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## Correspondence/Sino-Sayings; Not-so-Ancient Chinese Proverb: Glib Truisms Gloss Over Reality

By SETH FAISON

A few years ago, when I took a visiting editor out to the Chinese countryside for a taste of rural life, I had an opportunity to show off my proficiency in Chinese -- or thought I did. We came upon a peasant working a field 50 miles outside Shanghai, and struck up a conversation. The farmer spoke of how things had changed in his village thanks to the arrival of television and, more recently, a video store. His thick rural accent proved no problem: I proudly translated for my boss.

Then the farmer threw me a curve. "No knowledge deer dead who hand," he said.

Huh? I looked around, half expecting to see a doe grazing in the field. I stared at the farmer blankly, probably resembling a deer myself, eyes transfixed by headlights. Then I recovered, nodded knowingly and swiftly changed the subject.

I said nothing to my editor, preserving (I think) the illusion of complete fluency resulting from years of studying the language. But in the privacy of my office later, I looked up the phrase in a book of Chinese proverbs, and found the saying the farmer had used. The explanation for it was a long, roundabout story about how a general in ancient China struggled to predict the future, saying to an aide something that can be roughly translated as, "You never know at whose hand a deer will die."

Of course it is hard to predict the future, I thought. But why bring deer into it?

Chinese is a difficult language for any Westerner to master, with its four different tones giving different meanings to the same sound, a mind-boggling number of synonyms and the meaning of each word, or written character, discerned only from the context in which it is used.

But the real killer, for me at least, is learning the proverbs that Chinese pepper their language with every day. Generally four to eight characters long, a proverb is often so cryptic as to be incomprehensible to me upon first hearing it. And almost every time I take the trouble to learn a proverb, I forget it the following day.

Virtually all Chinese who have been to school, and many who have not, can and do spout proverbs; farmers, street cleaners and postmen employ them as readily as professors and writers.

"A thousand dollars buys a neighbor; eight hundred buys a house" is a proverb that wisely reminds the avaricious that friendship can be more valuable than property.

For the Chinese, such verities are a proud reflection of their ancient culture (and some relish the chance to tell confused outsiders, in a tone of superiority, the long and arcane story behind this or that proverb). But beyond their actual meanings, proverbs also say something about today's China: They often serve not just as timeless truths but also as pat homilies to gloss over or explain away the unpleasant realities of the present.

"FEELING stones while crossing a river" is a proverb that Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader until his death in 1997, often used in describing the uncertain nature of China's ambitious but unwieldy efforts to use capitalist methods in a socialist state. For mid-level officials and company managers who grapple with the challenge of making decisions in a nominally Communist land that in fact lacks an ideology, one utterance of "feeling stones while crossing a river" can excuse a multitude of hard-to-explain actions, virtuous or otherwise.

In a society that stresses deference to authority, proverbs are one of the more subtle tools used to maintain and reinforce those in power. Political leaders often trot them out to placate or simply distract underlings with the implication that problems are ages old and cannot easily be solved.

In times of political extremism, the Chinese reliance on proverbs can be manipulated to an extreme. It is hard to imagine another country in the world where so many millions of people would fall into line, as Chinese did during the leftist frenzy of the 1960's, behind slogans from the "Little Red Book" of sayings by Chairman Mao.

Yet even in more rational times, proverbs are regularly used to justify actions by the authorities. In a recent interview, a Shanghai

construction executive dismissed objections to the edifices of chrome and reflecting glass now dominating Shanghai architecture -- buildings erected in some cases after stately old buildings and homes were demolished to make way for them.

"Fish scale order comb comparison," the official said brightly.

I looked at him blankly. Luckily, my assistant was along, and he translated the proverb in what sounded to me like a random string of disconnected words: "Packed in as tight as teeth of a comb."

The official apparently meant that buildings will keep going up until they are packed in tightly. Expressing it in an ancient proverb seemed to justify the action, as though the fact that there was an ancient metaphor for such a situation made this particular action itself acceptable.

On a bad, proverb-laden day, I often become convinced that the Chinese use of these sayings is a conspiracy to keep out ignorant interlopers. I have come to dread the words, "We Chinese have a saying . . ." because I know a long lesson about a Chinese proverb is about to begin, and with it will come the recurring sense of helplessness that has bedeviled my efforts over 10 years to learn Chinese and understand China.

China's locomotive-like growth over the past decade has excited some outsiders, and scared others. Many visitors eagerly ask me questions about China's future, mostly about the mystery of what will happen to a country run by a Communist Party when no one believes in Communism anymore.

It's a fascinating question. It's also an unanswerable one. When it is raised, it always stumps me. Maybe I should answer with a proverb, but given my problem with proverbs, I can never remember one on the spot.

Wait -- how about this one: "You never know at whose hand a deer will die."

He Who Dabbles in Cryptic Phrases...

CHINESE proverbs generally evolved over centuries from old stories offering a specific lesson. Some are easily understood; others have become cryptic over the ages, referring in some cases to long-forgotten personages. Examples:

Proverb: "When one man finds the way, his chickens and dogs ascend to heaven."

Meaning: When a man is promoted to a position of authority, all his friends and relatives benefit.

Proverb: "Eight immortals cross the sea; each shows a saintly passage."

Meaning: Different individuals can achieve the same goal in different ways.

Proverb: "The sky is high; the emperor is far away."

Meaning: Far from a central authority, one enjoys relative freedom.

Proverb: "When you mention Cao Cao, he soon arrives."

Meaning: I was just talking about you!

Proverb: "Never pull on your shoes in a melon patch; never adjust your cap under a plum tree."

Meaning: Don't act suspicious if you want to avoid being suspected.

Proverb: "Lord Jiang casts a line, a fish wants to be caught."

Meaning: Someone who is trapped willingly.