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## Some Reflections Occasioned by the Publication of the Revised Edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader*

In the fall of 2002, the Peking University Foreign Language Press announced the release of a revised edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader*, a Chinese language textbook and reader for English-speaking students whose first edition, published in 1981, progressed by telling a series of stories about Gubo and Palanka,<sup>1</sup> two university students studying Mandarin Chinese, and their Chinese friend, Ding Yun. It follows their experiences as students, first in Gubo and Palanka's home country,<sup>2</sup> and then in China. As a widely popular and surprisingly engaging textbook and reader, it was a beloved and instrumental part of the education of nearly an entire generation of anglophone students of the Chinese language.

**T**HE UNEXPECTED, BITTERSWEET PLEASURE of a letter or an e-mail whose sender you haven't heard from in years. The serendipity of a chance meeting in the street, its loud-laughed happiness, the unguarded, guileless desire to embrace, and what you sought to embrace was not just the person, but something past her, something larger, fuller, the whole part of a lost life, the entirety of your time together.

It's something like this you feel when coming across for the first time the "revised" edition (in fact, a near complete rewrite) of the *Practical Chinese Reader*, released just this fall by the Peking University Press. It's a book whose title and subject will be instantly recognizable to a certain kind of student of the Chinese language, one who studied the language in the early eighties and nineties, before the language became in vogue here at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

1. According to the editors, Gubo and Palanka are intended to be transliterations for the names "Gilbert" and "Bianca," respectively.

2. Gubo and Palanka's national origin is left (purposefully?) ambiguous in the textbook. However, it is generally assumed that the two are Canadian.

And how can certain kinds of objects be blamed if they unhinge the floodgates of certain kinds of memories? Objects always begin as themselves, simple and shapeless, and then accrue our associations. You think, upon taking up this successor in your hands, of wooden desks, of certain slanted sunbeams alighting on blackboards dusty with chalk, of the skylines of foreign capitals. You think of the people you have known and the people you have only ever read about. Such associations, swollen with narrative and memory, are apropos: the first edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader* always felt like a collection of stories first and a textbook second, centering, as it did, around the adventures of Gubo and Palanka, two Canadian students trying to learn Chinese (Gubo and Palanka are their adopted Chinese names, we never do learn their English names). In a way, it was almost a sort of alternate reality whose inhabitants could live a life that was stylized and simple, but also vibrant and real, closer to the conception of life that you held as a young man. And how appropriate, it strikes you, to remember that the *Reader* began with a reunion, Gubo and Palanka's meeting at the train station, the kind of reunion that could occur only in the bounds of fiction: the lovers embracing after defeating the exigencies of time and distance. It's only after the lessons of painful experience that one learns that what was normal to youth becomes miraculous in adult life. Nothing would have struck you as more normal or more honest: she climbs off the train, sees him, and then leaps to embrace him (in the original textbook, the scene is given a three-panel illustration ending with Palanka tearfully pressing her head into Gubo's shoulder). All this drama, just for a lesson on how to say *Ni hao* (Hello) and *Ni hao ma?* (How are you?), when the adult part of yourself understands that it so rarely happens that way, that love is fragile enough to be defeated by something as simple as separation.

Or else think of the book as a sort of refuge where youth could be preserved, its mistakes left unpunished, an ultimately kind place that evoked a sort of boundless, endless summer: think of the chapter where Gubo and Palanka go to the beach with Ding Yun, the Chinese girl, a cheerfully complaisant third wheel accompanying them on all their adventures together. As if nothing could be simpler than to take a day off to leave for the beach, and the sun, the shore, the ocean, and the waves that broke upon it were reduced to items in a vocabulary list.

In the subsequent chapter, lying on that perfect beach, the three discuss their dreams. A clever way to create a list of professions. What perfect and perfectly suited careers awaited? Engineer? Doctor? Teacher? Gubo explains that he would

like to be a writer. Palanka and Ding Yun's enthusiasm for the idea was boundless; if he said such a thing, it was assured.

What comes across most surprisingly in the book was the depth of the characters:

Gubo, whose wit never fully masked the depth of his idealism, so that his confession on that beach never seemed surprising; if he was the gentle, athletic layabout (the "Sports and Athletics" chapter finds him playing basketball at the gym) stepping on to the beach, it was not essentially surprising to discover the soulful writer leaving it.

And Palanka, whose decisiveness—it was always she who introduced so many chapters with the phrase *Women qu nar ba* (Let's go there), and who, at the end of the chapter on "Time Expressions," had cried out, *Women gai wanle!* (We're going to be late!)—always drove the narrative and presaged so perfectly the depth of her ambitions (she wanted to be a *yi sheng*, a doctor).

And Ding Yun, whose undemanding happiness and gameness—she followed the other two everywhere: the cafeteria, the library, the cinema, and the "discotheque" (how utterly standard and beautifully old-fashioned the settings of each chapter were!), always there to ask the questions (*Na shi shenme?*, What is that?) that would elicit the enrichment of vocabulary—bespoke an almost preternatural kindness, with an amiability and low-key drive that seemed a closer match to Gubo's than Palanka's was.

What united them, perhaps, was their assuredness, in the world, in their futures, and (could it not ever be the case?) in China, which was always, in their estimation, on the verge of its advancement to the league of great nations (this is something of a reflection of the inevitably politicized creation process of the first edition of the *Reader*, which still referred to the Communist Revolution as a matter of recent memory).

Even the airport scene (and who these days still believes in airport scenes?), where Gubo and Palanka leave for Beijing, together, has a self-assured quality, imbued as it is with all the hope and optimism of their perpetual youth. Taking leave of their tearful parents and of Ding Yun (she was a foreign exchange student and didn't return to Beijing until the *Reader's* end), Gubo and Palanka were nevertheless filled with an excitement that you might have understood immediately as a young man.

And it's a scene whose poignance and power is magnified if you yourself ever went to Beijing; what it held for you was a sort of promise, what you'd held was

a kind of conviction. About the size of the world, about its fullness. Who after reading the two volumes of this book, who could turn around and say no, I don't want to go to Beijing? If only for a year. You would grab all your things, bid all your farewells, make all your rash, youthful promises, and then fly off—if you'd read the book.

If you were in Beijing, if you were in Beijing once, especially if you were there in the early eighties, you would remember a cold, gray city warmed in the winter by the steam of food carts, how the colors returned in the spring, and in the summer, when you walked from the Peking University campus to the Summer Palace, all the people were out, a sea of kites fluttering above them like reflections in the heavens of their own earthly dreams.

Your memories would be tied up with the memories of classrooms: a shifting prism of haloed dust, as the light slipped in through the window. Or the darkness of the dorms at Peking University, the frailty of your electric lamp and its yellow light, barely sufficient to light all the words you wanted to write down.

Memories which would alight with the restful finality of migratory birds at the moment of arrival—if you as much as touch this book. For the first edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader* was equal to and coeval with your youth. Tied up with all the places you'd traveled, with every girl you'd ever been in love with, as a young man. Even if you were in Beijing, you would want to know why. Its cover was the cover that your hands and her hands reached across one day, and seeing the cover of its successor, it is not some completely unreasonable instinct that expects in the succeeding instant for a pair of piercing blue eyes to turn up to yours; the expression that gave that fierceness to their color was the mystery you spent a semester attempting to unravel.

How powerful narrative is!

You remember the words for *writer*, *doctor*, and *engineer* as if they were your own professions, instead of Gubo, Palanka, and Ding Yun's respective dreams. You know the word for *blue*, and the word for *eyes*.

You know how to say "I love you" in Chinese because once, on a rainy day in Beijing, Gubo had made this declaration to Palanka. And not just because you had said the same thing over a static line to a girl who was nothing like Palanka or Ding Yun and yet who is, somehow, inseparable in your mind from both.

And so when you pick up this new book, what will happen? Will time freeze and stand still? Flipping through its crisp, white, acid-free pages, it comes not

as a surprise to find the new edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader* peopled by new characters and set in the present age. The characters no longer referring to each other as *tong zhi* (comrade), the skylines dotted with skyscrapers, everyone shuttled about in bullet trains. The glory of communism tucked quietly away, as into a dustbin, before your arrival.

The world needs new stories, and better to leave Gubo, Palanka, and Ding Yun in peace. Only, not. Only, in skimming the pages of this revised edition of the *Practical Chinese Reader*, you discover a quiet miracle, a sentence that is capable of rewriting all your ideas about the characters and people you thought you knew in your youth:

Cast of Characters

Ding Dao—age 21, A university student from Montreal, Canada, majoring in Chinese Language and Literature. Son of Gubo and Ding Yun.

Thus we find the fate of the two lovers and their friend. It was Ding Yun whom Gubo ended up marrying, not Palanka! And this despite all the protestations made in that beautiful language that he would love her forever. And a child! Older now than you were when you first opened the pages of the *Reader*. You shout with amazement and slap your knee, as at a dinner with a long-lost friend where, drunk with happiness, you stand up too quickly to propose too loudly a toast, moved by the ability of people to defy any and all of your expectations, overcome with bitter, unbearable happiness at the news of people from your own wasted youth, laughing because you are so in love with something—is it love? is it humanity?—you’d almost forgotten could bring you such joy.

Oh, in Beijing you spent entire nights writing letters! There was so much, so much more than you could ever explain in a letter, more than you knew how to say to her. You wanted to recapture the magic of the first night you’d spent together, talking into the early hours of the morning until the sun came up, not as a glow, you’d discovered, but like the unclenching of the night’s darkness. You wrote about the acerbic, anti-party wit of your classmates at Peking University, what it was like to study in the park by the Temple of Heaven, about the life and beauty of the sight of the thousands of people who gathered every evening at Tiananmen Square.

You wrote until one day one of you said: “I’ve found someone else.” And it doesn’t even matter who, who said it, who meant it, who wanted this more (a year

is a very long time, you should never promise anyone anything about forever). It's all been written already. It's all there already.

So what remains after two decades whose passage was like that of slumber? Even a night that feels like it could last forever is broken eventually by the dawn. What, in some grand search for lost time, can you return to, ultimately? A few things only, perhaps, a few things that remain whole, firm, and fresh, studded in your memory like seashells in the wet sand of a beach that will lie forever on the bounds of your youth, where it is always summer, where you will always have all the time in the world:

- The two of you reaching for the same green book, covered in beautiful Chinese script. The way her piercing blue eyes looked up at you, with an expression of innocent amusement, and how you had paused for one exact moment before you could think of what to say.
- Or the feeling of her hand in yours that first morning as you walked to class together from her dorm.
- Or the small, wet stain on the shoulder of your shirt as she walked out of the airport. You should have dropped your bags right there. Told her you didn't want to go to Beijing anymore. Told her she was reason enough to stay. But, ah, it's all there already, she's gone already, and you've already turned around, an act printed in the indelible ink of the past, something you could never erase or undo, save perhaps in the wrinkled palimpsest of your own regret.

Which is why you place the book back, ultimately. The adult world, with its set routines, its lockstep finality, is a hostile place for lovers of language. It's only in some eternal, time-removed youth that one can fall in love for the first time, move to Canada or China, learn Chinese, have your heart broken, or break someone else's. The past is a nice place to visit, but you can't live there. Time for someone else to learn Chinese. Time for someone else to fall in love. The thought of this lifting your lips into the faintest smile as you walk out of the university bookstore, into the evening.