

Discovering my Fortune [in China]

By Lan Zhou

Whenever my friends and I dine in a Chinese restaurant, we always end our experience by playing the “fortune cookie game.” In this game, we pick a phrase such as “while milking a cow” or “when on Facebook” to add to the end of each person’s fortune. Depending on the phrase, the game can be funny, serious or both. This time, in celebration of our upcoming trip to the Beijing Summer Olympics, we decided to add “in China” to our slips of paper. And as an additional twist, my friends challenged me to explain each of their new “Chinese” fortunes in reference to my own experiences with China.

Vicki shared her fortune first: “Ride a bike [in China].” What seemingly random, yet practical, advice! The suggestion recalled my summer abroad when I bought a used bicycle from a Beijing corner shop. Despite its battered frame and rust-stained rims, its little blue wheels zipped me through the Hutongs and back into the 1950s. For me, the bike not only served as my mode of transportation, but also as my ticket into the real fabric of society—with a bike, I was a local. The bike lent me legitimacy as a Beijing navigator and initiated me into the million-member cyclist community. Yes, Vicki will definitely see a different side of China from behind the handle bars of a bicycle.

Andrea read her fortune next: “Make new friends [in China].” This fortune immediately triggered memories of meeting Sun Xian. She and I were roommates in the overnight train compartment ride from Beijing to Shanghai. Everyone on the train was extremely friendly, and after the initial formalities, we were soon sharing food and swapping stories. Eventually, someone started singing and we all joined in. At first, I felt out of place due to my unfamiliarity with Chinese songs, but Sun Xian welcomed me into the group by suggesting we sing in both English and Chinese. The older travelers belted out sonorous classics by Teresa Teng, the younger generation rapped to the hip-hop rhythms of Wang Li Hong, and I attempted to sing along to translated English lyrics of the popular *Lao Shu Ai Da Mi*. Given Andrea’s open personality and the Chinese hospitality, Andrea will have no trouble meeting people. Even after she returns to the United States, Andrea will undoubtedly find herself connecting with her Internet-savvy Chinese friends through a QQ account, just as I still do with Sun Xian.

As we continued around the circle, getting closer to me and my fortune, Alice read her cookie next: “Smile big for the camera [in China].” As she read her message aloud, I found myself chuckling at the statement’s veracity. This was definitely sage advice; my outings with Chinese

friends inevitably became “red carpet” moments with floods of camera flashes. I still recall how on my last day in Hangzhou, my friends and I scrambled to borrow more digital memory cards because ours were filled with photos of our goodbyes! For many Chinese people, pictures immortalize memories and serve as a connection with the past. Therefore, when Alice hears “qie zi” (“cheese”), she will definitely break into a smile.

Finally, it was time for me to reveal my fortune. Breaking the cookie in half, I slowly pulled out the tiny slip of paper. Reading it to myself while keeping my friends in suspense, I found myself smiling at the message’s wisdom: “Be gung-ho about your next endeavor [in China].” These eight words resonated with me much more than I expected. Heavily involved with entrepreneurship and social enterprise, I constantly dream about my next “grand innovation.” Everyday, *Wall Street Journal* headlines report on the worldwide impact of Chinese companies. China has always beacons as an exciting country of change, and I’m certain that my next endeavor will find its home there. “Yes, I will be gung-ho about my next endeavor in China!” I vowed to myself as I tucked the fortune into my pocket for safekeeping.

Though I know fortune cookies are a Chinese-American creation from California, and that the fortunes are written by workers in cookie manufactories, a part of me still believes that their messages harbor prophetic secrets. Fortune by fortune, these sweet desserts and their tiny slips of wisdom have helped to shape America’s perception of China over the past century. And on this day of celebration, the fortune cookies not only provided my friends with a glimpse into China through my eyes, but also reminded me of what the country means to me.