

September 29, 2008

A Year of No Significance

Good morning, Father Li, Mr. Kung, teachers, and students.

Some of you may remember, two years ago, I brought with me a huge book on Da Vinci, which weighs about 23 lbs, and talked about the Renaissance man. Last year, on the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival, I started my sharing with a poem written by Su Dongpo, a Renaissance man of the Sung Dynasty, on a Mid-Autumn Festival night in 1076. On both occasions, I ended my talk with an appeal to you to visit the library more often and concluded by mentioning the benefit of cultivating a reading habit.

In the past couple of weeks, while I was preparing what I should share with you today, I noted that 1st of October was just around the corner. I thought, perhaps, I could start with something related to the National Day. But then, a question popped up in my mind. “Why is the 10th month of the year named October?” Most of us know that “octo” means “eight”, as in “octopus”, the marine creature with eight tentacles and, of course, the magic octopus card we all carry in our wallets.

So, I looked up the word in the dictionary. It confirms that the word October does mean the tenth month of the year in Latin. However, when I searched the internet and some books, I learnt, in fact, in the old Roman Calendar, the months of January to June are names of Greek mythologists, with July and August, named after two Roman emperors, and **September, October, November and December, the seventh to the tenth months of the year.**

What happened?

It was in the year 1582, when the Catholic Church held authority over many matters of the state, that Pope Gregory XIII made an order for the change to a new calendar, now called the Gregorian calendar. Don't worry, I will not go into the details about the differences between the two calendars. But I want to tell you one very interesting thing which happened in the year 1582. Now, pay close attention.

Today is 29 September, a Monday, right? And next Monday, it will be 6 October. Believe it or not, **there was no 6 October in 1582!** When the Pope decided to change to the new calendar, he “cut away” 10 days, i.e., the day following 4th October was not 5th but 15th. In other words, **the dates between 6th and 14th October did not exist in the year 1582.**

So, 1582 was quite a significant year to those countries adopting the Gregorian calendar, wasn't it? But, in China, I'm afraid, 1582 was rather insignificant. I deliberately use the word "insignificant" because I'm going to refer here to a book, written by a Chinese scholar (黃仁宇), with an interesting title: "1587, a Year of No Significance". The Chinese version was later translated and titled: 《萬曆十五年》. You may refer to the notice board outside the library about this book.

《萬曆十五年》 is a book about the history of the year 1587 in Ming Dynasty. The many stories and events are described as "insignificant". But, it gives some very interesting insights on how the events in this period profoundly influenced the fate of Ming Dynasty and the history of China thereafter.

The Pope in Europe and the Ming Emperor in China were two different people living far apart during their time. But, **the two shared a passion for learning.** Pope Gregory put a strong emphasis on education and scholarly pursuit. Emperor Wanli was known to be eager for new knowledge. The two, of course, never met. But there was a link between them. **And, the link began in the year 1582, involving a priest who would celebrate his 30th birthday on 6th October, 1582, as you may recall, a date that did not exist!**

The man was Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇). In the spring of 1582, Matteo Ricci received an order to go to China. After spending a few years in Macao and Zhaoxing, the Italian priest could speak, read and write Chinese in the classic style (文言文). He was probably the most famous, respected westerner among scholars in China. Not only was he the first westerner to be given free access to the Forbidden City, he was also a mathematician and astronomer in the Imperial Court of Wanli. His many translation works on sciences and cultures were much treasured by the scholars and officials in China. He played an active role in China's long history of interaction and dialogue with the modern western world.

We will celebrate the National Day soon. Yesterday, we celebrated the success of Shenzhou VII (神舟七號). Last month, we also celebrated the success of the Beijing Olympics. We are proud of the 51 gold medals won. Yet are we not proud of the successful organization of the Olympics that represents the desire and efforts of China to be **"on the same track with the modern world"?** (與世界接軌). I heard from someone about a TV programme interviewing foreign visitors in Beijing during the Olympics. When asked what was the sight-seeing in Beijing which he found most memorable, the answer from an Italian was: the grave of Matteo Ricci. **I was surprised and somehow touched.**

This morning I have wandered from a question on the word “October”, to a year with 10 missing days, to a priest who came to China and was buried in Beijing. What have these got to do with reading? You are right. There are of no significance to the theme of the promotion of reading. **“Curiosity is the power behind all learning.”** My hope is what I have said this morning **may trigger your interest to dig out answers to common-day but over-looked questions, to unearth some interesting but invisible links between persons and between places.** Then, you’ll begin to visit the library more often, and hopefully, you’ll start the habit of reading. I’m confident that you’ll have great fun indulging in this wonderfully rewarding habit. Me? I certainly do.

All of you have an Octopus card, haven’t you? I hope the card will help remind you what I have said this morning. Thank you.

Chiu, Lai Wan
Teacher-Librarian

《萬曆十五年》/黃仁宇著

“1587, a Year of No Significance: the Ming Dynasty in Decline”/Ray Huang

「很少有人這樣觀察歷史，更少有人這樣寫作歷史。」

作者黃仁宇窮盡三十年心血，出入典籍，宏觀細究，以超然獨到的眼光，俯瞰古老的中國，將中國的糾結、迷惘與困惑，纖毫畢現的開展在讀者眼前。

《萬曆十五年》英文版在 1979 年由耶魯大學出版社出版，被美國許多大學採用為教科書，另有法文、德文、日文等版本。在台灣發行至今已多達二十餘版，是黃仁宇著作中最暢銷的一本。」（汐止：台灣食草出版）