

THE STARS OF HEAVEN

By Robert Watt

1ST TIME IN CHINA

Leo arrived in China on a freezing February lunchtime in 2012. He'd been picked up from the airport in Beijing and been driven three hours to his hotel in Tianjin. There had been just enough time to check-in and drop his bags before being whisked off to a welcome banquet. It was the start of a non-stop schedule of work: listening attentively to presentations in broken English, or delivering his own to mostly silent crowds of unpronounceable names. There had been lunches and evening meals of strange food and, on one occasion, a tedium of karaoke. His nights had been spent lying awake, exhausted by jet lag but his mind racing, trying to make some sense of the day's many difficulties. There was no time for himself, to relax and reset his overwhelmed senses. No chance to wallow in a bath, or binge on

movies and in-room pizza. Even his weekend had been planned out for him: a 9am start with the company administrator showing him the city.

VALENTINE IN TIANJIN

Leo was waiting in the marbled hotel reception togged up in layers of clothes; thick ski gloves and a hat, when a young girl, equally concealed inside a shin length quilted coat and boots, introduced herself.

"My English name is Stella." She had said to his relief in excellent English.

They spent the sub-zero Saturday visiting sites around the city. Keeping warm in the shops of Ancient Culture street, and the eccentric China House. In the late afternoon they took a tour in a horse and carriage around the foreign

quarters, sitting together beneath a thick blanket. Stella was very knowledgeable about the city and its colonial past. Leo had never heard of Tianjin before this trip and was embarrassed about his ignorance and surprised by their countries shared history. They stopped to eat in Italian street. He hadn't realised it was Valentine's day and the restaurants were full of courting couples. After the meal, they walked along the Hai he. The lamps along the bridges and the German styled embankment lit the frozen river. The night was clear, but only a slice of moon and the brightest stars weren't hidden by the glare of the city lights. It was a beautiful ending to an interesting day, the first where he had felt enough at ease to appreciate the country and be open to this rare experience.

The romantic tale of forbidden love is a familiar theme in both Chinese and Western cultures. We bring the two together in a modern retelling of this ancient myth.

In an offer of exchange in cultures he

invited her to eat at 'Chateau 35' during the week. He had seen this restaurant recommended online and had drooled over the French menu. She couldn't meet on Monday she'd told him, but Tuesday she was free. On Wednesday night they met again, this time to enjoy the seafood that Tianjin is famous for. Thursday was his last night before returning home and a farewell banquet had been organised. He sat with the department heads, project leaders and Stella, around a large circular table. The meal of never-ending dishes was accompanied by rounds of Baijiu and toasting. It ended suddenly at 8pm and Leo found he was sad to be leaving. His earlier feelings of being out of control and helpless were still there, but it no longer made him stressed or anxious. The language, the distance and the differences are large he thought, but bridges can be made.

Stella was given the task of making sure he got back to the hotel safely. In the taxi he told her he'd like to see the local night life and asked if she knew anywhere. She took him to Soho bar where they danced to a lively Filipino band. Later, as he got into a taxi to the hotel and they said goodbyes, he had looked at her face framed in the fur of her thick coat hood and wondered if he should kiss her. To leave with just a wave felt inadequate for all her company and how close he felt they'd become. He wished he'd bought her a gift.

2ND TIME IN CHINA

When he was back in the UK, he wrote to thank her again. Gradually, his e-mails became more frequent and soon he was spending the first hour of each morning writing to her and in the following morning there was always a reply. Their letters slowly became more personal and he found that when he wasn't writing to her, he was thinking of her; about the exotic time in Tianjin, her farewell face framed by fur, and what could have happened.

In August there was another business trip - just a week this time. Leo wrote and told Stella how he was going to add a week of holiday to his trip and visit Beijing. He asked if she could join him.

"Maybe I can," she had replied. They took the train to Beijing together on the Friday afternoon after work and Leo checked into a hotel. He wasn't sure if she was staying too or had her own plans, nothing had been said. They went to Hou Hai as the sun was setting over the lake and the red lanterns, hanging from the old buildings along the shore, were just turning on. The voice of a Beijing opera singer floated over the water and Cicadas screamed from the trees. They kissed for the first time.

"Do you love me?" She asked Leo realised that he did.

QIXI IN BEIJING

The rest of the week was spent visiting the famous tourist sites: Tiananmen square, the Great Wall at Badaling and the Forbidden city - a blissful few days together. On the Wednesday she told him it was Qixi festival. They went to eat at a Teppanyaki restaurant to celebrate. He took a bottle of Champaign and a little slice of cake with candles on for after the meal. When the other guests had gone, the staff withdrew to leave them alone turning down the lights. It was perfect.

Later, as they were leaving, Stella received a phone call. Leo could hear a man's voice on the other end.

"Who was that?" Leo asked when the call was finished. "Just a girlfriend," she replied. He knew it was a lie.

They returned to the hotel in silence. Leo's thoughts were grasping for reasons that might explain her fib, and a call so late at night. He couldn't understand why she would have tricked him, 6 months of lies woven like a net between the two perfect Valentines. A spell of the flawless dream had been created which the unexplained call had abruptly broken.

Back in the room they talked; she explained how her marriage had been arranged before they had met. How she didn't love this man, but had agreed to the wedding because of the pressure to marry. Her worry of her advancing years



and desire for a child. She said her father would lose face if she backed out. Leo argued that her father would understand, that she is still quite young and can wait a few years, that he would find a way for them to be together. She said she would discuss it with her father, but Leo knew there was no hope. That some unfathomable difference in their cultures divided their lives and that discussion, or blame, was pointless.

They had three more days together and continued as before; the phone call and the knowledge that it brought ignored as though it never happened. On the final day they went their separate homeward ways, any ending was left unspoken and their future left unmentioned. Their secret weeks of heaven was disconnected with their normal lives, kept pure, with the two perfect valentines' days shining like the brightest night-time stars they'd always share. At Qixi festival they recall that love together; that world preserved, unchanging and eternal in their minds. And for that day, it's like they've never been apart.

牛郎织女的爱情今天还能实现吗?

七夕节是中国传统节日，最初是一个祈禱姻缘的节日，并且被赋予了一个美丽的爱情传说。天上的仙女织女爱上了凡间的牛郎并嫁给了他，过上男耕女织的生活。织女的母亲大怒，把她抓回了天庭，用银河把牛郎和织女永远分隔两地，每年只有农历七月七这一天两人才可以喜鹊搭成的鹊桥上相聚一次。

不管在哪个年代，都会有很多人的爱情面临重重阻碍。在现代社会，牛郎和织女们也可以不畏距离，永远相爱下去吗？

