, I leap from my armchair with its pretty doilies and race for the exit. I've no idea where our quarters are, or any other toilets. I see a student residence. There must be a loo there. But it's a female dormitory. Shrieks from female staff, stern admonitions in Putonghua from finger-pointing slab-faced guardians, unsurprised a depraved Westerner would so blatantly prey on virtuous Chinese girls.

I speed on my bursting way. The bushes are brightly lit, but the bushes it will have to be. At least indecent exposure is a lesser charge than attempted rape. Creeping behind a tree, I look up – and there is the main building. Toilets!

The following night, I walk to town. I pass a bird market where men are buying birds in cages, just like you see in Hong Kong. I find out later, as shall the reader, that it is nothing like Hong Kong. I walk past a nice canal and then on to the city centre. Someone had said the Nanjing Hotel has an excellent restaurant. They were right. I have my best yet *kung bao* chicken, my favourite Szechuan-style dish, fiery hot and laced with roasted peanuts. The sauce is darker than usual, vinegary, with ginger more prominent. Sweet, sour, salty and spicy, in perfect Chinese harmony.



Returning to the university, my tongue and lips agreeably humming to that Chinese harmony, I pass through some pretty crummy areas. It is getting dark, and now I do feel a tad nervous. People lounge around, staring at this Long Nose walking along, alone. Passing one group, I am accosted by a girl in a heavy overcoat.

'Mister,' she calls.

I walk on.

'Mister, stop.'

Mugging is a crime, prostitution is a crime. I'd been told that ordinary citizens are scared stiff of the PLA and the police so that crime statistics are miniscule. That was in 1991. I certainly wouldn't walk the backstreets of a Chinese city now, or of an Australian city then or now, but I would in Hong Kong anytime. So what is this girl on about? Maybe she and her friends are at the point of inflection in the crime statistics. But which statistics: those for prostitution or those for mugging? I don't stop to find out.



Three days into the conference and still no word about my workshop. I only have two days to tee it all up. I'd already given my paper and I am certain there were no teachers from the Curriculum Department there. I seek out the contact person Professor Wu had nominated. My contact is evasive. 'Talk to me later. Now we are busy with the conference.'

Okay, I'd try again on the penultimate day. That would leave time. Just.

Next morning I go for a run. I explore the university grounds, pass a furnace room outside of which there are untidy piles of coal, black smoke trickles from the chimney and coal dust is thick for quite an area around. I see a back entrance to the campus. Going through, I find myself in a street, but further up the hill I see a park. I jog towards it. It is winter and the trees are bare of leaves. The smog has created a highly atmospheric mist. Pushing on, I come across an amazing sight, a beautiful sight. For instead of leaves, some trees have birds in little bamboo cages hanging from their lower branches. The Chinese love their birds. In Hong Kong, you often see old men walking their birds; they carry them in their little cages, just like these, talking to them. But that afternoon I discover when exploring the town that the old men in



Nanjing walk their birds rather differently. They tie a string around one leg, then let the bird out of its cage to fly round and round in despairing circles, their self-propelled toy aeroplane. The bird I now see in its smog-dusted cage will soon be released, her little heart full of what she thought was a promise of freedom...

Tonight is the last night of the Conference and I still haven't had any sort of reply about the promised workshop. I grab my contact and try some assertion this time. He is equally blunt. 'We have this important conference to attend to! How can we spare the time to organise a workshop? You must come again at some more suitable time.' He glares at me for my being so unreasonable as to expect such a thing.

I now know for myself what those Nanjing birds feel like, as they whirl in trapped circles.

