

# China . . .

## My Magic Place

### The Geography of Chinese Philosophy

by Steven Andrew Martin

**C**hina is my magic place, a real-life theme park – fun, different, and exciting. I remember digging in the back yard as a child and my grandmother telling me not to go too deep

or I'd end up in China. It was an intriguing proposition. Eventually I did dig deep enough. Though imagination evoked farmers in pointy hats and water buckets balanced at the ends of bamboo poles, my beginning was a jet-propelled flight to Beijing, where I found fast food, bustling markets, living museums, and a complex history of philosophy and religion.

### TAI SHAN

Starting in 1995, I studied during summers in China with the University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UHH) and Peking University. Our travels unfolded the chronology of Chinese culture and thought. They began by ascending Tai Shan, duplicating a prehistoric Asian pilgrimage to one of the world's mysterious mountains. It rises from the North China Plain in solitude, an ancient pathway etched on its side before recorded history. I beheld a place of running water and enchanted forests which seemed to yearn for explanation, as if for no reason other than to make humanity ponder life's riddles. In a temple courtyard at the base of Tai Shan, an ancient stone tablet is inscribed *Number One Mountain*. Calligraphy engraved on the face of the summit proclaims:

*Pines and stones are bones  
Clear springs at heart  
Breathe in the cosmos  
Tai Shan is the soul of China*

### CONFUCIANISM

As a youngster, I watched cartoons of an old and humble man who expressed, "Confucius says," stating worldly truths like, "A journey of 1,000 miles is equal to reading 1,000 volumes," or, "A worn pencil is better than a good memory." In 1997, UHH students sought the cradles of Eastern philosophy, such as the hometowns and temples of the Duke of Chou, Confucius, and Mencius, who successively (nearly 500 years apart) built upon each other's teachings. Despite dynastic cycles which outlawed ideologies, they created a mainstream philosophical identity, masculine in temper, and often recognized as Confucianism. Above all, Confucian analects transcend time and reflect ethics: "At 15 my heart was set upon learning. At 30 I was firmly established. At 40 I had no more doubts. At 50 I knew the will of heaven. At 60 I was ready to listen to it. At 70 I could follow my heart's desire without violating the truth."

### TAOISM

We proceeded south to widen our perceptions at Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain), mystical home of Taoist artisans, where twisted pine trees cling to enormous pinnacles of stone and rise to misty clouds. A poem presents the enigma of China's true *home-grown* religion, "Breathe the wind, drink the dew, ride the clouds, and wander about." Embracing the Taoist laws of change, such as yin and yang principles, was like approaching a torrent river and not feeling discouragement from my inability to cross. I learned to stop and relax, allowing time to lend

new meaning, direction and salvation for the turmoil within myself. Taoism, as demonstrated through its mortal child Tai Chi Chuan, is a game of intention. I find it comparable to surfing, not by examining the board, but instead by harmonizing with the situation – willing to give up expectations, yet sticking to the experience and going with the waves.

### BUDDHISM

When UHH students traveled on the Silk Road, we followed the memoirs of Marco Polo and legends of Chinese literature like the Monkey King in the epic *Journey to the West* (a tall tale often played out in contemporary Peking Operas). Our 2,500-mile journey westward traversed the Gobi Desert and Tarim Basin, met Middle Eastern and Persian influenced cultures, and discovered that the Silk Road was also the road of Buddhism.

The Buddha espoused the only foreign religion accepted into ancient China. Monks, transporting scriptures from India as early as the first century A.D., avoided the Himalayas, and dared the mountain passes near present-day Tajikistan (China's extreme west border.) Next they mounted Bactrian (two-humped) camels and faced unyielding deserts in search of the security of the Great Wall system. I learned that Buddhism changed China and that the Chinese changed Buddhism, revolutionizing strict Mahayana into Chan (Zen in Japanese) as it mixed with Confucian and Taoist dogmas. An ancient maxim expresses this collective unconscious: "San Jiao Fa Yi," meaning, "Three teachings flow into one." A Chan verse orates the newly formed possibilities for earthly redemption: "Boundless is the sea of bitterness, yet a man who repents can reach the shore."



### MINORITY CULTURES

With the new millennium came an opportunity to view nature reserves, see the raw beauty of East Asia, and dip into the fairytale China of my childhood imagination. We followed the sound of water to rice paddies, primary forests, colossal mountains, powerful rivers, gushing waterfalls, and endangered pandas. We visited many *minority* cultures, which revitalized my perception of China's ethnic diversity, a country with 56 linguistic identities, each with colorful customs, legends, and individualities. Among the many societies our program had met since '95, all seemed endowed with a wealth of song and dance. We left with lasting impressions of language, culture, and history.

### TIBET

I pursued a personal quest after my most recent UHH program, setting forth to Tibet to see the world's greatest plateau and ascend Mt. Everest, at least as far as my lungs would allow. Historically pilgrims to Tibet have felt that the longer and more arduous the journey, the more enlightened the participant. I relished that notion while enduring downtown Beijing traffic and pollution in preparation for the journey, which was like being in the lair of a bureaucratic dragon. The dragon instilled change: from clouds, to rain, to sunshine; to my quest for travel documents, gear, and tickets to Chengdu and Lhasa.

I discovered that people of Tibet were once animists with elaborate rituals to suppress demons and encourage merciful spirits to serve human needs. Eventually, most adopted Mahayana Buddhism and early writing (Sanskrit) from India and fused into various political sects uniquely Tibetan. I learned of majestic legends, such as Guan Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy, who



came to Lhasa from the East China Sea to meditate in a cave (many believe the Dalai Lama is a Guan Yin incarnation). I heard eerie tales of Yeti, the Himalayan snowman of the Everest base camp and saw vast plains, glacial streams, and magnificent fields of brilliant yellow flowers grown for vegetable oil. It seemed possible to experience Heaven and Hell in the same hour: from poverty, begging, and deathly roads of cliffs, landslides, and dust; to the most glorious mountains and courageous skies in existence.

INTRINSIC AFFINITY

Born in the year of the Tiger, I fancy that China has fashioned me with good spirit. Integrity is something still greatly admired by a people often forced to compromise dignity in trade for the contemporary yuan (Chinese dollar). Many Chinese are in a quandary, identity difficult to regain in their changing and dynamic era. I recall a joke regarding China's favorable intrinsic connection with the West: "If China and the West were to enter into confrontation, and a U.S. pilot were shot down on Asian soil, he need not bring a gun, but merely smile and extend an open hand. Surely the people would be kind to him."

It is my impression that China, although geographically characterized as a chicken, is more like a **proud rooster** in personality: frisky and masculine in nature. Sometimes the individual is proud, with head high, the rooster's crest back, other times shuffling, hunched over, crest hanging. Men seen arguing in Beijing peck at each other in short jerky motions, compared to men in Shanghai, who back off with pride, breast protruding. Manchuria is the head, from Shanghai to Hong Kong the breast, and Tibet the wings to the heavens.

I have learned, with curiosity and intrigue, to perceive many modern Chinese as having little time for pious loyalty to a single cause. I have found a people who cling to Buddhism in times of disparity, to Confucian ideals in times of prosperity, Taoism as an explanation for the cosmic laws of change, Christianity as a fresh identity, and finally, newer ideologies, ranging from Neo-Confucianism to *Special Economic Zones* (called SEZ's) such as Shenzen (including Hong Kong), Xiamen, or Pudong (including Shanghai) to fuel social and economic reform. Flexibility is Chinese sensibility.

China has taught me not to be sanctimonious and to use the word "perhaps" more than I was previously inclined. It compels an empathetic outlook toward social and religious issues through the reconciliations of contrasting viewpoints. China still holds the magic and mystery of life for those with a positive attitude and a quest to learn. It offers humanity a truthful window to the world's oldest continuous civilization. After a five-year relationship with the East, I feel that a traveler willing to recognize, reason, and come to terms with the jewel of China is unendingly enriched.

**Steven Andrew Martin**, a student at UH and recognized travel essayist, is a Hawaii lifeguard surf instructor here in Kona. Pictured at Mount Everest (previous page) and surfing in Kona (right), Steve plans to study in China next spring. (More photographs and information available for viewing at: [www.studyabroadjournal.com](http://www.studyabroadjournal.com))



Hawai'i and Tibet

First-time visitors to Kona often find our white stone graffiti on the black lava fields curious. Coming from Kona, I found it equally

intriguing to see in Tibet. White stones have been used to write prayers in Sanskrit on dark hillsides since ancient times.

I began to make connections. Tibet, like Hawai'i, rose from the sea several million years ago. Although Hawai'i pierced the sea in its midst, Tibet swallowed it entirely, creating enormous salt lakes and a wealth of marine fossils and legends.

Each place has a majestic, one-of-a-kind mountain: Hawai'i with Mauna Kea, tallest mountain on earth from its base; and Tibet with Everest, the tallest mountain to rise above the continents. Everest, called *Qomolangma*, was a princess who saved the animals from abounding seas by creating a mountain to reach the heavens. Mauna Kea (White Mountain), has *Poli'ahu*, the Hawaiian snow goddess, who could melt her sparkling ice to make lands fertile with flowing streams or spread a cooling mantle of snow in Pele's fiery path.

