

Dog Meat at Hanukka

A lighthearted fish-out-of-water tale in which an innocent abroad finds himself, in turn, puzzling over cultural oddities and being exasperated by them

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ONE AFTERNOON DURING an unexpected detour on my way home in Bangkok, I found myself at an open-air market staring at a wire-mesh cage of beige and black cobras in listless heaps. I had been invited along by a friendly shoe repairman who plied his trade at a rickety curbside bench.

He pointed to a fawn-colored specimen. Obliging, the snakes' guardian, a matted-haired young fellow, unlatched the lid, hooked the five-foot reptile with a fire iron, and plucked it out onto a tabletop. Suddenly, he cuffed the snake from behind.

The cobra spluttered, and rearing, spread its collar in warning. He smacked the irate reptile again. He did so, I was later told, to get the snake's blood up – literally. With adrenalin pumping furiously through its veins, a cobra's blood is believed to turn its most magically potent.

The fellow then grabbed the hissing animal by the nape and carried it over to an elderly Chinese man, who looped a string of kitchen twine around the snake's neck and tied the reptile to a vertically mounted aluminum pole. With scalpel in hand, he proceeded to eviscerate the live serpent while carefully collecting its blood in a tumbler.

Adding a drop of honey and two parts whisky, he offered the concoction to me. My friend stood by, smiling benignly.

Snake blood, I learned, is believed to have wondrous curative effects and aphrodisiacal properties. It's said to heal rheumatism, hemorrhoids, impotence, even lethargy.



It's also lauded as a marvelous pick-me-up, although I wouldn't recommend it to the faint of heart. I braced myself and gulped it back.

The concoction tasted like certain tonic beverages: part sweet, part piquant. As for the observable curative effects, I cannot much vouch for them, apart from a short adrenalin rush triggered by imbibing the rather unappetizing cocktail.

In Laos, meanwhile, I was offered fried rat. In Vietnam I saw locals slurp turtle meat soup, while downing rice wine from a bottle with a large black scorpion marinating in it. In Cambodia I was present at a wedding feast that included crocodile meat jerky and finely seasoned water beetles.

I've sampled a few such treats and turned down most others. But never have I had to invoke religious dietary restrictions as an excuse to pass up on one.

MICHAEL LEVY HAS NOT been so lucky. One fine day in 2005, the young Jew from Philadelphia arrives in Unicorn Hill Village #3 (so numbered, one presumes, to distinguish it from several other Unicorn Hill villages)

in central China for some acclimatization ahead of a two-year stint as a Peace Corps volunteer in a nearby city. Almost immediately he is faced with the prospect of offending his hosts at a welcome feast by declining an invitation to munch on a local delicacy: fried millipedes licked off a sugar-coated stick. Levy begs off by explaining he's a Jew, or rather *wo shi youtairen* (which translates as "I am a person who is special, too" in Mandarin).

The foreigner's dietary peculiarities baffle his hosts, and so begin Levy's adventures, culinary and otherwise, as an English teacher at Guizhou University in Guiyang, the capital of an underdeveloped, ethnically diverse province in southwestern China. Before long, the erstwhile vegetarian who once kept kosher and studied in a Jerusalem yeshiva succumbs to nibbling on pork dumplings and celebrating Hanukka at a restaurant called Dog Meat King, where he samples the trademark dish. (It "tastes like chicken," we learn.)

Clearly, "Kosher Chinese," Levy's account of his time in China, is not meant to be a treatise on the challenges of keeping ko-

sher in a land where people will gladly eat “anything with four legs but the table” – as well as creatures with no legs (snakes), with two (birds), and with six or more (insects). Rather, the book serves up a lighthearted fish-out-of-water tale, in which an innocent abroad finds himself, in turn, puzzled and exasperated by cultural oddities.

Right from the start, Levy is faced with such routine yet baffling challenges as squat toilets and the scrambling free-for-all that passes for queuing in China (“a Darwinian survival of the fittest,” in his words).

He gleefully mines local idiosyncrasies for their full comic potential. There’s the neighbor who wakes him every morning by meowing Sichuan Opera tunes while banging a gong. There’s the minor official who is shocked to discover that Americans know nothing of Guiyang, even though the city now boasts its own Walmart (in a warehouse right beneath People’s Park with its obligatory Chairman Mao statue). There’s the student who yells his answers at Levy as per the instructions of a popular local “Crazy English” guru who encourages Chinese learners to shout out sentences by way of gaining conversational confidence in the foreign vernacular.

Yet unlike many travel writers and expat authors, Levy doesn’t just treat locals as two-dimensional caricatures whose defining characteristic is their conformity to popular stereotypes. By befriending several locals, from fellow teachers to girls belonging to an impoverished ethnic minority, the Bouyei people, Levy seeks to see the world through their eyes. Inevitably, he rubs up against the contradictions that underpin life in China, where the phrase “with Chinese characteristics” turns familiar concepts – democracy, socialism, freedom – pretty much into their opposite.

China, he notices, is a country where party dogma condemns the material trappings of “soulless” capitalism even as party policy furthers the cause of rampant capitalism. As the nouveau riche of Beijing and Shanghai unabashedly flaunt their wealth, across the country’s vast hinterland hundreds of millions languish in grinding poverty. Frequently, Levy is confronted by the sad realities of moral ambiguity and intellectual stupor in a culture where the idea of meritocracy is the successful accumulation of *guanxi*: cultivating relationships with people of influence.

At the same time, rote learning in schools

stifles creativity and fills students’ heads with suspect ideas. When Levy is asked to teach a graduate course on postmodern American literature, he wonders how his students with their limited English might handle novels by Nabokov, Pynchon and Heller. A fellow teacher is nonplussed by his doubts. “What is there for [the students] to discuss?” she tells the American. “They don’t know anything. You’re the expert, so you should just tell them what to think.”

“THE JEWISH PEOPLE’S SECRET for Success” is a best-selling self-help title in China. Written by a former factory worker, it features snapshots of Karl Marx, Albert Einstein, Vladimir Putin and Bill Gates as paragons of Jewish smarts and business acumen. The book’s success has clearly not suffered from its inclusion of the Russian leader and Microsoft’s chairman (one a Russian Orthodox, the other from a Congregationalist background) as members of the tribe.

The Chinese, Levy discovers, admire Jews for their storied business savvy. Whereas in much of the world Jewish success is merely seen by many as proving their avarice and perfidy, in China it’s endorsed as a virtue worth emulating. If there is anti-Semitism in the country, Levy clearly didn’t encounter any. A local bureaucrat even insists to the American Jew that the ultimate sign of China’s superiority over the US will be “[w]hen the Jews begin to immigrate here. [Then] we will know we have won!”

Shortly after he begins to teach at Guizhou University, Levy finds himself appointed honorary chairman of the ad hoc Jewish Friday Night English and Cooking Corner Club, set up by some local teachers and students. On Shabbat eves they gather in a small apartment, where Levy cooks matza ball soup and bakes challa for them.

On Yom Kippur, one of his Chinese friends even joins Levy in his fast as the plump woman is eager to marry her dieting regimen to a spiritual cause. Yet a Chinese woman fasting on Yom Kippur to lose weight, Levy, a self-described agnostic, points out, is “no more or less odd than a white guy from San Francisco lighting incense in his fancy loft apartment and practicing tai chi.” Or an Israeli backpacker seeking sudden Enlightenment at a Vipassana meditation retreat in Dharamsala in the Indian Himalayas, we might add.

Yet despite the implied premise of Levy’s book, which is played up by the cover design’s prominent skullcap with a Chairman Mao print on it, the Jewish element in “Kosher Chinese” is fairly tenuous. It’s more a conceit than an essential part of the narrative. The author’s Jewishness does lend an added dimension to his experiences in China, but it does not really define them. In fact, locals seem to view him far more as a typical American than as a religious minority, if only because of his primarily secular habits.

Equally, at times the book reads like repolished diary entries and its narrative arc doesn’t exactly make for high adventure: Levy teaches, observes, grapples with culture shock, adjusts, makes friends, and gets on the college’s basketball team as its token foreign star. What enlivens this fairly everyday story is the author’s self-deprecating wit (with liberal doses of scatological humor) and his tolerant humanism.

Levy learns Mandarin well enough, yet he remains deaf to its tonal subtleties. Inevitably he garbles sentences to comic effect. A few halting statements he musters apologetically about his limited Chinese-language skills end up sounding to a native as “I, this water, arrive a little Chinese, egg, ten of me, not written this knife.” Another time at a restaurant, Levy writes, “in an attempt to order meat balls, I asked the waitress to show me her breasts.”

But verbal gaffes work both ways. An undergraduate mispronounces Gordon, his chosen English nickname, as “Moron,” while another student calls herself “Pussy,” after her love of cats. (For propriety’s sake, Levy promptly renames her “Kitten.”) Her friend blithely introduces herself as “Shitty,” telling the astonished foreigner that she likes the warm sound of the word, whose exact meaning she is clearly not familiar with.

Yet another student takes the name “Hitler.” He’s promptly renamed “Moses.”



**Kosher Chinese:
Living, Teaching,
and Eating with
China's Other
Billion**

By Michael Levy
Holt Paperbacks
256 pages; \$15