

China Images

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Staring is Okay

The train gathered speed past lotus ponds and the yellowing rice fields of Shandong Province, three-hundred miles southeast of Beijing. Two amiable men with whom I had shared a small train table had gathered up their plastic bags and tea jars at the last station and gotten off. When the train started up again, I luxuriated in the realization that no new passengers had replaced them. I settled into the rhythm of steel wheels rolling along miles of tracks and opened the second volume of *Dream of Red Mansions*, a nineteenth century novel known inside out by most Chinese. Putting the book on the empty table I leaned forward, elbows spread out, and enjoyed the space that is hard to find in a land of 1.3 billion people. The next station, Shijiazhuang, was two hours away.

One page later a neatly dressed young man in a dark blue sweater leaned on the table and looked out the window. I was annoyed by his intrusion into my anointed private space and the prospect that he might sit in one of the empty seats. I returned to my reading, hoping he'd go back to his original place. Less than a minute later his hands grasped the book and pulled it from me. Startled, my annoyance slid to apprehension, but I remained mute. I didn't speak Chinese. He examined several pages of the English print.

The year was 1994—well past the Tian-an-men Square disaster. Individual freedoms had loosened, but I was unsure how much. Every Chinese I knew had read the book many times. Who is he, I wondered. Could

he be a leftover from the Red Guard, policing the reading habits of foreigners? Was his dress an official uniform I didn't recognize?

I kept my eyes on the book. As he leafed through it, I tried to remember the cover. Bought in the United States, it could easily have a voluptuous woman on it to boost sales, breasts overflowing her bodice. Anathema in China a few years before. The book was about privileged young friends who speak indirectly (from my Western perspective) about their feelings. Hardly lascivious, but I had no idea how it might be regarded by an up-tight Chinese official who couldn't read the title. My hands dampened as I tried to keep my face free of anxiety. He closed the book, studied the cover (not at all bawdy), then handed it back to me and went off toward the dining car.

I had been to China several times since my first trip in 1989, and I was used to the unexpected. But this incident unnerved me. Besides I was just plain angry at his intrusion.

As I calmed myself, I returned to reading with intermittent moments devoted to puzzling about his strange behavior. One of my goals for this trip was to notice what actions and behaviors seemed unusual to me, an American of European descent. His certainly qualified.

Shijiazhuang

'Sally', the president's assistant at Hubei Engineering College, and 'Arlene,' head of

the foreign affairs office, greeted me at the Shijiazhuang [Shee-jee-ah-ju-ahng] station. (Many Chinese have English names since they assume—correctly—that Westerners are likely to mangle their Chinese names.) We visited like old friends. I'd been at the college the week before when my friend and colleague, John Regan, and I had planned a two-week seminar about non-verbal behaviors in cultures. For example, the nearly unconscious rules that govern what we wear to a college class or a swimming pool. How we greet a professor compared with a good friend. How we arrange chairs in a classroom. He had taught the first week and gone on to another city; I had come to teach the second.

They led me to the spacious visitors' apartment, gleefully pointing out the new, highly polished furniture, a sign of modernizing China. Sally instructed me on how to control the shower with the kitchen water heater, and they demonstrated how to work the lock on the bicycle they were loaning me. With some merriment, they related a story about an American English teacher who could never identify his bicycle. I glanced around at the sea of black bicycles and made a mental note of a small fender scratch that might help me find this one.

The next morning I strolled around the campus and, coming to a college gate, meandered up the city thoroughfare that ran along the campus. As I walked by shops and catalogued their wares—notebooks, toilet paper, fruit—bicycle commuter traffic poured past. I noticed young children watching me from the seats on the back of their parents' bicycles. They kept their eyes locked on me from the time they came alongside me until the dense crowd broke their view. As their parents pedaled past, they turned their necks as far as possible to stay focused on me. I was used to being a curiosity in cities where Westerners were scarce. My brown hair, strange eyes, and

quick gait all declared “foreigner.” But the children's persistent staring was exceptional.

As I wondered about this second staring episode and why it seemed different to my U.S. experiences, I returned to my apartment to prepare for the afternoon seminar about non-verbal rules embedded in American and Chinese cultures. I changed into more appropriate clothes minutes before Cheryl, a recent Beijing University graduate, arrived to take me to the seminar.

She was helping out the English department for a few months. As we walked across the campus we talked about Shijiazhuang and her Beijing years. Once in the classroom, she checked the chalk supply and brought me tea water while I copied information onto the board from my notebook. As I wrote, she walked over to look at my notes, read the page I was using, and then turned to other pages and read them. I could barely restrain myself from grabbing the notebook and yelling, "Give that back. It's mine." I told her I needed to finish my preparations, and she returned it while my mind continued to lambaste her. I finished writing as the students arrived and had no time to revisit the incident.

The next days were filled with meetings, seminars, and banquets. Then an overnight train to Xi'an, in the center of China, where a handful of Chinese and Americans were gathering to explore the ramifications of our different writing systems.

The Xi'an Seminar

With the luxury of time and thoughtful discussion at the Xi'an [Shee-ahn] seminar, I had a chance to reflect on my recent experiences, and I began to remember similar staring episodes from previous trips to China. A notable (and, in retrospect, amusing) one had occurred on my second trip in 1991 when I spent a month doing research.

My train to a city in Northern Jiangsu [Ji-ahng-soo] Province had arrived an hour earlier than scheduled, and I had no way to communicate this to my host, Xu [Shoo]. Dragging my over-sized suitcase, I planted myself at the top of some steps that ran across the front of the railway station and began my vigil for him. Fascinated by the teeming mix of vendors, families, assorted luggage, and the sounds weaving together around me, I slowly realized my view was being obscured by a growing number of people looking at me. Concerned that Xu wouldn't be able to see my 5' 4" presence, I towed my suitcase and heavy briefcase inside the station and repositioned myself under the wall-sized board announcing train arrivals and departures. Again curious onlookers slowly surrounded me, all standing at a respectful distance—no pointing nor laughing. Just staring. I looked at them off and on. Mostly I studied my dusty shoes and my briefcase and craned my neck to hunt for Xu. When he arrived Xu had no difficulty finding me. I was the most interesting object around, a foreigner with a lavender ski jacket and wooly tan hat at a time when most adult Chinese wore dark blue Mao suits.

As I sat with my colleagues in the dimly lit hotel bedroom suite we were using for the Xi'an seminar, I wondered if this earlier staring incident had any relation to the behavior of the three situations I had just experienced the week before—the man on the train, the children on bicycles, and the young woman.

How easy it is, I thought, to write off people's behavior as inappropriate and rude—or at least, strange—rather than understanding it. The people in the railway station were curious, and although I was concerned about whether Xu would be able to locate me, their open staring intrigued me.

I had spent a year in England where my neighbors never made eye contact nor said

hello when we passed on the sidewalk. I couldn't get used to that distancing. In fact, I found it offensive. Now with the luxury of reflection I was beginning to notice that the unfamiliar way people looked at me didn't mean 'wrong' even though I did not like it. It just meant different habits.

I had recently read *Home Rules* by Denis Wood and Robert Beck. In order to examine the hidden social and environmental structures that shape our environments, they detailed the hundreds of rules the Wood children could tick off about their living space. (Walk in the hall or you'll slip and fall on the rug. When you go upstairs, take the pile of things that are on the bottom step. Friends can open the screen door, but strangers have to stay on the outside.) Our lives are filled with rules we adults are unaware of. What to sit on, where to walk, what to do when and with whom have all become automatic. We learn them from our parents who learned them from their parents, and so on back through generations. The rules are adapted a little as new circumstances arise, but remain fixed in myriad ways. Were the ways the man took my book or the woman took my notebook behaviors passed down through generations or were they unusual (or rude) by Chinese standards? I wanted to find out.

Toward the end of the Xi'an seminar, discussions turned to what we perceive in each other's cultures. A topic that turned out to be fraught with pitfalls because we talked from inside our own cultural perspectives. Yet the small size of the seminar gave us time to unravel and probe perceptions that we often ignore since they are so commonplace to us.

I described the three experiences to the group to get their reactions. The American responses were similar to mine. Elizabeth, a former TV news producer and an energetic graduate student, was as startled as I was about the adults taking my book and

notebook, and curious about the way the children stared at me.

The Chinese, on the other hand, took a different view.

We began with the episode of the young woman taking my notebook. The Chinese did not consider her actions unusual. Hao Keqi, the most senior Chinese put down her tea and leaned forward in her overstuffed chair. "I wouldn't be angry at the young woman," she said. "She was just curious." Ping'an, who had been Hao's graduate student, pushed his glasses up on his nose and added, "She might want to know more. Habit always wins out."

Elizabeth's high-pitched laugh broke in. "I'd be completely offended if someone did that to me. I might even grab back the notebook."

"This process of looking is normal," Weijiang said. "Why not look?" His style often suggested he thought he had all the answers. "When I'm translating, I know it's impolite to look at a Westerner's materials, but I want to look."

Okay, I thought with unease. All the Chinese here think it was perfectly all right for the young woman to take my notebook. I sure didn't. It went against everything my mother had taught me. I asked one of them a question, and John, an anthropologist and scholar of nonverbal behavior, launched furiously at Elizabeth and me. "You're ignoring their first reactions. They're giving you their answers with the first gestures. Watch them."

The room grew silent. I was furious. I already knew what their reactions were. They'd not only nodded in approval of the young woman's behavior, but they'd said it in words.

Weijiang, who had worked with John for years, gathered a few of our tea cups and headed for the bathroom. We could hear the cups clanking in the sink as he washed them needlessly.

I interrupted John. "I'd like to hear the rest of people's reactions," I said. I was skating on thin ice. He had been my PhD thesis advisor, and he was paying for the seminar.

"Maybe she wanted to know more about English," a Shanghai linguistics professor added. "Or maybe she just needed to know the title of your talk." And a quiet woman from nearby Xi'an Textile Institute added, "The student is clever, but maybe she doesn't have much schooling in politeness." Even with John's tirade, I noticed, they kept steady in their view that Cheryl's actions were normal.

I went on to describe the incident of the children looking at me from the back of their parents' bicycles. They all concurred that the children looked at me because I was a foreigner. That didn't surprise me. Ping'an explained, "Their parents probably said, 'Look. There's a foreigner over there.'" Others nodded agreement.

As they talked I could hear my mother saying something like that when I was young, followed immediately by, "Don't point," as she pulled down my hand and added, "Don't stare."

I realized I had been taught from an early age how to be a sneaky observer. Don't stare; look in a way that you can see what that weird person looks like, but without her noticing that you are looking. These children seemed to be taught to stare openly.

We ended the morning discussion with the young man's behavior on the train. They found this situation more puzzling than the other two. Hao Keqi spoke thoughtfully, "It was strange behavior since he took the book slowly. If he had taken it quickly," she said, showing a grabbing motion, "it would have been rude." Several others said he was probably curious, but he didn't know how to begin a conversation so he picked up the book.

“Without warning?” I thought. Without a nod or gesture to ask if it was okay? Not my idea of what to do.

I wondered if my Chinese colleagues’ responses to his behavior were tempered by their desire not to offend me. I’m sure I had, in small ways, communicated that I thought his behavior was rude. Even so, they certainly were saying that taking my book and looking at it, if done properly, was all right.

That night, as I packed for a twenty-hour train trip east across China to Nanjing, I mulled over these discussions and my reactions to the staring incidents. How different were the Chinese staring habits from many Americans? Or were they different? I had been fascinated by how the children looked at me, but I was accustomed to being looked at when I visited schools. Children are naturally curious, and haven’t learned to cover it with etiquette. The two adult instances, however, had offended me. They violated rules deeply embedded in me from childhood. “Don’t stare. It’s not polite.” But even stronger, and probably inculcated from many different venues, was the rule of “Don’t you dare read my personal writing without permission.”

The Exploration Continues

Two weeks later, I traveled to Shanghai to catch my plane back to Los Angeles. Another chance experience reinforced the earlier ones and launched me toward a several-year research project.

I spent my last Saturday afternoon sauntering along the Bund, a promenade stretching along the Hangpu River where adults and families stroll, watch the boat traffic, and enjoy each others company. I paused to watch the river, leaning on an elbow-high granite wall and fishing a paper scrap from my pocket so I could write down my impressions of family life on the barges plying the waters.

As I wrote, a man and woman stopped behind me. They were too close by my standards, and I figured they might be watching me write. I had now been in China long enough to know that space bubbles—those areas studied by Edmund Hall that we don’t want others to intrude into—appear to be smaller than in the U.S.. Looking sideways, I tried not to turn my head, but I must have moved for they withdrew slowly. I didn’t follow them with my eyes past the first few seconds because I wanted to capture the sensation of people standing that close looking at what I was doing. My reactions were changing. I’d been angry at the train and notebook incidents, but now I was intrigued.

I returned to jotting my notes, only to realize a man of about 35 had stopped at almost the same distance from me, except he leaned closer to look over my shoulder. When I looked up, he left. This was getting interesting. I went back to writing.

Invariably one or two adults would stop and look until I shifted my position slightly which caused them to leave. Standing there and writing was like throwing bait into the water with all the trout coming to inspect it.

I went on during the next years to complete studies comparing the looking behaviors of U.S. and Chinese children and adults. (Yes, there are real differences, but that’s another story.)

On a personal level, no amount of research can erase my childhood teachings. I try to take advantage of the fact that in China it is okay to stare and that looking at what someone is holding isn’t rude. Sometimes when I want to see something in someone else’s hands, I draw a little closer, but I’m timid. My Chinese friends laugh at me. “Just look,” they say. “No one’s going to bite!” But what I learned from my mother lives on in me, and, I assume, in my children. When a friend in Nanjing recently pulled me close to a woman in an internet

bar to see how she was using a video cam, I could hear my mother's words across the

decades. "Don't stare. It's not polite."

Resources

My website, <http://nancypine.com>, has a pdf file of my 2005 article on visual behavior of preschool children in the U.S. and China, and includes one picture of how most Chinese hold their children. Another article will be in print in the next couple of months.

Home Rules, the book mentioned above, was written by Denis Wood and Robert Beck, with Ingrid Wood, Randall Wood, and Chandler Wood. It is quite detailed, but if you are interested, it was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1994.

An investigation of your own. Ask a child in your life (5 to 12 year olds are usually the most knowledgeable) to tell you what the rules are for their house, or a portion of their house or school room. If they have trouble getting started, giving them some silly, inappropriate possibilities may help them get started.

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