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A READER'S JOURNAL

Encounters with Chinese Writers

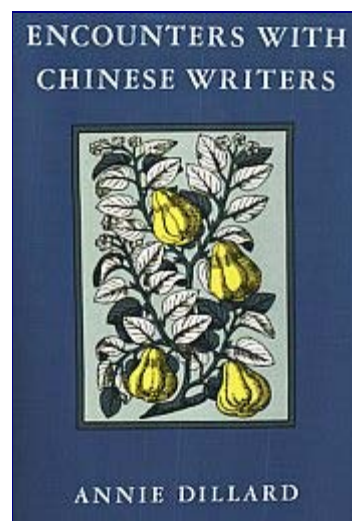
by
Annie Dillard

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2016

This author is my favorite non-fiction writer,
and there is no one who could better

summarize the contents of this book but Annie Dillard herself in her Introduction.



[page 7] These are only glimpses, not portraits; their subject is not China, and not even entirely Chinese writers, but a few vivid, equivocal moments in the days of some of earth's people in the twentieth century. What interests me here, and elsewhere is the possibility for a purified nonfiction narration — a kind of Chekhovian storytelling which might illuminate the actual world with a delicate light — coupled with humor in the American tradition and no comment.

The first vignette Annie gives us is of a Chinese man, Wu Fusan, who had a way of looking deeply into her eyes as if he were examining her soul. A friend, who was Italian but had lived in China for years and had close Chinese friends, said this was exactly how Chinese men acted.

[page 15] This is their great area of expertise. Have you read much Chinese literature? Most of it, for thousands of years, is about this one thing: the human spirit in all its depth and complexity. Whole stories hinge on some small human variation, some quirk of the interior life. There is nothing they do not already understand.

In one meeting someone asked the roomful of Chinese writers, "What are your goals as a writer?" (Page 20) She lists their responses, most of which are predictable, e.g., "Hold up a mirror to life" and "To write for the people." But one curious poem compared the Yellow River to a shroud and created a sensation!

[page 21] How patriotic is that? Even foreign writers have the sense to praise their rivers: the Mississippi, the Danube, the Don. What goals could possibly be served by running down the Yellow river with such a negative simile?

That last sentence conjured up the image of someone naked running down the Yellow River with only a smile on their face, and it inspired me to imagine people running down other rivers in various fashions.

Running Down the River Poem

Running down the Yellow River with only a smile,
Running down the Shenandoah, loving a daughter,

Running down the Nile from a crocodile,
Running down the Missouri, let them show me.

Running down the Tennessee, an old friend I happened to see,
Running down the Rio Grande with an escape plan,
Running down the Russian River with a hammer and a sickle,
Running down the Colorado, I'll be dammed!

Running down the Wailua, strumming my ukelele,
Running down the Mississippi with my blues guitar,
Running down the Potomac with a political hack,
Running down the Alabamy, a banjo on my knee.

Running down the Yellowstone with a grizzly behind,
Running Down the River Poem to the end of the line.

Annie Dillard was writing these stories three decades ago. The Chinese writers shared with her that everything they wrote was to serve their country's goal of modernization. It was the "function of every shoe in China, every tree, every television set, cartwheel, flywheel, airplane, ditch." (Page 22) Also the function of every writer.

[page 22] "I believe," says one man, "that after several decades we will be able to lead a good life on our soil." He is speaking of his goals as a writer, and he is addressing the point directly.

China has indeed reached the point of a good life in many ways. In America almost every shoe, TV, shirt, flywheel, and everyday item we buy has a China label on it. With their good life has come perhaps the worst smog on the planet. What London experienced during its coal-burning centuries, Los Angeles in the 1960s, China is experiencing now as it strives to power its industries with hydrocarbon energy sources.

Annie gives us a wonderful visual aid for understanding Chinese agriculture: look at your right palm to see the rivers of China flowing east, and along these rivers the narrow strips of good soil for planting crops. If China were the size of your palm, the arable areas would be the size of the dirt in the creases of your palm.

[page 23] There is good soil in China, too, on which peasants raise three and even four crops a year, and there are 2,000-acre fields, and John Deere tractors — but there is not enough. There are only some arable strips in the river valleys — only one-tenth of China's land. If you look at your right palm, you see a map of China: the rivers flow east, and most of the rest is high and dry; the arable land is like dirt collected in the lines of your palm.

She saw two men pulling a plow through the baked soil of an eggplant field and a third man guiding the plow's blade. Later she saw four women cleaning on the steps of an office building. They were bent over, one on each step.

[page 26] They were scratching dust from crevices between the steps' stone blocks. To accomplish this task, they were using toothpicks, and moving only their fingers.

Our interpreter turned, indicated them with a proud wave, and said, "Do you know how those women got their jobs?"

No, we didn't. (Was it something they said?)

"They *knew* somebody!" He was happy to explain. "Each of them knows somebody, or has a relative, who works in this building, and so the friend or relative gets her the job of cleaning the steps!"

Everywhere in the clay on the sides of buildings and in the soil Annie could see fingerprints of the workers baked into it, everywhere in the ridges the workers created between the rows to keep the moist soil of the plants from drying up. She was moved by the patriotism which keeps China going.

[page 32] I am moved by their awareness of the enormousness of the task of modernization, and their awareness that, no matter how many factories they show us, we will notice only the oxcarts and the fingerprints on the buildings and the soil.

When I moved to Southern California, I was amazed to discover that all the green vegetation I saw along the highways and in the lawns of houses had to be watered or they would turn brown. The so-called Golden Hills surrounding Orange and Los Angeles counties were covered with dry grass during most of the year until the months of December and January when the desert-like six inches of rain a year fell on them. They would turn green during this short time. Annie discovers a similar fact in China. But instead of sprinkler systems the watering was done by workers with buckets.

[page 39] I hear distant thunder. Outside in the stone courtyard, fathers are walking their children before bed. If it rains, I think, it will help; it will help China. It will help water those sycamores and ginkos we see lining every street, and the little pines and cypresses by the railroad tracks. None of these trees stands in anything resembling soil. It is a kind of packed dust. Every day, another of us notices this dust and asks the guide, How can these trees live?

Along the highways — the guide always answers — work brigades water the trees, with buckets. In the cities, the families who live in each housing unit are responsible for the trees on that unit's street. Shopkeepers are responsible for the trees in front of their shops. In short, apparently, everyone is roused to this task, as to many other national tasks; all the trees get watered. Still, I hope it rains.

Donald, a member of the writing group, got lost far from their hotel in Shanghai, and a young Chinese worker, who spoke a bit of English offered to help him back to his hotel. Along the way he asked if Donald owned a bicycle and when he said, "No," the worker began enthusiastically describing his bicycle, "Chinese bicycles are steel, and built to last." They walked a few more miles and the worker asked if Donald owned an automobile. He said "Yes" and the young worker remained silent the rest of the two miles to the hotel. (Quoted and paraphrased from Page 44)

After watching the 2016 movie, "A Hologram for the King", in which Tom Hanks played a top executive for Schwinn who moved all of Schwinn's bicycle manufacturing to China, I became aware of the consequence of this move: the Chinese learned how to build the Schwinn bicycle and soon began building such bicycles cheaper than Schwinn and drove the Schwinn company into bankruptcy, and now the Schwinn brand is attached to bicycles built in China. A couple of years ago, my wife and I bought ourselves bicycles which look and operate similar to the 1950-era Schwinn bikes with coaster brakes that I remember from my youth. We bought them from Target for \$125 each, an amazing price. Schwinn bikes of this style sold for about \$50 around 1950, and adjusting for inflation, our new bikes cost us only \$12.50 today. One can see the modernization, that China was striving for some three decades ago, has arrived for them today, along with the accompanying ills of pollution.

In my book club, I looked forward to sharing with the members one of my favorite books, [*Flight to Arras*](#), but I wasted my good intentions. Most of them stopped reading the book when the famous pilot and author Antoine Saint-Exupéry stopped writing about his plane and started writing literature, about halfway in the novel. One member even brought a mechanical drawing of the airplane featured in the novel! "Quick! Behind the arras!" I thought, "engineers are taking over this group." I immediately stopped sharing any more of the book with them. They can read or ignore (most likely ignore) the review I wrote about this novel. Look, here's how bad it was: one member insisted the novel was an *Autobiography* based on the one word category on the back cover of his small mass-market paperback book! This episode, from a couple of months ago, came to my mind when I read this next anecdote from Annie. If you wanted a book

which was not in your local library in China of that time, you could order it, if you had a good reason for reading it, the Chinese man told her. She became curious.

[page 46] "What's a good reason for borrowing a book?"

"You need the information for your work.

"What if you were an engineer and wanted to borrow a book of literature?"

To my astonishment, Song Hua burst into laughter. He doubled over as if kicked, he gasped for breath, he hugged his ribs and stamped his foot. I looked down the back of his neck. Gradually his head rose again; he face was splintered with hilarity. He gave me a sidelong "oh, you card" look, and said, as clearly as he could, "But you couldn't . . . if you were an engineer . . . get to read . . . a book of literature!" And off he rolled again into squalls of laughter.

Engineers in China can't get permission to read *Flight to Arras* and the engineers in my book club apparently can't understand anything but the engineering parts of the novel.

Do we learn better by hearing things than by reading them? To me, the answer is clearly "Yes" — if the person saying the things *understands* them! Why? Because the meanings and understandings held by a live lecturer or speaker transmits directly soul-to-soul to the listeners. In my Final Paper for my graduate course "College Teaching" — the section called [The Live Lecturer in the Classroom](#) — I explain how I discovered that to be true. Since then I have encountered a similar thought in writings on education by Rudolf Steiner(1).

The passage below from Annie Dillard is consonant with my discovery.

[page 47] New American "styles of learning" studies show that many Americans, like others worldwide, learn better from hearing things than from reading them.

On books, when she asked one man what he read for pleasure, he answered completely puzzled, "We do not read for pleasure." Another man said he only read one, maybe two books on his own in a year's time. He said he had no time; he was working hard, saving to buy some furniture. "Not additional furniture — just furniture." (Page 48)

We cannot resist sharing the conversation Tiziano had with Annie's Marxist friends after dinner. Someone asked him aren't things better today than ten years ago? The Communists had taken over 30 years ago when this dinner was taking place.

[page 52] Tiziano raised his enormous brows. "Better than ten years ago? Sure." He looked around the table grimly. "But not better than thirty years ago."

My American friends, who are Marxists, sat quite still. Our host went on.

"During the Cultural Revolution, people didn't lift up their heads in the streets. Now their production units take them to the Great Wall once a year. That's what they call progress!

"Each one is a little part, a silicon chip, a screw, bolt, in the big machine. They all died in nursery school!"

Clearly he was saying their soul died in nursery school and now they were parts of a mechanism, not free spirits. Tiziano stopped ranting and began talking in a calmer tone of voice. His calmness didn't last long, as a Marxist threw the "special case" epithet at him.

[page 53] "Communism is good for winning wars. Communists fighting a revolution are like Christians: they sacrifice themselves! They are for all the good things! You can't stop them!

"But Communism is not good government! "

After a fairly stunned pause, someone began, "But China is a special case."

**That did it. Tiziano jumped to his feet and began pounding himself on the head.
"That's how it goes! 'Soviet Russia is a special case!' 'Poland is a special case!' 'The
people aren't quite ready yet!' That's always their excuse!"**

At the end the decade during which this conversation took place, there would be no more Soviet Russia, no more Communist Poland. Their people were ready to cast off the smothering cloak of Communism. Tiziano added one more epithet, speaking very clearly and controlled, "The plain fact is that Communism is an abomination that should be wiped off the face of the earth."

In her "Encounters with Chinese Writers" this last one was a close encounter of the fifth kind, a direct communication between a Chinese alien and American Communists, with the alien vaporizing some of their cherished Marxist illusions. In this book, Annie Dillard gives us a look inside the Red China of the early 1980s and a look inside the aspirations of some of its remaining free spirits.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. See [Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 1](#)

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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