

Asian love affair



Last year we arrived in Harbin in May. May in Harbin is cold, damp and wet and everybody developed "God let me die" cold flu. You ever wonder why Flu epidemics always have Chinese names? Catch the Sichuan Flu in Sichuan or the Hong Kong Flu in Hong Kong and you'll appreciate the fact that the virus loses strength on the journey to Canada. This Harbin flu shortened our tempers considerably and at the point of lowest morale, the seven women in our group had to share one washroom with five guys. This doesn't seem like much of a hardship, but when 12 people compete for a three hour daily ration of hot water, the transmutation of warm, educated, civilized humans into snapping, rabid animals is truly amazing.

...not everybody had mastered the technique of squatting on a moving train.

On May 3rd of this year, 21 students from University of Alberta and two students from University of Calgary will go to Harbin, Heilongjiang province of China, to participate in an oral immersion course for students of the Chinese language. The government of Alberta and the University club APOS (Asian-Pacific Opportunities Society) will help fund the cost of the trip.

I was lucky to have been chosen to go last year and this year, because I'm a Chinese major. I will be going again. I was surprised to be allowed to go again; last year I was far from being an exemplary student. I was known for skipping afternoon classes, not returning for my nightly meal of cold eggplant smothered in congealed gravy, and finally, late at night after the front gates of the compound were locked, creeping through the window. Not to mention the three huge strings of fire-crackers I lit on our day of departure. However, the director of foreign students has written me four times over the last year so I must have been doing something right.

After six weeks of study/sickness/misery we went on a two week cultural tour. Everybody was extremely worn down from the Harbin ordeal and we all quickly overdosed on tourist attractions, and a daily diet of banquet food. I feel especially guilty complaining about the banquet food; after eggplant, rice gruel, grey potatoes and lots of congealed gravy, this food was heaven sent. However, to illustrate my point, imagine your favorite food; now imagine eating it every night for two weeks straight. Get the idea?

Even the temples and ancient buildings that inspire awe when first seen quickly become passe. China seems to have such an overabundance of these sites that the tourist soon becomes jaded. The temples usually have

red wooden pillars, green or grey tile roofs, lots of gold leaf, and a deviously designed door step that is build purportedly to discourage evil spirits from entering, but nowadays just trips up clumsy foreigners. Each temple has huge doors that must weigh half a ton but can be swung open and shut with just two fingers. Anyone who has tried to force open the front doors of the Old Arts building can appreciate the usefulness of this ancient technology. To make these temples and historical sites even less appealing are the plagues of tourist merchants selling T-Shirts, Mao caps, opium pipes, ivory — both plastic and real, and the skin of every endangered species imaginable (except Panda — I couldn't find Panda skin no matter how hard I looked).

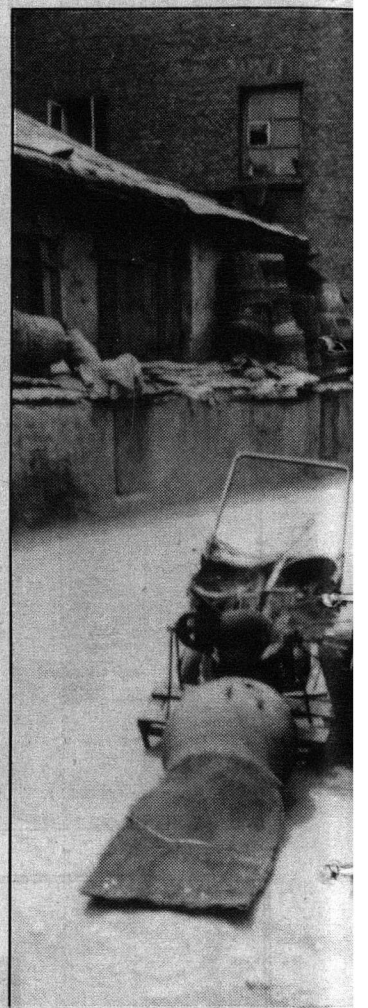
The most unnerving thing about being in China for a white Canadian is the experience of being, perhaps for the first time in life, a racial minority. Slowly, subconscious apprehension becomes full realization: if a pogrom of foreigners ever happened, such as the boxer rebellion or the recent riots against the black African students in Nanjing, there is no place to hide. This feeling is strengthened by Chinese people who unblinkingly stare at you, no matter where you go. In the non-tourist areas where our group had the chance to visit we were often surrounded by hundreds of inquisitive onlookers. Some of the country people had obviously never seen white people before and they were enthralled by our differences. Public washrooms were usually just rotting boards suspended above a huge sewage pit of unknown depth. I stood on the boards and feeling them sag slightly under my weight, attempted to urinate while men unabashedly crowded around me trying to get a glimpse in order to satisfy their curiosity.

In comparison, washrooms on trains were relatively modern; however, to use one of these "squatters" required skill and by the end of a train journey there was usually, left on the floor, an accumulation of evidence showing that not everybody had mastered the technique of squatting on a moving train.

Anyone who has successfully travelled alone through China and not been able to speak the language is, in my opinion, brave and lucky. Our group was led by two Canadian professors whose native language was Mandarin Chinese, but their fluency didn't prevent us from waiting long hours at train stations or having our travel plans completely disrupted. Once we rode a train for five hours to make an airline connection. We had the tickets booked June 25, at 7 p.m. The flight was confirmed. But when we finally arrived, we discovered the airport had been closed since April. Even the runway had been dug up; so, we had to wait for the next train to take us out of there.

After reading this litany of complaints you must wonder why I would want to go again. After all the trip will set me back two grand plus, and that would get me to Hawaii, Acapulco, Europe, or... or other places I'd rather not even think about.

Actually, last time I went I had only studied Chinese language; this time I'm armed with a couple of Chinese history courses under my belt. I think anyone who is planning to participate in this exchange



Feature
Gerald



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