CHAPTER THREE:
EMBRACING THE AMBIGUITY
Exploring the hazy space between what is said and meant

一切尽在不言之中
Yí qiè jìn zài bù yán zhī zhōng.
Everything is inside of no words.
Westerners crave specificity and directness; they like getting to the point. “Now, please.” “Don’t waste my time.” “For God’s sake, spit it out son!”

Easterners prefer the indirect approach, talking around points of contention, seeking refuge in ambiguity to avoid confrontation, and understating themselves wherever possible. Chinese would much rather 繞圈子 (run in circles) than let on you’re about to make a strategic error which could cost your company millions. Why deprive others of the pleasure of unraveling the hidden meaning behind their carefully chosen words?

The thinking goes something like this: time is of no consequence as long as I’m filling up these moments with words, often without saying anything of substance. After all, not everything need be said between friends, and being up front with my true intentions is far too abrupt and shallow. So please, relax, be patient, and perhaps, eventually...I’ll dangle a clue about what I really want. And don’t worry, if you miss the first dangling, I’ll dangle again later.

If you are 含蓄 (humble, subtle) and able to embody and contain this depth, you are considered well-educated with refined tastes. In terms of inner substance, the more you
show, the less you have.

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**How to mess around**

*Dào jiàng hú* 搀糨糊 (stirring glue) means “messing around” in common speech, though it can take on a variety of meanings based on context:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>后果 (Ni dào shénme jiàng hú?)</th>
<th>你捣什么糨糊? (What are you talking about?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>你捣了半天糨糊, 到底要说什 么? (Ni dào le bàn tiān jiàng hú, dào dǐ yào shuō shénme?)</td>
<td>You’ve been stirring glue for half a day. What are you really trying to say?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or when you want to get someone’s attention:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>搀什么糨糊?! (Dào shénme jiàng hú?!)</th>
<th>What the…?! You expect me to eat this crap?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>这个怎么能吃? (Zhè ge zěn me néng chī?)</td>
<td>这个怎么能吃?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nowadays, many Chinese business people have a more international outlook, or if not, can easily switch back and forth between cultural orientations. Baked into these sweeping generalizations are the seeds of their own demise. They are accurate, yet imprecise at the same time. After all, this is a chapter on ambiguity.

Most prominent are the values learned growing up. There are Chinesey white kids, just like there are westernized yellow kids – some of whom affectionately call themselves “eggs” and “bananas” - yet even values and upbringing don’t tell the whole story.

I met a five-year-old boy from a mixed-race family who
likes to help around the house. He offers his African father a beer, and if the answer is “no” then it's a no, end of discussion. But when his Chinese grandmother says “no” to a cup of tea, the boy continues pestering her until he gets her real answer. "C'mon grandma, have a cup of tea, you'll like it!" He's already mastered the fine art of the conversational flip-flop. If child labor wasn't so administratively awkward, I’d hire that kid to run my company.

My Favorite Mistakes

What I meant:
Wáng xiān shēng de bà ba zǒu le.
王先生的爸爸走了.
Mr. Wang’s dad just left.

What they heard:
Wáng xiān shēng de bà ba zǒu le.
王先生的爸爸走了.
Mr. Wang’s dad is dead.

Same characters, different meanings. Just one of those you have to know.
Here’s another telling conversation from a Chinese family setting:

Daughter: Dad, can I take you to Hong Kong for your 60th birthday?

Father: Don’t trouble yourself.

Daughter: It doesn’t matter, it’ll be fun, and it’s your big birthday!

Father: Don’t worry about it. Let’s not waste money.

Daughter: I’ve already saved my salary for several months.

Father: But it’s troublesome to work out so many things.

Daughter: Don’t worry I’ll sort everything out tomorrow.

Father: So which day are we leaving?

The culturally Chinese mind considers 提要求 (asking for things) and 有需求 (needing things) as too direct, even rude. There’s also a preference for leaving room for correction, so someone might say 可能吧 (maybe) to a dinner invitation just to keep his options open. If he later chooses to go, he can tell the hostess that
he has time. If he decides at the last minute not to go, and an upset hostess is still holding a seat for him, he can fall back on his original “maybe”. In other words, rudeness is subjective and ambiguity in China equates to flexibility and saving face.

Richard Nisbett in *The Geography of Thought* investigates the East/West cultural differences and concludes:

Westerners - and perhaps especially Americans - are apt to find Asians hard to read because Asians are likely to assume that their point has been made indirectly and with finesse. Meanwhile, the Westerner is in fact very much in the dark.

Here are several delicious ambiguities you may encounter in China:

马上到了
*Mǎ shàng dào le*
Translation: I'll be there immediately.
True meaning: I'll be there sometime in the near future. Probably.
Westerners talk about time to get somewhere, e.g. “I’m ten minutes away.” There’s often a shared view towards timesaving, at least in big cities. Chinese rarely talk that way, unless they’ve adopted this Western habit. 马上到了 (lit. on the horse arriving) invokes powerful imagery of gallant warriors and bareback stallions on a windswept plain. It sounds fast, it should be fast, but in reality it probably means your meeting is going to start half an hour late.

很难说

Hěn nán shuō
Translation: It’s hard to say.
True meaning: I have no idea;
            or I know and don’t want to say.

An elegant way to dodge any question or curtail any inquiry. Like its cousin 说不定 (can’t say for sure), the possible reasons why she isn’t saying are infinite. So if you’re on a date and this phrase pops up, it could mean you’re approaching the promisedland. Or, you failed to read between the lines and you’re toast - date over.
以后再说

_Yī hòu zài shuō_
Translation: Let’s talk about it later.
True meaning: I’m hoping we’ll both forget and it never comes up again.

Not disagreement, not agreement, not agreeing to disagree. It’s a temporary deferment that might not be revisited. This phrase most often comes up when the speaker is...

(a) acknowledging the complexity of a situation and its many variables, or
(b) preventing you from raising a sensitive topic in front of clients, or
(c) clueless on the subject and doesn’t want others to know.

It’s up to you to figure out whether you’re with a sensitive genius or a clever ignoramus.

应该没问题

_Yīng gāi méi wèn tí_
Translation: Should be no problem.
True meaning: Everything is under control OR you’re in deep trouble.
A structural engineer could feign confidence in your architectural masterpiece. An accountant might assert that your startup company is not going broke. So how do you know whether to relax or run for the hills? The secret is to listen for the pronunciation of the word yīng gāi (should). A short, fast, confident or dismissive answer is much better than long and drawn out. If you hear “yīīīīīnnnnnnng gāāāāāiiiiii méi wèn tí” there’s a good chance malodorous excrement is about to hit rotating blades.

I think I really, really like you
Chinese enjoy greeting long-lost friends with the teasing expression nǐ pàng le 你 胖 了 (you've become fat), which derives from an implied compliment from times gone by when being fat meant you must be doing really well. This holdover from the days when starvation was a real threat is reflected in the common greeting fàn chī le ma 饭 吃 了 吗 (have you eaten?) But in modern China, as elsewhere, prosperity is leading to obesity. So much for the healthy traditional nóng mín 农民 (peasant) diet. Nǐ pàng le 你 胖 了 has never been more ambiguous.
In fact, there is a relatively narrow range of expressions that one hears in China on how most people feel about any topic. Chinese in groups do not often stray outside the range of *yī bān* 一般 (average), *mǎ mǎ hū hū* 马马虎虎 (so-so, lit. horse horse tiger tiger), *hái kě yǐ ba* 还可以吧 (okay), *hái kě yǐ* 还可以 (even more okay), *bú cuò* 不错 (not bad/pretty good) and *hěn hǎo* 很好 (very good). “I like pizza a lot” is much more common than “I'm crazy about pizza” even from the nut who eats it three times a week.

That said, there are plenty of guys who go around claiming everything is *niú* 牛, short for *niú bī* 牛屄, which literally means the cow’s vajayjay, though it’s better translated as “awesome” or “orgasmic.” You gotta love it - even one of the best Chinese expletives is ambiguous.
Perhaps a little roleplaying can help illustrate the point. Let’s imagine a conversation between a man and a woman, so far just friends, but each hoping it might become something more. Depending on culture, their approach and responses when he calls her up are often quite different:
Same problem when asking a Chinese woman for her hand in marriage. Westerners think it’s a one-time offer. You pick the right moment, give it your best shot, and hope she says yes. She said no? Drink yourself silly for six months until it dawns on you there are plenty of other great girls out there.
Chinese men, on the other hand, expect “no” to be the first answer. Then it’s game on! Let’s see how many other creative or romantically mundane ways there are to ask, to wear her down, before she finally gives in. Or so he hopes.

The newspaper recently reported on a 30-year-old Chinese man who arrived on a crowded subway platform holding flowers and a diamond ring to ask his Chinese girlfriend to marry him. He had chosen an auspicious date (February 22, 2012) and determined this was the perfect moment for them to start their life together. On bended knee, right in the middle of the platform, he popped the question. And being a good Chinese girl, she politely refused. She must have sounded way too convincing because the would-be-groom fainted in the subway stopping traffic. When he woke up, she screamed: “All you had to do is ask again!” Sometimes the Chinese themselves lose their way in the ambiguity.
Expert Opinion

Did you know that Chinese people rarely say “wǒ ài nǐ” 我爱你 (I love you) to each other? The word “love” feels too strong. If a boyfriend said it to his girlfriend, she might respond: “nǐ yǒu mào bǐng ma? 你有毛病吗? (are you sick in the head?) as a playful reply even though she might secretly love hearing it. Lovers are more likely say, “nǐ hái bù cuò” 你还不错 (you’re not bad), or better yet, “nǐ hěn tǎo yàn!” 你很讨厌! (you’re so annoying!) or maybe even, “wǒ fēicháng xǐhuān nǐ” 我非常喜欢你 which sounds like “I really really like you” yet that might feel quite profound to a Chinese person. If I ever said “I love you” to my father, he would probably ask if I got hit by a car or if I was moving to another planet. For us, when the emotion is real, everyone feels it. There’s no need to say it.

Time Travel

Beyond the obvious visual contrasts, there are major perceptual differences between Chinese and English. In the West, people often speak about “putting the past behind us” and “moving forward into the future.” Chinese perceive the opposite, with the past in front where it’s plainly seen, and the future behind as it’s yet to appear. This past-in-front
orientation also holds true in Japanese and several other Asian languages. Same same, but different.

The Chinese also have their own method of marking time. Although the Gregorian calendar (the common solar calendar: 365 days a year plus a leap year now and then) is standard across the world, in parallel to it Chinese still follow the lunar calendar, an agrarian cultural legacy. Practically speaking, you only notice the lunar calendar’s influence via the numerous “floating” holidays. For example, the Lunar New Year falls on a different day each year and marks the dividing line to a new Chinese birth sign.

Here’s where things get tricky. Since Chinese calculate age from life beginning - when sperm meets egg - time in the womb counts as one year. Kids born just before New Year’s Day also get to count crossing into the new year as one year. So it’s possible for a bouncing baby girl entering the world, after only a few days, hours or even minutes, to hold up two fingers, one for each virtual year of her life so far, and smile for the camera. That’s how xū suì 虚岁 (abstract age) compares to shí suì 实岁 (actual age).
In China, think “back to the future.” Westerners perceive the future as ahead, while Chinese perceive the future as behind us. For example:

- qian 前 (front) + tian 天 (day) = day before yesterday
- hou 后 (back) + tian 天 (day) = day after tomorrow

**Naming the Nameless**

No discussion on Chinese ambiguity would be complete without talking about the Dao (also spelled Tao), the Chinese “way of being” attributed to the philosopher Lao Zi 老子, Master Lao, who lived around 550 BC some time during the Warring States period. The Dao accounts for the long, poetic love affair the Chinese people have with ambiguity. Scholars are unable to agree on the exact dates of his life, or even
whether or not he’s the real author of the *.Dao De Jing* 道德经 (lit. *The Way of Virtue Scripture*). All of which makes perfect sense. No true Daoist would ever claim authorship of that text.

Daoism contains plenty of wonderful ambiguities such as:

- In weakness lies strength.
- Force eventually defeats itself.
- Seeking something is the fastest way to not finding it.
- The sage does not boast and is therefore given credit.
- Be humble in the world and eternal power never leaves.

I too find many Daoist truths in my life:

- Maybe is the only sure thing.
- Only optimists see the glass as completely half-full.
- Life is far more the way it is now than ever before.
- I never drink whisky unless I’m alone, or with someone.
- I may be dumb, but I ain’t stupid.
Daoists believe that in the perfectly balanced universe, the existence of a quality brings its opposite into being. They caution against our human tendency to elevate one quality while rejecting its opposite, such as when a person’s obsession over beauty leads to feeling ugly. In a world of dualities, high and low, light and dark, good and evil, it’s impossible to eliminate one without the other. Even attempts to suppress a quality you want to eliminate can backfire; in other words, the more laws, the more thieves.

The opening verse from the *Đạo Đế Kinh* by Lǎozǐ sets the stage for 81 transient passages exploring the sublime mysticism of life:

道可道 非常道
名可名 非常名

*Đạo kễ đào, fēi cháng đào.*
*Mìng kễ mìng, fēi cháng mìng.*

The Way that can be expressed is not the Everlasting Way.
Names that can be named are not changeless names.
Me: What is the secret to inner peace?

Daoist: Avoiding sharp distinctions between opposites.

Me: Does this work well outside the monastery?

Daoist: The next best approach is when neither side of a dichotomy is stressed as absolutely superior, yet both are recognized, leading to a state of complete harmony and inner balance.

Pause.

Me: Uh...what was the first one again?

The Daoist concept of wú wéi 无为 or “non-doing” is often misinterpreted as inaction rather than its intended meaning of non-interference. In other words, understanding that which already is and going with the flow. Solid advice for anyone living in China.

China can be frustrating from time to time (the so-called “bad China day”) and mystifying to both newcomers and old China hands alike. But as foreigners, we all know that coming in. What could be more foolish than continuing to stay somewhere and complaining nonstop about it? There
are ten thousand things here to annoy you - and a million things here to make you happy. It’s your choice.

Where there is opportunity, there is challenge in a sea of ambiguity. Fortunately for us, surfing the wave of ambiguity is easy to learn. It’s a balancing act of flowing with your surroundings, while ignoring the reef below which can rip you to shreds.