



January 2007

New Year's Day Reflections *By Jeffrey Sun*



Jeffrey Sun

I went and plopped myself in a comfy chair at a local coffee house to speak with passers by. A young woman stood by the bar, and our exchange ensued:

“Waiting for a drink?” I asked.

“Café Mocha,” she replied, covering her smile.

“Do you have plans for the New Year?” I continued.

“Work evening, then sleep,” again her hand went to cover her smile.

“Good plan, a time honoured tradition. Do you have a new years resolution?” to which she hesitatingly nodded and replied “Many children.”

She was Chinese—bravely speaking her newly learned English—and she had misunderstood my question.

In China, other than perhaps in Hong Kong, the practice of New Years resolution is not observed. Traditional Chinese New Year involves well wishes and red envelopes stuffed with lucky money. Longevity, large families, prosperity, good health, and financial success are examples of common well-wishing sentiments toward others upon the New Year. However, personal or altruistic sacrifice is no more implied now than any other time in the old world of China.

Thus, the woman I was speaking with—not knowing exactly how to answer my question—was attempting to apply the traditional well wish for others to herself. She was accustomed to wishing others prosperity to support a large family, and knew not better than to simply reverse the direction of the sentiment, bestowing it upon herself. This is an example of a cross-cultural faux pas during exchange of greetings. Another example of an easily misunderstood cultural saying is the Chinese phrase “you’ve gained weight” on meeting someone you know. Culturally in China, this phrase has implied that the receiver of the compliment looks prosperous, as they could obviously afford the once sparsely available food. This comment has been fittingly used, by long-standing friends, over the centuries of Chinese cultural evolution. So, if ever you are told you’ve gained weight by someone who has recently arrived from China, it’s a compliment. These traditional New Years wishes are exchanged during visits at that time, amidst the celebration of firecrackers and dragon dances.

This all contrasts with our Canadian resolutions for self-improvement: quit smoking, eat more organically grown flax seed, drink less alcohol and soda-pop but more water, exercise more frequently, spend more time with our significant other(s), or take the bus, walk, or ride a bike to work more often. You see someone at a gathering, wish them well and ask them what their sacrifice this year will be—it’s the toll bridge of holiday greetings. You get to pass through the toll station, but only once you’ve gone by the bucket, to drop in your two bits. The funny thing is that our vastly different cultures have found a common focus to unite societal members at the changing of the calendar year.

I, myself, saw the tradition fall by the wayside some time ago. My first childhood resolution would have been to the effect of “I’ll go to bed on time, or do more dishes after dinner, or something,” as it was simply something I was supposed to do, to get to stay up past bedtime. I have since tried the self-improvement resolution, but found daily choices more powerful than yearly betrothals to change. I have also made party resolutions; to the effect of loud and boasting comments I shan’t repeat here. Honestly it was my puppy that got me out of the party mood—he was afraid of the firecrackers, loud noises, and commotion. I didn’t think it was fair to leave him alone and frightened, nor bring him along to cower amidst the noise. I have, over the years, not uncommonly skipped the partying and ritualistic making of resolutions, which—as Psychology research tells us—a quarter of us abandon within the first week. Instead, I try to live my best, as always, this new day as well.

I explained to the young Chinese woman—in my broken Mandarin—how personal and New Years resolutions were different than well wishes, and how the former is akin to swearing an oat (of shorts). She was embarrassed, but appreciative of the explanation. She said her resolution, then, was to learn more English; her smile went uncovered this time. I wished her success and fortune. We parted, over café mocha, and a reflection of the differences in detail between our common celebrations of an international benchmark of yearly renewal.

Jeffrey Sun is a member of the Psychology Honours Program and UVic’s Chapter of Psi Chi

Happy New Year UVic!

January has brought PsychOS some excitement thus far.

Almost immediately after returning from holidays we got busy organizing our first pub crawl of the year, an event with