

# air blooms

ure by  
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should take at least one Chinese history course; otherwise, they will soon feel as disenchanted and bored as I was during the countless historical tours we went on. Also, little things that escaped my understanding last time I now understand. Such as the time we ate dinner at an old mansion, and our tour guide gave a sly glance to a Taiwanese lady in our group and then commented that this was the house where Madam Soong had slept around on her husband while her husband was fighting the communists. Our professors seemed completely unperturbed by the remark; however, the Taiwanese lady was upset and whispered to me loud enough for the guide to hear, "That's a lie."

My extra year of studying Chinese characters will also allow me to see much more this time than last time. For example, in the street markets it is common to see people dressed as doctors with an assortment of unsterilized pins, needles, and rusty scalpels, drawing blood from people and then using these blood samples in a series of seemingly scientific tests. On one occasion these tests included staring at the blood through a battered microscope that was missing three of its lenses. In Harbin, a Chinese friend explained that they were testing blood types. But now I can read their advertisements and, by looking at my snapshots, I know that these medics were not only claiming to be able to tell blood type, but apparently could also determine personality and, for a fee, would examine your blood to know if you and your mate were compatible.

This year I believe my two grand will be best spent going to China. My increased knowledge of Chinese history, the improvement of my language skills, and most importantly, the patience to learn tolerance for things alien to me — which is something I only just acquired last trip — will go a long way to making this trip even more successful, and memorable than the last trip.

The attraction China holds over me isn't with its temples, each almost the same as the last. It is with the people. Chinese people must be the happiest people on earth. Walking down a Chinese street you can feel the bustle, the energy of the people all around you; as you turn down every street there is a new surprise waiting. I remember a young girl standing beside an old man who was kneeling and turning something on a charcoal rotisserie. I paused, wondering why the little girl was laughing and why her hands were clasped firmly over her ears. Suddenly a loud explosion roared through the street and I instinctively ducked my head trying to avoid the unknown danger. Children came running at me from all directions to eat the puffed rice from the old man's primitive pressure cooker.

One day, riding my bicycle, and not paying attention, I nearly collided with a man who had three live chickens suspended from his bicycle handlebar. Angrily looking over his shoulder, the man noticed my clothing, and guessing correctly at which language he should use, he shouted, "asshole."

An old man sitting alone in a park playing a Chinese violin was quite memorable. He saw me and immediately started playing an Irish jig, quickly followed by American country and western, and concluded with some Russian folk.



I recall the young entrepreneur who furtively sidled up beside me on a busy street. He had a small satchel wedged firmly under his arm. From my limited vocabulary and his pantomime I gathered he wanted to sell me what was in the bag, but he refused to show me what was inside. He stood before me frantically hopping up and down, whispering, "lu lu lu lu," with his hands on either side of his head, two fingers on each hand fully extended and waving at me. Ah, I thought, he wants to sell me opium. Finally, he exasperatedly unzipped his satchel and practically shoved a small deer antler up my big nose.

Wandering the night markets is magic. The storefronts are dark and unlit and the complete lack of streetlights permits the stars to shine overhead. While the flickering oil lamps of the street vendors are dim enough to obscure your identity as a foreigner, you can mingle with the locals almost unnoticed. The street market has a carnival atmosphere: people are laughing, noisy, and boisterous. Long tables covered with plates of food and bottles of beer line each side of the alley. As you walk by, stout, matronly women urge you to sit and partake of the feast. Old ladies sit crouched over steaming black kettles stirring the pot and trying to yell above the din, "Who will

buy my tea eggs?" Hot spiced barbecued shishkabobs are available for two thirds of a Canadian cent each. I lived on these. After 9 p.m. the crowd disappears; the hawkers pack their wares and return home.

By 9:30 p.m. the streets are deserted and I make my way to the International Hotel where there are always lots of foreign businessmen who are willing to buy you beer if you'll sit quietly and listen to them complain about the "damn Chinese." Their companies have exiled them from their wives and children for up to three months at a time. They are in a place where hot showers are not guaranteed, electricity is sometimes unreliable, a machine part might take two months to arrive and the diversion of local female companionship is denied them by the hotel doorkeepers. People either love or hate China; but businessmen invariably hate it.

This is my second trip to China. I know I'm falling in love with the country, and I know now, just as I knew the last time I wrote about China for *The Gateway*, that this won't be my last trip. I'm willing to sacrifice my morning hot shower, reliable telephones, electricity and modern toilets, and even choke down the occasional meal of eggplant in order to have a career in Asia where every day will be different than the last and full of adventure.



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