

## Leaving China

Two stories. Both are true:

### 1. October 2018.

My daughter and I were on our way from Canada to Beijing, where I was to spend a week as a visiting lecturer at Beijing Normal University, known as BeiShiDa. When we landed, my daughter's passport was gone—"missing in transit", as the travel-declaration form says. She boarded the plane with it in Vancouver; in the Beijing arrivals hall we discovered it was no longer with us, nor was it on the plane or anywhere else findable (most likely pickpocketed, according to the Global Affairs hotline employee in Ottawa, whom I called in a state of controlled panic).

In Beijing, we were two travelers, one of whom is legally required to enter China (me with my visa) and one of whom is prohibited from entering (my daughter), yet who cannot be separated. As long as we remained neither in China nor out of it, we were Air China's problem, and a complicated dance went on between Air China staff and the immigration police to find a solution that would clear us off the balance sheet for the next shift. Only two outcomes existed: entering China together or leaving it together. I hoped (and politely argued for) the former, but in the end we got the latter. We were escorted to our gate by a young police officer with temporary travel documents (technically, I believe my daughter was extradited), past curious passengers, and onto the plane, with China behind us and Canada ahead.

In the moment when we realized we had to go back home, I felt disappointment, frustration and the urge to either yell or cry, neither of which would have been a good idea. But in the sleep-deprived lacuna of the flight back to Vancouver, where I first began to write this story, what struck me was how absurdly fortunate we had been. We had arrived in the capital of the largest country in the world, whose government is famously preoccupied with security ("look at all the cameras," said my daughter, minutes before the absence of the passport was discovered), with no documents: travelers who should not have existed. Yet in five hours we managed to get neither

deported or detained; we got temporary documents to enable my daughter to enter Canada; and we got on the next plane to Vancouver, with Air China absorbing all additional costs.

And this in the middle of the night on the weekend, in a place where we didn't speak the language and everyone we dealt with appeared to be under 25 years old with a military haircut (yet all seemed to be genuinely concerned on our behalf, even as they kept circling back to the same legal pincer: one of you must enter China and the other one can't enter). I couldn't even thank the people who helped us, not knowing if a handshake would be appropriate, and ended up making a series of awkward tapping-heart-with-closed-hand gestures, hoping that these were universal code for "I deeply appreciate what you are doing to help us out of this mess".

I learned the importance of a few practical things: always make many copies of important documents and get them laminated as they may be the only proof of your official existence if things go sideways; keep every essential thing in your carry-on; and use the phrase "I would like to speak to my embassy" generously.

I also learned some less immediately pragmatic lessons. Although I have no proof that would pass scrutiny, I still believe that one reason we were on the Beijing-Vancouver red-eye instead of immigration limbo is because I am a white Canadian woman, who remembered to mention "university professor" and "BeiShiDa" and "here is my Canadian business card"; and that my daughter was an appealing and well-behaved younger version of same. As the old American Express tagline goes, "membership has its privileges". In this case, the privileges of being a particular kind of person at a particular historical moment were manifested in not getting the worst possible outcome in China – getting, in effect, a do-over that says, "We'll zip you both back to Canada. We hope to see you in Beijing again soon".

What is the end of this story? In its passport-crisis phase, it came to an end with the two of us awake for roughly 40 hours, nearly hallucinating with fatigue, drinking black coffee and eating apricot yogurt on the plane. We landed in Vancouver, we got through immigration with the aid of our emergency travel documents, we finally went home, bodies in space who came to ground back in Canada.

Sometimes privilege is invisible to white Canadians who embody this undeserved good fortune, or visible only as the outcome of a global sorting process in which we have done remarkably well. At other times, privilege is as corporeal and tangible as the food on my dinner tray and the manila envelope with my daughter's papers in the flight attendant's folder at the front of the cabin.

This episode of our story ended here. But the story of how we came to leave China began almost a hundred years ago.

## 2. 1933-1945.

My daughter and I are the third and fourth generation of our matrilineal line to be escorted out of China under conditions not of our own choosing, which is a sentence I think not many people could produce. My mother was born in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in 1936, where her parents were missionaries until the conflict between Communist and nationalist armies forced them to abandon the mission station for a temporary haven in India, after which they took the long way around back to New York in 1946 and thence to Kingston, Ontario, which is where I knew my grandparents.

I have to acknowledge that this familial link was one of the reasons I applied to visit BNU, eighty years later. I felt a jolt of sentiment as our plane touched down at Beijing International Airport and poked my daughter awake. "We're in China!" I said, "where your grandmother was born!". She is at the age when taking rhetorical statements literally is considered very witty, so she pointed through the window and said "Right here?". I conceded that my mother was not born on the runway, or even within several thousand kilometers. My mother's and grandparents' proximity existed only in my mind.

Roy Spooner and Kathleen Ferguson, my grandparents, were Scottish-descended small-town western Ontario people, the sort Stephen Harper would consider "old Canadian stock" (although I would like to think that they would have rejected that concept, with its implied ethnic arrogance). They moved into the slipstream of world history via their attachment to the United Church of Canada, the only religious body in Canada to be created by an Act of Parliament (in

1925). The UCC merged four Protestant denominations, and in the 1920s looked like the closest thing Canada would have to a national church. It was the church of temperance, earnest strivers, and Social Gospellers, neither as elegant as the Family Compact Anglicans nor as boisterous as the Baptists and Pentecostalists who were starting to come up from the states. My grandparents took “The Pledge” of lifelong abstinence from alcohol and set out from Bloor Street United in Toronto, arriving in Chengdu in 1933, to work at the West China Mission, the largest mission of the new United Church.

I can’t pretend to know my grandparents’ mind as they made their way to Chengdu, any more than they could have imagined their great-granddaughter’s thoughts on the tarmac in Beijing more than eighty years later. China was favored by Canadian missionaries in the late nineteenth century, considered a field of souls ripe for harvest. Did my grandparents want to bring these souls to Jesus, or did they just want to see more of the world than southern Ontario? In later years when I knew them, I never heard them express any religious priggery, and they maintained a quiet cosmopolitanism in their small house in Kingston, where they settled in the late 1940s. Roy went to work for Alcan while Kathleen taught high school and took in boarders. They were Anglophiles and modest sinophiles, drinking endless cups of tea and listening to the Queen’s Christmas message in a living room with rugs and pictures from China.

I learned more about them after my daughter and I came back, when I reached into the archives of the UCC and of Victoria College, the UCC-affiliated branch of the University of Toronto. Here were the letters, reports and correspondences of West China Mission, one of the great beachheads of Canadian missionary work in Asia. The listing of correspondences is a staccato shower of concerns mundane and critical: shipments of supplies stuck in Tianjin; Christmas concert plans; theological disputes; at least one murder; and a reminder to mission staff that “sunny days bring [Japanese] bombers”. My grandfather turns up in these letters negotiating for a furlough, announcing the birth of a daughter, worrying about the dearth of new missionaries, conveying the importance of education to an imagined future China under Chiang Kai-shek, and poignantly, expressing a “sense of being cut off” from Canada.

In the official West China Mission chronology in the Victoria archives, the Spooners' arrival in Chengdu is sandwiched between entries headed "civil wars begin" and "severe drought leads to famine". Their housing was outside the ancient walls of the city proper, and my mother remembers her mother telling her about "warlord armies" marching past, and later the Nationalists in pursuit of the warlords (and after my grandparents were gone, the Communists in pursuit of the Nationalists). Through my grandmother, I have inherited a few large silver rings with prominent stones in carnelian and jade. These were said to be from Tibet, and to have been purchased by my grandmother from "curio sellers" who went door to door in the mission quarters. Later I speculated that the sellers may have been high-ranking families fleeing from the west and north into central China and buying their passage by selling heirlooms, the material traces of people who had to move on. I have also heard that my grandfather drove in a convoy bringing medical supplies up the Burma Road to relieve embattled Chengdu in the 1930s, but I cannot verify that story. In western China, as it then was, my grandparents lived on the edge of history.

Their mission was founded in 1891, and despite being sporadically burned down, bombed and sacked, by the 1930s it had become a thriving if disputatious community of Canadian and Chinese Christians. The Chinese people themselves, the focus of missionaries' zeal, are a spectral presence in their records and letters home. They appear as local Christians, converts, and potential converts, and missionaries debate when and how to hand over more theological and managerial authority to them (I understand that West China Mission was unusually democratic in transferring resources and power to Chinese Christians). They come in for praise for their sobriety and seriousness, and several exemplary individuals are mentioned, especially recipients of Canadian scholarships such as the Reverend Samuel Lu, "studying in Canada and deceased in Hamilton" in 1935.

Beyond these traces, however, the Chinese people of Chengdu in the archives are as nameless yet as necessary as the staff at Beijing International Airport, who got us home safely but whose identification I never managed to get. My mother's memories are more personal - a Chinese nanny who taught her her first words and made sweet rice for her, and Chinese children in the international school. My grandfather retained a rudimentary knowledge of the Chinese language

and I remember him translating the characters on the black canvas slippers I wore in Toronto in the 1970s (not surprisingly, they read “Made in China”).

My grandfather makes a brief appearance in the history of Chinese-US relations in 1938, when he escorted a panda to the New York Zoo. Pandora was the first panda in North America, and was covered by newspapers and radio as an adorable novelty and a harbinger of enlightened international co-operation, despite the accelerating pace of fighting in western China. Pandora inaugurated “panda diplomacy”, which became a thing of its own after the war when the Chinese government used strategic gifts of pandas as affable messengers traveling between China and friendly foreign nations. Pandas have become so well known as a symbol of China that Pandora’s avatar accompanied the Spooners’ descendants on our Air China flights, in the form of a cartoon panda pantomiming correct use of emergency exits in a safety video.

Except for panda furloughs, for twelve year, the Spooners remained in Chengdu while bandits, escapees, soldiers and refugees flowed around them. The world outside China swept through Chengdu too – my mother remembers American military men visiting her parents for Christmas, bringing as gifts their emergency rations of chocolate. Their 1944 Christmas card shows the family grouped around a piano at song and reads “Christmas! A time for poetry and song, for reverence and laughter, for worship and rejoicing”, with translation into Mandarin. I draw a line from that card to the promotional brochures in my carry-on bag three generations later, advertising the values and secular virtues of the University of Alberta.

About six months after that picture was taken, my grandparents got wind of a rumored Japanese offensive on Chengdu and determined that it was no longer safe for foreigners to stay. They had to move quickly, flown over the mountains by American military airplane – I’m not sure it could exactly be called fleeing – to safety in India where they waited for a year for passage back to Canada. (A few mission families rolled the dice on safety, threw their lot in with the “New China” and stayed, getting permission from the Communist Party to remain even after mission activity was ordered to end, and continued teaching in the secular university that West China Mission became. Today there are fourth and fifth generation descendants of the Willmotts, Hockeys and Crooks living in China).

The missionaries had left Canada to evangelize, to bring Jesus to people who didn't have him and who, in their view, needed him. They were also engaged in what Cory Willmott, a missionary descendent and anthropology professor, calls the construction of alternate modernities, modalities of progress and future-orientation which aligned with nationalist projects at work in west China (2012). West China Union University was the culmination of the pedagogical efforts of the missionaries, a school of science and medicine, and by the time my grandparents arrived, WCCU had more Chinese teachers than white ones.

The Spooners fit the mold of alternate modernizers, working with Chinese counterparts for a more peaceful and rational tomorrow. Roy was a chemistry teacher and soon one of the respected senior men of the mission; Kathleen organized the international school for missionary children. In 1938, my grandfather wrote an essay for the West China Missions News, a newsletter circulated amongst missionaries, in which, in the course of reviewing a rather soporific book called Prelude to Chemistry, he argued that Science with a capital S held the key to human happiness in a future China:

The man of Science should be enabled to see his profession not as THE profession but as one of many scientific subjects all joining in the use and continued progress of Science to the end that Man might be enabled to grow in wisdom and strength.

This passage echoes the description of Jesus' education in Luke 2:52, a verse which must have been familiar to Roy Spooner, who was a theological autodidact.

Shorn of religious allusions, it also echoes the technocratic optimism of the great white fathers of Western European sociology in the late nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, proceeding from Henri St-Simon and Auguste Comte, who believed sociology could be a universal secular religion, to the self-serving conservative functionalism of Talcott Parsons. It was not those patriarchs but their disobedient and quarrelsome intellectual descendants, who tended to be brown or female, that brought me into sociology as a graduate student, yet the reformist, progressive tendencies of the discipline hold me there. Sociology is the modernity project to

which I've committed my professional life and it brought me to China, just as Christianity and science did for my grandfather.

Although I was fascinated by the details of my grandparents' missionary lives as child, those lives never had much purchase on my own. My international interest focused on southern Africa, and the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s in which the moral contours of right and wrong were as sharp to me as they would have been to the Social Gospellers of the 1920s. I went off to Zimbabwe to work for an NGO and later to an academic career in southern African studies without ever connecting this to my grandparents. I should have realized that my urge to set the world to rights was not far off from, and no less flawed than, previous generations' urge to bring the world to Jesus. It's a truism that the first, second and even third generations of missionary descendants tilt disproportionately towards social sciences, clergy and journalists, and so I find myself predictable, not as autonomous from history (the world's or my family's) as I would like to imagine.

When I got the invitation to go to BNU as part of scholarly exchange with the University of Alberta, I was excited about the possibility of going somewhere that was not Edmonton, especially during the doldrums of the fall term. I also started buying a lot of books to help me understand the country I would be visiting. And when my daughter and I staggered home after being routed from Beijing, I noticed just how many books were scattered around our home. There were novels translated out of Chinese and novels set during the Cultural Revolution; there were anthropologies of the "floating population" in the factories of the Yangtze and of the children of the One-Child Policy; and memoirs of backpacking and teaching English as a second language. There were guides to "Old Peking" and language texts that promised I could learn the essentials of Mandarin without trying too hard. I usually do a bit of reading before I go somewhere new, but this was above and beyond. Something was happening here. I had no romantic fantasies about China, but I craved information – I wanted to know.

Knowing myself as a missionary descendant is awkward knowledge. Much wrong was done under the sign of the mission enterprise, but good was done too. As far as I know, the rampant child abuse and sadism of Canadian residential schools was not replicated in west China, but I



could be wrong. I believe my grandparents went to China with goodwill, but I also believe they could not have escaped the prejudices of their day, which elevated Protestantism, European education, and western science. My memories of them contain no intimations of cultural bias or Eurocentrism, but then I wasn't in Chengdu in the 1930s.

In the 2010s, however, I was recapitulating their journey. Without conscious intent to proselytize, I was on the way to China with a USB stick full of PowerPoint presentations on Canadian society and a sheaf of promotional material from the University of Alberta. It took my grandparents twelve years to leave China; it took my daughter and I only twelve hours. We went with good intentions, we brought our history, and in the end, our unmissable status as cultural and political outsiders required that we leave. Sometimes you don't realize your life is part of a circle until the wheel has come all the way around.

Chengdu is somewhere I have never been, as is the whole of China. But I want to go there, and to take Roy Spooner's great-granddaughter with me. What would we feel, who would we be, in Chengdu? I do not and will never belong there – I am not seeking a second home or some sort of familial recognition, and I'm not consciously harboring a fantasy of expiating colonial guilt. What I want is the chance to touch something concrete on the other side of the world, some wall or stone or book that might have been familiar to the Spooners. What I would bring to Chengdu is the energy of my embeddedness in waves of history, which washed my grandparents through Chengdu eighty years ago and washed me into Beijing airport in 2018. We didn't choose to become Christian modernizers or secular academic internationalists, we don't decide how and when our lives will intersect with the large moments of history – wars, religious colonialism, panda diplomacy. For four generations, we have moved back and forth on the globe, our paths not entirely predetermined and not entirely free.

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