

Wishing in China

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Crack! The thunder booms so loudly I duck, though not before the lightning strikes. Luckily, both the exquisitely decorated stupas around me and I are unscathed. The heavens open up with rain thicker than I've ever seen. Are the gods trying to tell me something?

I'm in northeast China, atop Shanxi province's Mount Wutai, the holiest of the country's four sacred mountains. Pilgrims have come here since the seventh century—and many, to this day, have done so on their knees. Even the Dalai Lama says he wishes to make a pilgrimage here. I'm admiring this UNESCO World Heritage site's architecture, but the loud and wet message from above has me wondering if I should be taking the spirituality of Mount Wutai more seriously.

When the rain finally lets up, I'm rewarded with a panoramic view of the densely treed hills sprinkled with temples. Nearby, a monk in a burgundy robe takes a hand-tied broom and sweeps pools of water off the stone floors toward hidden drainage pipes. Visitors return to lighting joss sticks in front of altars, holding the incense between their palms as they say prayers. I wonder what they're wishing for: the health of a parent? To find love? I hope it's for the sun to come out. With the skies beginning to clear, my soaking umbrella and I feel brave enough to explore more of the area's numerous temples, and so I begin to descend the 108 steps that lead to the towering Great White Pagoda.

As I approach the 400-year-old structure I can hear its hundreds of tiny bells tinkling in the breeze, but there's an even louder hum

rising up to greet me. The pagoda's square base, protected from the elements by an overhang, is lined with spinning bronze cylinders and colorful mosaics of the Buddha in Lotus position. A procession of nuns and monks in grey, saffron and navy robes, as well as Chinese nationals in street clothes, walks clockwise around it, murmuring prayers aloud. As they pass, they touch each cylinder to keep them whirling.

I'm told that spinning these prayer wheels helps one to accumulate wisdom, compassion and good karma and I'm invited to give it a try. After seeking assurances that I won't offend anyone, I join the procession. I watch those in front of me carefully to ensure I'm doing it right. I know I'm meant to recite a mantra as I spin to help me be mindful, but my Western brain starts to wander as soon as I feel like I've got the technique down properly.

What am I supposed to be thinking? As a non-believer, it doesn't feel right to pray. But the concept of wishing sits comfortably. I make a wish when I blow out my birthday candles, when I have an eyelash on my cheek and on the first star I see at night: the North Star. Perhaps that's somewhat like spinning a prayer wheel in China? On my third trip around the pagoda, I find myself feeling calmer and more compassionate. The storm has blown away to reveal a bright blue sky. There might be something to this.

As I travel through China, I find opportunities for reflection everywhere. Whenever I see someone light a joss stick, I take a moment to think about how I want to live my life. At the UNESCO-honoured Yungang Grottoes,

I explore a kilometer-long series of 1,500-year-old sandstone caves. Carved into these 53 caves are 51,000 niches, each with a Buddha statue inside that ranges in size from a few centimeters to 20 meters tall. Visitors bow in prayer throughout the site. The joss sticks near the largest statue are a meter high—whether that’s proportional to the height of the Buddha or the importance of the wishes, I can’t say. But once again, I feel like China is asking something more of me.

In Hunan province I encounter another wishing cave. Deep underground within Huanglong—“Yellow Dragon”—Cave, visitors must walk through one of two doorways to continue seeing the cavern’s stalactites and stalagmites and, eventually, exit. The doors are marked “Happiness Gate” and “Longevity Gate” in English and Chinese characters. The choice indicates one’s wish. Without a second’s contemplation, I march through “Happiness.” I hear gasps from the domestic Chinese tourists waiting to see what the foreign woman will do. I’m told that the Chinese always choose “Longevity,” given the reverence for elders here. Seems I’ve more to learn about how to make wishes in China.

Still in Hunan, I soar via the world’s longest cable car over the 99 bends of Heaven-Linking Road until I reach the clouded top of Tianmen Mountain. I walk along pathways cantilevered out from cliff walls. The views must be spectacular on a sunny day. In the swirling fog things look mystical, especially the strange trees. Among the green foliage are bright red leaves, and as I walk farther, the trees get redder. It is only close up that I realize the red leaves are not leaves at all, but ribbons.

Red is a lucky color in China. Both the secular and the religious write wishes on red ribbons and tie them to trees in hopes that some higher power will respond. Wishes are generally for health, prosperity or love, I’m told. The higher the ribbon is tied, the greater the chance the wish will come true—which is why there are so many on this mountain.

It seems that China has worked its magic on me, as I find myself moved to make my own wish. I buy a ribbon and, feeling the need to respect the local customs, ask for help writing it in hànzi characters. I find a quiet spot in an area that is dense with ribbons, where I hope no one will see me. I solemnly recite my birthday, eyelash and North Star wish: “May I live a fantastic life.”

The wind ripples through my ribbon as I reach to tie it to the tree. I hesitate, hands in midair, and reflect back on the people I’ve seen at alters, pagodas and caves. Perhaps they weren’t wishing at all—perhaps they were giving thanks. I slip the ribbon inside my pocket, deciding instead to take it home with me, where it can remind me to give thanks for the fantastic life I’m already living. 🍀

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