

From the Series. "Successful in China":

The One Who Moved Out to Get Rich

Volume 1 "The Empress of Suzhou"

ALL CHINESE EAT DOGS AND CATS!

Franz Übermut is a German businessman. He wants to gain a foothold in China for business and pleasure. Franz humorously dispels mistakes about China. The land is brought closer to the Europeans and the Western world, in a way that no travel guide can.

Every day in their life, Franz, his wife Hong and her family, all come up with exciting stories and one or the other, pitfalls cannot be avoided, despite all warnings.

Franz and Hong are not the happiest in marriage. They both come from different cultural backgrounds. Now and again, they keep on clashing. But there is no reason to give up. They are too much into one another. They genuinely love each other. The life of these two love birds rotates around thoughts, money, happiness, intrigue, love, power, sex, and business.

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For my dear family in Germany and China, especially for my beloved wife Zheng, and my dear son Adrian, who have supported me a lot to complete the series of this book successfully.

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Internet: www.gtec.asia

E-mail: contact@gtec.asia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Germany, KangHan YUAN has been a manager in various international projects, with well-known original manufacturers in Europe, America, and Asia. For over 20 years KangHan has been working as an advisor, coach and supporter of companies in quality assurance, purchasing and negotiating businesses in Asia, mainly in automotive, engineering, electrical, and electronics sectors. KangHan's professional expertise in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India, and his blending with the Asian culture, and the Chinese perception of life is where his strength lies. Since 2005, KangHan has worked as a General Manager in China, where he gained tremendous experience and excellent knowledge of the law, human resource and compliance. Since 1999, KangHan has delivered numerous lectures and successfully published books, audiobooks, and e-books in German and English languages.

Contact the author via GTEC publisher.

FOREWORD

Franz is German; Hong is Chinese, can the two possibly live together? Cultural differences are significant, especially in Europe and Asia where many prejudices make it difficult for people of the two sides of the globe, to get along with one another. Franz wants to disprove this "Western-Asian" concept. He believes that everything is possible. He is Calm and relaxed. A workaholic, who tries his luck where the money is. He is, however, a spendthrift. He loves the warm climate, dating pretty

women and eating the sweet sauce and spicy foods. But there is one thing about Franz. He is too naive; he has a problem saving his hard-earned money.

Hong, his wife, is different. She is intelligent, unpredictable, fizzy, nagging, and loves provocations all the time. She is full of herself, and she loves sweet food. Her detective instincts make her suspicious of her Husband's unusual behaviours. She starts to spy on him clandestinely. However, despite differences in character and personality, Franz and Hong are genuinely in love.

If you want to skillfully overcome all the hurdles in private and professional life in China, just get carried away by the inter-cultural and action-packed experience between "East and West". Get deeply soaked into the humorous and exciting stories about money, luck, intrigue, love, power, sex and business.

DISCLAIMER

Names in this book, people, companies, as well as places, are all fictitious. Similarities to the living or deceased persons, as well as Chinese or Germany company names, are all purely coincidental and not intended.

Shanghai, in the Spring of 2020
KangHan YUAN

All provinces as well as the main mountains in China and the seas of China (Source: GTEC Publishing House):



All major cities and rivers in China (Source: GTEC Publisher):



CONTENTS

About the Author.....	3
Foreword	3
Disclaimer	4
CONTENTS	7
A Breast in the morning dispels all worries	8
With a ladyboy in your pockets, you will always have a snack ...	62
Taking a shower for two saves water and time	116
Who laughs last, thinks too slowly	183
There is also a life after birth.....	217
The order from the country of the export world champion	240
In the long run, only power will help	313
The battle with the developer	363
Thanksgiving	393
List of keywords on Chinese culture and traditions	394
Recommended GTEC E-books	402

A BREAST IN THE DAWN AND WORRIES ARE GONE

It is precisely one o'clock, on the morning of January 2014. The weather is chilly. A plastic bottle of hot water is warming my feet, while my wife Hong is lying next to me. "Hong" means "red". The red colour was significant at the time Hong's parents were still working as civil servants and party members for the Chinese government. That is why red as a colour was immortalized with their daughter's name.

Hong is a beautiful woman, medium height, with a voice sounding a bit deeper than most Chinese women. She attributes the roughness in her voice and character, to her childhood experience, when she was separated from her mother, to go and spend days with relatives. Her parents used to travel long distances to work many hours in the field, during times of the Cultural Revolution. It is quite evident that she lacked maternal affection; perhaps this is the reason for her provocative behaviour and constant screaming.

Taicang is a small Chinese city in the north of Shanghai. It is one or two hours drive to and from the city centre, depending on the time of the day. However, because of a busy schedule at work, I sometimes spend a few days away visiting my suppliers, making suggestions for improvement, filling out forms, and much more. From time to time, I visit the offices of the Asia headquarters in Shanghai. I mostly go there to calculate the costs of shopping parts, and to prepare notes for the upcoming board meeting in Germany headquarters. I work with senior buyers of the individual product groups in the purchasing department of Schluckauf company, operating in Shanghai, Taicang and Anting. I have a local employment contract, same as the Chinese living here.

I rented an apartment and negotiated a chauffeur-driven mid-range service car from Shanghai-Volkswagen, on the grounds of being able to concentrate better on my work. To drive a vehicle in China, you must have a Chinese Driver's Licence, because neither the German nor the International Driver's Licence, are accepted here. Chinese people living in Germany, are lucky because their driver's license is acceptable at least for the first six months, so long as the notary certifies it.

I do have a Chinese driving licence. Chinese driving test examination questions are like the German ones. When you present the German Driving Licence, you are only required to take a theory examination, but the traffic rules are different. All employers in China are aware of this. Since they prefer seeing their employees getting to places of work, they have no choice, but to abide by the rules. As a foreigner in China, when you get involved in an accident, you should know that you are on your own. The language barrier problem makes it more challenging and time-consuming. I experienced this several times in my former company in Shanghai and Suzhou, around 2008.

My current company has two offices, one in Shanghai, another one in Taicang, where the production plant is situated. Being a newcomer here, I am not yet utterly conversant with many tasks and processes, and therefore, I am unaware of benefits for individual top buyers. I always work under pressure, to deliver excellent quality service to the head office in time, with no excuses.

Sometimes when I have too much work, Hong decides to go to her parent's home in Suzhou to avoid being bored. The city of Suzhou has a population of approximately ten million inhabitants. It is two

hours bus drive west of Taicang, near the third largest inland lake of the People's Republic called Tai Lake, baptized the "*Venice of the East*", because of its many canals. The right connections by express trains highway and Kaiserkanal, make Suzhou one of the fastest-growing cities. It is one of the so-called *Boomtowns*. Suzhou is also in the rankings of the oldest cities in the Yangtze Basin. With more than two thousand five-hundred-year history. It is the cradle of the *Wu culture*, tracing its foundation to the legendary King Helu of Wu.

Hong told me that she chose to name herself *The Empress of Suzhou*, because of her family name, Wu. There is a brief story about it; this is how it started. Once upon a time, there was a small village in Suzhou, where everyone was named Wu. It followed a legendary story of Jingniang Wu, a girl kidnapped from Suzhou, but later rescued by Emperor Kaiser Song, the brave warrior. On their way back to the village of Suzhou, the Emperor and the rescued girl Jingniang Wu had an affair. As a result, a baby was born, who was later to become Hong's great-grandmother, this, Hong said is how her family retained the surname Wu. Therefore, as a descendant of Wu, she chose to call herself *The Empress of Suzhou*. Suzhou, as a modern city, is developing rapidly. Imperial Canal, the longest human-made waterway in the world, connects Beijing to Hangzhou, stretching over two thousand kilometres, is in Suzhou. The city is also known for silk production, as well as blossoming high-tech industries. It is being referred to, as the *silk capital*.

The architectural landscape of this once old town is a magnet to the booming tourist industry because the maximum height of buildings

here is still limited to twenty-four meters high. Some of the parks in this city are in the list of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The most spectacular thing in Suzhou is a *hukou* of this old town, the invaluable "*registered permanent residence*", a certificate that Hong owns and will always keep, even if she moves elsewhere. In Germany, people do not keep hanging on to the principal residence, because even a student who is entitled to plenty of benefits, can also be convinced to change places.

Hong's parents moved into a terraced house in the North of Suzhou years back. They bought the house when prices were still affordable. In Suzhou, property prices are rising day by day, because of the sporadic changes and development in the area, for example, the opening of a modern metro station. Hong moved here to live with her parents the time when I was busy running up and down, working hard. Being away from her parents could have been the reason for going to them. It happens when you are the only child in the family; parents tend to spoil you with whatever you wish to have. For example, Hong owns a private sleeping place in her parent's home, on the top floor of their house, distinctly separate from the standard living room and kitchen.

Her parent's house is in a quiet housing estate. Plants decorate the stairs of the house going to the terrace being guarded by "Bingjiling" the small dog, that greets guests with a joyful barking. The living room can be reached using the front door. My in-laws named their dog "ice cream" because it licks the "cold desert " so well, especially when he wants to be allowed into the house. In China, before you enter the home, you must remove your shoes, and exchange them with slippers, because Chinese household does not welcome dirt.

The house comprises of a kitchen, parental bedroom, and Hong's room, which also in some way is my room since I am married to their daughter. Next is a visual art-related studio, which belongs to Li Gengnan, my father-in-law, a man with a passion for calligraphy.

Despite space occupied by the desk and an office chair, the room looks more of a studio, than an office which was initially a balcony and later converted into a living room. Instead of computers and other accessories, the desk has writing brushes, rod squid, friction stone and papers, typical of the Chinese tradition, that has been in place for millennia. Textbooks here and there, are part of the décor and the artistic ambience of the room. I relocated from Shanghai to Suzhou. Hong was living with her parents while teaching law at Suzhou University. The job was not paying well, she was earning only 5,000 RMB, per month, that is about six hundred and fifty Euros, at that time, including all insurance and taxes. She was working only two days a week. RMB (*Renminbi*) is the Chinese national currency, also known as Yuan. 5000 RMB is not much money. Civil servants earn less than private-sector employees. Despite living on a meagre income, Hong's parents worked so hard to save for their pension. In China, pensions schemes for public servants pay well.

To support my business projects, Hong applied for an indefinite break at the university. My mother-in-law Wu Meilan was the mediator for our semi-detached house, while Li Gengnan, my father-in-law, arranged all the contacts with the real estate agent. It helped me to understand that without relations in China, it would have taken me a long time to settle, including paying dearly for such a simple thing. We live in a small but quiet condominium.

A gatekeeper is slated off the main road, and there is a small garden too. It is a relatively new house, with double-glazed windows, and modest heating system.

It is common to find homes with no heating system in the South of the Changjiang river, which is popularly known as the Yangtze in the West. Even though it is part of austerity measures, temperatures in this part of the country rarely drop below zero degrees celsius. Rules were set up by the Chinese government in the 1950s. In order not to freeze here, you must have the underfloor heating, and in hot temperatures, you need the air conditioner. Preparing tea in Suzhou is popular; it is famous too. Traditionally locals here make tea from infusing leaves, for example, Hong's parents use plants parts such as buds, flowers, fruits and others. I prefer green or herbal tea; Hong loves fruit tea.

Interestingly, in China, black tea is called red tea. Yellow tea is also on the list but has not yet stormed the wholesale market, although, for some time, they have been secretly making it in small islands.

Hong and I took advantage of a week off work to fly to Germany, at the headquarters of Schluckauf in Ingolstadt. Each morning before having our breakfast, we used to jog together, passing through the city, and illuminated pathways in parks. We found this interesting because the air in Germany was crisp and fresh, as opposed to that in China.

We later proceeded to Upper Franconia, in the northernmost tip of Bavaria. We were to stay with my father and sister for a few days and to attend Hong's christening and the marriage ceremony in a church between Christmas and New Year.

I got married to Hong in June 2013 at the Chinese registry office in Nanjing. 6 months later, she needed to invite as many relatives as she could to our wedding party in China because it was a special day for both of us. We celebrated our marriage in Suzhou in a spectacular ceremony. More than three hundred guests attended the ceremony. Thanks to my in-laws, for funding everything. Hong and I would never have made it.

The ceremony in Suzhou provided an opportunity to introduce myself to all relatives. I presented a speech in the Chinese language, which I had to practice for some time before the event. My American boss of Schluckauf with his wife, and a travel-loving friendly couple from Germany, were visibly impressed by my speech. Despite attending adult evening classes in Germany, still, I have not mastered the Chinese language, to be able to speak fluently. As it is in Germany, there are many dialects in China. In Suzhou, the one spoken by my kinship is incomprehensible to me.

I recalled years back when I used to work as a supplier developer for a French company in Bietigheim. There, I joined a group to be trained like a marathon runner. Even though we only meet once in a year; we all have each others' contacts. I did not spend much time convincing Hong about the health benefits of sports; she was a good runner, too, during her school days. Sports activities help me to get away from the hustle and bustles of daily life. Therefore, Hong and me took the chance to participate in the famous yearly "New Year's Eve" running event through the city with thousands of spectators, before we flew back to China.

Yesterday, I spared some time cleaning up my office to get prepared for the Chinese New Year. After doing all the cleaning, I turned the

television on to watch programs. There was continuous buzzing sound, indicating no signals. I wondered why. I asked my wife what could have happened! "It is pointless to keep on paying television monthly bills when you are always busy travelling abroad" She answered. What have you just said! I asked, surprisingly, trying to figure out where the logic was in her statement. Hong's way of doing things sometimes amazes me. In Germany you would never think of cancelling or stop paying television licence, just because you are temporarily going out of the country, it is even hard to imagine such a thing. However, despite all such behavioural characteristics, which are sometimes intolerable to me, I am proud of my wife. Perhaps her aim, in this case, was to save us from paying unnecessary costs.

The television bill was still not paid yet, what we decided to do instead, was to watch a movie on DVD. We also treated ourselves to special Tata tea, a powdery blend with a natural taste of various herbs such as Tulsi (Indian basil), Brahmi (fairy weed), cardamom and ginger, which I came back with from a business trip to India last year. As usual Hong is a woman with impulsive behaviour. She could suddenly change from one topic to another. Sometimes I find it difficult to understand her. At times I ask myself whether it is not the age difference? She is about twenty years younger than me. For example, when watching the DVD movie, she suddenly asked me what simple gifts do Chinese men donate to their loved ones? Not much concerned about the question, I replied, wine, books, and tea. "No, you are wrong; it is flowers, wrist-watches, and wine", she replied. I did not know that I learned it from her.

As the Chinese proverb goes, "don't listen to what they say, go see", we continued watching the movie; it was called "The Devil Wears Prada", its theme fittingly connected us to yet a short discussion

about money and wealth. "I prefer to stay rich and healthy instead being poor and sick", summarized Hong her ingenious opinion.

By the time we finished watching the movie, it was late in the night. Before I retired to bed, I grabbed my laptop to browse through my emails. As if driven by intuition, what caught my eyes straight away, was an email from my bank about an investment company that had suffered severe losses in value. I remembered another email from an Australian administrator sometime back alerting me of a company that had filed for bankruptcy, and that he had been asked to start the process. On reading this one, I immediately contacted my two British financial advisers Alan and Michael from Shanghai; they advised that my company was not affected. Amidst many thoughts, Hong came to the door, trying to distract me with a conversation. I took that opportunity to ask for legal advice on this since she is a lawyer.

I explained to her how I had been alerted that my Australian finances had plummeted to the bottom. But my financial advisers assured me that the investment in question was protected against losses in value. I got information that if I did not generate money, I would at least get my capital investment back. I was still confident since Deutsche Bank managed the funds and because it is commissioned by one of Australia's oldest financial companies. Hong advised me that if the company was to go bust in Australia, I could at least sue the financial advisers In Shanghai. She suggested that it was vital for me to get another adviser to manage my funds. She explained that private individuals were not allowed to do business directly with financial institutions. "Organise all relevant documents so that I can advise you further," she said.

Hong had a somewhat similar experience. In Germany, she was surprised one day to find that her bank statement with Deutsche Bank, showed "no funds available". She knew she had not emptied her account to the last penny. Inquisitive as a detective, she vowed to find out how this could have happened. "No funds available, yet I know I had not withdrawn all the money!", she wondered. She privately carried out her investigations. Eventually she found out that the day money was withdrawn from her account; she was in Bonn writing entrance examinations to obtain university qualifications. She further discovered that when she was still sharing a flat with two Arabs and a Chinese woman, her bank details were secretly copied.

Evidence indicated that it was the Chinese woman their roommate who did it. She faked Hong's signature and presented it at Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt. Because many Asians have similarities in features, it was easy for the Chinese woman to forge Hong's signature. Hong was determined to finish it all. After a long, arduous task, efforts paid off. The bank finally refunded her stolen money.

Every night before I retire to bed, I check on the share price index, at least before the end the day. Today it is not all good news; prices have gone into minus. Amidst thoughts, the small voice in me is referring to what my financial advisers have always said, that it is normal for share prices to go into minus. I must be patient and wait for them to rise again.

I am about to go to the bedroom, but still feeling a bit troubled by the share price news. As if to revenge for my coming back home late, when we went to bed, Hong turned her back towards me, I had no choice but to coil my left palm around her breast. It perfectly

fitted inside. I consoled myself by saying after all "*A breast in the morning dispels all worries*".

In a speech after church wedding in Germany, I mentioned that as far as I am concerned, I care less about whether Chinese women have small breasts. Her breasts fit in well into my palm, and I am comfortable with it, I don't need anything more, end of the story. Whenever I hold my wife's breast in my palm, I contemplate about many different things between China in the East, and German in the West.

In China, when I turn the garden lock around on the left, it closes, when I turn it on the right, it goes up.

If I wanted to have a shower, I turn the blue tap on, for hot water, and a red tap, for cold water.

On Christmas day, churches in China are mostly decorated yellow and red, while in Germany, they are decorated white. In a Chinese church, there is no collection box during ceremony. In Germany, you need to be prepared to give during and at the end of worship. Indeed, travelling is an adventure.

At conferences, Chinese officials and company representatives are more flattering, while in Germany they talk more about figures, data, facts.

In the West, they use Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and others, while Chinese have WeChat and Weibo.

In China, when stock markets blink red, it means prices are going up, green means prices are going downhill.

Magnetic compass needle in China shows to South, whereas Western compass points to North.

I am looking at my watch; it is six o'clock in the morning. I hear sounds of the morning birds chirping. I can only imagine what they

are saying. The temperature outside is about 10 degrees Celcius. It is cold inside the house, because of the single glazing thin walls. Hong is feeling a bit chilly, and maybe it is the reason why she kept on coughing throughout the night. The kitchen and bathroom are colder than the rest of the house. I asked her why she wants to keep the house cold all the time. She replied that in her childhood days, there was hardly any heating in her parent's house.

"Living and working in the cold and sitting on the couch wrapped in a winter coat, were quite normal for us as kids", she replied.

Hong studied the German language entirely. She even knows the insulting and gossip words. We communicate more using German rather than English or Chinese languages. I need time to practice the Chinese language, but Hong is impatient with me. I asked her how she came to learn all these colloquial words in German language; she replied that she used to read *Bildzeitung* daily. I could not hold my laughter back on hearing her talking about reading *Bildzeitung*. I asked whether there is an equivalent of a German *Bildzeitung* in China, I got no response we left it at that. My busy working schedule prevents me from concentrating on learning the Chinese language. Away from work, when I am with Hong, we commonly use German language, in that case, I have no pressures of leaning complicated Chinese language.

When we talk about busy working schedules, at times, I sit back to reflect on the strenuous work during the past week. I remember one time I was sitting with my American Boss in his office in Shanghai. We were to meet to discuss how to improve the headcount in the company. His budget had been cut and instead money was allocated elsewhere. He looked so worried, saying that he did not even know how he was going to pay wages to his employees, not to mention the

cost of headhunters and bringing old and experienced people on board. He was worried about what would happen to scholarships of those gifted Chinese students.

“Yes, that was the situation. I think we need to tighten our belts”. My boss said resignedly.

The day before, I was at the Global Sourcing Board for a conference call with the head office in Germany. Unfortunately, they did not inform me early enough. I then had to organise the essentials quickly and do all the calculations at night in the hotel. I was lucky, I finished in time. Delivery notes were written in Chinese. Knowing the language, saved me.

Shortly afterwards, I received an email from Germany asking for a quick translation of those notes into English language. A German manager was supposed to travel to a Chinese supplier the following day, therefore, there was a need for urgent support in requesting the necessary information for subsequent cost calculations in English and Chinese languages. I did not have enough time to forward the email to a German-speaking Chinese in the Shanghai office. I used my specialist knowledge of English and Chinese to do it myself.

However, I could not send this file since I was still driving. I had to wait until I reached the office. It was nine o'clock in the morning, but luckily, no one had complained yet.

“I cannot understand this.” I heard myself talking to myself. “Why do people do things at the last minute, and heap the pressure on others to finish them?”

In this case, I would have imagined that travel plans were already in

place and fixed beforehand. I wondered why these German managers do not want to speak English; after all, we are an international company. Or are they just lazy for the sake of it, simply because they want their work done by others? I tried to raise this issue with one German colleague in the office one day because I was upset about it. I was not surprised when he answered that all emails were written in German anyway. He said that a new colleague in the company once tried to impose the use of the English language, but the proposal received an adverse reaction among the Germans. The colleague was upset and left the company.

Taking you a little bit back, my American boss in Shanghai had also proposed cost-saving measures, by merging several offices on the higher floor into one. It would then mean that an entire floor was to be given up, including my office. My boss argued that I did not need that office anyway, since most of the time I am out meeting suppliers or attending meetings with buyers in the office at our production plant in Taicang. I disagreed with this decision. I told him that it would be difficult for the management team to hold together if I was far away in Taicang and that it could no longer be possible for me to attend team meetings that were so close to him. A few hours later, I had been allowed to retain my office in Shanghai.

My wife Hong was the happiest person on hearing the good news about keeping my office in Shanghai. She praised me for being brave and fight on for my cause, hmmm? It was not fighting for my cause alone; I was instead fighting for both of us. "I am doing all I can to get a foothold in China," I told her.

I am preparing to go to work tomorrow. Despite being a Sunday as well as a public holiday, it was designated to be a working day. I am

quite happy working on Sundays because then I would push buyers to work hard, and to get more time to send out invitations to the many meetings.

As it is the case in Germany, office working days are Monday to Friday. Working hours in China are regulated by law, not to exceed forty-four hours a week. In exceptional cases, people do also work on weekends and public holidays.

Additional to eleven public holidays, staff gets five to fifteen vacation days, depending on seniority.

The difference to Germany is when you work overtime, you get paid at least one hundred and fifty per cent of the total wages. If you work on weekends, and you are not compensated, the payment rises to at least two hundred per cent. There are cases where people are paid three hundred per cent on public holidays.

The Chinese New Year, also known as CNY, is globally referred to as Lunar New Year. This festival is called the Spring Festival in mainland China. It is one of the several Lunar New Years in Asia. Observance of this festival traditionally takes place from the evening preceding the first day of the year, to the Lantern Festival, takes place on the 15th day of the year. The First Day of the Chinese New Year begins on the new moon, that appears between 21 January, and 20 February. Every year, this date is different.

A few days ago, Hong and I went to Shanghai. We had gone to attend the AHK monthly meeting of the German Chamber of Commerce. It was here that for the first time, I met a new evangelical pastor in charge of Greater Shanghai area. The Shanghai Metropolis

assigned a small church in the Western Qingpu district, which I like calling Qingpu church. The pastor in this church delivers divine services of the Chinese Evangelical Church, called the "Three-Self Church". In China, religion is sensitive, because the philosophy of faith, and that of the state, do not auger well. However, there are now a few officially recognised religions in China, with strict instructions from the state. It includes, among others, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam. Many followers of other religions are still persecuted in China today.

According to history, Catholicism made the first attempt to start missionary work in China in the 13th and 14th centuries, but their mission was not successful. The protestant missionary came to China at the beginning of the 19th century. Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism was moderately successful, although initially on a plodding pace. Five years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the present Evangelical Church started operating under the name the Three-Self Church.

Hong told me how the name "Three-Self Church", came about. "During the Cultural Revolution, everyone concealed their religions. Buddhas destroyed, instead, Mao's images hanged. If you wanted to survive, you had nothing to do, but to cooperate with the Communist Party. The only opportunity for the Evangelical church was to break away from the Western organisation, and all its influences. The church got buildings to operate from, and members were advised to look for finances (self-financing), to expand. The name 'Three-Self Church' came from there".

The current membership of this church is difficult to figure out, as there are countless registered congregations in addition to state

recognised and gazetted churches. However, according to statistics carried out in 2013, in Germany, Catholics and Protestants were almost at par with each other, with nearly sixty per cent of the total population. Germany has a small number which coincides with the people. The estimated six per cent of Christians in China fits well into the vast Chinese population.

Also, in Shanghai we met Peter Kreuz, a catholic pastor whom we had known for a long time at the German Chamber of Commerce Abroad meeting. Kreuz's church is called CCPA (Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association). To be officially recognised in China, CCPA church had to be renounced from the Pope. It is not a trifle in this faith, which regards the Pope as the head of the Church.

Peter Kreuz now works in Anton Rebe's company. Foreign priests in China do not get work permits. They only get short term visas, since they do not work for the Chinese church. They work for a legalised company and put it on their name cards.

Hong is already preparing for the Chinese New Year. She wants to spend it with all her relatives. I will present a speech in Chinese or in Suzhounesian, which will be stressful for me because they understand my Chinese, I don't understand their Suzhounesian. However, I am always grateful for their warm reception as a family, to a 'Laowai,' a Chinese name for foreigners. It is rare in China because Chinese people are always suspicious of foreigners. History maintains that they have all the right reasons to do so, and perhaps these are one of them.

Struggle for land possession in China only benefited a few, leaving many scrambling in a quest for the same. The first Opium War in

the middle of the 19th century resulted in the cessation of Hong Kong to Great Britain. A few years later, France also came in during the second Opium War, which forced China to drop opposition to international trade relations. At that time, the Chinese's economy had collapsed, which saw the end of its dominance in Asia. Great powers such as Germany, Britain, Russia, Japan and France, used this opportunity to compete for dominance, in dividing China.

At that time, the Qing government was in a severe financial crisis. The Chinese's economy was not strong enough to sustain itself. It, therefore, had to borrow money from Western countries, pledging to surrender its marine customs. As a result, significant powers gained control of Chinese's finances, opened branches of banks throughout the country, handled capital exports and issued banknotes. They manipulated and dominated the Chinese economy. In just five years after 1895, there were nearly a thousand factories in China. They dominated railway construction, ship transportation and mining.

Astonishingly, until the end of the 19th century, the US had played no role at all in the conquest of China, but that was not going to last long, because it proposed that it should be given equal advantages and opportunities in the Chinese market too. They accepted the proposal without any conditions, which later resulted in it becoming entrenched in China. In the 1930s, however, China put up resistance battles against Japan. During World War II, with its allies together, it brought Germany, Italy, and Japan to their knees.¹ Briefly that was

¹Page "History of China". In: Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.
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the story. I wanted to give you a synopsis of what happened. Let me now go back to the Chinese New Year Festival.

I will use the upcoming holiday as an opportunity to practice Chinese language, preferably on my notebook. Soon it will be Valentines Day again. As if she had read my mind thinking about her, Hong wakes up and comes to me. The temperature outside is about 14 degrees celcius. She is still having a little bit of a cough, I think of advising her to visit a doctor.

The Chinese New Year is dedicated to the horse. Many legends and folk tales surround the origin of the twelve zodiac signs. Many other ethnic minorities do not adopt the animal selection and its order that is mostly used in China. There is a popular legend that Emperor Xuanyuan once announced that twelve animals should form his imperial bodyguard. The animals use rabid means against others, to secure the best place. This unfair struggle used to be organised through an order in which animals would be arranged. There is another legend of a day being divided into two-hour cycles, where the selection and ranking of animals would depend on which one

https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Geschichte_Chinas&olidid=161364081 (Retrieved: November 19, 2017, 11:31 UTC);[http://www.china-guide.de/auslaendische-aggressionen-und-imperialistische-aufteilung-chinas.html\(01/09/2017\)](http://www.china-guide.de/auslaendische-aggressionen-und-imperialistische-aufteilung-chinas.html(01/09/2017))

was the most active during these cycles.²

Hong was born in a horse year that repeats itself every twelve years, which is why she customarily wears red underwear. According to the Chinese culture, wearing red underwear, drives away evil spirits, at least to some extent. There is also another belief to the contrary that the year of the horse is not as good as the Dragon year, since only half as many children would be born in this year. Whether that is true or not, I don't know, at least, I would not tell Hong.

In a sense when you think about it deeply, those who believe that being born in a horse year may not be desirable, I could somehow agree with them. I see that a newly born horse would seem restless, struggling to move and searching for adventures. In that case, the year of the horse would fit to be described in juxtaposition to a newly born horse, as exciting, being adventurous and lively. On the other hand, it could also be symbolically interpreted as struggling to live, being stressed, or yearning for help, which would mean going through hard times. In comparison to that, I try to give my wife, as much as possible, the space she deserves, without restrictions. She is not a type of woman you can put down anyway. As a modern person, I have no problem with it. What is essential to me is to have financial security and freedom, as a horse also stands for. Financial independence is vital in life. Having stated that though, I always avoid being seen to be a materialistic person.

²Source: <http://german.china.org.cn/german/de-12sx/matter.htm>
(02/06/2017)

I once asked Hong, whether she knows about big people such as Merkel, Cameron, Holland, and the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, being born in the horse year.

"A female Prime Minister as Merkel in China is more than a dream. It is a far-fetched hope. It could be possible maybe in future, not now", she retorted. Hong told me that in Chinese history all Emperors were male, except Empress Wu Zhao, who was accused of poisoning her husband to come to power."

It is now time to go jogging along the river. The weather is not all that pleasing. Smog is worst this time of the year. The sun has no choice but to struggle to pierce through thick smoggy clouds. In China, around this time of the year, the weather is bleak, which sometimes makes me uncomfortable. All I can see right in front of me now is a one big grey mass of smog. When local people see me jogging in this weather, they take me for being mad.

"That is the problem with foreigners", I heard one of them retorting, they did not expect me to know the Chinese language. Anyway, I am not too much bothered about what people say. I will continue jogging, as long as it helps me to keep healthy and fit. Anyway, nothing much to worry about, because after the Chinese New Year celebrations, Hong and I will go for a holiday in Thailand.

After jogging, I return home and go straight to a cold bathroom to take a quick shower, and afterwards get some brunch, after which I will check on my emails. Many of these emails are from German Chamber of Commerce Abroad, or from LinkedIn, the international networking site for businesspeople. I also received many New Year's Festival greetings cards. This evening we must go to the

pharmacy to buy a cough mixture and tablets since Hong is still not feeling well. We will then head to a restaurant to have noodle soup next door to our house.

I like noodles because you get the opportunity to choose recipes, amongst them. Another thing is that eating noodles saves my wallet because they are too filling, although sometimes I don't like the way they prepare the food. They mix too much glutamate, an additive that helps to enhance their taste. Being used to Western rather than Oriental cuisine, when I eat food with too many additives, I develop heartburn, making me feel uncomfortable. However, there is another way you can avoid that. You can order a special meal without added glutamate; I do that a lot. You can also go to restaurants which prepare fresh dishes, other than order food deliveries. Anyway, after our evening meal, we head back home. On our way, we pass by the bakery, to buy my favourite alcohol-filled confectionary. I enjoy these snacks while watching a movie. Hong, who is not a good fun of movies, would be surfing the internet. While concentrating on watching movies sometimes, Hong comes to interrupt me with her unedning Chinese jokes, which I don't find too funny. Is it because I don't understand them?

We have had our meal; it is now time to go. Usually, before I go to bed, I make sure that I don't forget to gulp a glass of a herbal mixture given to me by Li Gengnan, my father-in-law. This mixture with more than 50% alcohol is too strong, but it does not only strengthen life, it increases libido and potency of a man too. Of course, you must believe in its effect. The mixture comprises of expensive ingredients, some of them being, a deer's penis, or a snow dog, from the mountains. It also has a high content of traditional liquor, which makes it to be more expensive. Women are however not usually

advised to take this mixture, for fear of them going into a sexual frenzy.

Traditional Chinese medicine, such as acupuncture, has been proven to have cured many people whose conditions had been described as "incurable" by medical doctors. I also personally do meditation practices such as Qigong, to bring my Qi into harmony with my body, to enjoy good health. An appropriate application of breathing exercises can also regulate a smooth flow of Qi. I usually get swamped at work on Thursdays, which is why I do not return home before seven o'clock in the evening. Today, Hong has already prepared an excellent dinner at home, with lovely Western herbs.

The aroma in the house aroused my appetite for dinner.

"Hong, did you know that you could open up a restaurant?" I bragged giving her a cuddle and a kiss.

"Oh! really, where can this be?" She asks with a smile.

"Of course, here in China", I replied. I tell her that Chinese food tastes suitable for the Chinese, but if you add Western herbs to dishes in your restaurant, you would undoubtedly reduce competition.

After eating, Hong grabs plates and heads to the kitchen to wash them. I mix cocktail for myself while watching the movie.

"Today, the first floor must be cleaned up". Hong says commandingly while going out of the kitchen. "I have always been cleaning the second floor myself, it is now your turn", she grumbles.

I look surprised wondering what could have sparked off her bad mood. I think it is time to relax and enjoy the evening. She kills my spirit. According to Chinese tradition, a house must be swept and cleaned, the day before the New Year, to cleanse it from the previous year's burdens. I quickly jump to help put chairs in place. I ask Hong to give me a broom to clean up.

"Go back, I will do this myself, all you know is to come when I have done most of the work", she murmurs amidst outbursts. I feel offended but ignore her. When I return to the living room, the movie had ended. I decide to retire to bed.

The New Year's celebration is as important to Chinese, as it is to Germans. It is one of the most important festivals in the year. Tomorrow is New Year's Eve, the CNY. Today we want to go and book a cheap holiday to Thailand, or at least to discuss booking it. After work tomorrow, I will be going to Hong's parent's house to have dinner together as a family. That is the Chinese tradition. They will be expecting us and, they will prepare our over-night stay.

After getting ready, we leave home in Taicang to go and start giving out "*Hongbaos*". These are the lucky money gifts which are wrapped in small red envelopes to give away during the Chinese New Year Festival holidays. Hongbao comes from two words, Hong (red), and Bao (bag). In China, giving away red bags with money wrapped inside is standard practice. It also applies to weddings and birthday celebrations. There is an exciting story that Hong tells me.

"It is about a migrant worker with a large family who used to spend fifty thousands of his sixty thousand renminbi annual earnings buying Hongbaos. Family celebrations can sometimes be expensive.

Even if you decide to cancel the event for any reason, you will still be obliged to pay. It is the tradition.”

The first people that we give our Hongbaos were the gatekeeper of our residential complex and our driver. Hong is going to drive, on our way to her parents' place. Indeed, she does, and we arrive safely.

We are in Suzhou, at Hong's parent's home, for dinner. I have lived in China for many years; I have never seen such a lavishly laid the table like this, because I have visited many places during the CNY festivals with girlfriends, to enjoy the sun, and the weather. The reminiscent ones were in 2012 when my girlfriend Jasmine and I went to Bali. In 2011, Fangfang and I went to the Philippines, in 2010, I went to Malaysia with Shuming, and in 2009 I was with my Chinese teacher in Yunnan. But uhhh!! Oh God! I forgot her name, but I remember, I had to put up with the teacher because by then she was a real binge drinker. Before, I used to come to China to meet businesspeople during the CNY. This season, tradesmen have time and spend money because of the festive holidays.

That was a long time ago, it is time to remember. I went to many countries enjoying holidays and spending lavishly. I could not care less about money, and I used to foot the bill for all holiday trips. But since I got married to Hong, I am now seriously committed to Chinese family life. My life changed a lot; for example, I no longer spend lots of money eating out. I believe that home-cooked food is much healthier than the one prepared outside, where many artificial flavours and enhancers are added to make money. A survey carried out revealed that in some restaurants in China, pork is "chemically marinated" after slaughter, and sold expensively as beef to make

more money.³

At home, focus is on taste, not on cost savings. Therefore, Li Gengnan spends hours in his kitchen to prepare delicious meals.

Hong resembled her mother Wu Meilan in body structure, and she is the smallest in the family. She always reiterates the importance of eating various traditional Chinese dishes.

“This fish is called Li Yu. Fish is pronounced as "Yü" but written as Yu. Sounds like “left over”, means in coming new year you will have a lot of money left, and therefore you will become rich.”

At Hong's parent's home, we also have rice cakes on the dinner table we are enjoying the meal. Hong passes a small cake of rice over to me.

“In the Chinese language, "Nian", means year, and "Gao" means cake, but it also means "high", concerning salary. It is traditionally believed that eating a rice cake, is equated" to becoming rich since it associates to earning a higher salary. "I have passed the rice cake over to you, eat it you will get richer", Hong said jokingly, looking at me.

"Of course, I would love that, who wouldn't?"

³ Source: <http://www.my-chinese.ch/fake-food-counterfeit.htm> (14.4.2017). It's about making more money

"In Chinese tradition, eating eggs filled with minced meat, known as *Dan Jiao*, increases your chances of wealth. Therefore, when you consume many of them, you get too much "*Jin Yuan Bao*", a monetary currency used during the Jin Dynasty.

On the other side of the dinner table, there is a bowl of yellow bean sprouts. The shape of the dish reminds me of a lucky Chinese charm called "*Ru Yi*", that is responsible for keeping you in good health. Yes, indeed, I couldn't wait to feast on the contents within this bowl, after the incredibly lavish dinner to balance the diet. At the dining table, Hong asks whether I know what "*Rou Yuan*" is.

"Yes, I do, they are meatballs representing the family's gathering at the Spring Festival, which is also another name for CNY" I replied while helping myself with some of it from the bowl. I am munching them unreservedly, after all, it is a day to celebrate.

My mother-in-law Wu Meilan encourages me to help myself even more with food in the rice bowl. China has many varieties of rice, and the most popular is the glue rice.

This time of the year, over dinner, the conversation mainly revolves around celebration and the mass migration of Chinese. There is even a name for it, and it is called "*Chun Yun*". In the Chinese language "*Chun*" means Spring season, whereas "*Yun*", stands for transport. Although it may not sound that poetic, it is how the name came about. During the Chinese New Year celebrations, around eight hundred million people swarm trains to go to their distant hometowns and villages. It can sometimes be a big challenge for logistics and transportation.

This period is so busy that tickets are sold out online within minutes. Migrant workers who cannot access the internet would struggle to get tickets. Some can still manage to get official tickets without seats; the problem is enduring many miles standing, in a country many times bigger than Germany. People can travel for over forty hours before reaching their destination. Think about those without seats, it is incredibly discomfoting. That in place, however, some opt to buy "black-market" tickets, from the so-called "Yellow-Ox Group", albeit at exorbitant prices, especially for those travelling as a family in a group.

After the Spring Festival, the situation starts to calm back to normal. Prices for train tickets go down, but the situation remains dramatic during the rush hours, especially for the many low-income earners, who struggle to go back to their places of work in time.

After the festive dinner, Hong and I receive a small piece of gold, made in the image of a horse's head. The significance of the gift is that when Hong produces children in future, they would also receive a similar piece of gold. This gesture seems to be luring Hong and me into having offsprings, for her parents to get grandchildren to raise. She has, however, told them that she would rather have children abroad, than in a polluted environment.

On the first day of the New Year, the Chinese usually stay at home. People believe that visiting other people's families on this day, would drain money from them and pass it over to the other family. As common sense would have it, no one would love to part with their money, more so 'being given to others', just like that. The belief maintains that if one stayed home on this day, "*Shou Cai*", a traditional greeting ushering in wealth and prosperity, would be

there to hold and protect the property.

On New Year's Day, Hong and I travel to the city using the metro train. The newly launched train contributed to the value increase of house properties in the area, including Hong's parent's home. We walk by the riverside using the pedestrian pathway. Farmers sell their products, mainly to the tourists who throng this ever-busy place. The locals use mopeds or cars using narrow streets, to access the area. Hong and I treat ourselves with a Tofu soup, and grilled lamb roasted on a spit, and flatbread.

After spending a night with the in-laws, Hong and I go to visit her ageing grandparents, and cousins, who were each given a Hongbao. As a couple, you must give money to relatives with children; it is a tradition. Most relatives were living a stone's throw away, so we do not go far. And, there are a few visits because the apartments were cold. People prefer to keep themselves in their homes. The second New Year's Day is also another busy one, because traditionally it is the "Son-In-Law Day". If you do not attend the New Year's Day, the tradition is that on the second New Year's Day, you must visit your wife's family. Fortunately for me, I was already there, which made it easier.

In the morning of the third New Year's Day, Hong drives me and her parents to Wetland Park on Taihu Lake. The weather is not all that good, we are, however, not much bothered with it. All we do is to enjoy the excursion, so we continue to see the hot springs. There are various springs under a vast heated dome, and you can comfortably bathe in them. We are unlucky. We are told to return home because we had not made a reservation at the hot springs reception office to be allowed in. We all look at each other. "What

is the meaning of this?", one of them echoes inaudibly. We have no choice but to return home. All tickets had already been booked. As expected, the place is at times overcrowded being a big touristic attraction. We missed the chance to see these hot springs. Hong was still feeling cold. She jumps on the wheel, and we drive back home.

It is perhaps a bad day. While we are driving back home, a dog suddenly runs into the road, straight in front of our car. "Oh! not again!" Hong exclaims. Before she even finished the sentence, the four-legged friend slightly hit himself on the vehicle. It was the second time for Hong to run into a dog. Fortunately, this time, the animal escapes it into the nearby bush with minor injuries. We are all left in shock.

"This can't be a good year if such an accident happens to us shortly after the CNY! We might not get children this year!" Hong observes. On hearing about not having children, I smile reservedly. I observe that Hong's mother, who is sitting next to me in the back seat is not thrilled. When we reach home, we notice that our car had a slight dent due to the minor accident earlier with the dog. Hopefully, the insurance will repair the damage.

In China, and in many other parts of the world women prepare something to eat for the family, in Hong's family, it is the other way around. It has been happening for decades. Here it is Hong's father who is always in the kitchen. Li Gengnan is, however, an excellent cook. His meals are delicious. Traditionally, this time of the year, a meal cannot be Chinese, if it misses *Nian Gao*, a small round rice cake. Nian Gao is sometimes known as the Chinese New Year's cake. In Chinese tradition, it is considered good luck to eat Nian Gao, a homonym for the "higher year" symbolising higher income, higher

position, growth of children, and promise of a better life. So, eating Nian Gao, is considered good luck, during the Chinese New Year period.

After dinner, I go to skype, to talk with my son Daniel, about creating a homepage. Daniel is a student of "Computing and Digital Media" in Augsburg. He designs websites for a German company between semesters. I ask to join us for a Thailand vacation, but he refuses.

"My opinion about the security situation in Thailand is, depending on what I were reading in newspapers and watching on television at that time, I advise that it is not safe to travel to Thailand."

Hong thinks, Daniel since he is a well-travelled person who always knows his way around. I disagreed with him because a few years back, when I was on holiday there, it was beautiful and peaceful.

I am not in any way threatened. Already Hong and I are planning to go for a holiday in Thailand, after the new year's celebrations. I ask Hong what she thought of a beach holiday in Pattaya, a prominent tourist resort for foreigners. Pattaya is only two hours drive south of Bangkok. I chose this place because I invested money to buy an apartment some years ago. It should be built on a mountain overlooking the sea. I still vividly remember everything about this brochure, even though it is ages ago today.

Despite Daniel's warnings, Hong surprisingly agreed that we go to Thailand.

"I want to see where your money is gone", she smiled.

That night, we booked the holiday online, using a Chinese travel agency. Hong pulled out her credit card to pay, but it did not work at first. In an angry mood, she banged the keyboard, asking herself what the problem was, but after trying a couple of times, the payment went through.

In China, employers are generous in approving additional holidays. For wedding, I got 10 vacation days from HR department. I should get only three, as I was married before, but they ignored this law. In Germany, a special holiday you get is generally on your wedding day. The reason for the Chinese's flexibility on allowing generous holidays, is likely to bet that people get married early, perhaps get children, from which the state would benefit, for the pension fund. But I am not a Chinese...

That time, I was thinking about the Chinese emperor in Dietfurt near Eichstätt in Bavaria, Germany. Sometimes such spontaneous thoughts come my way. I told Hong how the Dietfurt population hid under the wall when the Bishop of Eichstätt wanted to collect taxes. "Coward like the Chinese," the bishop scolded them, and since then a Chinese emperor with a concubine and carriages ruled there for fun, not just for the annual carnival.⁴

It is cold and wet outside. According to the weather forecast, we expect snow tomorrow. Whatever the weather will be, I will have to go to the bank, to invest my savings on interest. Although in China, banks open even on bank holidays, Hong advises me to go on the

⁴Source: <http://www.dietfurt.de/bayrisch-china/> (02/09/2017)

first working day, after the Chinese New Year, because it is when banks will charge low-interest rates. While she was telling me this, I noticed that something was not well with her. She seemed to be in excruciating pain. Around this time of the month, she usually experiences the same problem due to her menstrual cycles. As if unconcerned with pain, she pulled out her phone to show me a new app which shows the best time when to have a child, and when one should be careful not just to conceive when you are not ready. On opening the app, her dates were matching.

But wait a minute, I thought it was the very Hong who said after the incident of knocking down a dog a few days ago, that this horse year was not good to have children! Why is she now thinking about children, and showing me the app? I asked myself inwardly. I was perplexed because she said herself that she did not want to have children in a polluted environment like that of China. But I did not mind much about it. I would find out from my in-laws whether they also supported the idea of not having children outside of China.

The night of the fifth day after the New Year was time to remember. A loud whistle of the remaining fireworks works was blown, to honour and celebrate the birth of the God of property. I know that for the European reading this now, you should be surprised to hear of the worshipping of GOD here since religions is not a popular ideology in China. Many Chinese believe in Buddha and Taoism, where there are many different gods. There is also the God of marriage, and Guan Yin–Pusa, Goddess of compassion. Godness of compassion observes all the sounds of suffering in the world and gives children to humanity and their supervision.

My father-in-law's' birthday coincides with the Chinese New Year' today, so we shall "kill two birds with one stone", celebrating the fifth day of the New Year, as well as his birthday. Hong told me that every Chinese gets an extra year older, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. If you take this tradition closely, it would mean that every Chinese gets two birthdays in a year. However, this custom is slowly fading away; it is being celebrated mostly by the older generation. The young age follows the Western calendar, and therefore, they celebrate this day every year on the same date.

I check on my emails regularly. Being a busy person, I sometimes wake up at night to do that. On New Year's Day, I received an email from Germany, requesting for some calculations, and yesterday I received another one asking whether I had done the calculations. I had sent a note to my bosses that I would be absent for some days, until the seventh of February after the celebrations.

Hong asked me what present we were going to buy for her father's birthday. She preferred flowers. I had a different opinion. I was thinking of buying a grey jacket from Germany, but I was not sure whether Hong would like it. However, Li Gengnan, prefers an egg clock, and kitchen utensils. Getting all these presents wouldn't have been a problem, because many shops in China are open on bank holidays, but time was not on our side. The party was starting in a few hours, followed by lunch dinner. I quickly put on my suit, grabbed Hong to head for the nearby flower shop. Thick fog and the slowly fading cloud of last night's fireworks were still hovering above. When we came back from the shops, guests were already arriving at my in-law's place. Some were sitting on the couch in the living room.

Hong gives me the red envelopes with banknotes inside that I have to hand over to the children. Everybody was thankful. The Presence of elders of the family at the party is something that will make them proud. Hong and I present our presents, the bouquet and Grey Jacket in the restaurant. Party gifts are not bound by particular rules. You give what you can. Children from low-income families get freebies such as pens, books and other small items that would fit within the budget of the one buying the gift. Wealthier families, however, spend as much as they want, with whatever they can. I prefer everyone to be present when opening a gift, give a handshake, to who has given it to me rather than thanking them on the phone or otherwise. The typical procedure here, though, is to unwrap gifts after people have left, I disagree with it. There is something that seems strange for us Europeans when it comes to donating gifts.

In China, when you invite someone, traditionally you are obliged to present a gift. Above all, you must also include a receipt of the item you bought, especially in the case of gifts to children. It is done to make sure that when people get children in future, they would also receive presents of the same value, as those which they donated. The party is going on. Children have been playing and screaming for the last three hours now. Bottles of rice liquor are slowly going down throats of guests. Food leftovers are happily packed to be taken home by whoever wants to. After many had left that evening, we continued as a family gulping down beers while enjoying the food too. After the party celebrations, Hong, her father, and two of the family acquaintances start playing Mahjong, a tile game, very popular in China. Mahjong is believed to have widely spread after 1905, taking over Chess.

I asked Hong why Mahjong is a game for only four people. "It's just a matter of only people being able to play." She replied. I am only a foreigner I don't know the rules of this game, that is why I had to ask. Wang, one of the family acquaintances, is an old army friend of Li Gengnan. They have been friends for a very long time since days when they were working in northern China. Wang is a Buddhist; he is a vegetarian and lives with monks.

He lives in a temple in Suzhou, working as a driver in a Germany company that I know as well.

"The only difference is that Wang has hair on his head, which is very rare for monks" Hong observed amusedly.

After spending time with guests, I am getting bored. I decide to go to the living room and have a look at birthday gifts. These gifts are somehow different from those given out in Germany. These are kiwis, apples, and many other types of fruits. Nuts are also part of the gifts given out. Every gift is expensive, of high quality, and nicely packaged. There is another wrap of a bouquet.

Hong joins me in the living room and took the opportunity to ask me to teach her the right way to do reverse parking on the curb. She suggests that we get out, despite the coldness and practically show her how they do it. I do not resist, because I am used to her abrupt decisions about doing things, insisting on them to be done the way she wants. We go out in the cold night together, we then sit in an old V.W. Jetta that belongs to Li Gengnan. I start with simple tasks, which she grabs quickly, and masters in a few minutes. Hong is

thrilled and jokingly says that I could become an excellent driving instructor. I smile back, thankfully.

"Yes, I mean teaching only beautiful women how to park", she says, pointing her upper lip towards me.

"Wait a minute, what is all this? Is this a market gap?" I tease her back.

She shrugs me off, pretending to be annoyed, but later hugs me with a lovely kiss and a smile.

"Yes, ideally you are a quick learner, I am now going to teach you how to play billiards, and dancing", I say, looking directly into her eyes. The night is cold again. When I go for a shower in the morning, I realize that we hardly had warm water. As I explained earlier on, in the West, red colour on the water tap stands for hot water, blue stands for cold water. I was still tipsy because of the previous night's drinking. So, when I opened the red tap, ice-cold water gushed out on to me. It instantly sobers me back to my senses. I scream still wondering why in China red colour stands for cold water and blue for hot water. It does not make sense to me at all. The theory of the Five Elements, which include wood, fire, metal, water and earth, was born in Daoism China, about 2000 B.C. It is these Five Elements around which the dynamic process of change, were assigned in China.

This theory started with four cardinal elements. Since then, endless assignments such as shapes, seasons, animals, and even colours surfaced. For Westerners, fire is logically represented by red, and metal with white/grey. In China, I am confused even up to now, why yellow represents earth; black representing water, and wood with green. I don't understand a thing. In China red colour, as you may already know, stands for wealth and joy. Green is also associated

with wealth, harmony, and health, which does not differ much from us in the Western world. However, when it comes to colours of items of clothing, a green hat, for example, symbolizes infidelity, and a cheated husband. Yellow colour as in dress stands for neutrality and happiness. Yellow is the most prestigious colour, which is why the emperor's clothes, palaces, altars and temples were all decorated in yellow colour. Black is the colour of the northern sky, revered as the colour of kings. Despite its brightness and purity, white symbolizes death and suffering, it is common at funerals⁵.

It is now time for breakfast. I will have to take "*yan wo*", an expensive traditional Chinese medicine. It is translated in "swallow nest". The drug is a product of dried mucus of birds. Before taking it, you must mix it with hot water. Uuuuhhh!! I can guess that you are thinking what I am thinking, but as the saying goes, "good medicine does not always taste good". It is not cheap to buy either. Taobao, the most prominent Chinese online auction shop sells five

⁵Color in Chinese culture. (2017, September 12). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 11:33, November 19, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Color_in_Chinese_culture&oldid=800299743; Five-element teaching page. In: Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Processing date: March 6, 2017, 11:52 p.m. UTC.

URL: <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=F%C3%BCnf-Elemente-Lehre&oldid=163343410> (Retrieved: November 8, 2017, 10:32 AM UTC)

grams for just under one hundred and ninety RMB. That is around twenty-five euros according to the current exchange. What I am not sure about is its curative capability.

From the neighbourhood, I can hear the roar of loud music. In this neighbourhood, everybody knows everybody, where most of the residents are pensioners living amicably and peacefully together. As a child Hong lived here for many years. She is known to everybody here. At breakfast table, we discuss many things. Our conversation is mainly about the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO), at Microsoft. He is an Indian. Chinese believe that Indians have conquered Silicon Valley. The way things are unfolding, it is one thing after another. The purchase of nine robot companies by Google, robots and the speed at which they are taking over human resources, and many others. Hong said that soon we are going to see robots cooking, or even taking care of children, we already know that they can do cleaning work. When it came to discussing robots "looking after children", I reserved my words, for fear of being misunderstood by in-laws. They consider grandchildren as unique gifts from God, and therefore their care should not be equated to anything other than the unconditional love of their grandparents.

I was not surprised about how precious, and unique grandparents take their grandchildren to be, because Hong, as a child, was deeply loved by her grandparents. Li Gengnan was in the military according to reliable sources. It was on a one-month leave, when he got married to Wu Meilan who conceived, later giving birth to Hong.

Hong owes her life to the then Chinese party leader Mao Zedong, who stopped the invasion to Taiwan. He called for the end of the

war, apparently saving Hong's grandfather from fighting and so he could take care raising Hong's mother.

Li Gengnan had to go to Russian border to prepare for fighting, but this war was stopped as well, shortly before his marriage to Wu Meilan. He was on the border with Russia. They were on the verge of war. To their surprise and relief, the conflict was settled through negotiations, and so the fighting did not take place. The one-child policy in China that prevented Hong from having siblings, is now being swept under the carpet because it is relaxed a little bit. The fact that girls are not necessarily on the procreation wish list is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and tradition. In Germany whereas a woman's name can be assumed as a surname, in China, only men that can use surnames. Traditionally girls have no inheritance rights. It is boys who get the assets, but the tradition is slowly fading out. With all this knowledge, I am grateful to my in-laws, for embracing modern efforts to fight for gender equality

On the last day of our holiday, we drove back to Taicang. We stopped at a local bank in Suzhou, to open a fixed-rate deposit account, to transfer my salary from ICBC Bank aiming at earning a reasonable interest rate. Because of the bureaucracy of the Chinese banks, there are several forms I must sign in Chinese language to confirm that I have taken note of the final print. Cash withdrawals from other Chinese banks with foreign names, cannot easily be made from that bank. The machines were designed differently. It was better to withdrawal cash from the bank next door which were compatible with various features, and then deposit cash in this one. Oh God! I said to myself, this is too complicated, I remember doing this twenty years ago.

"At that time, online banking was not yet operational. Hasn't the world changed here?"

Hong said that withdrawing cash from one bank and deposit it into another was possible, if it could help you save on transfer cost and avoid bureaucracy. By the time we did all that, it was three o'clock in the afternoon, no bank was open, so I did not have a chance. I thought of using a cash machine, but with ATM, the maximum amount you could withdraw is RMB 20,000, the equivalent of 2,750 Euros, on the exchange rate of the day. So, I rightly abandoned the idea. I then opted to use online money transfer. The problem is that in China, all online transactions go through the Bank of China in Beijing. Hong looked at me and wondered why I wanted to transfer the money in a hurry.

"Tomorrow is the first official working day after the New Year, what is it that cannot wait till tomorrow?" she asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

It was still cold outside. We had nothing to eat except for the hard Chinese kiwis that were given to us by Hong's parents. We decided to go to a Chinese barbeque restaurant. Such restaurants are often crowded, making it hard to get a place where to seat. We had to wait. I needed to use a toilet, when I went there, I met a man who told me that he had come from Australia, specifically for this Chinese New Year celebrations.

I grabbed a raw fish to put it on the grill plate. As soon as I did that, Hong hurriedly pulled the fish out of my hand; she believes that women were the masters at this work.

"You don't know anything. What men can do is to eat, sleep, and snore, no more," she grumbles provocatively. I look at her thinking of what she had just said about men not being masters at cooking when she knows full-well that at home, her father is always in the kitchen. I murmured without finishing the sentence.

"A fish in the morning dispels sorrow and worries, but a fish in the evening..."

Oh goodness me, I did not know that Hong had heard what I said. She retorts inaudibly, grabs a small piece of paper, writes something and passes the note over to me, it read.

"Yaaa right... when the time comes, sleep well."

I read the note and wondered why she should have written that, but she looks less bothered, for her, it was business as usual. It was now time to pay. I pulled out my bank card, entered a PIN, protecting my details with a palm of my hand.

"Let them see the PIN, why are you hiding it?", she rebuked.

"Well, I am sure you know that banks always advise us to protect our details to deter probable fraud, forgery and the like. When the waitress gets hold of my PIN, for example, the next thing you know is my account being emptied", I replied.

It at all it happened, by the way, it would be a big problem for me. Since I do not have an online account yet, it would take me time to sort it out. In Germany it is different because the option of changing bank details online is always available.

“Anyway, it is time to let go of the talk of banks and online accounts, let us enjoy our food”, I said to Hong.

After eating, we continued our journey home.

When we arrive home, the apartment is dead quiet. Before we left, Hong had turned off the air conditioning system. I wondered whether that was a smart move. I thought it would have been a sensible thing to keep the heating on before we left since it was a cold season. As if she knew what I was thinking about, she replied that it would have been much expensive to leave the heating on. Hong reasons that it is better to succumb to the first few minutes of the cold while the heat was gaining momentum, than paying vast amounts of money in gas bills.

“You can still learn a lot about savings from us the Chinese”, she retorted.

“In China, everybody is a saver; even hot sewage sells for recycling. It can be ordered directly from factories such as steel mills. They use them as water coolers for their machines”, she explained to me that even hot water could sell to the public, for bathing, washing, and many other benefits.

It could be true though because I observed that this scheme is cheaper, affordable and profitable too, for the end-user. However, what I am sceptical and doubtful about is the health and safety of this brackish water, which I have used many times in China. I wonder whether it is not radioactive. As I am still thinking about savings, Hong proposes that if I wanted to save money, I would turn off the heating, and put on warm clothes instead.

I spared myself the burden of arguing about saving money. Women would always have the last say anyway, especially in China. The mentalities between East and West are too different. Yes, I would love to save money, also, but not at the expense of our health. The first night on returning home from the New Year's celebrations, we could not sleep because of the heartburn. Was it because we overate food or too much glutamate?

On the second day it rained cats and dogs. Unfortunately, on my side, I had no choice but to dare the torrential rain to go to transfer the money, as my wife had advised me. Hong picked up the driver, he sat on the steering wheel, and we set off to town. We arrived at the bank just in time. It was still early in the morning; we did not have to join long queues in the bank. We picked up two large bundles of banknotes and went to deposit them in the other bank. Were the counting machines on holiday too! They were not working correctly. The bank employee in the counter had to count the notes manually. It was followed by many papers that I had to fill and sign before depositing the money, here China is the same as Germany. When it comes to interest rates for new customers, today's rates are a little bit higher than in recent days.

After coming from the bank, Hong quickly prepared herself to go to the Thai Embassy in Shanghai, to apply for a visa for our joint holiday. I do not need a permit. As a German citizen, I can go in and out of Thailand, as many times as I want, if I have a valid return ticket on entry. The visa offices are closing at half-past twelve; we have less time left, so Hong must hurry up before they close. I go to office and driver and Hong go on.

I arrive at the office at half-past eleven in the morning. It is on the

twenty-second floor; it is cold. I am told by my colleagues in the office, that the central heating system in the entire building was still switched off, and that the canteen on the fifth floor down, is also still closed. It could not make sense to me. What is the point of paying rent then? Are our landlords only interested in collecting rent to save operational costs, instead of providing better services to their tenants!

Most employees here are not going back to work, until the following week on Monday, others maybe a little bit later than that. My American boss is also present in the office. We are discussing the budget and other cutting-costs measures. At noon we go to the restaurant next door with my American boss, he pays for our meals, typical of him. I like his way of doing things. That evening around six o'clock, I have to attend a meeting with my employee Dr. Zhang, to discuss company issues in order to fulfill orders from our headquarters in Germany.

After the meeting with Dr. Zhang, I head home. I inform Hong about the lunch we had at the restaurant with my business friends. I say to her how my friends laughed at me because I usually use Skype and emails to communicate. They accused me of being "out-dated and backward", in a modern world where people use WeChat or WhatsApp. Hong has both on her phone, the Chinese WeChat, and the Western WhatsApp.

"The problem with you is that you are always too busy to take care of yourself, do you know that many companies now cannot do business without WhatsApp?", she asks.

Without dragging the topic farther, I promise, I will change into a modern man.

Hong tells the driver about the small accident where she crashed into a dog, that escaped with no injuries, and how the car got a small dent. The driver advises her to contact our insurance company, to cater for that minor damage because the leasing company would not pay after all. We have to wait until the end of the week and initiate a accident which will be reported to the police.

In the West, according to our calendar, the week starts on Sunday. In China, it is different, because to them the days of the week are counted from Monday to Saturday. So, Monday is day 1, Tuesday is day 2, and so on. In China, Sunday has two names, Sunny Day, and Sky Day. Travelling is learning. Whenever and wherever you travel, will undoubtedly learn about many new things.

Today is a working day because it automatically compensates for the additional holidays that we took during the New Year. Even though this is the case, many people are not yet fully back to work, which is common during such periods. I have to work hard to get the backlog out of the way because today I want to go home earlier than usual.

When I arrive home, Hong is in the shower braving the cold water; I become frustrated when I think about the meaning of saving, that makes a person have a cold bath, in this weather! I feel pity for Hong. While we are having dinner, Hong told me that she did not have lunch, because there was plenty of work to do.

I look at her, thinking about the proverbial saying, "all work and no play, made Jack a dull boy".

"Bytheway there is no drinking water left", she adds, while gulping

a glass of water. I nod signalling that I got it. After dinner, I quickly ran to the supermarket to buy a few bottles of water.

After coming back from the supermarket, I sat down on the sofa and watched the movie "Bourne Identity". I am a fan of films because they take the stress off me, after a busy day at work. When watching the movie, I realise what the American secret service has been doing all the time; the Chinese had done it much earlier if not longer. I remember that twenty years ago when I first came to China, all cars and hotel room would be bugged, and telephone conversations intercepted. All accommodation employees, all drivers to mention a few, were "undercover agents". That time the Chinese were more suspicious of Western foreigners than today. Have they completely abandoned their secretive spying missions, given up, or are doing it even more than before? I have no answer for that.

It was getting cold. I decide to pour the rest of my Chinese rice wine in a saucepan and warm it a little bit. Since this wine is yellow, it is also called "Yellow Wine" in China. You can also get rice wine in Japan. It is called Sake, and in Korea, they call it Magoli, but the difference is that amongst other countries, the wine is colourless, not yellow as it is the case in China.

After warming the wine, I grabbed a glass, poured it in and headed for my private office on the third floor of our house. Before I could even warm my seat, Hong came running in the office shouting.

"The whole house is smelling of yellow wine, have you vomited?" she asked, blowing her nose with her right palm.

Still holding the glass in my hand, I answered. "No, I just warmed it

because it was too cold".

"Ya right, you just warmed it because it was too cold, do you then have to suck the whole bottle?" she interjected before I even finished the sentence.

"Calm down Hong, it is not a bottle; it is only a glass" I answered, trying to calm her moods down.

"Do you know what is going to happen now?" she asked.

"No, I don't" I answered back.

"Your sperm is now going to get drunk; then it will start swimming aimlessly drunk without hitting the target, this is why children are born drunk from drunkard fathers like you," she said dejectedly.

Hong is a woman who always has something to say about everything. When it comes to having or not having children, Hong is a very fickle minded person. What does she want? Children or not? Is it because of the alcohol in the rice wine, or is it whatever she said was smelling in the house, what makes her so upset? I cannot tell. Whatever the reason could be for her mood swings, I think there is more alcohol in Brandy than in a rice wine.

While still thinking about Hong's behaviour, she calls me to go to her office, one floor down. My heart pumps rapidly, thinking about what she was going to complain about next. I am wrong; it is entirely about a different topic. It is about a property for sale in Taicang, very close to our neighbourhood. Like in Germany, assets whose owner become insolvent, are advertised and sold by the banks to recover

part of their money, or the whole of it sometimes charging interest on them. I browse through the advert and tell her that the property is too expensive. The court and the bank want to make more money, on top of what they are supposed to. Hong is quick to add before I could even finish the sentence that from her experience, the price in the advert is negotiable. I agree and propose to go and visit the property.

I am astounded to learn that the down payment as the deposit was a whopping 300,000 RMB, the equivalent of 40,500 euros of the then exchange rate. I was, however, not too much in agreement with such craftily designed adverts only meant to lure people into spending. I showed Hong part of the advert reading as follows in small print, "*getting your money back later*". I warn that paying the money is one thing and getting it back as quickly as the writing seems to suggest was another thing. If those banks and other financial institutions got the money, they would twist languages using all technical words to protect their side. Hong agreed.

"You are right; it is like giving a piece of meat to a dog and expect it to return to you easily", she says.

It is a snowy Sunday morning; Hong is still sleeping. So, I have to go jogging alone. I call my driver to go to the nearest police station, to record a statement about the accident that Hong was involved in with a dog. That way, she could go to the insurance company to fill a claim form. The driver does exactly that. I later give him a gift to thank him. That gift had been given to me by my bank two days ago, thanking me for being a loyal customer.

Everything is running smoothly. I clean up my office, sort out the paperwork and shred the ones that I did not need. Hong is busy on her laptop sitting opposite me. She always reminds me of thoroughly checking every piece of paper before I shred them. I wondered! One time she is complaining about savings, another time about stuffing the house with smelly wines, and now I should be careful with what I do and do not shred. Is this not going too far, is she not one of those typical control freaks? I asked myself.

After dinner, I grab a phone and call Daniel in Germany, and Hong calls her mother. We go to bed early. My water bottle is already full to comfort me in bed since it is cold.

On Wednesday, Hong had to travel to Suzhou to attend a monthly DUSA meeting, to meet acquaintances and her work colleagues, and to exchange news and ideas. DUSA is European Business Association, founded twelve years ago by many Germany companies to facilitate the initiation of business in China through information, workshops, and training courses for small and medium-sized German companies.

In addition to her work at the university, Hong is a freelance lawyer in her law firm in Suzhou. One of the benefits is her membership card that allows her free parking, of which she takes advantage. Later, that day, I take a flight from Shanghai Hongqiao Inland Airport, to visit a supplier in Qingdao, in Shandong province about five hundred kilometres away. The business trip is supposed to last for two days. I promise Hong that I would be right back, after the tour.

As usual, when going on such trips, my colleague, a Chinese buyer

and I, are picked up from the airport in a limousine, to be taken to the supplier's factory outside the city. Being a Hi-Tech field, we had to do everything thing in its precise measurement and standard. I am, however, dismayed to find out that the plate we commissioned, is much thicker than that of the competition. I also complain about the drawing, not being suitable for turning parts.

My colleagues point out that it is due to the standardisation efforts of the company. I however believe that losing material cost-share is much higher than any savings on standardisation. I also note that the rotary part produces long chips, and with the new material, a worker would be removing the waste every too often. Otherwise, they would wrap around the chisels, which would later be dangerous. My buyer also tells me that their measurements for specifications come from the headquarters that Chinese designers have no permission to anything to change the specifications. I turned a blind eye on this type of "copy and paste" procedure. I wondered why the buyer would have an interest in protecting the supplier other than myself! I realise that he did not want to tarnish his name and the relationship of a company. He have which he had built it years, and that he wants to have a pleasant working life, without any stress.

After the business meeting, we are invited to dinner by the supplier. We sit at a round table in the pre-ordered and preheated adjoining room of a traditional restaurant. I order warm yellow rice with less alcoholic content than red wine or brandy. It keeps the mind flowing and has no hangover side effect. Its warmth is pleasant in a cold season. I call the waiter, give her a camera to take a memorable group photo of all of us at the dinner table. I return to my hotel room after dinner, still with heartburn until the morning after. I later realised that the previous night's dinner had contained a lot of

artificial flavours and enhancers, which are always the cause of my heartburn. When I am having breakfast with my colleagues in the morning, I tell them about my heartburn. One of them replies confidently. "Glutamate is a Chinese tradition; it does not cause problems to us, our bodies have had it for centuries, yours is not yet".

The weather is cold. Chinese drivers keep their car engines running to warm up interior space, for the guests and for them not to freeze. I am opposed to that though because in my view, it only adds to high levels of pollution. No wonder the levels are too high in the country. Everyone thinks about him or herself, but not the environment. They just talk about finding solutions, no one seems to care. It is business as usual.

After breakfast, we go to a sub-supplier where I record data from the plate's manufacturing process and discuss cost-cutting ideas. On the way back, we talk a lot about the cultural differences between the East and the West. None of us seem to understand the other.

"I know of many German companies that are not bothered about negotiating, that is why they make losses in China", remarked my buyer.

"That is true by the way, probably, because they lack the necessary know-how, about the way business, is done in China". I answered.

I returned to my hotel room still with heartburn problems. I later realised that the previous night's dinner had contained a lot of artificial flavours and enhancers.

When taking breakfast with my colleagues in the morning, I told them about my heartburn. "Glutamate is a Chinese tradition; it does

not cause problems to us; our bodies are used to it for centuries; yours is not yet". One of them said confidently.

The weather was cold. Chinese drivers keep engines of their cars warming, for the guests and indeed for them not to freeze. I am opposed to this because in my view it only adds to high levels of pollution in the country. No wonder there are high levels of pollution in the country. Everyone seems to be thinking only about themselves, but not the environment. They say a lot about finding solutions; no one seems to care; it is like business as usual. After breakfast, we went to a sub-supplier where I record down data from the plate's manufacturing process and discuss cost-cutting ideas. That afternoon while going back to the airport, we talked a lot about the cultural differences between the East and the West, about which none of us seemed to understand the other.

"I know of many German companies that are simply not bothered about negotiating, that is why they make losses in China", remarked my buyer.

"That is true by the way; perhaps this is because they lack the necessary know-how, about the way business, is done in China", I replied.

I have personally come across many cases, where I get instructions from our headquarter in Germany, to do things the way they want. What I also know is that Germans always want to bang their heads against the wall. The Chinese, on the other hand, do it differently, they are more pragmatic and flexible. I am now used to the Chinese way of doing business. I am not as stubborn as I used to be before.

On the way back home, I buy my wife a present. I decline an offer by the supplier to go for lunch after all the journey was only one and a half hours away. I do not have anything to eat during the flight. I will have to wait until I reached home; hopefully, a delicious meal is waiting for me there.

Hong's parents have already arrived at our house in Taicang, to work together to celebrate with us, the end of the fifteen-day Spring Festival with the Lantern Festival. Hong's mother Wu Meilan has already decorated the house with pretty lamps, to make it easier for the ghosts to get home. They also light candles outside and lanterns along the streets. It is the tradition. I happily hand gifts over to Hong, for tomorrow's Valentine's Day. Presents included, an umbrella and a delicacy from Qingda called "*Guotie*", the roasted dough bags, with meat or vegetable filling. What Germans have as a pancake at the Berlin Karnevals (carnival of cultures) festival, the Chinese have "*Tangyuan*", a dumpling of sticky rice flour with a sweet filling, for the Lantern Festival. Time is slowly melting away as we are waiting for Li Gengnan to prepare dinner. Hong and I use this opportunity to go for a quick jog. On the way, she reminds me about our earlier times; and how we met. I nod with a smile.

"Back in the days of strong cultural traditions, women from wealthy families were not allowed to leave their houses for some time. The culture imposed tiny shoes on women. It was because those days, men believed that if women wore small shoes, it would make them feel uncomfortable to walk, and so they would stay at home and remain faithful to their loved ones. It was only during the Lantern Festival when wealthy parents would allow their daughters to walk in the streets with their feet tied in little shoes. They believed that it was the only day of the year when these girls would flirt with men.

This tradition is said to have been in practice, during the Qing Dynasty in 1919. The Lantern Festival, however, is still used for Bridal Shoes and Marriage Foundation. It is still common for only men and women from the same social class, to be allowed to get married.”

This year’s Valentine Day falls on a Friday. At this day, I am not good at timekeeping and arrives late. Now that we are all hungry, we go out to eat together, to eat “*huoguo*”, the Chinese firepot. Before heading for our holiday. The food there is cheap. It costs fifty renmibi per person, which is about 6.50 euros. We could eat and drink as much as we wanted for three hours. While eating, Hong reminds me about the gifts one would consider presenting in China. “There are three gifts that you must avoid here in China, and these are umbrellas, grandfather clocks, and pears” she warns. When she mentions about not giving an umbrella as a gift, it makes me nervous. So, I am asking “why?”

After realising that I was a bit confused about all this, Hong gets out a small paper and draws illustrations of each of these forbidden gifts with an explanation of each of them one by one. She explains: “Let me start with the long case clock when it sounds in Chinese like ‘stops’ and it is easy to confuse it with the ‘end’. As for pear, the word sounds like ‘divorce’ in the Chinese language, and the pronunciation of the word ‘umbrella’ in the Chinese language is the same as ‘separate’. Oh God, my precious gift to Hong was not very romantic. However, my in-laws ignored that they excused me for not understanding the symbolism of these gifts. They did not see it as being intended. Hong continued to explain that apples as gifts are different because the syllable somehow sounds like “peace”, so

many lovers prefer giving apples as gifts to their loved ones. Woow! The whole of these illustrations and resemblance of images, objects and their interpretations to be honest with you seem to me as being more of superstitions than nothing else. As a foreigner here I must think twice to even consult locals before giving out gifts.