

Read Chinese (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

Still sleeping? Or just not out of bed yet? I wasn't gone long. You know, you can—you'll say you can't, but you can—read Chinese. Maybe not a book, but for sure a newspaper. In any language, a newspaper's a newspaper. You look at it, you turn the pages—you can tell which parts are the news and which parts are the ads. You can look at the photographs, the drawings, the border designs. You can figure out what's international, what's local, what's fashion, what's entertainment, what's sports, what's business. Some of the words you can read because some of them they don't translate. Some people's names they don't translate. So you have a bunch of Chinese characters and then you have a name like ROY ORBISON. Yesterday there was an article that was all Chinese characters except for ROY ORBISON six times. So most names they go ahead and translate, but others they don't. And K-MART they don't translate. And THE SUNSHINE STATE they don't translate. Certain expressions they don't translate—KEEP FIT they don't translate. BYE-BYE they don't translate. Some words you think they would they don't translate. DOWNTOWN they don't translate. And SPAGHETTI and PASTA they don't translate.

That's Chinese newspapers, but spoken Chinese—sometimes in the coffee and pastry shops here in Chinatown I mimic the words I hear, but very softly. If you do it, don't get too loud, because then it sounds like an echo, and people start looking around.

Chinese, spoken, is such a pleasing language. So many tones—it's like singing. Since I don't know what I'm saying, I never try to use those words when it comes my turn to order. I say, "One of those, one of those, one of those, one of those, and one of those. And one of those." All in one tone. Not so pleasing.

Oh, you learn a few things in Chinatown. One thing is that you don't whistle. Because whistling in China is what the blind people there, the ones who massaged for a living, would do as they walked down the alleyways. Like the ice-cream man here, but whistling, not bells. And parents would send their children out to the alleyway to put their hands on the walking sticks of the blind people to guide them into the houses that needed their touch.

And in restaurants you learn. For instance, it means something if you're alone and order bird's-nest soup and the waiter smiles and says, "Good for you." If he tells you what it means when you're alone and you order it, you might change your mind on the soup, but some of the things he says you'll remember exactly: "And if you live in a house full of love you love the house. You love the bird that builds its nest under the eaves of the house."

Do you have anything you want washed? The laundromat I leave my stuff at uses a Chinese kind of soap; maybe you noticed. When I'm in another part of town and I want to calm down, I just go and sit by myself somewhere. I don't actually shut my eyes—I just keep still until I can smell the soap in my shirt.

Who knows, who knows how it will go? What you want, what I want, and so on. The Chinese seem to have fewer words than we do. Maybe they make every three words into two—so one word would cover "want" and "desire," and one would cover "desire" and "need." Roy Orbison, Roy Orbison, Roy Orbison, Roy Orbison, Roy Orbison, Roy Orbison—right now that's all I can say.

Are you sure you're awake? Don't you like mornings? But it's o.k. for you to keep sleeping while I go out and come back like this. What's great about living in Chinatown is that there's so many people getting up in the morning knowing what they want that I start wanting what they want. So this is coffee with cream and sugar. That's right, cream and sugar—don't you want to try some

things that I like? I tried some things that you like. Some of them I liked. These are sweet rolls, all different kinds.

And because I know that the world really doesn't—at least not for long—go away, I picked up some newspapers. Three published here, two from Hong Kong. Let's see . . . here, you start with this one. It's in—they all are, and now that you know you can, you can read—Chinese.

