



Takes Two to Tell the Truth

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It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak and the other to hear.

---Henry David Thoreau

Getting off the big bus in the dusty dry heat, we were greeted by a cacophony: energetic elders beating drums, excited children shouting welcome, and curious mothers holding babies. The babies' cotton pants were conveniently split at the crotch, an eco-friendly alternative to diapers.

In the Fall of 2006 I traveled to China, as part of an American storytellers' group tour. At the heart of our trip was a 4-day visit to a small rural village called Geng Cun (耿村), population 1,200, a 5-hour bumpy bus ride south of Beijing.

The villagers followed us as we made our way to the local shrine to greet their ancestral spirits. We passed modest homes enclosed by high brick walls, and several small cotton fields. Goats and chickens crossed the unpaved streets.

What's so special about this ordinary village is its people. Every one of them is a storyteller. Situated at the eastern end of the Silk Road, Geng Cun once was a thriving trading post, accumulating thousands of stories for six centuries. In recent years, scholars from Beijing discovered the cultural values of this tradition, and encouraged the village to keep it going. Our plan was to visit half a dozen master storytellers' homes in small groups on a rotating schedule. We would meet the master teller and his family, friends and neighbors, exchange stories, and learn from each other.

Except there was one snag. We discovered that village elders only spoke their traditional dialect. We had with us translators we hired in Beijing, bright college graduates who spoke excellent English, but they threw their hands up and declared they had no idea what the elders were saying! So we scrambled around to find another set of translators who spoke the local dialect and Mandarin. So



our story swaps went like this: The master storyteller told a story; the local translator repeated it in Mandarin, then the Beijing translator put it in English. When the American tellers told stories, the same process was repeated in reverse. We all worked really hard!

The local translator who helped my group was a well-dressed, diminutive lady in her fifties. Her name was Mrs. Ma. She was a librarian, and did not speak any English. I tried on her my rudimentary Mandarin I had picked up in my college days. She was very patient, and even a little protective of me. I called her Lao Taitai, which meant Madam.

Each day we spent several hours swapping tales with the villagers. Then we went back to a hotel in a nearby city for dinner. The second night some of my American tour mates told me their groups had visited a Mr. Jin who told war stories. Mr. Jin had been a POW, captured and tortured by the Japanese Army during the WWII. In fact, the village of Geng Cun itself had been nearly destroyed by the Japanese, my friends said.

As a high school student I had learned about the invasion of China by the Japanese Imperial Army. But my knowledge was neither deep, nor personal. My family never talked about the war much. So when I heard about Mr. Jin, I had mixed emotions: sadness, guilt, curiosity, embarrassment...

My group visited Mr. Jin on our last day at the village. Accompanied by Mrs. Ma and our Beijing translator who called himself Kevin, we went through the stone gate. We were led through an attractive courtyard into modest living quarters: a small kitchen and a spacious bedroom that also served as the living room. Several villagers were waiting for us, sitting on the edge of a double bed. They gave us chairs to sit around the bed.

I noticed a short, stocky man with white hair and a well-tanned face, chatting with an old lady. He was wearing a beige sweater that reminded me of Mr. Rogers. He was the only person there that looked older than my father, so I figured he was Mr. Jin. I sat in the corner of the room, not quite sure what to expect.



“Today I am going to tell you a true story,” Mr. Jin started solemnly. Mrs. Ma and Kevin translated. Mr. Jin looked around the room, and our eyes met. Then he hesitated, and asked Mrs. Ma something. Mrs. Ma looked in my direction and replied quickly. Mr. Jin nodded and cleared his throat. “Actually, I am going to tell you a different story, an old folktale.” Mrs. Ma nodded and smiled.

Then I realized what was going on! Mrs. Ma told him I was from Japan, and he decided not to tell his war story, so as not to hurt my feelings. “Excuse me,” I was surprised to hear myself say loudly, “I am Japanese, but I want to hear your war story. Please don’t switch for me.”

Mr. Jin, Mrs. Ma, and even Kevin looked surprised. I could not back down now. “Please,” I begged, my cheeks feeling hot.

“All right,” Mr. Jin finally said, and in his quiet, unceremonious manner, told us a very short story. It went like this:

When I was a young man, the enemies came to this village. My friend and I hid in our cabbage patch. The enemies came after us. One enemy found my friend under a big cabbage leaf. He grabbed my friend and tried to pull him out, and my friend bit his hand. He screamed and hit my friend with his gun. I jumped out to save my friend, and we were both captured. Then they ran my friend over with a truck.

Abruptly he ended. After a moment it became clear he was finished, and we all applauded politely. Mr. Jin went outside. The gathering broke into clusters of small conversations. Kevin was organizing us into a group photo shoot.

I tore a blank page out of my notebook, and consulting my pocket dictionary, quickly wrote: “Thank you for your story. War is wrong. I wish for us to be friends.” Of course in my horrible Chinese it might have read: “Thank you story. Fighting is incorrect. I want friends we are.” I signed my name in Chinese symbols.

I went out and found Mr. Jin smoking a cigarette. I handed him my note. He read it, and a broad smile came over his face. “Su-zi,” he pronounced my name in



Chinese, and I nodded. Then he started talking rapidly, gesturing wildly. I had no idea what he was saying!

Just in time, Mrs. Ma came to my rescue! She told him, well I assume she told him, that I only knew a dozen words in Mandarin and could not converse like a normal person. Mr. Jin seemed to understand.

Then he did something completely unexpected. He swung his arms and marched in place, counting “1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4,” in Japanese! In a flash of insight, I understood. He was sharing with me the only Japanese words he knew: how to count from 1 to 4. He had learned it in the prison camp where the Japanese soldiers made him and other captives march.

He was grinning from ear to ear, quite pleased that we finally found 4 words we both understood. We looked at each other, knowing there was so much more we wanted to say, needed to say...and there were simply no words for it.

So I did the only thing I could do. I bowed deeply to him, Japanese style. You know, Chinese people don't bow. They shake hands just like Americans. As I came up, Mr. Jin took my hands, shook them firmly, and roared with hearty laughter. Mrs. Ma looked at us from one to the other, smiling with relief. She said something and I understood it too! “Hen hao, Zhen hao.” Very good, truly good.