

Hero

Big hit Sword movie, Hero is an unmistakable reference in the new Chinese movie industry. Director Zhang Yimou directly refers to other directors: Ang Lee, Kurosawa. From Ang Lee, he benefits from the Chinese franchise of epic sword movies, where fights refer to inner poetry of human soul. From Kurosawa, he rewrites *Rashomon* (the same story, told over and over, with intricate layers of clever lies) in a storytelling duel between the Emperor and his assassin.

Photography is gorgeous, settings are absolutely stunning and costumes are breath-catching. Concerning acting performances, the spectrum stretches from very good to tasteless medium, but characters are very fascinating.

Hero uses pseudo historic elements relative to the first unification of the Empire of the king of Qin, and the numerous assassination attempts against him (theme already explored by Chen Kaige in *The Emperor and the Assassin*, in a more sober and historical way, with a astounding cast). A Qin's prefect asserts that he has killed the three most feared assassins and, as he receives honors from the king, starts to tell his glorious tale...

More captivating and less twisty than *House of Flying Daggers* (of the same Zhang Yimou), more beautiful too, the theme and its treatment are definitive must-sees of the new Chinese wave of cinema. To those who can't stand gravity free stunts, don't make the error of not seeing this movie!

Maggie Cheung plays a wonderful mature woman part in this movie.

Jet Li plays a part too in this movie.

Age of Empires: Chengde

The Chinese Empire has difficulties keeping pace with the demands of Mongolian and Tibetan minorities. The Emperor has granted you the task to erect in Chengde a town which will be a full embodiment of the Emperor's Grace towards the ethnic minorities.

Your mission will be to build there 7 temples in the minorities' architectural style and a Wonder (The Emperor's Garden).

This town is really fascinating: as in a video game, temples are neatly arrayed the one next to the other, making perfect axes along the impressive natural reserve, the latter being full of temples and imperial pavilions. Pines grow from 600 to 1200m altitude and spread a perfume of holydays, shading deer and pheasants. The last two will be neatly cooked in a hundred ways tonight.

A great village right next to Beijing, calm and captivating.

Being White in a tourist town sucks real hard.

Order your Meal!

When you want to order your meal, there usually are a lot of series of little characters, some more frequent than others and, generally speaking, one only recognizes the digits.

<u>Generally speaking</u>, a Chinese dish is composed of four consecutive elements.
The first element is the cooking method or the preparation of the dish. It is usually only one character long and owns the fire component and means : boiled, fried, deep-fried, steam-cooked. The lack of this first element usually means that the dish is cold (as is Tofu, cucumber or soy).

The second element expresses the “side meal”. It is very often a vegetable or something alike: cucumber, potato, tomato, but also egg, cashew nut or peanut.

The third element indicates what kind of meat is ordered: fish, pork, beef or lamb. If the element only mentions “meat”, it is therefore pork.

The fourth element specifies the shape of the dish/the meat: balls, skewers, strings, slices, big chunks or soup.

As soon as you know the twenty or so basic characters, you roughly know what you order.

Of course, the system does not mention if you’re ordering something spicy. Moreover, some dishes are traditional, and their name does not apply with the previous model. Finally, lots of freedom of interpretation is left to the cook, she actually cook you something really unexpected. You’ll never get bored when ordering a meal in China.

Chai-na

In Beijing, there is a symbol foreigners have quickly learned to hate. It is the Chai (see above). The Chai means “destroy, demolish”. It is swiftly painted on a wall by the municipality servants and the game is over: the owner is now aware that his lodging will be soon destroyed.

This character is now a slow plague that rots the old neighborhoods of Beijing. After the large concrete disasters in the 80s-90s, the urbanism modifications are made step by step, according to promoters’ and potential clients’ desires (such as international hostel brand) and mayor’s hysteria. Yeah, the very same that destroyed the city ancient walls, the one who used the old moat to settle the underground. Let’s talk about bad mayors...

No genuine good point here.

Find out a very nice market in a wooden barn, Beijing center; come back two days later to take pictures and discover the dreaded sign that forbids further use of the building.

In China, money is a question of numbers and digits. Counting is primordial to society stability. When you buy a train ticket or a meal, your Chinese interlocutor quickly goes through your hip of banknotes and holds it back to you, proudly announcing how much he or she counted.

A polite someone will just nod. A foreigner is bound to wonder why one refuses his good money.

Pay attention now: you have to count **everything**. Yourself. Whatever the amount. In a bank, if you want to withdraw an awful lot of money, the cashier will be kind enough to use the automatic counting machine twice, and then to count it herself once.

Being polite requires you to count it yourself on front of the cashier, to show that you won't come back with complaints.

Withdraw 150,000Y

Look at the cashier counting through your 1,500 notes

Come back two days later and give back the same amount

Having your client doing the same with you

Anonymous Phone Call Game

The big renewable joy of Chinese phone: anonymity. It is highly useless to wait for your interlocutor to say his name on the phone. Discussion quickly tackles the issue of what the phone call is about.

I see some of you in the back of the room start shifting in your seat: You are so dumb. Why don't you ask'em ? Well, that would be too simple. Here follows a gathering of random answers I got for asking that:

 This is your friend

 This is your Chinese friend <i>('course I only got one)</i>

 We know each other

 I live near your place

 We met once in September

It is the game of "Guess or Die" each time.

There is a definitive gaming aspect to it.

It is exceedingly upsetting to settle an appointment for next week with someone whose identity is not clearly defined.

Time is no Money

Here, let's be abrupt for a while, Time has not the value Europeans & Americans credit it.

One can spend one whole hour for a shabby discount on a price, yes, one can do it. One can spend hours sorting out sunflower grains one by one in Carrefour to finally pay them by the pound. One can do it and actually Carrefour has set special trays to this kind of hobby.

One can spent much time with friends without having scheduled such an investment beforehand. One can also be ready to invade the company that sold you an ineffective item and settle down for days to obtain a compensation.

This is quiet unsettling when you have been raised in a society where every minute counts, where phone calls are paid by the minute and where it is suitable to stay enough time, but not too much, at a friend's place.

You can waste a Chinese's time, he doesn't care.

A Chinese will waste your time, he supposes you don't care.

Negotiation 101

Negotiations, whatever their kind, with Chinese people, can be summarized in two objectives:

- Establish what the other wants

- Don't give her and wait

That way, you can see how far she's ready to go to obtain what she's looking for, giving you maximum assets. Western Negotiations techniques like "winner-winner" are completely excluded here.

Immediate corollary of the previous two objectives: a good way to obtain what you want is to take something from the other, don't give it back and wait.

Sometimes, Chinese individuals are taken aback by a sudden opening that you should offer and get soft. Moreover, most Chinese individuals can't stand against a foreigner's smile.

That method breeds frustration and takes a lot of time.

Rendezvous

When making an appointment, if you are not the one who **said** what time the rendezvous takes place, you are absolutely not required to respect it. Understand well that you're not supposed not to show either, but you're completely entitled to postpone it three days later or to wonder if in 5 minutes it would be possible.

The smart ones have already understood that in these situations, there always one that never said "when", therefore at least one of them is entitled to postpone and that it is a vicious circle of hell. Yep, you're right George.

First safety: try to get your partner to tell "when". Problem: most of them won't do it in order to be allowed to postpone. If you had up the western layer (it's polite to let the other choose the time), you'll go straight in the wall, head first.

This habit amplifies the value of cell phones, since the latter enables you to postpone at the very last minute.

When you expect to do something really heavy (move out your furniture) and that the driver changes his mind three times in a row (for most obscure reasons) and that he finally picks up the most awkward time possible (with the only principle of not choosing the time you proposed at first by sheer pride), it is more than annoying.

Digits & Numbers

The little subtlety of Chinese numbers: they don't work the same way as ours, with hundreds, thousands, millions and billions. Or, to be more specific, the principle is the same, but the units aren't.

Here are the five basic units of the Chinese system:

Ten Thousand Thousand Hundred Ten Unit

For the small numbers, no problem, it is the same.

Stacking a digit (from 0 to 9) to a unit, you obtain a number. For example, 2 Ten makes twenty. 4 Hundred makes 400. Easy meat, isn't it ?

For bigger number, you just have to stack smaller numbers. 121 is written 1 Hundred 2 Ten 1 Unit (or 一百二十一). To write 7628, it's finally 7 Thousand 6 Hundred 2 Ten 8 Unit (or 七千六百二十八). Quite workable, uh?

And for bigger bigger numbers? Well, we'll quickly sort of those of you who studied math and those who suffered math. Above 100 000, you stack the Unit as well to form bigger Units.

For example, 100 000 is written 1 Ten Ten Thousand (一十万). One million is 1 Hundred Ten Thousand. And to write 13 587 899 is simply 1 Thousand Ten Thousand 3 Hundred Ten Thousand 5 Ten Ten Thousand 8 Ten Thousand 7 Thousand 8 Hundred 9 Ten 9 Unit. (一千万三百万无十万八万七千九十九个).

I lost you there, right?

You always know of how much you're talking about, even if it's taking the whole day.

Picture yourself a translator between firms with that kind of mental juggling during negotiations. Poor fellows.

ChinaScope 10 - 07-07-05

Editing a Website from China

It's great to have a website while in China. You are all asleep when I am updating my website. Hence, nobody is exhausting the lines in France and I have a light fast access to my hosting services.

I am not waiting for hours in front of my little screen that all French mails have been transferred before being able to send tons of images to my website in Marseilles (that is where my host is).

Moreover, I should have sent loads of faxes to access to these hosting services, but as soon as I mentioned China, a most exquisite operator overrides that process to open my account. Kewl. Thanks to him and to the credit China has in France nowadays!

Good Point

What's more, I have a pretty lot of visitors for a site this ugly.

Bad Point

I am never awake when the forum is used. Sorrow.

ChinaScope 11 – 10-07-05

10 reasons why Hong Kong is British

1. Everybody speaks English
2. It is a proud island facing a completely alien continent
3. Cars use the left lane
4. Pedestrians only cross streets when the little guy is green
5. There are many more fancy cars than in the mainland
6. Streets are narrower, cars are more numerous, but there are less traffic jams
7. It is a first-rate financial spot
8. And a little bridge towards the continent
9. Life cost is extravagantly higher than in the mainland
10. Underground geography is a huge mess, nothing on the same level, shaped as a three-dimensional maze

Good Point

British lifestyle, that's quiet neat

Bad Point

As a French, I always feel like I'm not perfect enough for such background

ChinaScope 12 - 12-07-05

Architecture in Hong Kong

Question: Is Hong Kong a prediction of what Beijing will turn into?

That's not likely, even if the vast majority of the Hong Kong population is from Chinese origin. Personally, the first big skyscrapers cities I saw were Beijing and Tianjin (since European cities aren't really, Montparnasse Tower does not make a skyline by itself) and I sincerely believed that those huge cities ought to be ugly by nature. And Hong Kong does not fit in this pattern. It is beautiful. Big buildings all right, steel, glass and concrete towers, but it is good-looking, it is massive and has a breath catching silhouette, though made of very different styles.

Beijing is not really completely ugly, it is just urban sad and flat. Random sprouted towers, old ugly buildings still here when some nice ones have been turned to dust and some depressing gray skyscrapers.

Moreover, all free space in Hong Kong is left to the luxurious flora: it is still vastly green and "wild".

Those Brits, they're great.

Good Point

Skyscrapers cities can be captivating

Bad Point

Nothing near that this side of the Yellow River

ChinaScope 13 - 03-08-05

Bringing down the prices

Welcome in the fluffy world of individuals buying from other individuals.

I will take the opportunity of those few following lines to give you a little glimpse of what can be done to bring down prices when fiercely bargaining.

1. Not wanting anything at all costs. If you want to buy something absolutely, the seller's sixth sense will trigger and you won't gain anything. To buy well, one shouldn't be passionate about a specific item.
2. Start from scratch. There is no use of giving a first estimate that is roughly the final price that you hope to get. It is better to start from the bottom: most items can be first priced @10Y, smaller stuff should receive a 1Y first offer.
3. Laugh and Smile. When a price is ridiculously high, when a percentage off is really small, just laugh. When making an offer, smile. Even when you stay on your previous offer, smile and let the sarcasms wind away instead of spitting in their faces.
4. Leave. Leave the ground in the last quarter of the negotiation to indicate that this will be your last price (almost). Don't hesitate to conclude a few yards away.
5. Fractionate to succeed. When buying a group of things, some items are always too expensive. When the situation is blocked, fractionate the group, leaving behind the too expensive things and offer a price lower than previously. Most sellers rather have a correct big sell than a bad small one.
6. New traditions. The old saying stated that in a bargain, one should start with one third of the named price and agree on the half. This is no longer true. Bring down the prices and then vaporize them.
7. Get competitiveness in. Miracle of the capitalist economy, most items are found in various places. Leave and start over with someone else.
8. Nothing is sacred. Some years earlier, some articles were exempt of bargaining. For example, food prices were always correct. It is no longer the case. Bring down the prices on everything.
9. Know the market. The most difficult thing to learn is to know approximately the correct price of things beforehand.
10. Trust no one. Bargaining is a lonely path: your Chinese guide gets a kickback, the passing-by expert is the uncle of the seller, local foreigners are as lost as you are. Be sure of your limit, impose it or leave.

Good Point

It makes fun time with most of the sellers, even if nothing is bought.

Bad Point

It is highly not recommended to ask the price of the same thing you just bought to another seller.

ChinaScope 14 - 07-07-05

Modern Music

I was, during one whole year, in a college full of girls. Outcome: the only modern music I was exposed to is the music made for soapy romantic teens. What troubled me was, this is a very popular genre in China. The same songs are broadcasted in supermarkets, lifts, buses, undergrounds, basically in every place where the noise level is far too low.

Hence my conclusion, which appeared later to be false: the modern Chinese music is a collection of über-romantic unflavored pop, highly inspired by Anglo-Saxon hits of the 80's. Solely focused on passive search for Love, break-up sadness and lasting feelings, this kind of noisy entertainment brought to life no spark of interest from me. Only sarcasm.

Sometimes, a Chinese did assert that modern Chinese music was versatile and vast, full of audacity and even genuinely original. But always failed to prove it. For a long time, I remained skeptical.

One fine day, a DVD shop opened down my block. It held a few rows of CD too. I take a look, buying a few western CD that were appealing. And then, a rather young Chinese, sparse facial hair, old Scorpions T-shirt still soaked of last night beers, asks: "You like Chinese rock'n'roll?". Embarrassed but polite, I just answered that I knew none of them. There he goes through the CD, fetching three CD, good old trash looking, and explains me, in a mix of Chinese and English, that those are the Chinese Radiohead, Nirvana and Korn. Ok, I buy.

Back home, rather convinced that those CD suck big time, I put one in the player. And it is huge. Sounds like a good American spanky song, except that the guy insists one singing in Chinese. Cheers. And the other two are ass kicking good too. I just discovered modern Chinese music – and a Guide to it.

Good Point

It is a renewal of my CD collection and I will be able to bewildering in casual conversations.

Bad Point

Good things are always pointed out by Chinese, no hope of discovering something alone.

ChinaScope 15 - 07-07-05

Music Dialogue

Yesterday, I went back to see my good Chinese music dealer. He wasn't there. So, I roamed through the CD rows, found the CD I previously bought and started to pick up those close to them, secretly hoping that they were sorted by style. Then, the Guide arrived. A had a good laugh when he saw what I was about to buy and put half of them back on the shelves “

-Those CD are for jerks, he explained

-I liked the previous ones, can I have some of the same breed?

-You have time?” Of course, I had. We picked up two plastic garden stools and went in the smoky end of the shop, just next to the speakers. There I enjoyed a gorgeous selection.

Tang Dynasty: “They sing traditional poems and stories. The sound is quiet Van Halen”

Cold Blooded Animal: “They scream. It is rather depressive, with big guitars and beer.” And yes, it sounds like a grunge under acid.

Yecha: “Chinese Style” I did not catch his meaning. But it basically sounded like many western bands (Joy Division, Pearl Jam, etc.) but with gongs, a strange Asian rhythmic, a music instrument played with chopsticks. Breathtaking.

Zhou Zhen: “Well, one is punk, one a rocker, one a country singer, and winds” Chinese ska, is it possible? You bet it is. And it feels good.

It lasted one hour and a half. Some of the CD I heard were his and weren't on sell, so he lent me them, so I could grab them on my laptop. And he showed me videos during the Chinese festivals, the Chinese Woodstock (Beijing Midi Festival) and he wanted me to go with him.

Good Point

That is so great.

Bad Point

Chinese Woodstock and new job's first day collide...