

## **Introduction**

“**The Jing**” is a new series of short stories (or maybe “novella” if I’m feeling snooty enough), inspired by the characters and events of my book:

Spectrum: The Joy, Stress, Love and Goodbyes of Expats in Beijing

As with the book it was inspired by, I hope that this series will give people an insight into expat life in Beijing, as well as life in China in general. It could be that all you know about life in China is based on various news reports talking about politics, military or economic affairs. The truth is there’s just so much more to China that makes it worthy of our attention and even adoration. As many expats discover, you can love China without loving its politics.

This book series is available absolutely free of charge, and I’m hoping that people just read and enjoy. But there are more ways to keep up with “The Jing”:

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And if you like what you read, you can get the original ebook that inspired the series on Amazon for Kindle or the Kindle App. Just search my name and you can find it.

Enjoy the story, and please feel free to offer feedback to one of our online channels!

### **Part One: Thursday Dinner**

Thursday just would never have been Thursday without Julia's special "Thursday Dinner." The invitation e-mail goes out on a Monday afternoon to all those expats who've signed up, when the depressing effects of the first day back at work after a mad weekend are starting to bite. Julia worked in the office of an international school, which meant very early starts indeed, far too early for civilized society. She was always suspicious of how perky her Chinese colleagues were at that time on a Monday, but then remembered that they were more sensible and saved their energy for daytime activities over the weekend rather than for all-night booze-ups in Sanlitun with the usual gang.

Julia was 39 years old now, and often wondered why she was still so enticed by spending the weekend like a college student, drinking until the early hours and getting a cab home in broad daylight and arriving back to

find her elderly Chinese neighbours up and about, doing their morning Tai Chi. Early morning Tai Chi was something she'd often wondered about trying to join in with, but the more she wondered, the more easily she came to the conclusion that five in the morning perhaps is just a little fearsome a time to be getting up, whatever the supposed health benefits.

By Thursday lunchtime, Julia had received her e-mail replies and was ready to book the table. She'd chosen a Chongqing hotpot restaurant, which she acknowledged was a strange choice for the time of year. Chinese style hotpot, or "huoguo" as it's known in China, is a very hearty form of eating that's usually something reserved for the colder winter months. Just imagine an Irish crofter's cottage kitchen, all toasty from the stew sitting on the range cooker all day long and filling the house with snugly and delicious warmth and smells. Hotpot is nearly the same atmosphere, but in a restaurant filled with hundreds of other people. In Julia's mind though, it was a good choice for the familiar faces who, as she knew, loved it, and for the new faces who want to see something really different. Moreover, she knew for sure that there'd be a free table for the eight or nine people she was expecting.

While Julia's Thursday dinners were open to all who wanted to attend, she did usually hope for at least a few new faces at each one, so that her friends all had the chance to do a little networking in China - the land that decided to "forget" about Facebook. Tonight was a good haul, with a total of two new faces to bring to the group. Sherry and Todd were both fellow Americans, and both quite new to China. Sherry had come to work as a

science teacher in Julia's international school, and Todd worked at the American embassy in their visa section. It had been a long summer of goodbye parties for Julia, and she was always happy to see new people arriving in the Jing.

New faces meant the expat life cycle would start over. The summer was typically a time many chose to take their leave, either to move on to new cities in China, to go back to their hometowns, or to move on to a whole new country altogether. The expat community in the Jing, as with other global expat communities, was a transient and temporary one. There were very few who truly made the city their permanent home.

Certain expats, like Julia, could always be relied upon to be remain in the Jing, and as they often joked, the day these veterans have their own leaving parties will be the same day Satan is dancing on ice. These were the career expats, like Andy, Paul and Mark - all replying with a big fat "yes" to Julia's hotpot invitation. There were others who were somewhere in the middle - the temporarily permanent expats, like Nigel and Marie, who every year since they'd been together had talked about the possibility of moving away, but had never made solid plans to do so yet. For Julia, Sherry was hard to place in a group, since school teachers often just suddenly decide to leave at the end of the school year, but sometimes end up staying on and on, like Andy's roommate, Carolina. Todd however was easy to place; he is a fixed-term expat, with a definite shelf life in the Jing that is determined by his place of work. Embassy shelf life is anywhere between 2 and 4 years, depending on what they do.

And so the working Thursday dragged on, and all the working expats of the Jing started to feel those pains of nearing the end of the day, and being close to the weekend, but knowing that they do have to come back in for one more day of work on Friday before the fun can begin. It had been quite a long one for Julia, with three separate tours of the school for prospective students and their doting parents, as well as her lunch break being shortened (and afternoon lengthened) by a ridiculous staff meeting where they discussed "putting words into action," the irony of which was not lost on her. The last half an hour was absolutely the worst part of the day. Julia constantly tried to busy herself with things, but when she looked back at the clock only a minute or two had passed.

Finally quitting time came and a jubilant Julia left the office to go home and get ready for the expat event of the week. Since most of the cast of tonight's show were regulars at the dinner, Julia knew exactly how it would all play out. Andy would definitely get there first, for two reasons. First, he's a stickler for time and always accidentally sets off too early, thus arriving before anyone else. Second, despite being gay, in many people's eyes he's the worst example of a gay man in history, and doesn't take any time to pick out nice clothes; doesn't fiddle with his hair; and definitely doesn't check himself in any mirrors before leaving the apartment. After Andy, Julia would arrive, closely followed by Nigel and Marie, who are annoyingly happy in their marriage and would no-doubt walk to the restaurant hand in hand. The newcomers would arrive next, after having a brief phone conversation with Julia so they could find the restaurant on Ghost Street (which is jam-packed with restaurants, and unless you read

Chinese, it's hard to distinguish between them). Bringing up the rear would be Paul and Mark who would arrive when the food was already served up and cooking away in the pot, and would follow their arrival with a bitter-sounding exchange of blame as to why they arrived late again.

Arriving home at about 5.40pm, Julia took enormous glee in changing into more casual attire. The lack of dress etiquette for Chinese restaurants and bars was something she, and many expats, found very useful when it came to getting ready to go out somewhere. If she didn't feel like getting glammed up, then she wouldn't ever have to ... unless she was attending an embassy ball or something, but then that's a night that everyone feels like getting glamorous for. After a refreshing shower, a change, and a quick 40-minute look on Facebook and Twitter via the VPN, she was ready to go.

The restaurant wasn't far from where Julia lived, so she went on foot. The horrendous summer heat of the Jing had lifted, and a pleasant September and more autumn-like weather had started to set in. Ghost Street was a busy road, especially in the evening when throngs of people from all over the city started arriving by taxi and pedicab, eager to find something delicious to eat. Walking down the street could sometimes feel like running the gauntlet, as there were usually an army of barkers there, shouting out at passers by to come in and try their specials:

"We have Beijing specials! We have Sichuan specials! Spicy, non-spicy we have it all! Come on in!"

Of course it was never really in English, unless they saw a white tourist and his family and then they start saying, "Hallo! Hallo! Come in please! Come in please! Okay!" Fortunately for Julia, her parents were born in Guangdong, so she does at least look Chinese. This meant she was bothered a little less by the barkers and the pushy street vendors. Many locals, though, did have considerable trouble grasping the concept that Julia was actually American. They would take one look and deny all the other evidence, "She's Chinese!" they'd say.

The neon signs and red lanterns of Ghost Street formed a bizarre tapestry of old and new; an interesting reflection of how China has been developing. They readily embrace new things like the colourful, brightly lit signs; a new mobile phone; a German car. But, on the flip side, they also stick with traditions like lanterns, and placing Buddha statues in their restaurants, offering them fruit in return for prosperity and success in their enterprise. Julia always found it so fascinating that China was like this, and especially in Beijing. It was probably one of the biggest pull factors that kept her there in the first place. It was the country that had said yes to American fast food, but had by no means surrendered to it.

As she approached the restaurant, sure enough, there was Andy, tapping his foot in apparent impatience as he clocked Julia's approach. She smiled knowingly, bracing herself for the imminent "insult" that Andy would no doubt launch at her.

"And what sort of time do you call this, woman? You're clearly 28 seconds late, and I have been waiting here now for ... five minutes and 28

seconds. It's no wonder I hate women. Too busy picking out your shoes, or putting your hair in curlers, or whatever it is women do when they're wasting everyone's time"

"Hello to you too, Andy. I'm sorry you were waiting, but why didn't you just go inside? The table is booked under 'Zhao' as usual"

"Go in? By myself? Aren't you the captain of the expat mafia, Julia? You know full well that no sane diner would go into a hotpot restaurant by themselves! It's not the done thing! Hotpot is a social gathering, you're supposed to arrive with your mates! We have a table for eight or nine booked don't we? I'm gonna look a right twat sat there by myself, people looking over at me going 'that foreigner over there looks a bit of a weirdo doesn't he?' Never gonna happen"

"Andy, you go to eat hotpot by yourself all the time at Xia Xia. Anyway, I thought you didn't care what people think of you. That's what you always say, at least."

"First, Xia Xia is not a typical hotpot restaurant, it's a businessy lunchy sort of place where you sit at the bar and have your own individual pot. It's the exception to the hotpot rule. And second, yes, maybe I draw the line at sitting alone in a big hotpot restaurant when it comes to not caring what people think of me."

"Amazing. You wouldn't draw the line at, say, wearing a hoodie and sweatpants to dinner in a nice restaurant?" retorted Julia.



"This is *China*, Julia, and you've been here almost as long as I have. We both know there's essentially no such thing as a dress code in this country. So tell me, expat queen of the Jing, who else is joining us tonight?"

"It's mostly the usual suspects, but also a new teacher from my school, Sherry, and Theresa's replacement at the US embassy, Todd. You met him at Theresa's leaving party ... but I'm not sure if you'll remember so clearly."

"Of course I bloody remember! God, I wasn't that drunk ... was I? Well I do remember the whole night in fact. I must have just been a little excited about something" replied Andy, trying to sound genuine but nervously realising that Julia was right, and that he had forgotten most of what happened. He silently hoped that Todd might reveal a few details of the night that might help him keep up his charade of knowing everything he did.

The two of them made their way inside and got to their table. As usual, there was a chorus shouting welcome, "Huanying Guanglin!" they would say at the top of their voices. It's something they're required to do when customers are arriving. The workers in the convenience stores do it too, most of the time. As Julia had predicted, Chongqing hotpot was indeed not the most popular thing on the Beijing menu that night. Only about half the tables were full, but as usual with Chinese restaurants in China, there was a good, jovial atmosphere ringing through the place, and there was an army of servers ready to get to work. The two sat down,

ordered some beers and perused the menus as they waited for the others to arrive.

The restaurant was fairly typical for establishments on Ghost Street, with the heavy wooden furniture and ornate traditional-looking Chinese decoration. The walls were adorned with scroll-style paintings of tigers, mountain tops and temples, and the army of servers were dressed in ancient silky Chinese finery; their young faces beaming a warm welcome to their international guests. It's a fairly typical feature of a Chinese restaurant for there to be nearly as many servers and other staff as there are diners, and all looking like they're fresh out of high school. The girls are often from the rural parts of China, sometimes from around Beijing and other times from as far afield as Sichuan or Hunan; their faces reddened and hands swollen by the effects of the elements as they've no doubt worked outside for much of their young lives. The boys often sport wispy teenager mustaches that look like a feeble caterpillar has crawled onto their upper lip and died. But, their youth and inexperience aside, the career expats like Julia and Andy were absolutely aware of their tough lives, and knew that it was likely they were here in Beijing making money to send home to their poor families and aging parents, and so the two of them always found it very hard to be abrupt, brusque or rude with them, as they often saw more wealthy locals and expats doing. As one of the young servers brought the beer, the man at the next table was barking orders at them, demanding to know why his bullfrog dish hadn't been brought yet.

"So rude!" Julia always said. Andy was often taken aback by the way

every time Julia said it, it was as if she was hearing it for the first time, whereas she had heard such abuse being hurled at servers many dozen times prior to this Thursday night.

"I suppose Monkey and Paul are running late ... as usual. Another domestic dispute or something; Paul forgetting to iron Monkey's socks or some other such nonsense," said Andy.

"Or the wine wasn't chilled to the right temperature

Julia started looking over Andy's shoulder and waved, to which Andy turned round to see Nigel and Marie walking in, hand in hand.

"Hey guys!" said Nigel cheerfully. "Good choice of restaurant Jules! I've passed this one several times but never been in!"

"Hand in hand? Must you heterosexuals always be publicly displaying your vulgar love for each other? It's bad enough you mix genders like you're throwing together some strange sexual salad, without reminding those of us who keep things pure and simple gender-wise that you are together," Andy remarked.

"Oh! Hello to you too, Andy. It's nice to see you on form ... and alone as usual," quipped Marie, prompting a knowing smile from Andy who knew he'd get as good as he gave. "I saw one of the hotpots over there and it looked like it was just *a//* chili!" said Marie looking a little nervous.

"You can handle spicy food, can't you?" asked Andy, looking a little

puzzled. "When we were roommates you used to pour Sriracha over absolutely everything."

"Well, it's not me I'm worried about," she replied, looking over at Nigel. Julia and Andy looked as though they were starting to get the message, but Nigel decided, in his usual style, to really hammer it home.

"I believe my lovely wife is worried that after eating this wonderfully spicy repast, I might be prone to a few gassy expulsions during the night."

"Gassy expulsions?" said Marie sounding a little annoyed, "we are talking about farts that border on chemical warfare in our apartment. If the UN smelt one of them, you'd be facing charges for crimes against humanity."

Nigel couldn't quite contain himself at that, and let out his biggest, loudest laugh, which turned a few heads in the restaurant.

"Wow, Nigel" said Andy. "You've somehow been so loud, that even customers in a Chinese restaurant in Beijing are turning heads to look. I do believe that's a world first!"

"Because what? You're as quiet as a church mouse, Andy?" retorted Julia. "Last year when you came to the 4th of July party, you sang the American anthem so loud in the street while waving *my* flag around, you had people looking out of windows thinking there was a US invasion on!"

"The *American* anthem? You're such a traitor, Andy. What kind of self-

respecting Englishman would be singing the American anthem and waving the star spangled handkerchief around?" asked Nigel.

"I wanted to join in the celebration of the colonial children leaving home and making it all on their own!" answered Andy, taking up his beer glass and downing all the contents. "Come on everyone, let's have a quick beer toast just the four of us before everyone else gets here."

With that, the four of them took up their beer glasses and topped them up to do a quick "here's to Thursday" cheers. To people unfamiliar with beer drinking in China, the idea of filling up a whole glass and downing it in one might seem a bit daunting, especially for a Thursday night where everyone has to get up early in the morning. Beer glasses in China though are usually somewhere between a shot glass and a whisky tumbler in size, and therefore downing a whole one is no worse than drinking about two or three fingers' worth out of a big bottle.

"I know I probably shouldn't start too early, but I just have a feeling that tonight is going to be one of those nights, where we all plan to have dinner and then go home, but we all end up in Sanlitun drinking cocktails until the wee hours of the morning" said Andy.

The whole group winced at the idea, and denied that such a thing was possible for any of them. Perhaps after getting a glass or two ahead of the others, Andy was already starting to feel the worry of an early morning the next day slipping away, as he allowed himself to slip into fun mode. Julia's phone suddenly started ringing and she answered to find it

was Sherry wandering somewhere on Ghost Street looking in vain for the right set of neon signs and lanterns to guide her into the restaurant. Julia got up and left the table to go and find her outside, leaving the others to catch up on their day.

"Good day teaching, Marie? How were the little shit bags today?"  
asked Andy

"Aww, no! My students are so darling! It's only when they get to the higher grades that they become really horrible. At grades 3 and 4 they're so cute!"

"I used to hate teaching younger kids. I never know what to say to them. It's hard for me to know if they just shouldn't know about some stuff yet because they're young and haven't been taught it, or if they're just plain thick."

Nigel guffawed at the idea, mimicking what it might be like for Andy to be teaching kids that young. "What? You mean you're in grade 3 and don't even know what parliamentary democracy is? Or even the Pax Britannica? How ridiculous! You're all thick as pig shit!"

Andy continued the parody. "Exactly! 'Oh you children! What a grand pooling of ignorance we have here in the classroom!' I wouldn't even know where to start educating the little blighters."

Julia walked back in the restaurant leading both Sherry and Todd to the table.

"It was such good timing. Todd was just coming down the street from the opposite direction at the same time as Sherry!"

She then made all the introductions, as was done with new arrivals.

"Sherry and Todd, this is most of my Beijing inner circle. Here we have Andy from the UK, Marie from Michigan and her husband Nigel also from the UK. There are two more joining us soon too, but they're usually late."

Introductions were followed by pleasantries, which in China always included things like "how long have you been here?" and "how are you finding it so far?" The answers are normally that they're finding it really fascinating, but are having problems with pollution and traffic. Little do the new expats know that this pattern will essentially be repeated throughout their whole time in China, whether it ends up being just a couple of months, or a couple of decades.

"Yeah we can probably go ahead and just start ordering, even without Monkey and Paul. If we wait, they'll only start a little domestic row when they get here about what they want to order.

"Sorry, these two guys coming, they're a couple?" asked Todd

"No ... not exactly..." said Andy, not entirely sure how to continue with the rest of the explanation. Nigel jumped in and tried to explain.

"They're what we like to call 'heterosexual life partners'. They're not

gay, but they do everything together except sexual stuff, and whenever you hear either of them use the pronoun 'we', it's bound to mean the two of them, as opposed to an actual girlfriend or significant other."

"I ... see," said Todd, still rather confused as to the relationship between these two guys.

"Monkey just needs a load of simple things," said Andy. "So, four plates of meat and some potato slices should do him, I think. And let's get a plate of the Chinese radish as well, that's fantastic in hotpot."

"But Paul has more complex tastes, as we both know," Nigel added. "We'll probably need to order some chickens' feet, earwig bladders and mosquito sweat for him," he joked.

"Not exotic enough for him. Don't forget that he's frequented the penis restaurant on no less than three occasions in the past six months," said Julia

"No less than you've been there, eh Julia?" Andy asked.

"Julia and Paul both just love to put those penises in their mouths," Nigel jested.

Sherry had to interject at this point. "The *what* restaurant? Penis?" she said in disbelief. Todd's jaw had also dropped upon hearing about this place.



Julia explained to them, "Yeah, it's a restaurant that specialises in cooking dishes made with ... various penises. I guess it stems from the traditional Chinese belief that the part of the body you eat is good for the corresponding body part on you. Eating eyes is good for your eyes; eating liver is good for your liver. You get the idea."

"So, what you're saying is that the restaurant is full of men with erectile dysfunction? Or genital warts?" asked Todd, prompting Nigel to burst out in loud laughter.

"I know this might sound strange coming from me, but can we try and steer the pre-dinner conversation away from plates of penis? Thank you," said Andy.

"It's just one of the many interesting restaurants I've taken groups to. It's something *different*, and that's the point of these events. That Thursday was the penis restaurant, the Thursday before that was the North Korean restaurant, and the Thursday before that was the toilet restaurant. They're off the beaten track; they're unique!"

"Oh my word, there's a 'toilet' restaurant?" asked Sherry.

"Yeah, there's a toilet theme to it. You sit on a toilet instead of a chair, and you eat the food out of plastic poo-shaped dishes..."

As Julia answered, she could see that she was visibly losing the newcomers on the idea, and it did sound rather unappetizing when described in detail.

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