

CHAPTER ONE

THE MANDARIN LESSON

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

天堂生下我的能力必須有用

If heaven made him, earth can find some use for him.

—*Chinese Proverb*

It wasn't exactly what I'd expected. I stepped across the threshold of the room that would be my home for the next two weeks. Along one wall sat a single bed, and on the opposite wall stood a plain wooden bookshelf and a metal chair. Under the room's only window sat a well-used wooden desk. Through the open window, I caught a glimpse of an apartment building partially hidden by trees and flowering bushes.

Every so often a warm breeze that smelled like flowers and bus exhaust would fill the room. Stark white paint and a stone floor made the room feel clean but impersonal. Beijing, China, in the spring of 1997 seemed intriguing to me—so far. After a

twelve-hour flight the day before, I had arrived safely on campus at the China Conservatory of Music. I told myself the room would be fine, especially since I'd be doing little more than sleeping there for the next fourteen days.

The main reason I had traveled to China was to assist my voice teacher. She'd been invited to serve as Artist in Residence at the conservatory. But I did have another reason for coming to Beijing, one that I didn't even tell my teacher. I wanted to meet Pastor Allen Yuan, a leader in the underground house-church movement in China.¹

In the 1940s, China's house-church movement began in opposition to the government-sanctioned church. After World War II many house-church leaders like Yuan and Watchman Nee were imprisoned for teaching the uncensored Word of God.

I knew how precious Bibles in Mandarin were to underground Christians, so I purchased and brought a few copies with me. My decision to bring them wasn't exactly a safe course of action, and I am not sure what might have happened to me if they had been discovered—but that didn't stop me from facing a moment of anxiety just as I stepped foot in China.

Facing Fear

When I arrived at Beijing Capital International Airport and headed toward security, I watched

agents tear through the luggage of the man in front of me under the careful observation of an armed guard. I noticed that the guard's hand never left his weapon.

Feeling my heart begin to race, I stood in line and did the only thing I could: I prayed for God's intervention. I hadn't thought to hide the Bibles in my luggage, so they were in the shopping bag I held in my left hand. There was no way they would be missed. When the security agent turned to me, I took a deep breath and placed my things on the table to be searched. He motioned for me to pick up my bags and move toward the exit. It took several seconds for me to realize he was not going to search any of my belongings, but instead simply waved me through the line! Stunned and grateful, I hurried off before he changed his mind. I had just experienced a miracle.

Staring Contest

My first week in Beijing was filled with meeting students, observing music rehearsals and even teaching voice lessons to the students who weren't given a spot in my teacher's classes. Each day after school our tour guide took us sightseeing or to nearby shops and restaurants. I expected the large volume of cars on the roads, but I was surprised by how many people rode bicycles, even on major roadways.

Also, Beijing was so densely populated that I'd thought our little group of Americans would blend in. How wrong I was. We drew crowds everywhere we went. Instead of the anonymity I had experienced in London, Rome, New York, and Los Angeles, imagine my surprise when I saw people fall off their bikes because they couldn't stop staring at the four of us: me, my teacher, and my teacher's daughter and her husband. In 1997 our brown skin caused quite a stir there.

Little kids would sometimes run up to us and poke our legs to see if we were real. When we smiled or laughed at their curiosity, they smiled back, but clearly they were rattled. Apparently, no category existed in their brains to account for people who looked like we did. If we stopped as a group to look at a sign, a large crowd of people would instantly form behind us. We'd turn around to face the people, who would be staring, pointing, or covering their mouths in surprise. It felt wild. Most adults, especially the elderly ones, stared so long that it actually became uncomfortable. Our tour guide explained that people of African descent were an infrequent sight in Beijing, so we did our best to take their reactions in stride. Constantly being on display was challenging, though.

We continued to sightsee, visiting temples, gardens, and palaces, and we even climbed a section of the Great Wall. I enjoyed walking through the market streets lined with herbs in woven baskets, or butcher shops with meat hanging from hooks. We saw bold, colorful signage everywhere, and we

breathed in the aroma of delicious food coming from countless restaurants. By the end of the first week, we were used to being in China, but the Chinese were not used to us. I woke up every day feeling like an American who happened to be in China, but before long I felt like a spectacle instead of a fellow human being.

The constant stares and attention were more annoying than hurtful. Having been raised in the southern United States, I'd experienced the sting of racism many times, but at least the stares and reactions I received in Beijing seemed motivated by curiosity, not hatred.

The Ceramic Effect

By the end of my trip it dawned on me that although Chinese people viewed me as a foreigner, their stares and thoughts had no power to change who I was. Later, when I was writing this book, I thought back to my first impressions of ceramic pans with the white cooking surface. When I began using this kind of cookware, I felt sure that the food I was preparing would stain or damage it, but that never happened. Just like any other pot or pan, the food that I cooked went from raw to tenderized, delicious, and fully prepared. After a bit of soap and water, the cooking surface was as white as ever.

Purpose and influence have similar staying power. Since God determines the purpose for each of our lives, no one else can ever destroy it. At best,

life circumstances and choices can delay the fulfillment of our purpose, but the Lord has a way of making all detours work to our advantage. Similarly true influencers leave situations better than they find them. Their beliefs, words, and deeds have the power to transform.

Proper influence increases effectiveness.

In retrospect, during my trip to Beijing, the Lord revealed my purpose and trained me to be an influencer. By teaching, delivering Bibles, and showing kindness to folks who didn't quite know what to make of me, God positioned me to display his goodness.

The Frail Giant

At the end of my first week in Beijing, I contacted Pastor Yuan, and he came to the conservatory to meet me in person. As he walked toward me, I was startled by his appearance. I had never seen anyone so thin and frail. Dressed in a tan shirt and pants that seemed far too roomy for his frame, he moved with surprising speed. We sat in the dorm's main lobby and began to talk. I was curious about how he knew where to find me on campus. He told me he had asked for "the foreigner" at the gate. I was taken aback by his

response, yet drawn to his directness. His voice was slightly hoarse, but he spoke flawless English that was both precise and economical – he didn't mince words.

I explained how the American ministry where I'd purchased the Bibles had given me his name and contact information. We talked about my deep respect for Watchman Nee's books, and he told me that when Nee had been released from prison, Yuan and his wife had allowed him to stay in their home. I can't remember if I gasped out loud when he said that, but I definitely got goose bumps. It was like someone casually saying, "I let Billy Graham live with me for a few months when he needed a place." The fact that I was sitting inches away from a giant in the faith was beginning to sink in for me.

Then I gave him the Bibles I'd brought. He looked in the shopping bag and asked, "Only these?"

"Yes, only these," I replied weakly.

I guess I should have brought more Bibles, I thought.

Suddenly I didn't feel so confident about the gift I'd brought, but before I could apologize, everything shifted.

He leaned forward in his chair and began telling me his testimony of being jailed for pastoring an underground church. "I have suffered untold hardship, imprisoned for over twenty years. I had no Bible, only a few hymns to sustain my faith...."

For the next half hour he told me the details of his imprisonment, torture, time away from his

family, and of the God he had clung to through it all. He spoke without raising his voice, but his demeanor changed. I watched as strength filled his body and deepened his voice. The atmosphere in the room became electric with the presence of God. By the time his testimony ended, I was in tears. Without missing a beat, he looked at me and said, “You will come and preach to us.”

His blunt words stopped my tears immediately. I protested, but he insisted. In one quick motion he stood up, wrote directions on a slip of paper in Chinese, and told me to hand it to a taxi driver the next morning, which was Sunday. With that, the frail man with the giant spirit walked out of the dormitory.

Have you ever experienced a moment in life that felt like a scene from a movie? I couldn’t believe what had just happened. I’d met one of the heroes of the faith, and he wanted *me* to come and speak at his church? My inner monologue sounded something like this:

This can’t be real. I am not a preacher. I don’t speak Chinese. A strange taxi driver could take me anywhere. Isn’t that exactly how people die in the movies? I’m not the one. I won’t do it.

I know, I know, my inner dialogue sounded pretty theatrical. All the while, deep down I knew I would go. I had already brought Bibles into a foreign country, so I figured that I might as well continue the adventure.

Taxis, Trust, and Truth

The next morning I stood at the gate of the conservatory. A few students asked what I was waiting for. When I told them I was waiting for a taxi, they laughed and wished me luck, but said taxis didn't come there on Sundays. While they were still speaking, a cab drove toward us and stopped. I got in, handed the directions to the driver, and spent the next several seconds wondering what I had gotten myself into. I don't remember how long the drive took, but I'll never forget the atmosphere inside that taxi.

The song playing on the radio was sung in Mandarin, so I couldn't understand the words. I have no logical explanation, but the peace of God filled that car. It felt like I was listening to worship music. To this day I don't know if the Lord or Pastor Yuan had arranged that taxi and driver, but the entire thing seemed divinely orchestrated.

The taxi driver stopped mid block in a humble part of town. There I was, a very tall, African American woman dressed in a pale yellow dress. I'm sure I stood out like twelve sore thumbs. A casually dressed man approached me, speaking Mandarin. After a few false starts I realized his connection to Pastor Yuan, and I followed him into a narrow alley that immediately became a combination obstacle course and maze. He trotted along quickly, and I was struggling to keep up when suddenly he stopped at an open door to my left. He

led me into a single-room house divided into two sections: kitchen and bedroom.

Unexpected Power

Eleven or twelve steps marked the distance between front door and the back wall of Yuan's home. The tiny space was packed with about fifteen people. Weeping and bent in prayer, the majority were women. When I saw the small drinking glasses clutched in their hands, I realized they were taking communion. The juice in their glasses was so diluted that it looked like pale purple water. In the few seconds it took to assess my surroundings, I felt overwhelmed by something familiar—the presence of God. His presence was so strong that by the time I walked the few short steps from the door to the bed (which served as a pulpit), my face was wet with tears and my soul was on fire.

The believers sang and wept, their voices just above a whisper as Pastor Yuan told the story of the last supper. He began to translate everything he was saying into English once I arrived. We took communion and then prayed. I shared a short message from 2 Corinthians 4 as Yuan translated for the congregation. The message seemed well received, judging by the frequent call of “Amen” that I heard.

After the service I met each member, including two young women intent on becoming missionaries in a remote Chinese province. I wanted to take

photos of my new friends, but Pastor Yuan advised me not to. He said that if my camera ended up being confiscated as I left China, it would have meant trouble for the people in the photos. It dawned on me that I had preached the Word of God for the first time in my life and that the Lord had taken me to the other side of the world to deliver the message. I looked around the tiny room and noticed a few photos on the wall. I saw a photo of Billy Graham preaching—in the same room. I saw another picture of David Yonggi Cho (pastor of the largest church in South Korea)—teaching from the same pulpit/bed. I was startled to see such towering Christian figures photographed where I'd sat just moments before.

After the church members left, I ate a simple meal with Pastor Yuan and his wife, during which they shared more details about their lives as believers. Today, twenty years later, I am still humbled by all the Lord did that day, and I hold those moments in my heart like priceless treasures.

During that trip God confirmed my identity and purpose. He led me safely through dangerous and uncomfortable circumstances to show me a glimpse of what he'd called me to do—to serve and influence others for him. It may seem strange to have travelled all the way to China to discover this, but the Bible contains countless stories about the Lord plucking people from obscurity and repositioning them to accomplish tasks for his glory.

*Sometimes, God confirms identity and purpose
in uncomfortable circumstances.*

One of my favorite examples of God confirming his purpose in strange circumstances involves a young man named David. He was the youngest of eight sons, and as a result he was given the most menial job in the household—taking care of sheep.

The Unlikely King

One day the prophet Samuel came to speak to David's father, Jesse. God told Samuel that one of Jesse's sons would be the next king of Israel. It was the prophet's job to determine which son the Lord had chosen, then pour oil on his head and announce God's plan. Samuel arrived, met son after son, but the Lord was silent. Jesse mentioned that he had one more out in the fields tending the sheep, apparently thinking there was no way the Lord would want David. You can probably guess how this ends.

In came David, sheepishly (sorry, couldn't resist!). I'll bet they could smell him before they could see him. Immediately God confirmed it: David was the chosen one. The prophet poured oil on David's head and announced that the Lord had chosen him as the next king of Israel (see 1 Samuel 16:1-13 for the full story).

God plucked David from obscurity to establish his identity and purpose. For many of you reading

this book, He will do the same. At some point in your life, if it hasn't already happened, the Lord will single you out and point you on the road to your destiny. While others struggle to figure out what's going on with you, God will remain faithful to unfold his plan for your life. He promises in Psalm 139:16, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." In other words some things will happen in your life because they are part of God's will for you and no one can stop them.

Before I go any further, let me clarify something. This book is not about China or ceramic pans or shepherds. It is about influence, a word in my opinion that is synonymous with leadership.

Why does that matter to you?

It matters because you are called to influence others whether you realize it or not. Sometimes it's easier to see ourselves in the stories of others, so I offer you parts of mine in this book. The scriptures declare, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17).

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Like David, the shepherd who became king, the Lord carefully prepared me for the work I would do at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Sometimes that preparation included

seasons when I felt overlooked or forgotten – as though my life was a series of detours. That’s only part of the story. My season of preparation also included times when my gifts and talents were put on display around the world. For a decade, though, I was privileged to serve and influence young military leaders at the Naval Academy as the Director of the Gospel Choir. I use the word *serve* intentionally because I have learned that service to others is a key to lasting influence.

Service to others is a key to lasting influence.

Not only is this book about what happens when preparation, influence and faith in God collide, but it’s also about the second assignment the Lord gave me at the Academy: to encourage unity and ethnic diversity within the Gospel Choir and ultimately among future military leaders. I’ve seen firsthand how unity and diversity brings strength to teams in ways exclusion and division never could. Now, more than ever, unity must be championed by the church in America as a way to combat the divisiveness running rampant in our nation. Fostering unity is part of our purpose as the body of Christ, so let us seek to stay on mission for God always!

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