

The Year of the Ox

by Michael J. Sloboda

This is the Year of the Ox, the second year in the twelve year cycle. Secularized Japan marks the change of animals in the East Asian zodiac on January 1, but socialist China still relies on the second new moon after the first day of winter. Thus this year February 7, 1997 marked the beginning of Chinese New Year, or, as it is now called in the Mainland, the Spring Festival. From its location in the 60 year cycle, this is a fire ox, a down-to-earth animal with extra vigor.



He spots the ox's hoofprints

The Chinese farmer is still attached to his ox



The oxherd looks for an ox

With the rapid spread of farm machinery in China, almost a million large tractors and 10 million hand-pushed tiny tractors for plowing small plots, plus a million trucks, agriculture no longer relies upon animal muscle power to the traditional extent, but many farmers and their children are still financially and emotionally very attached to their oxen.

This is evident in traditional sayings like “one hair from nine oxen” (a drop in the bucket), “nine oxen and two tigers” (a task which requires the strength of Hercules), “ox-hearted” (stubborn), “the life of oxen and horses” (a life of drudgery), and “I stole a rope” (a joke whose punch-line is “there was an ox attached to the end of it”).

Then the stars Altair and Vega in the Summer Milky Way represent the Oxherd and the Weaving Maid, mythical lovers who are united only on the seventh night of the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

The ox and the shepherd

The ox and its shepherd are the theme of a set of paintings by the Chan (Zen) monk Kuo'an Shiyuan (circa 1150 A.D.). The ten paintings illustrate a parable in action. First the oxherd is by himself, looking around for an ox. This symbolizes a person with some vague yearnings who begins a spiritual quest. But he then sees hoof prints on the ground and follows the trail. The Buddhist scriptures and/or

a monk put him on the right track.



The herdsman tames the ox

In the third picture he catches sight of the ox in the distance. This represents mere intellectual understanding, with knowledge remaining compartmentalized from life. Then the herdsman has to make an effort to tame the beast. Meditation is hard work, and muscles ached from sitting on a mat in the lotus position.

In the fifth picture he watches the ox peacefully grazing. Meditation becomes easy with practice.

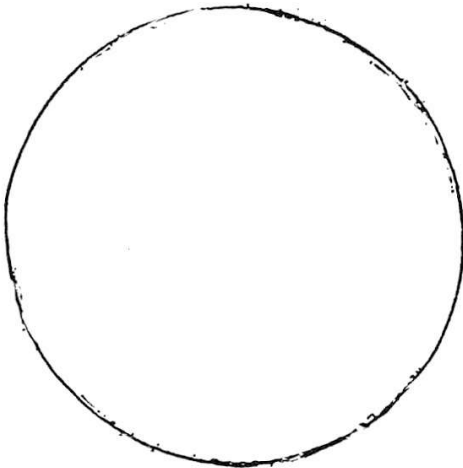
Next he is playing a flute and riding joyfully atop the happy ox. Spiritual discipline

has led to confidence, joy and freedom.



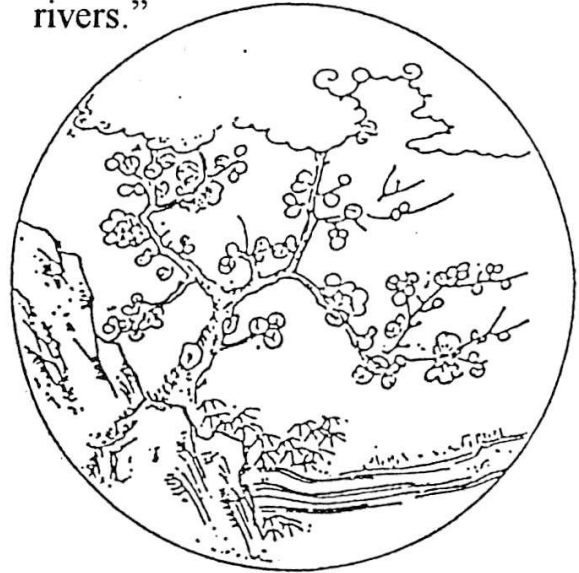
The oxherd rides the ox joyfully

The seventh painting is the shepherd all by himself. What happened to the ox? No one needs a boat after crossing a river, nor a whole repertoire of spiritual techniques after seeing the light.



The circle is the symbol of emptiness

The eighth frame is empty. Neither words nor pictures can capture a peak experience. Then the shepherd reappears in his familiar surroundings, illustrating what another monk expressed in a poem: "Before I was enlightened, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. When I became enlightened, mountains were not mountains, nor rivers. After I became enlightened, mountains were again mountains and rivers again rivers."



Emptiness ends in enlightenment

Finally, in the tenth frame, he enters the marketplace, happily greeting everyone. Authentic religious experience leads one back into

the world and one's proper place in it.

Buddhism does not teach a Creator or personal God, yet this set of pictures has parallels in the Judeo-Christian tradition. "Peak experience," comes to Elijah on Mt. Horeb experiencing God not in wind, earthquake or fire, but in a tiny whispering sound (1 Kgs. 19:11-18), and from Jesus to Peter, James and John up the mountain of the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-9). In both cases an ineffable experience of the divine was soon followed by a walk downhill and a return to work that had to be done.



The herdsman returns joyfully to the marketplace

Moses was not on a mountain top when he was

granted an indirect vision of God (Ex. 33:18-23), but he also had a difficult mission to complete afterwards. Over the centuries Christian mystics such as Gregory of Nyssa and John of the Cross have elaborated and allegorized on the Biblical accounts of transcending the world briefly only to "return to earth" with renewed energy and commitment.

Changes in Chinese Society

But what does any of this have to do with China on the threshold of the twenty-first century? Oxen are quiet creatures, able to work patiently, which do not require excitement. On the contrary, constant noise and stimulation are bad for their health. The majority of people in China, even in the countryside, now have a TV set in their homes. Young people are drawn to the lights and discos of the big cities.

This has a parallel in U.S. history. After World War I, many soldiers did not want to resume a life of farming. A hit song was titled: "How are you gonna keep 'em

down on the farm after they've seen Paree?"

How is the Chinese government going to keep young adults down on the farm now after they've seen Hong Kong or Shanghai? In the rush to make money, who has time for quiet and a leisurely life? Or prayer and meditation for that matter?

A recent survey of young people in the most prosperous part of China, the cities along the east coast, showed that even Christians were interested in the stock market, and spent less time in church or in private prayer than believers in the countryside. When asked about people who always have

the TV on or commute with their earphones into the recorder, a Buddhist Master from Taiwan said: "They are running away from themselves. If they are afraid of silence, we cannot help them. But if they want to get in touch with themselves, we have some useful techniques."

The late Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk from the U.S.A., wrote volumes about the contemplative life and once said: "A well-ordered life is a sign of our nothingness before God." In this Year of the Ox, may all our readers, and the all people of China, ruminant over the need for tranquillity and silence in their lives. □