

disco: myth or mirth?

I was very lucky to have Sasha as a companion. He had studied Chinese for five years with the purpose of eventually researching and excavating an ancient Chinese city built in Russian territory. Because of his interest in history, he spent a lot of time in the University library researching Harbin's history.

Harbin was mostly built by White Russians who had fled from the Reds after the revolution. They took refuge in Harbin and issued their own money called occupation roubles, believing communist Russia was just a temporary situation. In the meantime, they built a European city on the banks of the Songhua river which



could easily be mistaken for a city on the Volga. During the Russian-Japanese war, the White Russians supported the Japanese. After the Japanese lost to the Chinese communists, the Whites emigrated en masse. Now there are only about 50 still living in Harbin. Many of them took Chinese spouses, and thus it is not uncommon to see a blonde Chinese.

Sasha told me that according to the official documents, there were no Jewish among the White Russians. Then he led me down a street lined with old dilapidated houses, each proudly bearing a star of David above their doorways. At the end of the street was a beautiful synagogue. The synagogue contrasted sharply with the houses in that the synagogue was freshly whitewashed and in beautiful condition. We went inside the synagogue and discovered it had been turned into a middle school for the Korean minorities. Two doors down from the synagogue was evidence of the constant flux of geopolitics: a tall minaret attached to a very Arabian looking building — a Mosque. When the Jewish Russians fled they took their religion with them; however, the Moslems brought their religion to China a thousand

years ago and today there are still many Chinese Moslems. The streets are full of restaurants displaying blue lanterns outside their doorways. The blue lanterns signify that the restaurant is Moslem and doesn't serve pork. Harbin has two Mosques; one still functions, but the other is now a dwelling.

The Chinese students of English were very friendly and extremely helpful. They would often visit our building and invite us to movies or for walks, or for meals in their dormitory. We helped coach their English and they corrected our Chinese. Sometimes we would look over their English assignments. One week their professor assigned them the topic of comparing Chinese life to Canadian life. One of the students' papers was a very popular read amongst the Canadians. In the paper she concluded: the Chinese love children but are only permitted to have one; however,



Canadians think children are too much trouble and would rather have cats or dogs. She also believed it was a common Canadian custom for women to work and pay to send their husbands to University. We can laugh at her ideas and wonder how she came to believe such things, but I wonder how many of the ideas about Chinese society which we Canadian students believe would cause her to laugh.

The climate of Harbin in May leaves much to be desired. The cold dampness caused almost everybody to spend at least a week in sickbed. Two of the students were so ill they were escorted to the

Harbin University of Medicine's hospital. They were amazed at the litter in the hallways, and at the filth on the doctor's apron; but they were especially horrified to have the doctor use the same tongue depressor that he had used on everyone in the line ahead of them. When the second student saw the tongue depressor coming at him he vigorously objected and the doctor conceded. So instead of the wooden tongue depressor, the doctor used a small dental instrument. He sterilized it over a small flame, then he wiped the soot from it with a dirty rag and thrust it into the student's mouth before a protest could be mounted.

My roommate was unusually unlucky; he was bedridden for most of the time we were in Harbin. First, he contracted the "God let me die" flu. Then, he caught just an ordinary cold. Seemingly moments after having recovered from the cold, he developed severe diarrhea. And the extended bout of diarrhea caused him to have very painful hemorrhoids. After consulting a Chinese doctor who very enthusiastically recommended surgery, my roommate decided not to have surgery and to bear the pain until he could return to Canada. The Chinese doctor very graciously gave him a prescription of bear bile to help him.

The only student in our group who didn't develop illness was a guy who sat up playing his guitar until the wee hours of the morning, drinking copious amounts of Chinese beer, Scotch whiskey, and chain smoking unfiltered Chinese cigarettes. Every morning, as we dragged ourselves out of bed and stumbled down the hall to the dining room, he'd be sitting at the breakfast table greeting us with a smug smile. Alcohol seemed to be much more effective than traditional Chinese herbal medicine.

My illness was a bad case of laryngitis which lasted a week and was a nightmare of a handicap to develop during an immersion language course. Chinese friends showed touching displays of sincere concern and brought large amounts of herbal medicine to my bedside. The professor translated the directions for me and so I choked back huge amounts of pills washed down with ginger tea. Perhaps herbal medicine requires belief in order to be effective — in short, next time I go to China I'll bring antibiotics. Yes, there will definitely be a next time.

Feature and photos by Gerald Kearney

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