

Mark Salzman is remarkable. He began studying Chinese martial arts, calligraphy and ink painting when he was thirteen. He graduated from Yale in 1982 with a degree in Chinese language. From 1982 until 1984 he lived in China where he taught English at a medical college. In his book "Iron & Silk" he shares anecdotes of that time.

He recalls encounters with Chinese bureaucracy. In one, he inadvertently killed a rat during a lecture. His students suggested that he take the rat to the Rat Collection Office for the bounty. Salzman was denied his earnings because he was a foreigner and the Government's official statement concerning rats is that they were stamped out. Only Chinese internal documents discuss rats and offer bounties to Chinese nationals. If a reward was given to Salzman for killing a rat, an official of the State would have confirmed to a foreign resident that rats exist in China. For that the official might be "criticized." The friend who explained this to Salzman concedes that it was silly, but the comrade who made the decision would rather do something silly than something stupid.

Chinese bureaucracy, however, is only a backdrop to the richness of a deeper culture explored by Salzman. In China, nothing is inconsequential. There are layers of obligations to be kept in harmony and which dictate behaviour.

Salzman is officially in China to teach English, but he continues his study of martial arts and calligraphy. He recollects finding teachers, or teachers finding him. Moreover, his discussion of calligraphy, martial arts and his commitment to their study is exceptional. In the age of nuclear bombs and mass destruction, the practitioners of the martial arts acknowledge that their disciplines are of no applied value. However, they value their effort in units immeasurable with currency and they feel richer through their study.

In a moving account, Salzman tells of Teacher Wu. She and her husband earned degrees from American universities in the 1940s when China and the USA opposed Japan. They returned to China, but Wu's husband, like most Chinese intellectuals of middle-class background, came under attack in the late 1950s Anti-Rightist Campaign. He apologized to the State for his crimes against socialism. Then, to protect his family, he took his life. During the Cultural Revolution, Teacher Wu was denounced, humiliated and her son was "sent down" to the countryside for nearly a decade.

Teacher Wu brought a piano home from the USA, but it too had been attacked. Salzman was able to repair and tune the piano. The gratitude of Teacher Wu after a life of persecution and privation for Salzman's few hours of effort is elegantly exquisite.

Salzman shares a famous Chinese story of an old man and his horse. The story was used to console Salzman after he ran into an insoluble cultural wall. In the story, an old man's horse runs away. The old man's friends despair, but the old man says, "I'm not worried about it, you never know what happens." The horse returns leading a herd of wild horses and the old man's friends congratulate him on his good fortune. The old man's response is the same. Later, the old man's son becomes a cripple while training one of the wild horses. Friends console, but the old man once again says, "I'm not worried about it, you never know what happens." Later still, government troops pass through looking for healthy young men to recruit for a border campaign, but the old man's son is passed over because of his injuries.

Salzman's is an enjoyable and reflective book full of humour and insight.