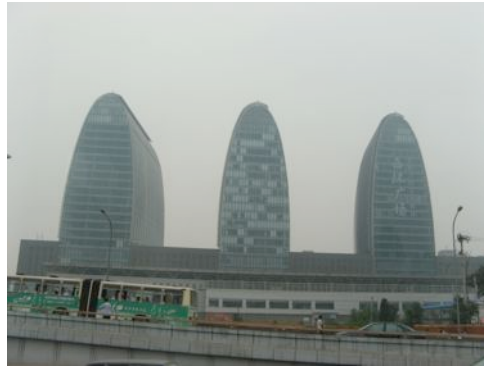


From Silk to Story:
Tellers and Toastmasters Trade Threads
of Traditions Through Visit

By Craig Harrison DTM



The Peoples' Republic of China in 2007 is a country steeped in tradition yet clearly in transition. On a recent trip with forty other professional storytellers from across the US this Toastmaster experienced the old and the new over a three-week period.



Storytelling — Bridging The Continental Divide

We visited Gengcun, an impoverished rural village dating back to the time of the old Silk Road, which boasts a 600-year tradition of storytelling. Among its 1,200 residents are more certified storytellers than any other location in China. Some are master tellers, who know over 100 stories! With the help of two levels of interpreters our English stories were translated, first into Mandarin, then into the

local dialect. Over much of a week I and other tellers told and heard stories in their school among 3rd and 4th grade students, and also told and listened to stories in the homes of village tellers, and in their Hall of Stories.



Story Threads

From local tellers we in turn heard stories about dragons, turtles, monkeys and elephants, about evil step-mothers and promiscuous children, mischievous dogs, emperors and dowagers, love unrequited and love reciprocated. Many stories of these men and women echoed stories we'd heard of Persian, Native American, African, European and Russian origin. We learned many of our stories had Chinese variations as well. When not telling stories in and out of school we engaged in arts and music projects, dancing and joining in celebrations at their local shrines.



Despite differences in language it was fascinating to hear the story of the three little pigs in Chinese, to simultaneously enjoy the immediacy of a mime's routine, and to use facial and body gestures and smiles honed in Toastmasters meetings to connect with foreigners on their own soil.

Watch Your Tone!

In the Chinese language intonation is everything. We learned the same sound, "ma," depending on its tone, could have five different meanings, from mother to hemp to horse and beyond! Inflection informs meaning. Many of the stories hinged on subtleties of language: puns and dual meanings of words, based on tone. Humor came in waves as these subtleties were revealed through translations. Other differences abounded. We learned about Chinese lucky numbers (eights abound), Feng Shui and the significance of certain colors.

Tellers and Toastmasters Unite

Another highlight of our trip was a visit with eight other storytellers to Beijing #1 Toastmasters (#6126-U) in Beijing, on September 11th. There, our tellers told 90-second stories and engaged as a panel in a question and answer session with members who were speaking English as a second or third language. One teller, 14 year-old Chloe Clunis, dazzled Toastmasters with her prowess for her age; Colorado teller Anita Strickbine spoke poignantly about how her father's life and hers were both changed through Toastmasters, when he joined a club in Germany almost 50 years ago while serving in the US Army. Yours truly shared experiences of departing the People's Republic of Berkeley an expert in communications, only to be humbled by a lack of comprehension on arrival in the PRC.



The Laugh Heard Halfway Around the World

Most exciting for this Toastmaster was the realization that a specialty club I chartered in the San Francisco Bay Area to focus on humor, Laugh Lovers (596430-57), has inspired similar clubs in Beijing and Shanghai! Humor really is a universal language.



Toastmasters Paving the Way

Nowhere is Toastmasters growing as rapidly as in China. Through promotion of communication and leadership skills it is leading its own cultural evolution that is contributing to China's key role in our current world.

While China prepares for its date with destiny as host of the Summer Olympics in 2008 I encourage you to prepare to experience all that is China in the twenty-first century.

Our Storyteller Craig Harrison DTM of Lakeview Toastmasters (2767-57) in Oakland, CA, is a professional speaker and leader in the National Storytelling Network. Visit his website www.HackinBoo.com for more resources of Craig's you can use around the world.