



Birds sing in the trees overhead

An Experience Essay in China

The birds sing in the trees overhead.

Under these trees, I am sitting, squatting in fact, on a curb stone in the parking lot of my hotel. My heart is still pounding, more from running than from fear. I look up and down myself and notice that I forgot to put on my shoes; my socks are smudged and dusty. Then I start looking around at the crowd of anxious people that has assembled in front of the hotel, some still close to the building, others at the far end of the parking lot. Most of them are pre-occupied with their mobile phones, but their expressions reveal that, for once, these technological wonders are of little help. I wish I had my mobile phone on me to try for myself to make a call even though I know it would be in vain since the network is jammed.

While I sit and wait, one of the hotel staff, a charming lady with cute freckles and a tan, notices that I am shoe-less and so brings me slippers. Never before have I been so touched by someone giving me slippers. Everything in life depends on circumstance.

I look up to the now-abandoned hotel. Dark-grey patches of plaster are visible where before there were smooth tiles. One car's rear window is smashed, victim of one of the fallen tiles. Now a light rain sets in. From where I am squatting, I can see hotel staff near the entrance shaking their heads at inquiring customers – no, it's not alright to go back into the building, is what they are saying. Some foolhardy customers are not deterred, however. They want to retrieve the items that they forgot to take with them in the hurry. One fellow guest, tall and robed in nothing but a bed sheet, elicits sympathy, but still, the "no" motion does not turn into a nod. He too will have to bide his time. I wonder what he was up to in the early afternoon that brought on the inconvenience of having to leave the building in nothing but a bed sheet. My eyes follow him as he walks away. Unwittingly, he drags the long end of the bed sheet along the ground, first over the concrete, then right through a puddle, and in the rippling puddle's reflection the hotel building sways, again.

One fellow with a load of dandruff draws nearer to me. He seems remarkably unruffled which is why, I guess, all that dandruff is still in his hair. We start chatting. He is from Chongqing, he says in a steady, low voice. He often comes to Chengdu for a bit of relaxation.

"Not so relaxing this time, eh?" I wink.

For a while he doesn't respond. Then he turns to me and muses:

"At first I wondered whether it could be that the couple in the room next were having a good shag. But then I realised that it is humanly impossible, even for an Olympic shagger, to make the whole building shake like this. That's when I decided to head for the exit." That the disaster which – as we know by now – has killed at least 30,000 people should have been caused by an act of herculean love-making is a bizarre thought, but I welcome this gust of light-heartedness.



And the birds are still singing in the trees overhead.

Three hours have passed since I arrived, breathless and in shock, in the hotel's parking lot. I wish I could get through to Angie to tell her I am ok. Since her flight was due to depart at 1:55pm, she must arrive in Hong Kong any time soon. By then she'll hear the news and be frightened to death, not knowing whether I'm well, hurt or dead. If only I could get through to her. But I have got on me only the clothes I wear, plus the new bathroom slippers. Everything else that matters – my money, my passport, my mobile phone – is in my hotel room. Without them, I feel naked and highly vulnerable.

My room key isn't with me either. So even if I dared to re-enter the building, I still wouldn't be able to get into my room. For that I'll have to wait until I can persuade a hotel staff to accompany me. When will they feel as urgent to be in touch with my wife as I do? It will be a long time, I am afraid.

Three hours ago, I was in my hotel room writing an email when life changed, not for me, but for tens of thousands of people only 100km from my hotel. At that moment, at 14:28, my hotel began to shake, at first lightly, then more strongly, within ten seconds wildly. Was I worried for my life? Not really. When you are in mortal danger, the thought of death is actually the last thing on your mind. Because in these situations it is one's survival instinct that takes over. The body reacts automatically, for better or for worse. Deliberate thought is buried deeply under disjointed fright.

I shot up, but could barely steady myself. So startled was I that for a second I didn't know what to do. With hindsight I know that the last thing one should do in an earthquake is run. But I ran anyway, straight toward the elevator. Thankfully, I instinctively decided against the lifts. I ripped open the door to the stairwells and joined a frantic crowd stumbling down the staircase. Some jostled to gain advantage, others screamed. I, for one, have never flown down seven flights of stairs this fast in my life. Seeing deep cracks appearing in the staircase walls and plaster popping from them made me want to run faster still. But there was no way to overtake the fleeing men and women ahead of me. If anything, the rushing stream of people slowed down the closer I got to the exit as tributaries at each floor led to congestion and the dust emerging from the cracks in the wall dimmed the light and shortened visibility. The staircase spewed frightened guests into the hotel lobby. From there they wandered, distraught and disoriented, into the slowly filling parking lot. Aimlessly, they all seemed to be looking for something. At first I didn't know what that was. But then it became clear: what only a few minutes earlier was a commodity had become the most desirable, but elusive quantity – a stable place to steady oneself.

I sit and wait. I want to get news to Angie. I scan every hotel staff's expression in order to find one that I'd dare approach with my question "May I use your mobile phone to send out a text message?" At last I pluck up the courage to approach one lady. It turns out she is more than obliging, but even now – hours after the quake – it is to no avail. Instead of the longed for "so glad you're well", I read instead the cold announcement "message delivery failed".

I wait some more, my mind filled with questions about where I might spend the night; how I'd pay for accommodation; whether people would be hoarding water and food for I had none; whether I'd be the last one in the queue because Chinese people are far more experienced in the fight for survival than I; above all, whether the shock we all experienced was the overture or the main act.



Four hours or so after the 7.9-size quake, one hotel staff with whom I have been chatting asks me, “Do you want to go get your things?” I am surprised that he is willing to expose himself to danger for my convenience. He doesn’t seem the type. Sure enough, when I ask, “Are you sure?”, he calls over a junior colleague and instructs the poor lad to accompany me to my room.

I re-enter the hotel with rather mixed feelings because I know that Angie would kill me if I got killed in this building after escaping from it to retrieve, what?, my wallet and my mobile phone. But I go in anyway.

The cracks that I saw forming in the walls of the stairwell are not as deep as I recall them from the time when I ran down. Also, all the dust has settled. I rush up the staircase, floor by floor. After only one floor, my chaperon is half a floor behind. So, there’s really no need to be in a rush, but I just can’t slow down. When you are afraid, running is a kind of homeopathic antidote – it makes you feel better even if it may not do you an ounce of good. And so I arrive on the 7th floor well ahead of the key-keeper. As I stand there, there are only two sounds I hear. One is my heart pounding. The other is that of the building making the creaking sounds of a wooden ghost ship on a rocky sea. This frightens me more because I am in front of my hotel room, and all I can do is wait instead of taking comfort in running. After what was a minute but felt like a lifetime, my appointee arrives and opens the door to my room. I grab my backpack, phone, room card, wallet, cap and windbreaker. Then we rush down wordlessly the staircase once more, breathing two deep sighs of relief when we arrive in the parking lot again.

There are countless missed calls and messages on my phone. Among them, this important one: “Hi, I am Nick, Angie’s colleague in Hong Kong. She asks me to relay this message to you: ‘Are you ok? I am still on the runway at Chengdu airport. We were just about to take off when the earthquake hit. Since then we’ve been sitting in the plane on the runway waiting to be allowed to go. Please reply when you get this message.’” Later she tells me that it was a bizarre feeling when the quake arrived at the airport. The plane wasn’t swaying back and forth, but seemed to be subject to some sort of vibration. But that was about it. No unusual sounds, no screaming, no smoke, no lightening. Then the pilot came on. He told the passengers that an earthquake had struck. And that they could now not take off because within seconds of the event the air traffic controllers fled from the tower and shortly after that the entire airport had been evacuated. In the end, it would be eight hours until the runway was declared safe, the airport staff and air traffic controllers returned to work and Angie’s flight to Hong Kong was at last cleared for take-off.

We are the lucky ones. Over the next few days, the scale of the destruction and the magnitude of the suffering caused by the earth shifting during its afternoon nap are becoming clear. A mere 100km from Chengdu, hundreds, if not thousands of school children have died as poorly built schools collapsed. These are, in a way, also the lucky ones. In piercing agony are those who are trapped below the rubble. For a few, amputation of a limb is the only way to get them free. Some you hear dying; others go without a whimper.



In Chengdu itself, however, there is very little visible evidence of the earthquake. One clue is the tents that are appearing in the large public parks. Another is that the normally laid-back Chengdu residents are now talking as Italians do – with their hands – as words alone are inadequate to describe their experiences in the shaking buildings. Vehicles that are marked by white-on-red letters to highlight their aid purpose are another hint: they have the look of a squatter on account of being loaded down with emergency supplies.

In fact, aid arrives from every corner of the world to support the Chinese rescue efforts led by Wen Jiabao, China's premier who arrived at the scene only a couple of hours after the incident and has been directing the emergency operation every since. As a first in recent Chinese history, international volunteers' offers of help are happily accepted. Wen himself publicly thanks a group of twelve American volunteers who have been taking care of homeless and now childless Laobaixing (老百姓 or "Old-One-Hundred-Names", an endearing term the Chinese use to refer to the common men and women of their country.) Even the Japanese, still seen by many in China as arch enemies, are welcomed this time for their earthquake expertise. China's fast and all-out response, its openness in disseminating information and practically unquestioning acceptance of help – unheard of until today – give me hope that China will become over time a reasonable global citizen.

Among all the emotions and thoughts that swelled and ebbed in me throughout these days, the one that keeps haunting me is prompted by the birds that keep singing in the trees of Chengdu's parks. Their lovely songs and undisturbed gaiety are, for me, bitter reminders of the fragility of the lifestyle we humans have created for ourselves. So cocooned are we from our natural habitat that the slightest tremors, a minor dowsing of small patches of land, or a puff of wind, that these miniscule disturbances of our orbiting home have become disasters of harrowing proportions for homo googleus. How proud we are of our modern achievements! I can't help thinking, though, that humility would become us more.