

PANAGIOTA P. LAMPRI



ON THE ROADS OF CHINA

To all
who carry within their soul
something of the spirit
of Odysseus

SERIES OF ELECTRONIC PUBLICATIONS
HELLENIC – CYPRIOT CULTURAL ASSOCIATION



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Critical Approach to the Work

«On the Roads of China»

by Panagiota P. Lampri

The travel narrative «On the Roads of China» by Panagiota P. Lampri is a rare example of literary storytelling that transcends the simple description of a journey. With language that is rich, sensuous, and vividly imaginative, the author succeeds in transforming the traveler's experience into an aesthetic encounter for the reader. Her prose is at once poetic and contemplative, weaving together lived experience and history, cultural observation and philosophical inquiry, everyday imagery and myth, as well as the universal legacy of civilization.

Lampri's writing stands out for its meticulous detail, authenticity, and harmonious flow. This is not a mere travelogue but a literary offering of the soul, where the reader "travels" not only through space but also through time—into memories, references to antiquity, philosophy, religion, and the wealth of diverse cultures.

The translation of this work into English carries particular significance. It is not merely a matter of linguistic transfer to bring the book closer to an international audience; it calls for a literary translation capable of preserving the aesthetic and intellectual richness of the text. Within this context, the Hellenic—Cypriot Cultural Association assumes the role of a cultural bridge: bringing Greek creativity to the English-speaking world, strengthening the outward reach of Greek literature, and contributing to the preservation of a global cultural dialogue.

The decision to release the book as a free eBook, in line with the Association's strategy, offers equal access to knowledge and high-quality entertainment. The Asso-

ciation's eBooks have already demonstrated their power: reaching every corner of Greece, Cyprus, and the diaspora, as well as libraries, schools, cultural centers, and universities. They are instruments of readership promotion, breaking the barriers of distance and cost, and enabling everyone to encounter fine literature and engage with the aesthetic and ethical values of writing.

Thus, Panagiota P. Lampri's *On the Roads of China* becomes part of a larger chain of cultural contribution:

- From personal experience and literary expression.
- To literary translation and international networking.
- To unrestricted access through the Association's eBook editions.

It stands as a valuable contribution to the love of reading, intercultural communication, and the aesthetic cultivation of the reader. Through her work, the author—and through its strategic vision, the Hellenic-Cypriot Cultural Association—join forces in a shared mission: to serve literature as both an art form and a vehicle for cultivation, peace, and meaningful communication among peoples.

Sissy Osia Sigioultzi

President, Hellenic-Cypriot Cultural Associatio

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The Journey

My first encounter with China belongs to a distant past—those years when, still a schoolgirl, I immersed myself with eager delight in the study of Geography. That subject enchanted me, for it opened a gateway to places near and far, allowing me to shape them in the images of my mind and consciousness and to dream of journeys. Countless journeys! As many, indeed, as the lands I was learning about.

At the time, of course, I did not yet grasp what travel truly offers. Yet even the simple experience of moving from one hamlet to another in our village—or, at most, as far as Arta when necessity required it—gave me, on a smaller scale, a measure of its worth. I was captivated, drawn to new places, to people, customs, tastes, and to everything that could touch my mind and stir my soul.

And the fewer impressions my small world could provide, the more unbridled my imagination became, taking as its starting point the pages of books, the lessons in our schoolrooms, and my father's stories. Sometimes those stories hovered on the edge of fairy tale, sometimes on that of quiet instruction—though never delivered as mere instruction.

They came in a tone of intimacy that holds the power to teach even the difficult things while awakening the senses and the fancy so vividly that one travels in spirit to faraway places and dreams of real journeys that might, someday, enter the realm of reality.

A reality that, even if it reduces the scale and dims the glamour of dreams, nonetheless offers full satisfaction through the lived experience that transmutes them and makes them part of life—part of a true, earthly happiness.

It was for such a real journey to China that we set out, when—like water rushing irresistibly into a sinking ship—a flood of beautiful, imaginary travel-memories surged upon me and swept me away. It was as if their very being longed to affirm, by their presence, that their birth had not been in vain. And perhaps it was not entirely so, for those memories rested on actual traces, though wrapped in the cloak of fantasy and daydreams. Only the journey itself remained to give them proof.

Athens – Doha

We left Athens in the late afternoon. The Attic twilight, at the very heart of spring, saw us off with its wondrous light. The few clouds shifted their hues through countless shades of the rainbow, while our flight bade farewell, one by one, to the islands of the Greek archipelago as it moved toward the southeastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula.

Now and then, as my eyes caught glimpses of the world below, I once again felt the truth of the verse: “when you look from high above / the world seems like a painting,”⁽¹⁾ though I confess I feel the same even when I gaze upon it from nearby or from a lesser height. The only differences I perceive are those of angle and perspective. For the world—this jewel in which we have been given life—is indeed an ornament, provided we keep our consciousness free and our eyes open, so that we may understand and love it, remembering the Heraclitean saying:

“To those who are awake there is one common world, but each sleeper turns aside into his own private world.”⁽²⁾

(1). *Sotia Tsotou, From the Airplane, 1973.*

(2). *Heraclitus, fragment 67.89.*

“Look at the far-shining stars,” my companion said, “welcoming us tonight from light-years away, as though wishing to consecrate with their undying radiance our journey to the East!”

“Yes, the far-shining stars with their imperishable light,” I repeated, breaking the chain of thoughts that other sayings of Heraclitus were weaving in my mind—those pioneering reflections on the world and its creation. “But where did you unearth such words?” I added, secretly delighted by the wealth of language with which he painted the images that now seemed to bathe us in their light from distances we could scarcely imagine, no matter what we knew of what a light-year means. After all, it is exceedingly difficult for a mortal to comprehend such things in their fullness.

“Well, what else have I been learning all these years at your side?” he replied with a smile, hinting in his own way that he owed the skill to me.

And the lights we discerned in small clusters across the villages and towns of Saudi Arabia resembled, from above, tiny illuminated crèches scattered in the desert by some unseen hand to lend artistic beauty to our journey.

This vast country—whose contours one is tempted to trace while flying over it—borders Jor-

dan and Iraq (where war still rages!) and is washed by the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, whose waters mingle with those of the Arabian Sea. Along its southeastern edge lie smaller states: Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait. Bahrain too belongs to this group, though it is an island near the eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula, the largest peninsula of Asia.

Its name is bound to a long and storied past. Hard it is to know that history in all its breadth and to recount it, yet who can forget the mysterious Queen of Sheba, who—enchanted by the fame of King Solomon—journeyed to his court to test him with riddles beyond easy solving! That meeting, however, blossomed into a great love, immortalized in the Old Testament, in the Qur'an, in epic poetry, in Hollywood panoramas, in the music of Handel and Gounod, and in the paintings of both folk and celebrated artists such as Paolo de Matteis...

And my mind, wandering free, brought to the fore verses steeped in love from Solomon's Song of Songs, as transcribed by Giorgos Seferis⁽³⁾

My beloved shines and blushes,
chosen among thousands.
His head is purest gold,

(3). *Giorgos Seferis, Song of Songs, p. 43.*

his locks are palm-fronds,
black as a raven.
His eyes are doves
beside the streams of water,
bathing in milk,
resting in their pools.
His cheeks are beds of spice,
caskets of fragrance;
his lips are lilies
dripping myrrh.
His hands are golden rings
set with jewels;
his belly is ivory
inlaid with sapphires.
His legs are marble pillars
set on pedestals of gold.
His countenance is like Lebanon,
exquisite as the cedar.
His words are sweetness itself,
and he is altogether desire.
«My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves
beside springs of water,
bathed in milk,
fitly set.
His cheeks are like beds of spices,
yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies,

distilling liquid myrrh.
 His arms are rounded gold,
 set with jewels.
 His body is ivory work,
 encrusted with sapphires.
 His legs are alabaster columns,
 set upon bases of gold.
 His appearance is like Lebanon,
 choice as the cedars.
 His speech is most sweet,
 and he is altogether desirable.»

Nor, of course, can one forget the life of the nomads or the journeys of the caravans across its inhospitable plateau, where for centuries profitable trade once flowed; nor Muhammad, nor Mecca—the holiest city of the Muslims; nor the luminous mind of Averroes; nor Lawrence of Arabia; nor the modern women who veil body and face behind the burqa, the niqab, and the abaya; nor the many other elements that shape the identity of the Peninsula

After all, when you set out on travels, forgetfulness is no wise companion, whereas knowledge, memory, and an open mind make you not only a good traveler but a citizen of the world.



Doha

The aircraft was nearing its destination. After a four-hour flight we beheld, in a sweeping panorama, the lights of Doha—the largest city and capital of Qatar. The landing offered ever closer and more dazzling views! On one side, the darkness of the Persian Gulf was broken only by anchored or passing ships; on the other, the fully illuminated city gleamed like a bold, provocative Siren whose enchanting songs, given the lateness of the hour—it was past midnight—and despite our own desire, we could not answer, even though we were to remain about five hours at the airport before departing for Beijing. And so, for as long as the descent lasted, we stayed content with the delight of rapidly alternating images.

As soon as we stepped out of the air-conditioned aircraft, a heat like molten lava struck our faces! It was not merely the difference in temperature; this heat, in the heart of spring, felt unusually intense to us. Fortunately we sensed it only for a moment, for inside the terminal there was coolness—artificial coolness, but coolness all the same.

After the necessary formalities for entering the country and for our onward flight with the same air-

line, we made our way to the area where we would have dinner. Dinner at two in the morning? Yes! What else could we call this after-midnight meal? Back home, at roughly the same hour a few days later—while we would still be far away—the Easter table would be set with magiritsa soup, red eggs, and wine; faces would shine as greetings of love and happiness were exchanged, and on that radiant night no one would be absent. Or, if someone was, deep within they wished only to be traveling or elsewhere, rather than to have been taken forever by Hades.

The hall was crowded with people of many nationalities, for Doha's airport is a transfer hub for countless destinations. Locals, Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Europeans... all together formed a multi-figured, multicolored, impressionistic tableau which—apart from the fact that its composition belonged to an interior space—reflected the Impressionists' own ideas about the use of vivid colors, the choice of viewing angle, and the emphasis on capturing light.

We joined the line—or rather, the queue—to take our food. We chose rice with turmeric and lamb, a small communion with the flavors of the region, and found a table from which we could observe both the dining area and the ground floor below, where shops

and travelers moved about. During our stay in this transit station, not only while eating but throughout our wait, what we never lacked was the spectacle of people: faces of many races, attire and manners of every kind. And, as always in such situations, one is tempted to make sociological or ethnological observations—risking, of course, frequent misjudgment. Yet one makes them nonetheless, a kind of gentle gossip to dispel drowsiness and the tedium of waiting. It is, one might say, a form of travel entertainment that leaves no traveler indifferent, for it awakens an inner urge to converse and to collect images and impressions that become treasured mementos.

Among these impressions the women moving through the hall could not be absent. Whether their skin was dark or fair—sometimes concealed, sometimes revealed—whether their hair was raven-black or blond, they inevitably drew the eyes of men and women alike. Especially those who were not dressed in the more or less standardized Western style invited, in their own way, a closer look.

“Look—oh, look at those Indian women! Aren’t they beautiful?” I said to my companion, urging him to notice them.

“Ah! Those are exactly the ones I’ve been observ-

ing and admiring,” he replied. “How could one not be captivated by their jet-black hair, their languid eyes, their dusky skin, the intricate drape of their saris, their gold jewelry?”

“Despite my prompting, I was certain,” I exclaimed. “How could such beauty escape you! And beauty is something we ought to enjoy wherever and whenever we encounter it—especially when, as at this very moment, it stands so near! In fact, these women remind me of certain sayings about beauty from antiquity, preserved for us by Diogenes Laertius⁽⁴⁾.”

“Excellent! Let’s hear what the men of that age had to say.”

“Well, Socrates, for example, called beauty a short-lived tyranny, while Plato deemed it a gift of nature. Aristotle said it was the best letter of recommendation; Theophrastus called it a silent deception. Theocritus likened it to ivory, which is polished and lovely on the outside yet hollow within. Carneades compared it to a kingdom without guards, and Diogenes himself declared it a divine gift.”

“Mmm! It seems we almost share the same opinions! Don’t we, too, say that beauty is a gift of nature—or of the gods? And though we are ardent

(4). *Diogenes Laertius* 5.19.2–5.

admirers of it, are we not fully aware of its fleeting duration? How often have we been enchanted by its magic wand, only to discover that the wrapping bore little relation to the contents? How many times have we witnessed the negative consequences when some rested on its power and thought it alone sufficient for success in life? Whatever we may say, we have ample experience on the subject. But now let us leave these reflections and simply enjoy the beauty that surrounds us! After all, even if we are in some sense deceived, it will be from a safe distance. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes—without a doubt!"

Agreed on the subject of beauty, we lingered in quiet reverie, studying it in its details. Our gaze soon settled on an Indian woman who was examining gold jewelry in a glass, polygonal display case. The yellow gold, of many carats, gleamed beneath the bright lamps, and her evident desire to view each piece up close allowed us to observe her more carefully as she moved slowly, pausing selectively beside the man who accompanied her.

Earrings, necklaces, brooches, rings, bracelets—so many bracelets, which Indian women customarily wear in rows—all appeared in intricate designs that reflected not only a dimension of the cultural ident-

ity of their makers but also of those who adorned their bodies with them.

The Indian woman who had captured our interest, though clearly traveling, wore golden bangles on her wrists, while her ears were graced with long earrings that, dangling low, touched her dusky neck and created a striking play of color. Her long hair, slightly wavy and drawn back, left her forehead bare, where the red round mark distinctive to Hindu women was visible between her brows. The glossy black of her hair prompted me to whisper the lines of a folk song: “Look at the hair, look at the hair dyed with pitch, / look at the hair that hangs down, hearts wither away!” And her large black eyes lent abundant light to her face; framed by equally black, arched brows, they joined with her full lips to form a truly exotic beauty.

Her arms, bare from mid-upper arm downward, were adorned, as mentioned, with golden bangles, while the upper part of her palm bore a delicately fashioned floral design in henna.

Her appearance was completed by a sari, elaborately draped in shades of red, which bestowed on her an air of nobility and grandeur. The sari—nothing more than a piece of cloth five and a half meters long and a meter and a half wide—demon-

strates in the finest way how a single length of fabric can, through chosen and carefully controlled folds, movements, and forms, become an art that lends elegance to the wearer and sends subtle messages to the senses of those who behold it.

This garment of Indian women is worn over an inner outfit consisting of two pieces in the same or a harmonizing color: a short, close-fitting blouse, sleeveless or more often with a short sleeve, and a long skirt. The front pleats and the end of the sari, which falls lightly—often secured with a pin—over the shoulder and down the back, leave the navel and the torso beneath the chest uncovered, for, according to Indian tradition, life itself resides in the navel and the diaphragm and therefore these points must remain free.

Yet whatever symbolism any garment may carry, at the Qatar airport we saw not only this particular Indian woman but others as well, who, beyond their predominant attire of saris, wore richly ornamented veils or headpieces from which jewels dangled over their foreheads. The cultural tradition of India in matters of dress is indeed rich—and how could one encompass it in a few lines!

After all, no matter how much we seek to record elements of a culture in writing, something—indeed

much—will always escape us, for culture evolves slowly over time and is the creation of many, often unknown, individuals who leave their mark through material or spiritual works that play a significant part in the later life of their people. All the more so since every cultural expression carries within it the primal and timeless soul of its nation, which is even harder to comprehend. Nevertheless, such records are made, and even if they fall short of completeness, they remain among the priceless mementos of our journeys.

Another female presence that drew our attention more than others of similar appearance was a woman in traditional Arab attire. Tall and slender, she wore a jet-black garment that covered her entire body. The fabric looked expensive and was trimmed with discreet black lace. Only her eyes were, in a sense, uncovered. To see them in detail, however, one would have to come quite close—and she, for some reason, would have to lift her gaze. But where could such luck be found? She walked with a firm step, and her eyes served only the primary function for which they were created. Yet her passing left behind a diffuse, hidden nobility and, through her clothing, a visible sense of luxury. It also left the faint suspicion of concealed charms—charms that would never be confirmed. Imagination, whether

galloping or restrained, was free to shape them as it pleased. In any case, no one would rush to contradict it.

The sight of this woman brought to mind another Arab woman, whom I described to my companion. I had seen her years ago in Ayia Napa, when, still very young, I traveled to Cyprus. She was with a middle-aged Arab man and had her entire body covered in a black garment. Only her beautiful face—from the eyes down to the chin—remained uncovered. At the time I tried, though it seemed difficult, to understand another culture that required such clothing of that young woman. And to think that the temperature—though hardly unusual in her own country—hovered around forty degrees, while everyone else sought a bit of coolness in the blue waters of graceful Cyprus! I reached no conclusion other than that traditions have very deep roots, that peoples preserve them as a fundamental bond of cohesion, and that they abandon them only very slowly, if they abandon them at all. Naturally, I also wondered whether any of my thoughts had ever crossed that woman's mind: whether she had ever wished to cast off the garments that concealed her beauty, whether she had accepted wearing them without complaint, whether... Of course, I would never know. Yet years later I have not forgotten her

beautiful eyes.

This time neither I nor my companion found anything strange in the appearance of the woman who passed so near to us, for we knew it was dictated by the religious and social life of the Arabs. Nor, of course, did we attempt to criticize what we saw. How can one be critical of something one may not fully understand? Religion—any religion, after all—as a fundamental social institution prescribes for its faithful a code of permitted and forbidden behavior.

With a touch of nostalgia—and I often feel this nostalgia even when I am in my own country—I turned once again to the distant past of our ancestors, to a time when they, far removed from any notion of religious fanaticism, worshiped whichever gods they wished and even depicted them in the nude, thereby revealing the understanding their society had of the human body, whose beauty constituted a primary reference point of their civilization. Today, although the religion of the majority of Greeks dictates various prohibitions regarding the display of the body, it seems that people—especially women—pay them little heed. It appears that the spirit of those ancestors whispers other instructions, and the peerless goddess Aphrodite stands ever ready to bestow her prizes for beauty.

From our study of beauty so far, however, no mention had yet been made of masculine beauty. This was not, of course, because of any peculiar feminist view that would exclude men. But, after all, how could it be otherwise? Our eyes had turned mainly toward the women, since their adornments and charms were more enticing. In human affairs—unlike in nature, where male animals are lavishly ornamented to be chosen by the females for reproduction—it is women who surpass all others in caring for their outward appearance. And this is not always for the purpose of pleasing the opposite sex, but often to catch the eye of their own: to stir envy, to send a silent message that they possess the qualities needed to claim a worthy male—or even that another woman's partner might be lost to their allure, especially if the man in question delights in parading the woman at his side as a trophy, regardless of what lies beneath the surface.

Our reflections on beauty continued as, after a while, we left the place where we had been sitting and began to stroll slowly through the section of the airport where the shops were located. There we had the opportunity to mingle with locals and, of course, with travelers who, like us, were killing time and soothing their drowsiness until the hour came to continue their journeys. This little excursion from

shop to shop was, in effect, an exercise in keeping our eyes open, but also an excuse to feast them—if eyes can ever be sated—on the sight of cutting-edge technology and, above all, on goods that carried a hint of the fragrance of the East.

We also had the chance to speak with local salesmen—there are no female shop assistants there—and, by asking about various products, to engage them in conversation. These men, unlike other native males moving about the airport in traditional Arab dress, were clothed in Western fashion. Their attire lent them a cosmopolitan air while at the same time highlighting their bearing and their dusky features. As employees, they stood out for their courtesy and their eagerness to serve customers, most of whom they would never see again. Their reputation, however, would follow them.

After roughly five hours in Doha's airport, the time for departure finally arrived. Boarding was swift, as the airline had already handled our luggage and passport control took little time. The aircraft that would carry us to the capital of the Chinese Empire—Beijing—was a modern Airbus, which, as we later discovered, ensured that our long journey would be a comfortable one.





Doha – Beijing

The aircraft was full, and the ethnic composition of the passengers noticeably different from our flight from Athens to Qatar, with the Chinese now in the majority. I cast a quick glance around to absorb a little of their aura, then fixed my attention on the takeoff, which proceeded smoothly and, like the landing a few hours earlier, enriched us with fresh images of the land we were leaving behind.

For a moment, as we climbed to higher levels of the atmosphere, Daedalus and his young son Icarus came to mind—those daring figures who first felt the astonishment, the joy, and the freedom of flight. As Andreas Kalvos wrote in his poem *Eis Samon*(5), the “winged” Icarus may have fallen and “was drowned in the sea,” but he fell from on high and “died free.” Is it really a small thing, even in youth, to die in such a way?

The screens hanging before us began to display our course toward the depths of Asia. Once the plane reached its cruising altitude, the flight attendants started serving meals to the travelers. Most were drowsy, but before surrendering to sleep and dream-

(5). *Andreas Kalvos, Odes, p. 119.*

ing of loaves of bread, they had to satisfy their hunger. For when the stomach is empty, sleep does not come easily. As the saying goes, “the snake-eater slept; the hungry man did not.” Hunger is a savage beast, and woe to anyone caught in its snare.

Because our journey ran counter to the earth’s rotation, time itself seemed to change meaning, and our biological clocks struggled as best they could to adapt. Thousands of feet above the surface of the earth, with dawn breaking far away on an unfamiliar horizon, we ate with appetite the tasty meal that was served—something not so common on air journeys, I must admit.

Afterward, the flight attendants saw to our comfort by distributing pillows, small blankets, and eye masks. With such care and warmth, and a flight free of turbulence, most passengers soon surrendered to the god of Sleep. Some were even snoring. As for me, I cannot say I slept; slumber rarely overtakes me while traveling. Yet with eyes sometimes closed, sometimes half-open, I dozed lightly, giving myself such rest as I could while intermittently turning to a small book of Confucian reflections that I carried in my bag. I had studied these sayings before, but now, as we traveled to the country of his birth, I wished to revisit them—both as a tribute to him and as an

effort to draw nearer to the soul of the land where we would soon set foot.

In this endeavor, besides the immediate experience of travel and the insights of Confucius, valuable support would come from the knowledge I already possessed of China, gathered from various sources and, of course, from literature. For example, from the novels of Pearl Buck—*The Mother*, *East Wind: West Wind*, *The Last Empress of China*—for the Nobel Prize-winning American author, having lived many years in China, portrays both Chinese and Western society without prejudice.

Also from Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, in which the author, through the lives of three women—her grandmother, her mother, and herself up to her flight to London a year after Mao's death—describes in meticulous and penetrating detail the history of her homeland.

Nor must I forget *Soul Mountain*, the book of Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian, which guides the reader on an erotic and spiritual quest, a journey back to the origins of humanity and Chinese civilization, in search of truth, wisdom, and purity, a return to childhood.

And, of course, *Travelling: Japan–China* by our compatriot Nikos Kazantzakis.

Finally, there is also the portrayal of Chinese society through the seventh art, especially in the epic, multi-award-winning film *The Last Emperor*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, and in Bertolt Brecht's great play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, where, through a Chinese fable, the author poses the universal question of whether goodness is possible in a world of evil and exploitation.

All these works and many more formed a spiritual treasury and a solid refuge for this journey, which was destined either to confirm or to disappoint expectations and dreams, while helping, as far as possible, to deepen our understanding of the country and its people. A difficult undertaking, given the time we had—fourteen days in all, during the Easter holidays of the blessed year 2006—but we were ready to make every effort in that direction. Otherwise, what kind of travelers would we be?

Thus, as I turned the pages of my book, rereading passages of Confucius that I had marked during an earlier reading, I decided to share some of them with my half-awake companion.

“Listen,” I said. “Listen to what the wise Confucius⁽⁶⁾ taught: ‘You cannot learn about death before

(6). *Confucius*, p. 121.

you learn about life.’”

“What’s come over you, talking about death at this hour?” he remarked.

“No, my dear, I am not speaking about death; I am speaking about life! For whoever does not understand the meaning of life cannot understand death either. Only it is difficult to grasp the meaning of life. Tolstoy also said that a scholar knows many books, an educated person possesses knowledge and skills, but only an enlightened person understands the meaning and purpose of life. Hard, you will say, to belong among the enlightened! But don’t you think it is worth trying—and, if you succeed, to become one of them?”

“I agree that it is worth it, but I see it as very, very difficult.”

“True! Yet I think Plato was also right when he said that the goal of life is not its length but living well. Only the word ‘well’ each of us can interpret in our own way. For us, at least, Plato’s ‘well’ certainly includes travel!”

“Oh yes! For us not only that, but also Homer’s line suits us perfectly: ‘He saw the cities of many men and learned their mind’⁽⁷⁾.”

(7). *Homer, Odyssey* 1.3.

“Yes—‘the cities of many men and their mind’! And now, ready once again for this kind of knowledge, let us drink the invigorating coffee that has been served and imagine all that we have planned to see on this journey. The country over which we have been flying for some hours awaits our discovery! It depends on us how many of the keys to its soul we will unlock and which of its secret voices we will hear. It is certain that it will not easily or fully open its gates to us, nor shall we understand everything. But if we keep the eyes of our souls open and watchful, as our national poet counsels, we shall see and feel much.”

“You are right—let us surrender for now to imagination! But for how long? Look at the screen! We are about to reach Beijing!”

Beijing – First Day

After a ten-hour journey, the aircraft began its descent. The landscape—so far as we could make it out—looked drab. We retained no beautiful image from this approach, and a wave of disappointment overtook us. But we soon regained heart. As lovers of travel, we knew one cannot judge a destination solely by what one sees while touching down at one of its airports.

Beyond all that, the airport that received us—large by our standards, though not by China’s—breathed something of the era of Mao Zedong, the “Great Helmsman,” as his compatriots called him. He was the leader who, when asked in an interview about his family—where the father’s authority prevailed, as the Confucian tradition prescribed—said: “There were two parties in our family. One was my father: authority. The opposition, by contrast, consisted of my mother, my brother, the farmhand now and then, and me. Yet the united front of the opposition often split over disagreements. My mother advocated a policy of indirect attack: she opposed all extreme outbursts of feeling, as well as our attempts at open revolt against authority. She said that was not the Chinese way.”⁽⁸⁾

(8). Enrico Fardella, *The Young Mao*, p. 14.

The Chinese way! The shadow of Confucius upon Chinese life. Yet many years had passed since Mao's words. We, travelers in the land he ruled for so long, set foot upon it and, like hounds on the scent, began step by step to discover the modern Chinese way—one that, as we would soon observe, for all the communist governance, gallops like a runaway horse across the threshing floors of capitalism, while preserving—who knows for how long—elements of its cultural inheritance.

After the usual checks and the retrieval of our luggage, my companion—who had mapped the journey with notable zeal, care, and precision—hurried to book air tickets for our next destination. We had chosen to fly between cities, save for one leg by ship, to economize on distances. A vast country, and the time at our disposal short; with more days we might have traveled by train as well and gained another, equally interesting way to know the land. But on journeys, as in life, you cannot have everything. Something is lost, and something is gained.

We boarded a taxi and headed toward the city center, where our hotel was located. The avenues were broad and the traffic heavy. The air was dull—almost dark. Beijing, preparing for the 2008 Olympic Games, was working at an intense pace, while

the air pollution had “gone into the red.” We had read as much in the Greek press, but it is one thing to read and another to see—and smell. Beyond the pollution itself, the atmosphere was further burdened by strong northerly winds that drove sand from the Gobi Desert, dusting every surface and making it harder for residents and visitors to breathe.

Inside the taxi, though we could smell the pervasive exhaust, we were spared the sting of blowing sand. Outside, we saw people hurrying along, hair tousled by the wind, and others wearing masks to protect already stressed lungs—or perhaps as a precaution against future trouble. We saw many cyclists as well, their bodies covered with raincoats—it was drizzling just then—and their faces masked. Despite the great boulevards, the city was literally choked with the number of cars. Economic growth had worked its wonders there, too.

Our taxi driver knew not a word of English. His country was vast, and he felt no need to learn even a few words for visitors from afar. The hotel’s name, of course, was enough to get us there; beyond that, nothing. Only a few phrases in Chinese, which led us to suppose that, when we climbed in, he welcomed us and, when we got out, he wished us a pleasant stay in his country—which, for us, how-

ever, was truly ...“Chinese.”

“Jianguo Garden Hotel”—that was the name of the modern, open horseshoe-shaped building where we arrived after a long drive. We paid the driver; a hotel attendant immediately relieved us of our bags, and we proceeded to reception. We gave the details of our reservation, which were duly confirmed—only to be told that the room booked for us was occupied. This, as it turned out, worked to our advantage: they proposed we stay in one of the hotel’s suites. A suite? Yes, a suite! One of the surprises of our journey.

We had, of course, never before stayed in a suite. Where would we have found the money for such luxuries! On our various excursions—not that we underestimate the quality of our lodgings—it is not that aspect that chiefly concerns us so much as the enjoyment itself: the wealth of experiences we live through and the knowledge they yield. And yet, at the very start of this journey—though the price was not high compared with hotels offering similar amenities in Greece or elsewhere—it so happened that, after the long hours of travel, we had the pleasure of resting in a suite!

Once all explanations and particulars had been given at reception, we were shown to the suite,

which, bright and spacious, exuded discreet luxury. Its wall of windows looked out over a broad avenue that struggled to breathe under the constant flow of cars, as well as the tall buildings that stood not only on either side but as far as the eye could see. Thankfully, owing to the building's soundproofing, the city's noise did not reach us.

Earth tones and white prevailed in the space. Besides a bed and nightstands, the room offered a sitting area composed of a sofa, a chaise longue, and an elliptical table; a desk where a vase held a lavish bouquet of flowers; a television; a refrigerator... The floor was carpeted in a geometric pattern, and the wall bore a single minimalist painting.

In the bathroom, along with towels and soft white robes, a row of personal-care items—replaced, as we discovered, every day—spoke both to attentive service and to unbridled consumerism in the heart of communist China, an observation we would make on various occasions during this trip. Slippers, toothbrushes, toothpastes, soaps, shower gels... were generously provided for daily use, and each following day was removed to make way for new ones. As conscientious environmentalists, though we enjoyed the luxury, we were almost troubled by such consumption. What harm would there be in wearing the

same slippers the next day, or brushing our teeth with the same toothbrush throughout our stay, or... ? Clearly, none. But many travelers—if not all—desire and seek comforts on their journeys, and businesses in the tourism sector hasten to offer them—especially when such comforts are lavished at little or no extra cost.

We ourselves, having been on our feet for more than thirty hours, enjoyed a relaxing bath and fell asleep.

Late in the afternoon we drank jasmine-scented tea in the hotel café overlooking the great avenue. From there we could take in everything that lay within our field of vision. The exterior, which we had also seen from our room, took on a different aspect as night fell and the lights came on. In the center of the forecourt a lit circular fountain seemed like a navel, and the jet that leaped at its center recalled an umbilical cord that, under some magical influence, lengthened and shortened in an effort to join with the hidden forces of the universe. The trees cast the shade of their foliage over the manicured paths, and along the asphalted lanes vehicles and people moved back and forth without cease.

Naturally, the space also had a flagpole from which flew the red flag of the People's Republic of

China, also called the Five-star Red Flag, bearing in its upper left corner one large star—the symbol of the Communist Party of China—and four smaller ones, all in a pale yellow hue. It is said that the stars represent either the union of the five principal Chinese ethnic groups or of the five social classes. Designed by Zeng Liansong, an economist and artist, it has been the country's national emblem since 1949. On either side, two smaller poles bore flags with the hotel's logo.

Our gaze moved farther afield, to the illuminated high-rises lifting proudly toward the sky, proclaiming in their own way the economic flourishing of the country that housed them, and to the bustling avenue—since the glazing that separated the exterior from the ground-floor interior where we sat made such viewing possible. Only the tall structural columns broke the view at intervals, as did the circular entrance flanked by two large planters with native plants—and two attendants who welcomed guests or saw them off.

At the center of the reception area stood a low circular table on which, placed slightly off-center, a huge bouquet of scarlet roses preened invitingly. A few meters before the reception counters, a taller table of a different shape was likewise adorned with

flowers—*Strelitzia* (bird-of-paradise), lilies (*Lilium*), ... and lush greenery—while right beside the counters intricately pruned topiaries confirmed the Chinese love for every form of botanical ornament, a love also inscribed in many branches of their art.

Then, continuing our reconnaissance of the hotel's amenities, we found that it offered spaces for dining, entertainment, exercise, meetings, conferences... Everything reflected the country's modern face, which combines traditional and contemporary elements in both exterior and interior architecture—though with a tendency for the latter to prevail over the former.

After this brief tour, we dined at the hotel restaurant. On our first day in China we chose a simple, light dish with familiar flavors. Our first encounter with the local cuisine we postponed until the following day. In any case, it was not wholly unknown to us, since we had tasted Chinese dishes in Greece and in other Western countries. What remained was to meet them in their homeland. We were almost certain they would taste different—and better—for a place's gastronomic identity is best revealed where it was born, being the result not only of the creator's skill but of the products that the land yields and, above all, of the very culture that brought it forth.

If anything from that dinner deserves mention, it is the care we received—and the teacup of lukewarm water offered to us at the outset, since, according to Chinese dietary custom, it is a good way to prepare the stomach to receive food. So the charming waitress with the welcoming smile explained, mostly by gestures and in hesitant English, for at the sight of the cup—before we could even frame a question—our eyes and movements had already betrayed our puzzlement. In any case, the water was at such a temperature that we drank it with pleasure, almost like a necessary medicine. Whether it helped our stomach accept the meal without unwanted effects, we could not tell. Perhaps it belongs to those unseen processes of the digestive system that profit—or not—without our knowing. And it seems that the long observation of the locals, experts and laypeople alike, regarding the benefit of drinking lukewarm water before eating, has elevated it to a salutary habit.



Beijing – Second Day

After a refreshing sleep, morning found us rested, in good spirits, and ready for action. Before setting out, however, our path led to the breakfast room. The space was pleasant, and the offerings many. What was striking was the choice between a Western-style breakfast—much the same as in hotels around the world—and a Chinese one that brought you into contact with local flavors and culture. We chose the latter. From that moment until our departure, this would be our way: to nourish ourselves, as far as possible, with what the locals eat, to breathe in and taste what they so zealously prepare in their woks and other utensils. Curious as we were, we would not try everything—not only because time was short, but because some things we simply could not bring ourselves to put in our mouths. How can one eat, for example, pale-gold scorpions, larvae, and other creatures of the animal kingdom which, until then, had no place in one's culinary code and which repel you even as you see them roasted and ready to eat?

Breakfast, of course, included nothing of the sort. Still, we had much to choose from: fresh fruit or compotes; a variety of vegetables, steamed or stir-fried in a wok, and some raw; eggs prepared in vari-

ous ways; soups; crêpes made in the Chinese fashion; little pouches of dough, steamed to doneness and hiding fillings of meat, seafood, vegetables—evoking the Pontic piroshki; rice... In short, a wealth of delights lay before us, inviting us to taste them. But how much can one eat! On this day—when we had much to do and see—we drank green tea and chose savory dumplings with all the available fillings, accompanied by vegetables and local fruit.

But what is the story of those tasty pouches of dough—my own term, since their name is dumplings? It is said that in China they were first made during the era of the Three Kingdoms, around 225, and they are made with flour or potato. Their filling depends on the region and personal preference, and they are a traditional New Year's delicacy. The main kinds of Chinese dumplings are guotie, which are first steamed and then lightly sautéed in oil; jiaozi, which are cooked only by steaming; wonton, used chiefly in soups; and zongzi, which are made with rice.

In the hotel lobby, after making arrangements, a Chinese woman undertook our first tour of Beijing. Of medium height, with a lithe carriage, she wore a fine-woven, much-worn coat which, in an ice-toned hue, set up an engaging contrast with her dark chest-

nut hair—carefully tousled and cut to the nape. Her narrow, sparkling eyes were framed by very thin brows; a small, slightly upturned nose lent a faint Parisian air to her Chinese features; and her slender, unpainted lips—almost expressionless—did not curve, even on first meeting, into so much as a courteous smile. Whether this last trait sprang from a professionalism unintelligible to us—one that permitted no familiarity, not even the friendliness of a smile—or from her temperament, we would not fully discern in the hours we spent with her. In any case, as it turned out, she guided us conscientiously, showed us with pride the proofs of her homeland’s cultural heritage, and took us—perhaps not without a commission—to workshops where a visitor can explore various forms of Chinese art and, if the purse allows, buy a keepsake. Her name was Hui—which, in her language, means “sunshine.”

Sunshine our escort and guide might have been, yet that day Beijing was anything but sunlit. Or rather, it might have enjoyed a lovely spring brightness had the air not been filled with a multitude of suspended particles: not only industrial pollutants, but grains of sand that the wind still carried that day from the Gobi Desert, which stretches south of Mongolia and into the northern and northwestern reaches of China. In Mongolian its name means “great de-

sert,” and indeed its vast extent makes it the largest desert in Asia—an immense plateau covered not only with sand but with bare rock as well.

On this day, as the wind lashed our faces mercilessly, we wore sunglasses constantly to protect our eyes and covered our nostrils with a handkerchief against the dust. And the truth is that, whenever it grew especially bothersome, I likened it to the hordes of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, for I felt it was ready to subdue us and prevent us from seeing what we had planned. Yet despite its vexing presence, it did not prevail. Our will to discover as many facets of the Chinese capital as we could proved the stronger.

Our first stop was the Great Wall—the largest human-made structure—inscribed by UNESCO in 1987 on the World Heritage List. A fortification of immense scale, it was built along the northern flank of the Chinese empire to protect it from incursions by nomadic tribes, stretching from the sea in the east to the Gobi Desert of Gansu in the northwest. It began to take shape in the 7th century B.C. and assumed its colossal dimensions under the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huangdi, who unified the country and lent it his very name: he christened it China—Kina in Greek.

The work, of course, was continued in one manner or another by subsequent emperors; yet in the end it became clear that, despite the lavish expenditure of human labor and money, it failed to fulfill its purpose, for invaders found other passages by which to strike the realm—showing that walls of this kind are by no means foolproof. Nevertheless, they cannot but inspire wonder—this one especially—for its length, which, according to recent measurements, reaches 21,196 kilometers, and for the audacity of the idea that such a work could be equal to the hopes of its creators.

Today, anyone who comes to China to admire the Wall up close—though it is impossible to see it in its entirety—will find that, like all human works, it suffers the relentless wear of time. People often leave to chance whatever no longer serves a practical purpose and hurl themselves into the pursuit of the new, which breeds hopeful expectations. And often enough the decay comes against their will, when they lack the means to preserve—even for the sake of memory alone—their cultural inheritance.

After traveling roughly fifty kilometers north of Beijing, we reached the Wall at the section known as Juyongguan. A vast, well-maintained bastion, protected by a moat, dominated the site where we wan-

dered; we observed with keen interest the architecture, the reliefs with apotropaic symbols, and the characters—opaque to us—that decorate the structures and provide, for those who can read them, an informative supplement.

We also had a taste of local painted wall decoration, developed as a broad ornamental frieze of distinctive artistry near the roofline. The images, in shades of green and blue, harmonize perfectly with the reddish hue—several tones lighter than Minoan red—that completes the décor of geometric and vegetal motifs. And, hardly by chance, the supporting columns are painted a reddish hue, creating an excellent aesthetic effect.

The roofs of the entire complex around the bastion, as well as those of individual structures and pavilions, offered a measure of Chinese mastery in this domain. They were covered with gray tiles, laid with exquisite craftsmanship even on the curved corner terminations, which were adorned with charming ceramic animals. Sharp triangular pediments, painted in the aforementioned reddish color, crowned some of them. Zoomorphic waterspouts provided a necessary and graceful functional complement to the roofs. We would have the pleasure of admiring all this again in the days to come, in old protected buildings

wherever the new age had not yet swept in to raze them and raise sky-high apartment blocks in their place.

The Wall, snaking like a mythic dragon across the body of the land, includes many such bastions, whose defensive function was supported by lookout posts, towers, and gates through which defenders could retreat or receive reinforcements, as well as by natural obstacles—cliffs, mountains, rivers. Yet, as we already knew and as our guide confirmed, most of this vast fortification is not maintained like the section we visited, but stands abandoned, and in many places has begun to crumble. Perhaps, for the sake of attracting visitors, the state will show greater care for its restoration and, ultimately, its salvation. But to be realistic, much as we might wish this monument preserved in its entirety, it would be very difficult to allocate the funds required. Thus future generations—just as with other admirable human works—will learn from restored stretches what it once was, while romantics will wander, where access allows, among those segments surrendered to the wear of time. For decay, bound as it is to human things, has—within its measure—its own allure.

With the weather unchanged as the hours passed—and with dust and mist preventing us from

seeing as far as the eye might otherwise have traced this colossal work—we contented ourselves with studying, with keen attention, whatever lay close at hand. And of course we did not miss the chance to walk upon the Wall: not only for the experience, but to take in something of the aura of those who labored to build it—many of whom lost their lives. After all, what grand human undertaking has not exacted losses of this kind? All the more since the workers were, for the most part, slaves: peasants, soldiers, convicts. Who was to care for them if, from malnutrition and exhaustion, they left their bones there at some hour of the day, chisel in hand, or when they withdrew to rest in the most rudimentary conditions? Likely no one—save a few loved ones who, though they had almost written them off, still awaited, as a gift of fate, the day they might somehow return.

Climbing the staircase built into the Wall, we felt more keenly the meaning of its construction. Following the slope of the terrain, the structure became one with it—grounded in the earth's magnetic fields—and gave its designers the impression that it would be impregnable. By the same logic, stairways were essential, a necessary complement to the defensive plan along the slopes, allowing the defenders to move with ease. For us, however, the ascent proved no simple task. The steps, uneven in height—some

very high—made it arduous; and so, despite our initial wish to imitate other travelers, mostly locals but also foreigners, who climbed higher still to the last bastion visible in the prevailing weather, we changed our minds and stopped halfway.

From there we viewed, from a different angle, the great bastion and the moat lying below us, and we admired the art of fortification. Across to the opposite hills we gazed at the Wall's continuation beyond the moat, until its last traces faded into the misty horizon. As travelers in this corner of boundless China, we gathered images unique to ourselves and fixed them in memory. Before beginning the descent—which can prove more taxing, even dangerous, for the unwary—we examined the masonry, which—as everywhere along the Wall—varies, for people tend to use first the materials their land provides.

As we made our way down, carefully, step by step, thoughts and images besieged my mind and gaze. They came from past and present alike, taking as their point of reference—and their center—the human being. For the mind cannot accept, or rather cannot bear to think, that humankind, after thousands of years upon the earth, has not found a way to subdue its arrogant lust for dominion and control; that it has failed to make use of principles and values that

people like ourselves once founded for the sake of the good, of progress, and of human happiness on earth. And, like the Darius of the Alexandrian poet, they feel a bottomless hubris and intoxication; and, drunk with arrogance, though they speak of works of culture, they destroy them with ease.

This descent from the Great Wall—the pride of many dynasties, and of modern China as well—brought before me the thousands who labored upon it and who journeyed early to Hades for its sake. I saw their tired, withered faces building, under the harsh oversight of their kings, a glory not their own. As for their lives, a line or two of general mention in the history books is deemed sufficient to record them.

A little later, we were on the road to the Thirteen Tombs of the emperors of the Ming dynasty—an exquisite example of funerary architecture and, like the Great Wall, included on UNESCO's World Heritage List. The tombs occupy an area of more than forty square kilometers and, although only three are open to visitors, they draw crowds of tourists, local and foreign alike. To tour such a vast expanse would have required far more time than we possessed. So, following Hui, we took the beaten path and visited the Changling Tomb, where the Yongle Emperor lies.

This tomb, like the others, is a walled architectural

complex—its high enclosure barring prying eyes—and its design consciously models the imperial residence. The tombs were almost always planned while the emperor was still alive and typically consisted of a cluster of halls. As for the site to be chosen, the first and last word belonged to the geomancers, who were obliged to determine the most auspicious place for the one to be interred.

In earlier times—among the Chinese and not only them—people cared deeply about where to build their houses, their temples, their tombs. They had not yet been seized by the frenzy to encroach on land merely to claim it as their own. Do not ancient Greek structures of every kind also show adherence to the rules of geomancy and geodesy—to the basic principle that there is an energetic interplay between macrocosm and microcosm, of which Greek philosophers spoke with such breadth?

And since we speak of tombs: what conditions for posthumous repose are offered by the practices of burial and exhumation in today's great cities? But what am I saying—modern life has swept even the dead into its pace: a brief sojourn in the grave; a swift oblivion among the living. Life is in a hurry, and delays of any kind find no excuse.

Given all this, the imperial tombs had to be built

where the energy was most auspicious, according to feng shui—feng meaning “wind,” shui meaning “water.” They were to face south; they consisted of a crypt before which stood the altars; and a strip of water was set in place to drive away evil spirits. Needless to say, when the tombs were first sealed, they contained rich grave goods—precious metals, porcelain, and other objects—to accompany the emperor on his final journey.

At the Changling complex, where the Yongle Emperor rests, we had the chance to admire its architecture, whose color scheme brought to mind the bastion and other structures we had seen near the Great Wall—save for the tiles, here made of a reddish clay. In the central edifice, we noted with particular interest the three tiers of marble balustrades that run as low fences around it and, at intervals near the base, terminate in marble waterspouts carved as animal heads; the railings flanking the staircase complete the exterior ornament in the same idiom. As for the massive supporting cedar columns—thirty-two in all—their size and number seal the monumental character of the building.

In the first hall we were greeted by a monumental bronze statue of the emperor, encircled by water. Many visitors—mostly locals—were tossing small

coins into it for good fortune, attesting to the human need to propitiate luck so that it might come to the aid of one's personal and family life. Human beings are fragile, and forever in need of Fortune's favor. What is striking is that the same attempt is made here at the emperor's statue in China, in the waters of the Fontana di Trevi in Italy, in the fountains of Christian churches in Greece... Whether luck can be coerced is hard to say. It is enough that people harvest hopes—or Hope itself, which contains multitudes—and that she arrives as Pandora's unique and precious gift.

In the rooms adjacent to the statue, display cases hold sumptuous garments, jewelry, crowns, quivers, arrows, warriors' uniforms—everything that speaks of the arts bound up with imperial life.

Beyond the exhibits themselves, the local visitors also drew our interest. Most were sun-browned, plainly people of toil. Their dress seemed to have stepped out of the past, recalling the nearly uniform clothing worn by the Chinese in Mao's heyday. They even reminded me of four Chinese students of Greek philology from my own student years—slight, with an almost constant faint smile when spoken to—who wore exactly the same clothes, a fact that greatly surprised us then. Now, years later, I looked with aston-

ishment at these people in nearly identical dark garments, packed shoulder to shoulder to snatch a fleeting glance at the emperor's glory. Perhaps their guide had urged them on. Or, accustomed to completing many daily tasks in little time, they had kept the habit of doing everything quickly, considering pleasure perhaps something distant for themselves. At any rate, when I suddenly found myself among them, I felt them press past me, indifferent to whether I wished to linger and observe—or photograph—some exhibit. This sweet rudeness made me smile and step aside for a moment. Who knows, I thought, where they had come from and where they wished to go next. Or how many years they had saved to make this pilgrimage to the Ming tombs—yet hurried they were! Who can say... I counted this mingling with ordinary folk an important experience, one that brought to mind those Chinese students in Thessaloniki who, when once I raised questions about relations between their country and Tibet, declared they knew nothing. Possibly. I confess, however, I did not believe them.

When the tour ended, Hui treated us to tea—authentic green tea without any aromatic additives—which we drank with pleasure. Immediately afterward she led us to workshops where, with great zeal, artisans produce handmade objects that are fine

examples of traditional craft.

In the first of the two we visited, precious and semi-precious stones were being worked—onyx, amethyst, amber... The wheels, the basic tools of the trade, filled the air with noise, and the foreman led us to watch the craftspeople at their stations, to see how they shaped the hard stones, grinding them to the desired form. In nearby cases we observed many expressions of their labor and artistry: compositions chiefly of animals and plants set the tone. Beside them, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, rings—everything made from similar materials—waited, like the various compositions, for buyers.

In the same space our attention was especially caught by the making of cloisonné vessels in various designs. We were truly astonished by the patience and care of the workers—women and men—who, having traced the design on the bronze bodies, affixed very fine, tiny strips of copper upright, one by one, with a plant-based adhesive and a surgeon's precision, to create depth. Once this stage was complete, the vessels' surfaces resembled honeycombs of irregular cells—cells destined not to be filled with honey but with enamel (a porcelain-like paste).

The process unfolded in stages: after each layer of material, the vessel was fired in a nearby kiln. As for

the final result, it left us with the best of impressions—especially since this time-honored Chinese craft comes to us from a distant past and stands as a point of pride, a creation they can truly call their own.

Indeed, the earliest examples of porcelain date to before 1000 B.C., in the era when the Shang dynasty ruled China. Like all human works, porcelain evolved—both in firing technique and in artistic expression—until, under the Tang dynasty (618–906), it reached its zenith. This was also the period when porcelain vessels began to be exported, first to the Arab world and later to the West, where their worth was duly appreciated by both the ruling classes and lovers of art. Thereafter, with the passage of time—as one might expect—porcelain won the hearts of many, and today products made from it are widely available consumer goods. Even now, however, porcelain wares of the highest quality and artistry remain the preserve of the few.

As for the colors and designs of the objects—vessels of every size and form, and jewelry as well—displayed in the cases beside the workshop, we were quite enchanted. Upon them were rendered plants, blossoms, exotic birds, dragons, landscapes, scenes from imperial life, from wars, from daily existence—everything the artists' fancy might devise. They were

so strikingly beautiful that we longed to make some of them our own. This art—justly costly and demanding so much labor—but... Having admired and touched them and felt the magic they radiated, we bought a few useful keepsakes and set off for the next workshop: silk processing.

“Do you know anything about the history of silk?” I asked my companion as we sat in the car.

“Yes, a little. I remember that the Chinese kept the secret of its production closely guarded, and they say some Byzantine monks hid silkworm eggs in a hollow staff, brought them to Byzantium, and from then on cultivation began in our parts. What is certain is that I love the feel of silk fabrics. I once had a silk shirt.”

“Ah, good! I too love the feel—along with the embroidery worked by the women of Soufli, in Evros, on silk fabrics with colored or white thread. There you see true grandeur! But would you like me to tell you a Chinese myth about the discovery of silk?”

“Tell it—why not?”

“Well, they say that around 2690 B.C., while the Empress Xi Ling Shi was in the palace garden drinking her tea, a cocoon fell into the cup. In trying to remove it, she drew out, they say, a very fine thread.

That was the first silk filament ever seen by human eyes! To tell you the truth, I wouldn't swear to it. But since the Chinese have believed it for so many centuries, let us not call their belief into question."

From then on, sericulture developed in their land, and for many centuries its secret was guarded as a precious treasure. As for the empress, they revered her thereafter as the goddess of the silkworm. Consider that it was only in the eighth century B.C. that their neighbors, the Japanese, learned of it—from some, it seems, loose-tongued Chinese who reached those shores and betrayed the secret!

As for us, we knew of it even before Alexander the Great's campaign. The silkworm was called *sēr* by our forebears, and silk fabric *sērikon*. Aristotle⁽⁹⁾, in speaking of the worm, notes that the women of Kos knew how to work silk and mentions a certain Pamphile as the first to weave with silk thread.

Now, as for the later legend about the Byzantine monks—centuries afterward—which says that Emperor Justinian sent two of them to learn the craft and steal silkworm eggs, who can say for certain? What matters is that, for many centuries, there were regions in our country where people practiced sericulture.

(9). Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 551b.9–16..

Even the Morea took its name, they say, from the many mulberry trees cultivated there for the silkworms. My father used to tell me how one of his teachers from Messenia taught them, among other things, the craft of raising silkworms. Nowadays, if I'm not mistaken, they are cultivated only in Evros. When I once traveled there, I admired—as I told you—the handiwork of the local women.

Talking as we were, we reached our destination. Hui led us to a space where one could follow the entire course of silkworm cultivation, as well as the process of reeling—the unwinding of the silk filament, the most important animal-derived fiber in weaving—from the cocoon and winding it onto reels. To achieve this, the cocoons are placed in special basins of hot water, which dissolves the silk gum (sericin) and helps the filament unwind with ease.

Of course, to see all this you need not travel as far as Beijing, since the Silk Museum in Soufli, Evros, offers more than ample opportunity. But since we had come to the source, as the proverb says, we thought we might as well drink. And this “water,” besides acquainting us with silk processing in China, gave us the chance to see what the Chinese make with silk fabric. There was much to see in a profusion of hues. We focused on traditional garments which—

if you are lucky and they fit—you can wear even today (I found nothing in my size!), as well as on scarves and foulards, all in exquisite colors and designs. The prices being affordable, we bought a few for ourselves and for gifts.

Having wandered through so many places where China's cultural heritage was so clearly on display, it was not yet, as one might suppose, time for us to retire to the hotel for rest. What room for such luxuries, when you want to drink in as much of the city's aura as you can—or rather, when you travel with Cavafy's "Ithaca" ever in mind?

With evening upon us and hunger laying persistent siege to the stomach, we now had the perfect pretext to commune with the flavors of the country. And moving about in Beijing, what could offer that experience more completely than the city's signature dish—Peking duck? Our guide led us to the most famous restaurant for it; at the entrance we gave her fee, thanked her, and bid her farewell. From this moment on, our tour of the land of silk would be ours alone. Our gear was sound; it had been prepared long ago at home.

As soon as we entered, a gaunt attendant greeted and welcomed us in Chinese. Wǎnshàng hǎo! Good evening! Huānyíng! Welcome! Chinese—and did we

understand? Yes, for as dutiful travelers we make a habit of learning a few basic words in the country we visit: to hear their sound on the lips of the locals, as a small gesture of communication, and to feel a little less foreign. After the greeting, and with the faintest of smiles, he led us to a table.

The restaurant—very large by our standards—was full of locals and many foreigners as well, all savoring crisp-roasted duck. The sights around us and the aromas in the air were the best heralds of what was to come. Without doubt we were in for a special feast, in the midst of many people—yet for two.

In a corner of the establishment, visible from everywhere, the ducks were roasting. Hung by the head and, so we were told, filled with water to keep the meat tender, they looked from where we sat like woeful beings condemned to death by fire. Despite the associations—and the qualms the sight provoked—our desire to taste the famed Peking duck left no room for sentiment, even though we are persuaded that animals, too, hold a rightful share in this earthly paradise that human beings consume almost greedily.

Our table, laid with a white cloth, lent a note of stateliness, and the red wine served in stemmed glasses marked the beginning of this particular

dinner. Just before the duck arrived—borne on a rolling cart in a rectangular pan—an attendant brought the accompaniments: green asparagus, mushrooms, soy sauce, lettuce leaves, chopped bulbs—some local kind of onion, it seemed—and a few other delicate vegetables we were seeing for the first time. Ah, and besides these he brought, in a mesh basket, thin, almost translucent round pancakes of dough, which reminded me of the large, delicate skillet cake my mother used to make from batter—while to my city-bred companion they suggested a crêpe base. To keep the pancakes warm, the little basket sat over a steaming vessel.

The attendant who brought the duck wore a white uniform and transparent gloves, and he held a broad, sharp knife with which he began to carve the roasted bird with a surgeon's skill. He then arranged the slices on a white platter—everything was white china—so that the rosy-golden crackling skin showed to best effect; at one edge he set a sprig of curly parsley and a pretty blossom in shades of pink and mauve. Another waiter took the first platter, set it down near me, and proceeded to show us, on my plate, how we were to handle the ingredients in order to enjoy the flavors. He was a comely young man with jet-black hair and fine eyes crowned by thick brows, dressed in a light-terracotta uniform trimmed

with a discreet gold braid.

Holding a medium-sized white spoon in his left hand and, in his right, a pair of chopsticks, he began the demonstration. He placed a pancake on the plate, spooned soy sauce into the center, set pieces of duck on top—after dipping them lightly in the same sauce—added a little onion and a few of those slender vegetables, and rolled it up. With the chopsticks he folded the pancake's left edge over the filling, then did the same on the right. Finally he lifted the bottom edge and folded it upward, creating a savory envelope open only at the top.

My companion tried—though not always successfully—to imitate our instructor in this little art, which is also the prerequisite for enjoying Peking duck. As for me—thank goodness for the fork! Beyond the pleasure of the food itself, we laughed heartily at his efforts to accustom himself to the Chinese way, and at the fact that they did not leave us the duck bones to gnaw. Do we not say, after all, that “a chicken and a woman need a hand”? True, we were not eating chicken, but a duck has bones too—and plenty of them. Whether licking them would have been a delicacy, we shall never know.

As for the taste: the crackling skin aside, it was good, though not, to our minds, equal to its grand

reputation. You will say, then, how did it acquire such fame? There must be reasons; and our judgment may well be colored by the fact that we are unaccustomed to it as a dish and so perhaps could not appreciate it as we ought. Or perhaps the cause lies elsewhere—our own culinary tradition and memory, with which we were raised, resisting new flavors as a kind of instinctive defense. I say this because, as day by day we sampled China's various tastes, they took on a tone of beguiling familiarity.

In any case, we relished the dinner. After so much activity during the day, it came as a restorative elixir: what we tasted supplied fortifying calories and—together with the wine and the general atmosphere—helped us feel cheerful, a certain kind of happiness.

Until our departure—and though night had already fallen—the restaurant was a hive of motion. People came and went; some were always waiting for a table, their faces bright with the prospect of savoring Peking duck. Among them, the locals—and perhaps a few foreigners—must have been devotees of its flavor, while others, like us, were waiting to try it for the first time. What their verdict might have been, we shall never know. Better so? Perhaps. After all, the exchange of opinions on gastronomy can seem futile when the arguments originate in the prior

experience of the taste buds—those very culprits behind our judgments, yet incapable themselves of rendering a verdict.

No sooner had we stepped outside than a damp, somewhat chilly air struck our faces, mixed with suspended particles that made themselves felt in our breathing and in our eyes—and were visible too in the light of the lampposts. Our stay inside had made us forget the city's burdened atmosphere; happily, we were not exposed to it for long, for we hailed a taxi that took us to the venue where we would watch an acrobatics show. Why, we were in Beijing! How could we not see up close the art to which they devote themselves with such passion?

Without delay we bought our tickets and went into the hall, for the program was about to start. We took our seats and waited. When the curtain rose, we saw columns at either side of the stage adorned with gilded dragons and other apotropaic emblems; beams, colored bands of cloth, and ropes were set so as to aid the acrobats' movements; soon enough the performers astonished us with their skill. At the back, a static scene depicted the Great Wall. This later gave way to one of those familiar Chinese landscapes in which mountain peaks—wooded or bare—jut through a mist-filled world; in another tableau,

flowers were pictured. All the scenes drew on themes beloved of the Chinese, which they render across many forms of their art.

The acrobats—women and men—performed to Chinese music that matched their movements, wearing costumes of varied designs and colors whose hues shifted with the lighting. They impressed by the precision of their motions, which seemed to defy the laws of gravity and opposing forces, and to us uninitiated spectators looked perilous indeed. The numbers alternated; trained bodies balanced, intertwined, and ascended, while their serene faces, composed to perfection, conveyed to the audience a steady assurance that all would go well until the performance's end.

Their movements—assisted not only by the apparatus already mentioned but by ladders, wheels, rings, bicycles, flexible beams—were clearly the fruit of long apprenticeship. Studied and disciplined, they were executed with remarkable precision and self-command; one might say they were subject to that inner power which reins in the ego and exists for the sake of the other. Only through such wordless communication and coexistence could the marvels we witnessed unfold before us that night, filling us with awe and admiration. It is no accident that China

included acrobats in the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, for the art they serve is deeply rooted in the country's cultural course, fruitfully fusing acrobatics with opera, dance, music, and the martial arts. Surely it would be an omission, for anyone who comes to Beijing, not to attend an acrobatics performance and—through it—feel something of the spirit of the country one is visiting.

When the curtain finally fell—our spirits flooded with happiness and the audience's applause making the air vibrate, confirming the quality of the performance—I found myself softly humming “The Acrobat” by the Hainides. I sang, and it didn't matter that in the general pandemonium no one could hear me. In any case, apart from my companion, no one would have understood the words:

“Behold, all of you, the acrobat who sways
and teeters;
behold, all of you, the outlander—see how he
never reels.
Behold the acrobat who, even when he falls,
yet laughs,
and never weeps—never weeps. [...]”

As soon as we stepped out of the hall, we found ourselves in another world. Though it was nearing midnight, the streets were pandemonium—traffic, blaring horns. People hurried in every direction. We slipped into a taxi and made for the hotel. The moment of rest was near at hand after a taxing day that had given us singular experiences and knowledge. And gentle Sleep—the twin brother of Death—did not delay in gathering us into his arms for a deep slumber. At the very instant my eyelids grew heavy, a few lines from the *Iliad* came vividly to mind—lines that Hera addressed to Sleep, not, of course, without ulterior motive:

“Sleep, lord of all the gods and all humankind, as once you heeded me, so now again attend—and measureless thanks I’ll owe you all my days.

Lull the fair eyes of Zeus, O Sleep, to rest for me,
after I first lie down with him in love at his side.”⁽¹⁰⁾

(10). *Homer, Iliad* 14.233–237.

Beijing – Third Day

In the morning, after the usual preparations, we set out into the streets. We wanted, among other things, to mingle with the people on their way to work. Heading toward the subway, we walked along the broad avenue that runs in front of our hotel. The shops lining it made you feel not as though you were in the heart of the People's Republic of China but in some Western capital. All the famous brands of clothing, footwear, and cosmetics were there. As our journey continued, it became increasingly clear that such streets existed not only in other quarters of Beijing but in many Chinese cities as well. The sirens of capitalism were present, luring every well-to-do Chinese passerby. After all, most of these companies—selling goods at prices astronomical compared to their production costs—manufacture a large portion of their products in China, perhaps the largest share of all, since the relentless pursuit of maximum profit almost by definition seeks cheap labor.

The subway station was crowded—or, to be precise, unbearably crowded, so much so that if you are unaccustomed to it, you feel a kind of suffocation. Nevertheless, my companion, a born cosmopolitan, quickly found his bearings on the map of lines and

pinpointed both the route and the station of our destination. Within minutes, tickets in hand, we boarded—pushing and being pushed—the train that would carry us to Tiananmen Square.

The carriage was packed to overflowing. Did we not wish to mingle with the locals? Here we had it, and more than enough. Indeed, had our fellow passengers not borne the unmistakable features of Chinese origin, we might have thought ourselves in the subway of some Western country. The faces around us, as much as we could observe them in this oppressive closeness, were serious, their gazes almost vacant; others—mainly those lucky enough to have seats nearby—were absorbed in a book or newspaper, or stared blankly ahead. Those within our line of sight gave us a brief look of curiosity, or perhaps interest—it hardly mattered—and then returned to their own inner worlds: the day awaiting them, the lives they led, the dreams they pursued, or who knows what else.

Each station we passed revealed the solid craftsmanship of its construction. The network's many lines stretch for hundreds of kilometers and serve millions of people every single day.

Our ride was brief. Emerging to the surface, we found ourselves in Tiananmen Square, the largest

public square in the world, covering a total area of some 440,000 square meters. Its name means Gate of Heavenly Peace, reflecting a yearning for order and harmony in the universe.

To stand before such a place leaves you momentarily speechless. Not that the existence of a square of this size is unjustified in a metropolis of tens of millions like Beijing, but you cannot help admiring both the sheer scale and the foresight of those who conceived it. You feel an irresistible urge to walk its expanse and take in the colossal buildings that frame it. Before beginning our tour of the Forbidden City, that is exactly what we did.

With a breeze stirring the air—cleaner than the day before—we strolled, gazing at buildings and people. Our attention was caught by a short local man in uniform, part of the square's cleaning crew. He held a stick tipped with a sharp spike, with which he tried to spear scraps of paper skittering across the plaza. Fighting the wind, he chased them like a playful child, darting after each fleeing fragment.

As we walked on, our eyes were drawn to the Great Hall of the People, standing on the western side of the square and housing the headquarters of the Communist Party of China. This immense structure covers 171,800 square meters and was built in

1959 to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. Remarkably, it rose in only ten months, through the volunteer labor of peasants and workers, following designs by the architect Zhang Bo.

The building's façade is striking, with a grand colonnade, massive bronze doors, and two elongated wings. High at the center gleams the circular emblem of the People's Republic of China, rendered in a gold-red hue. Designed by the celebrated architect Liang Sicheng, it was adopted as the national emblem in 1950. Within it appear the five stars of the national flag; the gate of the Forbidden City as seen from Tiananmen Square; a wheel at the base symbolizing industrial workers; and a border of ripened wheat, representing Mao's vision of an agrarian revolution.

Inside, among other halls, the Great Hall contains an amphitheater that seats ten thousand people, where the National People's Congress convenes beneath a ceiling adorned with a gigantic red star surrounded by a galaxy of countless lights—an emblem of China's preeminent place in the communist universe. Certain areas are open to visitors when no official events forbid entry. We were content to admire the building from the outside; we did not even ask

whether, as foreigners, we might be allowed inside, and we continued our wanderings across the square. Time was pressing, after all, and the day held much more to see.

We moved toward the southern end of the square, where the mausoleum of Mao Zedong stands, the former leader of the People's Republic of China, who died in 1976 at the age of eighty-two. We viewed it only from the outside, as it was closed that day. Long before reaching it, we had realized that we would not be able to enter: we had read that when the mausoleum is open, immense queues form as people wait to file past the embalmed body—draped in the flag of the Communist Party of China—without even pausing for a lingering glance. Millions of eyes have gazed, and will continue to gaze, upon the lifeless remains of the Great Helmsman, which were embalmed and placed on public display for a week after his death, despite his own request to be cremated. While alive, he made the decisions; in death, others decided for him, in direct contradiction of his wishes. Yet the Chinese mourned him deeply, even with extreme demonstrations of sorrow, and more than a million people came to pay their respects, among them numerous foreign diplomatic delegations.

At that hour the area around the monument was

nearly deserted. The mausoleum itself is built like a square peristyle temple—though of a markedly different aesthetic—and includes a smaller upper floor. On either side of the monument, set slightly forward, stand two enormous sculptural groups of human figures, clearly inspired by Socialist Realism, with its heroic depictions of communist ideals such as the emancipation of the proletariat.

As we made our way toward the northern side of the square, intent on visiting the Forbidden City and having seen Mao's mausoleum only from the outside, my thoughts turned—without venturing into comparisons of cultural value—to the disappointment of travelers who reach the foot of the Athenian Acropolis after long journeys, only to find the site closed, unable to admire the monuments or feel the aura of an incomparable heritage. It is neither the time nor the place to analyze the reasons for such closures, but I deeply understand those visitors. It was not only that the mausoleum was closed; on other journeys we too had been denied the chance to enjoy cultural treasures that were the very purpose of our trip.

The Forbidden City—also called the Purple Forbidden City—was there before us, waiting. But why “Forbidden,” and why “Purple”? Forbidden, because in imperial times the common people were barred

from entering. Purple, not because so many of its walls are painted in shades of that color, but because the name refers to the North Star, a key point in the Chinese reading of the heavens, which they associate on earth with the emperor himself. And purple, not only in China, is the color of power and royal authority.

Beyond its name, the very design of the City—enclosed by high walls—declares emphatically how distant and inaccessible the emperor remained from the people he ruled. Yet in what country have monarchs ever been truly approachable? Visiting this place would merely confirm that timeless truth once again.

Walking on, we crossed gracefully arched marble bridges, admiring their elegance. Ahead loomed the Gate of Heavenly Peace, dominated by the massive portrait of Mao that replaced the one destroyed during the 1989 demonstrations, when workers hurled paint-filled eggs at it. On either side of the portrait, bold white ideograms stand out against a red background, proclaiming: “Ten Thousand Years to the People’s Republic of China!”—an optimistic slogan indeed. The upper level, to which we climbed to enjoy the view of the square, is decorated with red columns and large crimson lanterns. Beneath the

eaves, at the center of a distinctive frieze, shines the emblem of the People's Republic. This gate holds special significance in Chinese history, for it was from here that Mao announced the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Today it also serves as a reviewing platform for military parades.

As soon as we passed through the Gate of Heavenly Peace, we entered a broad courtyard where rows of vendor stalls and a few small restaurants stood neatly arranged. To the west lay Zhongshan Park, once the site where the emperor offered propitiatory sacrifices in spring and autumn to ensure a good harvest. To the east had once stood the Ancestral Temple, a shrine as important to the Qing dynasty as the Temple of Heaven itself. Today, in a stroke of irony, the Workers' Cultural Palace rises proudly on that very spot.

After crossing the next gate, we made our way to the Meridian Gate, whose architecture evokes a fortress. This is, in effect, the true entrance to the Forbidden City, for only the emperor was permitted to pass through it—accompanied by the roll of drums and the peal of bells—on his way to the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

As we continued our walk, we were captivated by the architecture, the sculptures, and the painted mo-

tifs: symbolic statues of dragons, lions, phoenixes, turtles... Beyond the Meridian Gate stretched another paved courtyard, traversed by five bridges spanning a fifty-two-meter-wide moat. Beginning here, the moat encircles the outer walls of the City, whose base measures eight and a half meters across.

Next we came to the Gate of Supreme Harmony, and beyond it admired, to the east, the Hall of Literary Glory, which once housed the imperial library, and to the west the Hall of Martial Valor. Proceeding further, we entered the Hall of Central Harmony, where priests were received by the imperial council, and then the Hall of Preserving Harmony.

Among all the halls of the Forbidden City, let us pause for a moment at the imposing Hall of Supreme Harmony, remarkable not only for its scale. Built on three ascending terraces, it is approached by two marble stairways separated by a massive stone ramp carved in intricate reliefs. For many years it was the tallest building in Beijing, for under the dictates of feng shui no one was allowed to look down upon it—good spirits, it was believed, fly at a fixed height. Indeed, the entire City was laid out according to feng shui principles, its southern orientation reflecting the belief that the south is the most auspicious point on the horizon. Around the hall stand large water cis-

terns—there are 308 of them throughout the Forbidden City—kept ready to extinguish fires that could spread rapidly through structures built with highly flammable materials such as wood.

Inside the hall, the emperor's throne dominates the space, for it was here that state ceremonies were held in his presence—typically on his birthday or when he announced the results of the imperial examinations. Yes, such a system of examinations did exist, designed to select the most capable officials for the vast imperial bureaucracy.

This system exerted enormous influence on the society and culture of imperial China, producing a class of scholar-bureaucrats whose positions were theoretically independent of family origin, though eligibility requirements varied over the centuries. In patriarchal China, only men were permitted to take the exams, which lasted three consecutive days and nights in conditions of complete isolation. Candidates were required to memorize prescribed texts of Confucius, whose teachings shaped not only Chinese thought and daily life but also that of other East Asian peoples. Before entering the examination compound, candidates changed their garments to eliminate any possibility of cheating. To guarantee absolute fairness, the gates were sealed at the start and unsealed

only when the ordeal ended. Provisions were even made—remarkable foresight indeed—for the possibility of a candidate dying during the exam: should that occur, a small aperture was opened so that officials could discreetly remove the body.

After leaving the Hall of Preserving Harmony, we reached the Gate of Heavenly Purity, where our attention was caught by a marble relief depicting a dragon soaring among the clouds. Passing through the gate, we entered another courtyard at the very heart of the Forbidden City, once alive with eunuchs, servants, and members of the imperial family. The Gate of Heavenly Purity opened directly onto the residential quarters of the complex. Here we saw the Palace of Heavenly Purity, which contained the emperor's bedchambers; the Hall of Union, where the empress resided; the Palace of Earthly Tranquility; and other buildings that housed eunuchs and imperial advisers. Behind the Palace of Earthly Tranquility stands the Gate of Earthly Tranquility, where we paused for a brief rest.

It was not only the long hours of walking and standing but also the sheer crush of the crowds that had worn us down. After visiting so many treasures of China's cultural heritage, I can say with certainty that the Chinese honor it with due reverence. In the

Forbidden City, although there were foreign tourists, the overwhelming majority of visitors were locals. Amid the throng and its clamor—as underscored by the desperate cries of a mother searching for her little daughter, lost somewhere in the crowd, a voice I can still hear in my mind—anything could have happened.

As our visit to the Forbidden City drew to a close, the flood of images and the knowledge gained set my thoughts wandering to other palaces we had seen on our travels through Europe. This vast complex of gates, halls, and palaces—though architecturally far removed from those shaped by the legacy of classical Greece—nevertheless shares with them one essential trait: each stands as a testament to a particular form of governance. And when it comes to the lives of the subjects, amply recorded by science and art in many forms, history invariably reveals deep social divisions and the contempt and resentment of one class toward another—resentments that rarely found satisfying expression in the defense of the powerless.

At times I reflect that countless democratic citizens around the world, ourselves included, travel to Athens to admire the monuments of democracy, and then journey to Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, or elsewhere to marvel at the monuments of monarchy.

It seems that human nature is drawn to splendor—provided one is not among those who neither enjoyed it nor could even hope for the slightest improvement in their meager existence.

As we rested, I turned to my companion and said:

—I envy them, truly I do! The Chinese, the Austrians, the French, the Russians... all those who, though governed by different systems, preserved the monuments of monarchy and now welcome throngs of visitors to admire them. In Greece, hatred for that form of rule and indifference toward cultural heritage allowed many buildings at Tatoi to decay and crumble. Truly, I feel ashamed, for the lesson against a form of government is not taught by erasing memory but by preserving it.

—You're not wrong, he replied. The governments of the time, educated and well traveled in Europe or elsewhere, could hardly have been unaware of how other nations handled such heritage. More likely, in pursuit of votes, they made poor choices in this case as well. But come—let's move on! We can discuss this another time. The hour is passing.

And indeed, we lingered no longer. We needed to see the other side—the city beyond the walls—the place where those once forbidden to enter the Forbidden City had lived, and to glimpse, as much as

possible, the life that still pulses there, even though emperors have long since vanished and the country they ruled now pursues its own modern claim to the idea of empire.

We passed through the North Gate of the Forbidden City, the Gate of Divine Prowess, and immediately crossed the bridge spanning the moat that surrounds the walls. Once outside, the avenue before us teemed with traffic of every kind, while on the far side unfolded—at a different rhythm, almost mythical—the enchanting labyrinth of Beijing’s hutongs: a dense network of streets, alleys, and narrow passageways running through the city center from east to west, in keeping with the principles of feng shui.

Unless you stand there yourself, you cannot imagine the complexity of their maze, and without a guide it is a real challenge to find your way out. Even the residents, willing though they might be, are often unable to help because of the language barrier. For that reason—and because time was too short for unnecessary adventures—we climbed into a rickshaw, a three-wheeled bicycle with a covered seat comfortably accommodating two passengers. Settling in, we set off toward the quarters whose very name, of Mongolian origin, means “passage.” After all, Mongolia is not far from Beijing; just a few kilometers

beyond begin the steppes where the war cries of Genghis Khan once echoed—a brilliant military leader who subdued China with the fabled ruse of a thousand flaming cats and ten thousand flaming pigeons (!) and whose hordes swept as far as Central Europe. Perhaps the distant echo of those cries still drifts by night over the roofs of the humble hutong houses, carried by the northern winds from the Gobi Desert, veiling them in dust and subtly altering their color.

The young driver of the curious bicycle—slender, sniffing, of medium height and dressed with utmost simplicity—handled his vehicle with practiced skill as he threaded it through the narrow lanes. We, with our eyes and our cameras, could not take enough photographs. Countless, endlessly varied images unfolded before us, utterly unlike those we had seen in Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, or the noisy boulevards lined with soaring towers that proclaim the new face of China—a face that seems to depart from the Confucian counsel, “When prosperity comes, do not use it all.”

Here everything was humble, spare, measured to a human scale—to a life without excess. Only then could I truly grasp what I was seeing. In neighborhoods such as these, one feels keenly the social

contrasts of modern China—contrasts impossible to imagine without at least a brief passage through the hutongs, not only of Beijing but of other cities as well.

We have seen them in films, for they have inspired many screenwriters and directors. We have read of them in the books of Pearl S. Buck, whose depictions of Chinese life remain strikingly current. The living conditions here have changed little since her time, and it is no accident that during Mao's Cultural Revolution she was denounced as an "American cultural imperialist," with the Great Helmsman's wife and senior officials forbidding her entry to the country. History shows that a writer's pen can indeed make enemies—especially when it reveals truths people prefer to ignore or reminds them of realities they wish no one else to know.

Whatever the motives of those in the past, history has rendered its judgment. What mattered to us was that we were discovering a different world: the world of ordinary people, reaching back into the country's past. Despite the dizzying pace of development and the coming Beijing Olympics—which unhesitatingly erased vast sections of these quarters to erect monumental new structures—this world resists, with what strength it can, both physical decay and, above all,

the loss of Chinese identity as it took shape over centuries. It is a difficult struggle, for the younger generation—though not quick to abandon traditional values, as we observed repeatedly on this journey—is nevertheless beguiled by the Circe of capitalism and the Western way of life. You see it clearly in the food and clothing shops of multinational chains, crowded with young people whose new prosperity besieges the old Chinese way of living. Whether tradition will prove more enduring, or whether some harmonious coexistence will emerge, only time will tell.

For now, many hutongs remain—not necessarily awaiting tourists—though some have been restored by enterprising owners who offer guided tours for a fee. Our driver took us to one such home, where the owner showed us the rooms and furnishings and gave a brief account of daily life in a hutong. I must admit he tried to embellish the story—as he had the renovated earthen, tile-roofed house itself. The alleys and the traditional courtyard houses we had walked through until then, and would continue to explore, spoke eloquently of another existence: the lives of poor families living in cramped quarters, without many comforts, sharing communal toilets with neighbors and working long hours merely to secure the bare necessities.

Many of these homes, including the one we visited, are built around an open communal courtyard where residents carry out much of their daily routine. The Chinese film “You and Me” (2005) captures such a setting through the relationship of a young student and the elderly woman who rents her a small room in a similar courtyard. Beyond the touching friendship, the viewer witnesses the essence of austerity and frugality and learns how some people, though living in absolute poverty, manage their lives with patience, perseverance, and admirable fortitude—perhaps because they perceive the beauty present in all things, a beauty not everyone has the strength to see, as Confucius once observed.

We left those neighborhoods filled with vivid images of daily life: the aromas wafting from family kitchens; the murmur of conversations drifting from behind closed courtyards and barred gates adorned with protective symbols—dragons and auspicious characters—along with the horizontal threshold beam, set flush with the doorframe and found in many Chinese houses and even temples, believed to keep evil spirits away and ensure the residents’ prosperity.

My thoughts did not remain solely with the scenes we had witnessed. They traveled also to those who,

in the name of questionable progress, were forcibly uprooted from the hutongs where they had known their neighbors—their virtues and faults, their sorrows and joys—where a hand could be extended for help or for the missing ingredient of a meal. I once saw a documentary about such people, compelled to change their way of life without being asked, moved—willingly or not—into high-rise towers where there are no neighbors and no one cares for their existence. The trumpets of modern life have torn down—and continue to tear down without sentiment—what centuries have built. Their sound, then as now, remains deafening.

When we emerged into the city's din, afternoon was drawing on. We walked back toward Tiananmen Square, lingered there for a short while, and then took the subway to our hotel. We needed a little rest. That evening we would attend a performance at the famed Beijing Opera.

Opera in China? Yes. Although the word “opera” usually conjures images and sounds of the Western tradition, China has for centuries cultivated a complex and consummate theatrical form—Chinese opera—with the Beijing style especially renowned, reaching its zenith under the Qing dynasty. This musical drama, in which music and stage action are

inseparably intertwined, arose from popular theater; hence its many regional forms, differing in plot, music, and costume. Its dramaturgy alternates lyrical and narrative passages, as in ancient Greek tragedy; the “song,” one might say, is a chanted recitative, and the plots draw on both real and imagined events.

To perform at the Beijing Opera requires rigorous training begun in childhood; in earlier times, orphans often filled the ranks. Watch *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and you will grasp the arduous preparation involved. All that remained was for night to fall so that we might be initiated—so far as possible—into a world new to spectators like us, about to have our first experience of it.

At dusk we reached our destination. The celebrated opera was still housed in its old venue, the Liyuan Theatre, with its imposing doorway dominated by red and gilt ornament, Chinese characters, and Greek key (meander) patterns. That distinctive motif had journeyed this far; we noticed how selectively the Chinese had woven it into their decorative repertoire.

We did not have the good fortune to see a performance in the new hall—an astonishing structure of contemporary, futuristic design near the Forbidden City—since it was to be completed the following

year, one year before the Beijing Olympics. A glance online, for those who cannot travel there, suffices to be enchanted by this marvel of engineering and by the beauty of its form, designed by the French architect Paul Andreu: a building like an egg floating on water—or, if you prefer, a droplet poised upon the surface.

Once we crossed the threshold, we found ourselves in a handsome atrium ringed, so to speak, by columns, with an impressive chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. Plants stood with trunks wrapped in tiny lights; display cases held the opera's costumes; and, naturally, small tables invited us to sit and enjoy tea. My companion set about photographing the actors, who, with jars of pigments before them, applied their makeup in full view—each alone, according to the role to be played.

The auditorium itself is simply decorated, with only a few masks on the walls. Beyond the stage it offers raked seating, and in front of the seats, tables and chairs for audience-diners. We took our places at one of these; a little later four other tourists joined us. Soon cold dishes were set before us—tofu, mushrooms, small red tomatoes—along with tea poured from long-spouted metal pots whose exaggerated nozzles made them look like exotic birds. We had

seen something similar at the restaurant where we tasted roast duck, where deft young servers handled the pots with practiced grace. Here too more than one tea master moved from table to table; with virtuosic flourishes they tipped the hot liquid into our cups, the teapots—playthings in their hands—darting forward and back across their bodies. Most of the tourists looked on, admiring them with exclamations and, of course, capturing the moment on camera. The main performance had not yet begun; this was a smaller show of a different kind—novel to many—and no less captivating.

When the curtain rose, we entered another world. The set was extremely minimal, almost nonexistent; Beijing Opera is, after all, an actor-centered art. On the right side of the stage, an ensemble of musicians—already playing before any actor appeared and continuing throughout—accompanied the action with a varied underscoring. The instruments that carried the rhythms included the flute, three-stringed lutes of various sizes, drums, bells, cymbals, and more. It was a distinctive and delightful music that opened to us the psyche of the people who created it.

Speaking of instruments, six are foremost in China's traditional music: the two-string erhu; the dizi, a bamboo transverse flute; the yangqin, a ham-

mered dulcimer whose name means “foreign instrument” (it arrived in the sixteenth century); the guzheng, a plucked zither played with metal picks, akin to the Greek kanonaki; the pipa, a four-string pear-shaped lute; and the ruan, a plucked instrument better known as the “moon guitar.”

As the music carried us along, the performers—actors, singers, acrobat-dancers—appeared one by one in character, wearing brilliantly colored, spectacular costumes and carrying the necessary stage properties; on their heavily made-up faces you could scarcely read emotion. That you sensed instead through the music, the voice, and the movement. In Beijing Opera, makeup, costume, and the manner of entrance—together with the specific musical cue—announce the dramatic identity of each role. And though even an uninitiated spectator can experience Beijing Opera as high theater, thanks to the density of its aesthetic signals, it is wise, before attending, to acquire a little background. That, combined with the explanatory captions projected on screens at either side of the stage, will help one savor the spectacle all the more.

We had done our homework. Beyond what we had already observed, we knew that—with the exception of the acrobats—all the actors wear elevated foot-

wear, something like the cothurni of ancient Greek tragedy, to signify the heroic stature of the characters they portray. When a role's importance needs to be emphasized, shoulder pads are added to increase the actor's presence.

We also knew that the colors of the makeup carry their own symbolism: red stands for virtue, white for treachery, black for violence, and blue for crime. Costumes, too, announce the roles. A woman in love, for example, appears in a lavishly embroidered gown, her head adorned with a profusion of jewels and feathers until she resembles an exotic bird, while the man in love wears a black hood that leaves his ears exposed. The emperor dons a tiara decorated with precious stones and feathers; courtiers wear robes patterned with dragons and wavelike folds; military figures appear in glittering armor; members of the imperial family wear yellow; aristocrats red; elderly officers white; prominent citizens red or blue; villains black—the list goes on in a rich visual code.

After the performance—so novel to us—and the applause it deserved, we left the theater pleased with the spectacle and delighted to have experienced it in all its facets. Outside, the humid Beijing night awaited us, along with a small surprise.

Without delay we hailed a taxi for the hotel. The

streets were choked with traffic, noise, and exhaust fumes. Air pollution in the city had already reached critical levels more than once, despite repeated warnings from the Olympic Committee, which sets strict environmental standards for host cities.

Our driver headed toward the hotel but soon tried a sly maneuver that we quickly detected: he was taking us on a longer route for obvious reasons. And to think we complain about such tactics back home! Profit and the methods of gaining it, it seems, know no national boundaries. Yet, as the saying goes, God loves both the thief and the householder. That evening proved it true, for out of nowhere—like a *deus ex machina*—a policeman appeared directly in our path. With the traffic as heavy as it was, it was easy for us to get out and report the incident. The officer promptly reprimanded the driver, and we paid nothing for the distance already traveled.

We did not take another taxi. Though tired from the day's activities, we walked back to the hotel through the murky, unpleasant air—adding yet another experience to the many of our journey. At last, the hour of rest had come, and we needed it badly.



Beijing – Fourth Day

That morning we set out for the Summer Palace, the retreat where successive imperial families once spent their holidays, located some eleven kilometers northwest of Beijing. Along the way our eyes absorbed a stream of urban and rural scenes that added fresh strokes to the great canvas forming within us, a picture that would only be complete when our journey came to an end.

The palace complex is a vast ensemble of temples, halls, and pavilions scattered around Kunming Lake. It first came into use in the twelfth century, though the surviving structures date mainly from the early 1900s. Long before that, the site had served as an imperial garden and place of retreat. It was transformed into a Summer Palace during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1736 to 1795.

As we approached, the distinctive landscape of the grounds unfolded before us almost like a film. After leaving the taxi, we made our way to the main entrance on the eastern shore of the lake. Entering, we encountered the Hall of Benevolence and Longevity, which—despite its benevolent name—was the very place where the formidable Empress Cixi (1835–

1908) of the Qing dynasty plotted her court intrigues. And what a story hers is.

Cixi, famed for her long, talon-like fingernails, is remembered both as the Dowager Empress and as the “Old Buddha.” Although the latter nickname suggests a kind of sanctity, it was far from deserved. This shrewd and calculating woman rose to power while still a concubine, giving birth to the son of Emperor Xianfeng, who ascended the throne at the age of five. That child-emperor, Tongzhi, was succeeded by her nephew Guangxu, whom she herself installed in open defiance of the traditional rules of succession—a task hardly difficult for a woman who spent her life weaving intrigues and who dominated the imperial court with legendary resolve.

But let us leave the empress to the judgment of history and continue our exploration of the site and its monuments. In front of the Hall of Benevolence and Longevity our attention was caught by the bronze statues, especially a qilin, a mythical chimera composed of several animals—here a blend of lion and deer—which, according to Chinese philosophy, appears on earth only during times of harmony and symbolizes prosperity, longevity, fertility, good fortune, and health.

It struck me how many cultures delight in such hy-

brid creatures, and how fitting it is that modern science uses the term “chimera” to describe beings or objects created from disparate elements—organisms that, for example in genetics, contain more than one set of DNA or cells from different sources. Our own Greek Chimera, celebrated by many authors from Homer onward, has been depicted by countless artists in various forms: a fearsome fire-breathing monster with the body of a goat, the head of a lion, and a tail ending in a serpent—though some accounts give it multiple heads, combining lion, goat, and dragon.

On the left side of the hall stand statues of a dragon and a phoenix, symbols of the imperial couple and more. To the north lies the Courtyard of Virtue and Harmony, where visitors can see the impressive theater. It was here that the ever-resourceful Cixi once appeared as Guanyin, the goddess of mercy. Such masquerades were hardly surprising, for emperor and empress alike held both religious and political power. Like rulers in many other parts of the world, they were credited with divine origins and regarded as intermediaries between the forces of nature and the people. With such attributes, it was not difficult for them to impersonate whatever deity they wished in order to command respect—or even to instill a sacred fear that ensured obedience. Thus Cixi, as mentioned, delighted in presenting herself as a goddess of mercy

while concealing behind that divine mask the iron will of a tyrant who often usurped the authority of male emperors.

Continuing toward the northern shore of the lake to visit the Hall of Happiness and Longevity, where Cixi spent her summers, we suddenly encountered Hui, who was guiding a group of European tourists. We greeted her warmly, and she was astonished to learn that we had come to the Summer Palace on our own. When we finally reached our destination, we saw not only the hall itself but also the landing stage where the now-familiar empress once disembarked after crossing the lake.

We gazed and gazed, never tiring of the imperial monuments before us—there was still so much to see—and we wondered whether these people, whose lives differed so profoundly from those of their subjects, had ever truly found earthly happiness or merely lived in perpetual dissatisfaction, like so many who receive life's gifts in abundance yet remain unfulfilled. After all, the very structures we admired so hungrily concealed fierce passions, incredible intrigues, and every kind of anxiety, though surely they also witnessed moments of pleasure and contentment.

Such thoughts accompanied my conversation with my companion until our steps brought us south to the

House of Rippling Waves, where Emperor Guangxu lived under confinement after it was revealed that he had supported the reform movement of 1895–1898. Beyond this punishment, the unfortunate emperor bore the additional misfortune of belonging to the final generation of his dynasty. He died in 1908, only one day apart from his formidable aunt Cixi, leaving the throne to the two-year-old Puyi.

Puyi, of course, inspired the film *The Last Emperor*. This child sovereign was indeed the final ruler of China. History placed on his tender shoulders responsibilities he could never hope to bear. In 1911 the Qing dynasty collapsed and the republic was proclaimed. At his age he could scarcely have grasped the magnitude of these events, but destiny had decreed that he live through them.

Walking beside the lake, we continued to capture images in our minds and, whenever possible, to imprison them in our cameras. The view was enchanting. On a small island we saw the Zhichun Pavilion, while to the north rose Longevity Hill, crowned with temples that dominated the landscape. Palace and temple stood side by side—human and divine authority intertwined in place and time.

Our admiration was also drawn to the graceful Seventeen-Arch Bridge, its arches mirrored in the

water as it links the shore to Nanhu Island. Before crossing, we paused to marvel at the great bronze ox that stands proudly beside it. On the island we visited the Dragon King Temple, where Cixi once prayed for life-giving rain to bless the crops and more. The blessing carved above the entrance—“eternal springtime dew”—makes plain the value of this natural gift. As for the dragon itself, it is the quintessential emblem of Chinese myth. Whereas in the West the dragon often carries dark associations, in China and throughout the East it signifies the opposite. No deep reflection is needed to understand this: everywhere one turns, dragons of every size appear in art and daily life.

Here the dragon represents the sage who has attained wisdom and immortality. In gold it symbolizes the sun; in silver, the moon. Together these two forms embody the dual cosmic forces of yin and yang. As a celestial creature it signifies spiritual power and sovereignty, while other dragons govern the clouds, the seas, and the elements. The emperor himself was regarded as its earthly counterpart, which is why his robes were embroidered with its likeness.

Near the Dragon King Temple lies a landing stage once used by the empress. From there, though lack-

ing any imperial prerogatives, we boarded a small boat to enjoy a crossing of the lake and the surrounding panorama. Beyond the amphitheatrically arranged temples adorning Longevity Hill, we were struck speechless when we beheld the Marble Boat. Nothing could better illustrate the extremes of vanity, reckless extravagance, and imperial corruption. This now-decaying vessel was built by the Dowager Empress herself with funds originally intended for the navy.

Sadly, this is no mere tale of “other times, other manners,” for our own era resembles hers—and many others—in the way the labor of citizens becomes a plaything in the hands of those who govern, whether under absolute rule, as here, or within modern democracies. Power intoxicates most leaders, breeding arrogance, and they count only those among the governed who sustain their hold on authority.

Our next destination was the Temple of the Sea of Wisdom at the summit of Longevity Hill. This unusual shrine is adorned with countless glazed figurines of the Buddha, many of them tragically headless—decapitated by British and French soldiers during the Second Opium War (1856–1860), when the Summer Palace was seized. The sight

filled me with profound sorrow, calling to mind all too familiar evils. My companion noticed the change in my mood and, understanding the cause—he knows well the love I bear for the cultural expression and heritage of peoples everywhere—he said:

“Unfortunately, that is how it goes with human affairs,” he said.

“Yes,” I interrupted. “Remember how often I have felt the same bitterness on our travels, both within and beyond our homeland, whenever we encountered similar acts of desecration—especially when they touched our own cultural heritage? Think how many statues of our ancient ancestors, of incomparable beauty and immeasurable value—whether of gods, goddesses, or mortals—we have seen in museums with their heads, and not only their heads, struck off. How many were mutilated by people driven by hatred, by the urge to impose new ideologies, new religions, or new political powers? In the end, human nature does not change. People, it seems to me, are moved by envy or by fear of what they cannot understand, and this has happened throughout history—even among nations that pride themselves on their level of civilization.”

As worthwhile as these reflections were, time

pressed relentlessly on. We still had much to see that day. We quickened our pace, passing the Pagoda of Buddhist Fragrance and the Hall of Scattered Clouds, fully aware that we had not managed to explore the entire Summer Palace complex. But on long journeys, when you hunger to see, to hear, to taste, to smell, to feel, to understand, time is never enough. You take away only an impression and then, like a migratory bird, depart with the uncertain hope of one day returning.

We hailed a taxi and before long were back in Beijing. Our next destination was the National Museum of China, on the eastern side of Tiananmen Square—the great symbol of the Maoist regime and a place indelibly linked to many historical events. As we approached, memories of June 1989 came unbidden to my mind, just as they had when I first set foot on the square.

“Do you remember?” I asked my companion. “Do you remember the bloody events of June 4, 1989? Think of it: right here where we are walking, young people—mostly students—dreaming of a different China, breathed their last.”

“Of course,” he replied. “How could anyone forget? In a country like this, it was never likely that such a movement would succeed.”

“And yet,” I continued, “the reformist leader Zhao Ziyang, who believed deeply in the younger generation and shared with the students their vision of a more democratic China, came before them. He said, ‘You are not like us; we are all old men, for whom it no longer matters,’ and he urged them to end the protest, calling for dialogue and admitting the failures of his own government.”

“Yes, but the students did not trust him,” my companion added, “and they continued their occupation of the square—a movement that the communist authorities had at first tolerated to an unprecedented degree.”

“Ultimately,” I said, “after six weeks, the students no longer faced a reformer but a hardened regime that branded their uprising a ‘counterrevolutionary disturbance.’ The outcome was already fore-ordained. On the afternoon of June 3 a public announcement warned citizens to stay home and claimed that a group of counterrevolutionaries had risen in the city center. That night soldiers and tanks entered the square. The next day, while the students were gathered at the Monument to the People’s Heroes—where the names of those who died for the communist revolution are inscribed—they were attacked, and their movement was drowned in blood.”

“As have been so many others in so many lands,” he observed.

“Indeed. Thousands were arrested, and to this day the exact number of dead is unknown. The student movement was silenced, while Zhao Ziyang, who had stood by them, was placed under house arrest by the Communist Party until his death. China remains under that party’s rule; the students’ dreams still hover over the square, while the people have been drawn into the beguiling embrace of capitalism. And June 4, with all its memories, will return again and again—perhaps to remind, perhaps to teach.”

“And the lesson,” he replied, “is harder than the memory itself. Memory can recall great events, but it does not necessarily teach.”

“Exactly,” I said. “If it truly taught, humanity would not repeat the same mistakes so stubbornly—mistakes so often paid for with the same, or even greater, suffering.”

“True enough. But come, let’s go inside the museum.”

From the outside, the National Museum of China—the largest museum in the world by floor area—imposes itself by sheer scale. Covering some

200,000 square meters, with exhibition halls occupying around 70,000, it would require many hours to explore in detail, time we did not have. But that was no reason to forgo the visit. On the contrary: if a country's monuments speak of its civilization and history, its museums reveal the many facets of those forces across the centuries. And the longer the history, the greater the fascination—especially in a land like China, whose historical presence spans millennia.

The museum houses roughly 1.2 million objects, displayed in carefully organized thematic galleries. As we moved past the glass cases and larger free-standing exhibits, we stepped into the worlds each artifact contained. We admired the intricately painted vessels of the Neolithic period, stood in awe before the Houmuwu Ding—the largest surviving bronze sacrificial cauldron of the Shang dynasty—and delighted in the beauty of the Tang dynasty's three-colored ceramic figurines depicting graceful dancers.

We looked and looked, marveling and regretting that we lacked the time to engage more deeply with what we saw. In truth, even a far longer visit would not have sufficed, but the feeling of wistfulness remained. Even so, the National Museum proved one

of the most powerful experiences of our journey, reminding us once again that through art we can feel the spirit of a people, for the language of art speaks directly and unmistakably to both mind and heart.

Our next destination was the Temple of Heaven, a magnificent expression of Chinese architecture and the site of the most important imperial ceremonies and rites—rituals from which ordinary mortals were excluded, for this was royal ground. Heading south toward it, we passed through Qianmen Gate, one of the remaining gates of Beijing's ancient wall, and after walking about a kilometer and a half we entered the park surrounding the temple, only to discover, to our disappointment, that it was closed for renovations.

Undeterred, we continued our stroll through other intriguing corners of the park, pausing often to admire locals exercising freely, some practicing techniques reminiscent of the Shaolin monks. These Buddhist ascetics, opposed to killing either humans or animals—acts that would end their spiritual progress—developed a system of psychophysical discipline that combined an austere way of life, careful diet, and rigorous training. Over time this evolved into the various martial arts of the East, in which the Shaolin could neutralize opponents by turning their

force back on them or rendering them unable to continue, all without abandoning their spiritual aims.

We stopped before the tall, cylindrical Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, built upon a circular, tiered platform encircled at each level by white stone balustrades. The hall rises in three roofed tiers that taper toward a conical summit, creating a breathtaking sight. Its circular form symbolizes the heavens, and its great wooden dome is assembled without a single nail. Four massive interior pillars represent the seasons, while two further rings of twelve columns apiece correspond to the twelve months and the twenty-four hours of the day. Rich in symbolism, the hall was first constructed by Emperor Yongle on the advice of geomancers who declared that here heaven and earth converge. With such cosmic forces meeting, the site was deemed ideal for ceremonies and prayers intended to compel nature itself to grant abundant early harvests.

Everywhere and always, humanity—frail before the elements—has felt the need to offer propitiatory gifts in hope of favor, good fortune, and the means to sustain life. Even when such hopes go unfulfilled, people trust that the next attempt will succeed. For, as Julius Caesar observed, human nature is such that what one wishes, one is inclined to believe.

We left the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests and soon reached the Imperial Vault of Heaven, another circular structure where the white marble base blends harmoniously with its facing of blue-glazed tiles. A little farther on stood the Echo Wall, which carries sound with astonishing clarity along its curve; and just to the south lay the Circular Mound Altar, rich with astrological symbolism. Here, at the winter solstice, various rites once took place—animal sacrifices accompanied by music, as well as propitiatory offerings meant to placate the elements at other times of the year.

Continuing on, we came to the Palace of Abstinence and the Hall of Life—both imperial precincts. The former contains an impressive beamless hall of striking red, while the latter was where His Majesty prepared for the ritual sacrifices.

After exploring this part of the city, we set off once more toward Tiananmen Square, eager—if only briefly—to wander the streets where, from late afternoon onward, food is cooked and served from roving stalls. In the neighborhood we reached, permanent eateries stood alongside the mobile ones, their window displays immediately catching our attention: skewers of starfish; pale-gold scorpions, some not yet entirely still; oversized larvae of un-

certain origin; tiny octopuses. At first glance we felt a strong aversion to these creatures destined for the plate—some were simply unthinkable for us to eat, far outside our culinary code. Yet as we watched smiling locals step forward to buy their favorite treats, we felt tempted to taste—not to satisfy hunger but to add another layer to the journey. I confess that, that evening and in the days until our departure, although we sampled many local dishes, we gave others a very wide berth.

The handcarts offered a remarkable variety of foods. Those who bought from them seemed unconcerned about hygiene—understandably so, having grown up watching such time-honored methods and, from childhood, savoring delicacies prepared in just this way. These were our anxieties alone, travelers arriving with different expectations and unable to fully grasp the Chinese approach to food—and not only to food. On a park bench, while a woman on a balcony, dressed in opera costume, sang what sounded like a lament, we took quiet delight in the sight of a carefree young couple: the girl enjoying a skewer of starfish, the boy one of scorpions.

With such images, sounds, and aromas accompanying us, we made our way back to the hotel, in effect bidding Beijing farewell. We were to leave the

next day. As a final experience in the city, we surrendered to the restorative touch of a relaxing massage in the hotel's spa. The deft hands of two young local therapists eased every trace of fatigue from bodies worn by so many excursions. Morning found us rested and light, ready for our next destination: Xi'an, a great city of the ancient world and the starting point of the fabled Silk Road.

Beijing had given us a wealth of experiences—too many to capture fully on paper. As we cast our last glances from above at the haze of particulate-laden air, the mind's horse, though eager to gallop toward the places ahead, tugged at the rein and returned, now and then, to Beijing, a city feverishly preparing for the 2008 Olympic Games. Its image was being remade with emblematic projects—above all the National Stadium, where many events would be held, its architecture modeled on a bird's nest. Fittingly so: the Chinese are fond of birds. They depict them in every form of art; they cook them in countless ways; and their eggs—of large and small birds alike—are a favorite food, often steeped and marbled as “tea eggs” to accompany the drink itself.

(11). *Homer, Iliad VI.179–182.*



Xi'an – First Day

We landed in Xi'an—known in antiquity as Chang'an and once one of China's four great capitals—shortly before noon. At the airport we booked tickets for our next destination, then took a taxi to the city center, where our hotel, the Bell Tower, awaited us. Its name is no accident: within easy walking distance stand two of the city's most emblematic monuments, the Bell Tower itself and the Drum Tower. After leaving our luggage, we set out at once to visit them.

The Bell Tower, a proud symbol of Xi'an, marks the point where the main thoroughfares converge. Originally built in the seventeenth century by Emperor Wanli of the Ming dynasty, it is a two-story wooden structure thirty-six meters high, with twin stairways leading to its summit. Climbing to the upper level, we reached the enormous bell that once served as a city clock. Beside it hung a massive cylindrical wooden striker, bound at the end with a strip of red cloth where it met the bell to produce the desired tone.

On the first level, now a small museum, we examined display cases filled with artifacts related to music: traditional instruments, reliefs and figurines

of musicians, and small statues of mounted players. Bells of varying sizes, we learned, were used as instruments to produce distinctive tones. The upper floor housed more instruments and bells, many still in use. Soon after our arrival we were treated to an unexpected concert by musicians in traditional costume—a charming experience that enriched our visit and showed yet another way the Chinese celebrate their cultural heritage. Within this fine example of local architecture, richly painted and adorned, we listened to sounds of the past while the modern city pulsed outside. From the highest gallery we gazed over an overcast sky, smog-tinged air, busy streets, a vast shopping complex, and—almost inevitably—a fast-food outlet of a familiar Western chain which, as we had observed elsewhere, lured locals with the siren call of foreign flavors, tempting them to adopt or at least sample tastes far from their own traditions. Below, around the base of the tower, a profusion of flowers added a welcome note of color.

About three hundred meters to the northwest, we visited the Drum Tower, built of blue brick in 1380 and similar in style to the Bell Tower. Its great drum, from which the tower takes its name, once regulated daily life in Xi'an. The beating marked the hours, signaled when cooking should cease and fires be extinguished, and warned that the city gates would soon

close for the night—a measure both to keep out unwanted visitors and to reduce the risk of fires in a city largely built of wood.

Around the two towers stretches Xi'an's Muslim Quarter, whose distant founders were merchants who reached the city along the ancient Silk Road, bringing their own cultural traditions. We wandered its narrow lanes, where scenes seemed to come from another world: women in brightly colored scarves; men wearing the white knitted Hui cap, playing board games or drinking tea outside their doors; and countless small shops offering a wide variety of goods. At the quarter's center we came upon the Great Mosque, built in the fourteenth century. To our surprise it bore little resemblance to the mosques we knew, having adopted the architectural style of Chinese temples. Entry, however, was restricted to Muslims, and we could only admire it from outside.

Our next stop was the imposing Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, set within a beautiful park of manicured gardens and fountains, adorned with Buddhist statues and inscriptions urging virtuous living and respect for nature. One exhortation captured the spirit of the place: "May your hands show mercy and your feet care for the green earth."

The pagoda, the city's most celebrated temple dur-

ing the Tang dynasty, was first built in 648 by Emperor Gaozong in honor of his mother, the Empress Wendi. Rising to a height of sixty-four meters, it consists of seven levels topped by a roof shaped like a four-sided pyramid, from which a spire ascends to a conical finial. As in all pagodas, this spire symbolically unites Earth and Heaven.

When the temple was founded, its first abbot was the renowned Buddhist monk and missionary Xuanzang, a distinguished collector of Indian inscriptions that were preserved in this sacred place. Over the centuries the structure, like all things, suffered the wear of time and required rebuilding. The reconstruction was carried out during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, in the architectural style of the Tang—the dynasty the Chinese regard as their most glorious. Yet Wu Zetian, also known as Wu Hou, enjoyed anything but a spotless reputation. A former imperial concubine, she entered history for her ruthless character and the intrigues she wove with extraordinary skill.

Her story invites renewed wonder at the ways of humankind. Wu's career recalls those women who, having once offered pleasure to emperors and officials and become playthings in their hands, later turned the tables—exactng revenge through murder or by seizing power themselves, which they often

wielded with notable severity.

As we approached the pagoda, we noticed two Buddhist monks seated outside. We climbed the staircase divided into two flights, between which, as elsewhere in China, stone dragons coiled in relief. Outside the temple stood unusual elongated candelabra where the faithful lit red candles as they offered their prayers. Passing through the richly decorated porch and stepping across the threshold, we felt the aura of the sacred space, where worshippers prayed in their own manner to their own god, the Buddha. One woman especially drew our attention as she alternately raised her joined hands to the proper height and then knelt devoutly on a soft cushion set upon a wooden base.

Everywhere the human condition is the same: frail, fearful, seeking solace in the beyond. One calls the divinity Zeus, another Christ, another Allah, another Buddha—but always there is a higher presence in whom the suffering soul seeks refuge. The names differ; the longing does not. Humanity wavers, often failing to find what it seeks, yet never ceases to search.

Inside, imposing statues of the Buddha and the Luohan—perfected, enlightened beings who have escaped the cycle of rebirth—dominate the hall. To-

gether with the other sacred objects, they awaken in the uninitiated a desire to learn more about the faith they embody. For me, who once studied the religions of the world, the moment called to mind the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. When we emerged from the temple and sat to watch the passing scene in the park, I said to my companion:

“Do you remember the gentle smile on the Buddha statues?”

“Of course,” he replied. “How could anyone forget such a joyful face?”

“And the eighteen Luohan—surely you haven’t forgotten them?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Quite the opposite.”

“Would you like to hear a passage I recalled from the time when I immersed myself in the world’s religions, one that speaks of their meaning?”

“Please do,” he answered. “How could I refuse, standing here beside the pagoda?”

“In the Digha Nikaya,” I began, “it is written: ‘Then the Exalted One spoke to the brethren: Because we did not understand the Four Noble Truths, because we did not penetrate them, brothers, we have wandered and roamed through this long, long journey of rebirths—you as well as I. And what are these four?

The Noble Truth of Suffering; the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering; the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering; and the Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering. But, brothers, when we understand these Four Noble Truths and penetrate them, then the craving for existence is uprooted, the thread that leads to rebirth is cut, and there is no further continuation of being.”

“The end of being,” he mused. “For physical existence it comes inevitably; for the spiritual, who can say? That is a matter of faith. But come—let’s wander among the little shops and enjoy a walk through the park. I feel wonderfully light today.”

“Let’s go,” I agreed. Hand in hand, we felt a quiet joy and reflected that, whether followers of the Buddha or of other deities, most people everywhere struggle to secure their daily bread and to taste what happiness this life allows—while some strive, with equal passion, to secure the life to come, or even both. What matters most is their peaceful coexistence, whatever philosophy they embrace to face this world or the next.

After our visit to the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, we walked southwest to the Shaanxi History Museum, named for the province of which Xi’an is the capital. There we saw, up close, several of the famous

terracotta warriors of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's army—figures we would admire in their full grandeur the following day. The soldiers on display, along with a single horse, allowed us to study their features in meticulous detail. Among the museum's many treasures, the collection of bronzes was particularly striking, revealing how early the art of metallurgy had developed in China. There were vessels for carrying and drinking water, steam cookers, wine-storage and wine-warming jars, ritual vessels used by high officials to make offerings to the gods, shells once used as currency, coin-casting molds, and coins themselves. Other exhibits included burial goods: finely carved incense burners and door knockers, compasses, teapots, and lamps. Especially memorable were a model of the tomb of Xing-Su and another illustrating the construction of the great walls of the Tang dynasty. Equally remarkable were statues of Chinese deities—some familiar, like the Buddha, others less so, such as the Heavenly God and the Bodhisattva. One dazzling piece was a white porcelain amphora whose handles ended in dragons; another, a group of musicians perched atop a brightly painted porcelain camel.

Each collection held its own fascination, reflecting the artistic vision of the Chinese people across the centuries and the succession of imperial dynasties

that shaped their history. Yet, as in every great museum, time was never enough to see everything in detail or to leave with the sense that no exhibit had been slighted. We looked, and looked again, but inevitably departed with the feeling that much remained unseen. The city walls awaited us.

We walked to the massive fortifications, whose perimeter stretches some sixteen kilometers. No longer dividing the inner from the outer city, the walls are now part of daily life for residents on both sides, their enormous gates crossed each day by vehicles and pedestrians alike. Built by Emperor Hongwu, founder of the Ming dynasty, the walls feature a central gate on each side, numerous watchtowers, countless battlements, and, of course, a defensive moat.

A highlight of our visit was climbing to the ramparts. Although the twelve-meter height does not provide a sweeping panorama of the entire city, it offers ample opportunity to observe the neighborhoods spreading on either side, many of them still arranged in the traditional courtyard style of the hutong. The wall's thickness is equally impressive: at the base it measures a full twelve meters.

After we had taken in all that met the eye, and as the day declined toward evening, we bid the fortress farewell with a tandem-bicycle ride along the paved

walkway between the ramparts. From there, gliding through the play of spring twilight and shadow, we savored the shifting colors of the muted Xi'an horizon before descending once more into the bustle of the city streets.

Night was falling as we made our way back toward the hotel, uncertain which experiences to embrace and which to let pass. The city glittered with illuminated signs that proclaimed, in bold characters, the functions of the buildings they adorned. We had seen bright nightscapes in Beijing, but nothing quite like this. China's explosive economic growth made its presence felt in a thousand images and a thousand voices. Concepts such as conserving natural resources and energy seemed to find little echo here. Beneath all this light, the streets themselves were thronged with people—so many that, accustomed as we were to smaller crowds, we felt a faint unease.

As we neared the center, every side street teemed with wheeled food stalls where residents hurried to buy their dinners, which they typically ate right on the street. Words can scarcely capture the shifting scenes or the astonishing variety of foods, most of them cooked on the spot: soups of many kinds, dishes prepared in woks or steamed, eggs of various sizes boiled with a herb that tinted and flavored the whites,

and fruits skewered like kebabs, among many others.

Such sights could not help but captivate us, conveying the atmosphere of a culinary and cultural identity far removed from our own. Once again we were reminded that food everywhere dictates its own rules of preparation and enjoyment, underscoring its importance not only for nourishment but also for the social life of a people. Amid that dense, lively crowd—even as foreigners—we quickly felt at home, conversing with locals, sometimes asking questions, sometimes sharing private admiration or gentle distaste for dishes whose appearance or aroma struck us as strange.

Still heading toward the hotel, we passed once more by the Bell Tower, now splendidly illuminated and presenting an entirely different aspect from the one we had admired in the morning. The interplay of light revealed unique, enchanting facets of the structure. We enjoyed its glowing presence again from our hotel window. With that image lingering behind closed eyelids, sleep finally claimed us.



Xi'an – Second Day

Dawn found us refreshed in spirit and ready for new adventures. That day we would head out to the outskirts of Xi'an, with the Army of the Terracotta Warriors as our chief destination. For once we did not choose a taxi. We preferred to go by local bus—to mingle with residents, to pass through their neighborhoods, to... Without delay we made our way to the terminus and boarded. The bus was neither state-of-the-art nor particularly clean—more a relic of another era—so the ride, interesting in itself, was not especially comfortable. Our passage through the neighborhoods made it plain that the country's economic boom had not yet reached this far: dust, potholes, rattling sheet metal, and conversations in the charming local tongue—beyond our understanding—set the scene. Among the striking sights along the way, familiar from other parts of our journey, were the people waiting at stops who squatted on their heels to rest—a posture, we were told, both comfortable and healthy, promoting bowel function.

Once beyond the city limits, the countryside—dressed in the colors of spring—rewarded us many times over, and after roughly thirty-three kilometers we arrived at our destination.

There, in the open country, stand the terracotta figures at the mausoleum of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. Having subdued the six warring states, he forged a single Chinese realm and proclaimed himself emperor. His rule began when he was only thirteen and lasted until his death in 210 BC: years marked by draconian laws, repression of his subjects, and, not infrequently, mass executions. Yet his exercise of power was also linked to great works of fortification—above all the Great Wall, to keep vengeful raiders of the north at bay—to the building of roads, to the standardization of Chinese script, to the persecution of Confucians and the burning of their books (depriving his country of important writings and uncannily anticipating Heinrich Heine's warning that "where they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn people"), and to one of China's most astonishing monuments: his vast mausoleum with its terracotta soldiery—troops of many arms and functions, and more besides. Their purpose? To serve and protect the emperor after death.

The complex was discovered by chance in 1974, when villagers digging a well struck not water but terracotta figures—objects no one had been seeking, since no written record of their existence survived. Archaeologists then took over, and the spade brought to light finds of incalculable value.

Crossing into the archaeological site, we were awestruck. We had read about it beforehand, of course, but reading is one thing and seeing another. The immediacy of it held us fast. We stood before segments of the immense necropolis created by the hard-hearted Qin Shi Huang—eyewitnesses to the boundless vanity of his ambition. How else to understand that from the very day he took power—before his life's uncertain course had even begun—he ordered his tomb prepared, a project left unfinished only by his early death? What can one say of a man who, before he had lived, pondered the hereafter with such obsession?

As we struggled to take the measure of him, figures seemed to rise among the soldiers and officials—workers, countless workers. We could almost see them: anonymous multitudes—hundreds of thousands, some say as many as seven hundred thousand—whose labor brought the project to completion. Above all we felt sorrow for those who lost the light of day in accidents on the site, and deeper pain for those who, as is also said, met the same fate so that the full extent of the necropolis, and the treasure hidden within, would never be revealed.

The eminent and the obscure, the rich and the poor, have driven the human engine for thousands of years,

and it is doubtful they will ever truly be at peace, walking as companions upon the earth. It is hard—very hard—to imagine. For humankind is capable of the greatest and the least; the question is which of the two one chooses to serve. Sophocles left us the line: “Wonders are many, and none more wondrous than man”⁽¹²⁾—that is, many things inspire awe; the greatest awe is born of man himself.

The emperor’s last dwelling is, in effect, a miniature of his palace. Beyond the tomb and the pits filled with terracotta figures, excavators have uncovered the remains of dwellings, offices, and stables. We made our way through the first and largest of the four pits, where some six thousand of the roughly eight thousand soldiers and horses were found. Walking the modern galleries, we marveled at the ranks of warriors, separated by walls two and a half meters thick. The lines of soldiers face east, away from the emperor’s mound, as if still keeping watch over his safety. At the rear of the chamber many figures have suffered damage; the horses, set among the troops, bore bronze harness, and archaeologists infer that they once drew wooden chariots long since perished.

Close study of the warriors’ faces shows that no two are alike—just as among living people—and it is

12. *Sophocles, Antigone* 332–333.

thought the sculptors used real individuals as models. Their scale is life-size: the rank-and-file stand about one meter eighty, the officers about one meter ninety-five, proclaiming by stature as well as by insignia their social preeminence. Hollow above the legs, they were painted after firing with pigments whose composition has caused most of their color to fade. Remarkably, though they would never see battle, the warriors in this and the other pits were equipped, by imperial command, with real weapons—arrows, spears, crossbows—found beside their terracotta bearers during excavation.

Beside the first and largest excavation lie three more. In the second pit, archaeologists have uncovered chariots, charioteers, infantry, cavalry, and archers—some standing, others kneeling—while work there continues. In the third and smallest pit, sixty-eight figures were found, their elaborate dress suggesting high-ranking officers, together with a single war chariot. The fourth pit, by contrast, was empty.

Near the excavations we also visited the small on-site museum, whose centerpiece is a pair of magnificent bronze chariots discovered just a few meters west of Qin Shi Huang's still-sealed tomb.

Before leaving, we stopped at the gift shop, where

replicas of the phantom army and other objects of Chinese art were offered for sale. As a memento of our visit we bought four terracotta figures and a small horse, hoping they were faithful reproductions of what we had seen in the pits. Yet a certain doubt lingered: beyond the fence, crowds of locals held aloft statuettes of every size, eager to tempt passing visitors. With the image of those raised hands fixed in our minds, we took our leave.

It should be mentioned—by way of an aside—that while writing these travel impressions I came across reports in the Greek press claiming that the famous Terracotta Army was the work of Greek sculptors⁽¹³⁾. Before the creation of Qin Shi Huang's tomb, China had no tradition of making life-size statues, only small figurines scarcely twenty centimeters high, so the discovery of the army posed a riddle demanding explanation. According to these reports, Dr. Li Xiuzhen suggested that such a dramatic change in skill and style could only have arisen under foreign influence: “We now believe that the Terracotta Army, the acrobats, and the bronze statues found in the burial complex were inspired by ancient Greek sculpture and art,” she said. Professor Lukas Nickel of the University of Vienna added that

13. <http://www.protothema.gr/culture/article/618715/o-pilinos-stratos-stin-kina-dim-iourgima-ellinon-glupton/>

the circus-acrobat statues unearthed in the emperor's tomb support this theory. He believes that the first emperor may have been influenced by the arrival of Greek statuary in Central Asia after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. "I can imagine that a Greek sculptor might have been able to train the local craftsmen," he observed.

I read and reread these accounts, which provided further details about the imperial tomb. What the foreign scholars stated confirmed impressions of my own whenever I had noticed, on various Chinese artworks, the Greek key pattern—the graceful meander. I had seen it even on the costume of one of the terracotta warriors, and perhaps it appeared on others as well. With a stirring of emotion, I recalled the poem by C. P. Cavafy *In 200 B.C.*, whose lines proclaim:

And from the splendid Panhellenic expedition,
victorious, glorious, resounding,
as none had ever been exalted before—
from that unparalleled campaign we emerged,
a new Hellenic world, great indeed.

On our way back to the city we decided to make one more stop, not far from the necropolis. During our outward journey we had noticed a cable car lead-

ing to a hill crowned with graceful buildings, which surely offered a fine view. We went to the departure point, bought tickets, and waited for the ascent.

There we experienced a memorable little incident. A few minutes after a young woman had sold us our tickets, a policeman approached. Having watched the transaction and suspecting that, as foreigners, we might have been cheated, he greeted us and questioned her. Fortunately everything was in order. What struck us was the swiftness with which he intervened—a sign, perhaps, that similar frauds had come to his attention. We thanked him and remained to await the cable car, chatting about the encounter.

From that place I kept two souvenirs: the memory of the vigilant policeman and a small flat gray ceramic disk that had fallen from some rooftop. It bore the imprint of a monkey—one of the animals of the Chinese zodiac and a symbol of intelligence.

The ascent itself was brief, yet it pleased us. Climbing always offers a different perspective on the landscape, and this was the first and last time in China that we had such an opportunity. Though we were in the countryside, the sky was a little dull; but in the heart of spring the blossoming greenery compensated us amply, while birds sang bright mating

songs to their partners.

In a few minutes we reached the summit—an easy victory by mechanical means. Yet, apart from the purpose of seeing the temple above and the plain spread out below, the climb brought no special elation. After all, when you have spent four hours in May hiking to the Dragon Lake of Tymfi in Greece, gazed on the thunder-struck peaks of Ploskos and Astraka, admired the alpine wildflowers and the tender new grass, drunk your fill of the blue spring sky and the Apollonian light—when you have lived such moments on other mountains of your homeland—this ascent can only be another travel experience. I do not mean to compare the incomparable, but the peaks have a different sweetness when, after toil, you win them: the true summits of the mountains, and those of life itself, which crown you with the sense of victory.

The temple we visited on that hill—temples raised on heights always possess a special allure—displayed all the hallmarks of classical Chinese architecture, inside as well as out. And the view it offered rewarded our climb with perspectives on the surrounding region we could never have gained from below. As we lingered, gazing and taking photographs, the buried Terracotta Army still revolved

in my thoughts.

“Just think,” I said to my companion, “how many material resources and how much human vitality were sacrificed to satisfy the vanity of a despotic monarch! Imagine if all that effort had been devoted instead to the welfare of his people.”

“Yes,” he replied, “but then what sort of monarch would he have been—especially this one, whose life and deeds we know so well?”

“Indeed. And as so often happens, the lives and works of such men now draw travelers from every corner of the world and generate wealth for the very countries they once ruled with an iron hand. Such are the paradoxes of human history.”

“Of course! And the nations clever enough to exploit their monuments reap immense profits. Beyond transportation, entrance fees, and dining, an entire industry thrives on producing replicas, posters, postcards, and countless souvenirs that travelers delight in carrying home.”

“The ancestors built what they built, and the descendants enjoy the rewards—a curious trade the former could scarcely have imagined. Yet when I first set eyes on those clay figures, I felt an inexplicable sadness, as though they were real soldiers

whom the emperor had taken with him into death.”

“Well, there’s no need to remember them that way,” he said, “but rather as a monumental work, fitting for its time and place. Come—the descent will begin soon.”

“Yes, let’s go,” I agreed, though inside me conflicting emotions still stirred.

We took our seats, and our eyes continued to harvest images. When the descent was complete, we walked to the bus stop. One of the local buses carried us back to the city—a return journey no different from the outward one, save for the fellow passengers.

We reached Xi’an after midday. After a meal and a brief rest, we set out once more into its streets, savoring until nightfall its sights, sounds, flavors, and fragrances. It was only our second day there, yet, though we knew not a word of the language, we already felt a growing familiarity. Xi’an, which during the Tang dynasty ranked among the richest cities of the world, continued to reveal some of its many faces to us. Much, of course, would remain forever hidden. Time was short, and the heart of the city—as with all cities—is not easily conquered. Perhaps that, indeed, is one of the great charms of travel: it leaves you with the urge to imagine, to dream, to

suppose that a second chance will one day be yours—a chance to return, to stay longer, to delve deeper. And even if such a return never comes, the fact that you once journeyed there, seeking both pleasure and knowledge, is no small thing.

Back at the hotel we cast our final glances at the illuminated city, lingering especially on the Bell Tower. By morning all those nightscapes would be gone, living only within us—in the treasure vault where we have long stored the most precious memories of our travels.

The next morning, after breakfast, a taxi carried us to the airport, where—after a brief wait—we boarded an Air China flight bound for our next destination: the city of Chongqing.

Chongqing

After a pleasant flight we landed at Chongqing Airport—a city also known as Chongqin. We would not be touring its sights, for it was merely a stopover from which we would board a ship to sail the greatest river of China, the Yangtze.

Still, since we had come this far, it is worth noting that Chongqing is a rapidly expanding metropolis whose population exceeds ten million and serves as the largest industrial center and transportation hub in southwest China. Including the administrative districts under its authority, the wider municipality numbers more than thirty million inhabitants.

From the taxi carrying us from the airport we saw a city spread across gentle hills and threaded by the Yangtze. Its soaring towers gave a vivid measure of China's astonishing growth, in a country where each year some eight and a half million villagers migrate to the cities in search of a better life. Chongqing in particular—little known in the West—is the fastest-growing urban center in the world.

Accustomed to the modest ports of my own country (and not even the largest of those), when I first read in our itinerary that we would embark here,

I imagined some picturesque little harbor from which our vessel would push off to cross part of the Yangtze. Yet as we passed through the city's outskirts, I began to realize how mistaken that romantic vision had been. And when at last we reached the center and the embarkation point, I inwardly chided myself for such naïveté. To err is human, and direct experience quickly put things in their proper place.

Our departure, in fact, was scheduled for the following morning, after we had resolved a difficulty with the agency from which we had reserved our river tickets by phone. We eventually made our way to a handsome hotel with a panoramic view of the river, where—much to our surprise—the reception hall was adorned with a relief of an Ionic column. There we finally secured our tickets, which included an overnight stay on the ship.

By the time we left the hotel night had fallen—or so the clock declared, though the city itself glittered like day. Towering buildings blazed with light, and neon signs, cleverly designed, created a spectacle of dazzling brilliance. Meanwhile our taxi driver sped like a man possessed, and the other drivers were no calmer. A frenzy reigned all around. As we descended toward the river we sometimes felt we might arrive ahead of time—and not in the usual

manner. At last, after my heart had leapt more than once, we reached the point from which we would walk down to the ship.

We had scarcely laid hands on our luggage when, out of the dimly lit area, a dozen porters seemed to materialize, eager to carry our bags for a token fee—so small that we paid them more, for the path to the ship, though short, sloped steeply downward.

Settled in our cabin, we lingered at the window before sleep, watching what portion of the city lay within sight. Multistory towers, their facades traced in neon, rose above the far bank of the river; some of their lights formed beams that shot into the humid night, while others, meeting the glow from vessels moored in the harbor, cast iridescent reflections upon the ever-flowing waters.

“An interesting day,” I said to my companion. “Thinking of the porters who carried our bags, I cannot help reflecting on all those who are uprooted from their homes in search of better lives in the great cities—lives most of them will never truly find. How profoundly life on our planet will change in the near future, when, as United Nations figures predict, by early 2007—just months from now—half the world’s population will be living in cities. And this trend shows no sign of reversal.”

“It will change enormously,” he replied. “Perhaps even we will live to see some of those changes. One hopes that whatever happens will serve the good of humanity and of the planet, but I harbor serious doubts—or rather, I am frankly pessimistic.”

“I feel the same,” I answered. “I think of how massive urbanization will create a different kind of person—one forced to live far above the ground, cut off from the earth that bore him, without neighbors and the communal life once taken for granted. Along with new dwellings and new work, people will also change the way they see themselves. Life in the city imposes other needs, other priorities. They live differently. They become consumers, eat in fast-food chains, grow obese, cease to be what they once were. And think of their children, who will be born into this environment!”

“Moreover,” I said, “to feed those who live in cities requires vast quantities of food—produced elsewhere, beyond their borders. If the current pace of rural-to-urban migration continues, it is quite likely that in the future the great metropolises will struggle to feed themselves. And what can one say about the pitifully low wages? Imagine: in Chongqing—this I had read while preparing our itinerary—between the port and the city’s commercial center

more than a hundred thousand porters live and work, ready to bear the city's burdens on their shoulders. Unskilled, with little or no education, they earn barely two euros for a twelve-hour day, carrying only a bamboo pole and a length of rope, waiting in markets, at bus stops, on the wharves, to haul goods up the harbor's steep slopes!"

"What can I say? Is such a life—such a half-life—truly a life?" my companion replied. "I cannot drive the porters from my mind. And their families! How do they support them? How do they manage on such meager pay? How do they send their children to school, or take them to a doctor when they fall ill? I do not know... This city, so brilliantly lit, has darkened my soul. Tell me something cheerful!"

At once he opened the map—he knew that, despite my fatigue, such dark thoughts would keep sleep at bay—and began to speak of the Yangtze, Asia's longest river and the third longest in the world, stretching some 6,300 kilometers. It rises in the Tanggula Mountains of Tibet and empties into the East China Sea north of Shanghai, creating a vast delta, while fully a third of China's population lives within its basin. Flowing through seven provinces, the river is bound up with the dreams and hopes of

those who earn their living along its course, as well as with the grand designs of Mao and his modern successors, who, in the name of development, built both the world's largest dam and the largest hydro-electric plant. It is also a river that has moved—and still moves—countless visitors, awakening lyricism and artistic impulse, turning many into poets and painters.

Talking of the river, we drifted off to sleep. For my part, though the thought of navigating inland waters always brings a touch of fear, I was ready to relish the unprecedented journey. The spirit of Odysseus lived within me and banished some of the dread. And the Yangtze—also called Changjiang, the “Long River”—flowed within a stone's throw, waiting to carry us in its embrace. What puzzled me was that the river had two names, yet neither resembled the two by which I had learned it in childhood. Then we called it Yang-Tse-Yang or the Blue River. I remember as if it were yesterday my father teaching me how to memorize the names of Asia's twelve great rivers, along with other geographical facts. He taught me to recite them like a poem, in the order in which those rivers lie around the vast continent, beginning with the lands of Mesopotamia. Perhaps that is why even now I can so easily recall, in that same sequence, the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Indus, the

Ganges, the Brahmaputra, the Mekong, the Blue, the Yellow, the Amur, the Lena, the Yenisei, and the Ob.



Yangtze – First Day

We slept soundly in our cabin. In the morning we woke to the noises of the port. Drawing back the curtain, we found a scene quite different from the night before: sheer banks lining a river the color of clay, and humidity—heavy, pervasive—hanging in the air. The great bridge spanning the Yangtze at that point—the one we had crossed the previous day—now loomed immense in daylight and from our new angle of view. Above it stretched a sky both misty and dull. We, hunters of every image a journey can yield, longed for the ship's engines to start so we could set out again into the allure of the unknown.

Before we cast off, while passengers—mostly tourists—were still boarding, we went up to the fifth deck, where coffee was served to the sound of light music. Then we made our way down to the second-deck dining room, furnished entirely with round tables, each with a smaller rotating tray at its center so that diners could easily help themselves from the shared platters. There we enjoyed a truly lavish breakfast of distinctly Chinese—and distinctly delicious—flavors.

At nine o'clock our floating hotel, the Sunshine

China, loosed her lines, maneuvered out of her berth, and began to slip into the river's turbid flow. As the guide welcomed us aboard—offering wishes for a good voyage, giving safety instructions, introducing the crew, and speaking with particular emphasis about the passage through the Three Gorges—we took seats where the unfolding images would pass clearly before our eyes. The river bore its wealth-giving waters, and we moved with them. We felt fortunate to take this voyage, even once in a lifetime. Once? The word struck a chord.

“Let me tell you something,” I said to my companion.

“Of course. What have you thought of now?”

“Watching the waters of the Yangtze, I remembered a passage in Plato's *Cratylus*⁽¹⁴⁾. There Socrates cites a saying of Heraclitus: ‘All things move on; nothing remains. Comparing beings to the flow of a river, he says that you cannot step twice into the same river.’”

“You cannot step twice into the same river.”

“Yes—think of it. Since all things change, even if we were to return and make this same journey again, we would only prove Heraclitus right. The

(14). Plato, *Cratylus* 402A.

river would not be the same—though it keeps the same name—nor would we be the same. Do you see why?”

“I think so,” he began. “We would be older, and—”

“And the river’s waters would not be the same either, for they are forever in motion.”

“Then let us relish this first time in its current, and delight in ‘all things passing, nothing staying.’”

“Look—fishermen,” I said, “angling in truly muddy waters. Some are standing knee-deep in it.”

“With so many cities and factories along the banks, the water must be heavily polluted—and dangerous to their health.”

“Yes. I read that Chongqing, which we left behind, has become one of China’s most polluted cities as a result of industrial growth, with serious environmental consequences—one of them the unbearable heat of summer. And since we are speaking of fishermen, fish, and pollution: abetted by overfishing, dam construction, and navigation works, that pollution led to the extinction of an endemic species—the Yangtze river dolphin. In its greed, and for the sake of one-sided ‘development,’ humankind destroys the habitat of animals and, by extension, its

own. Not only on the Yangtze.”

“Look there, in the distance—another source of pollution.”

We watched in silence. In a few minutes we were passing it: a shipyard for river vessels, weighing down the beautiful scenes that nature has composed with an open hand along these banks for thousands of years. And of course it is not the only generator of such contradictions. As the natural boundary between North and South China, the Yangtze is a point of reference for those who live along its shores, and it has long served as an artery of communication between east and west. Even today—an age when its importance for transportation has waned, with cars, trains, and airplanes largely supplanting its waterborne road—the river still keeps its aura, still captivates and inspires, and, even wounded, still contributes to China’s economic miracle.

Vessels of every size moved with the river’s current in both directions, while each bend revealed new scenes of green-clad hillsides, tiny houses, and patches of cultivated land. There—a solitary figure with a tent! It seemed he lived there, fishing in the river and roasting his catch, as suggested by the extinguished fire on the rock beside his small canvas home. A little farther on, a group of girls sat on river-

side stones while someone photographed them.

The next view was less romantic: a vast factory beside a residential quarter. The apartment blocks—high, harsh, and crowded close together—looked as though someone had stacked one unit atop another with no thought for beauty, only the logic that poor people must house their dreams somewhere. Old and dark against the misty landscape, they seemed like remnants of another age, crudely reflecting the socialist realism of Mao's era.

As noon approached and our eyes feasted insatiably on the unfolding panorama, the guide invited us to the captain's welcome reception, which we gladly attended. In the reception hall tables were beautifully set with cold delicacies and drinks for the passengers. There the captain greeted us warmly, offered champagne—we drank to his health—and wished us joy in this unique voyage on the Yangtze, amid natural wonders that have enriched the feelings and the lives of the people of the region, and beyond, and have inspired countless artists. Afterwards we moved on to the dining room to savor a splendid Chinese luncheon.

Soon we returned to our familiar spot on deck, where the shifting landscape—damp with humidity and brushed by spring drizzle—held our gaze. The

river, green and turbid, murmured its eternal song. Fed by the waters of countless tributaries, springs, and streams, it seemed in haste to reach the sea, carrying millions of cubic meters of water and, with them, the unspoken longings of many lives.

A large fertilizer plant interrupted our reverie. On the riverbank its products were being loaded directly onto a waiting vessel—production flowing straight to market and consumption. Farther along we saw lignite being loaded, while elsewhere decommissioned hulls lay rusting on shore.

Fortunately, wherever nature had escaped the heavy hand of human interference, it was magnificent. Those who wished—even some young men braving the weather to swim—could still revel in its splendor.

Then came a graceful cable-stayed bridge swathed in translucent mist, perfectly matched to the wooded slope where newly built houses echoed the classical architecture of China. The Yangtze is spanned by many such bridges, and, as we observed, more are continually added. Economic growth demands them and—ever voracious—cannot be satisfied with what already exists.

Not far downstream we encountered yet another loading site for lignite, where workers toiled in harsh

conditions for wages unknown. With shovels they guided the ore into a metal chute from which it dropped into a ship for transport.

As for the city that soon appeared, what can one say? Densely built, with towering, poorly designed, impersonal structures that wounded the landscape. Thankfully, the riverbanks are not lined solely with such buildings; here and there we glimpsed others whose architectural spirit drew inspiration from China's own traditions. So many contrasting images unfolded along this river that the pen can scarcely encompass them all.

By the time we approached the city of Fengdu, the journey—showcasing both the works of nature and the works of man—had never ceased to command our attention. Meanwhile the guide summoned us once again to witness an ancient Chinese craft: painting on the inner surface of a transparent bottle. With astonishing dexterity, the artist inserted a fine brush through the narrow opening and painted for us one of the favorite motifs of local art—a delicate exotic bird perched on a twig. His work, recalling calligraphy, expressed the deep bond of Chinese art with nature and, by extension, with the cosmos itself.

At Fengdu the ship moored and we disembarked.

Gone are the days when vessels avoided this shore for fear of attack by ghosts. Now they not only approach but anchor here, landing passengers who, like us, come to visit the famed City of Ghosts.

Tradition holds that the souls of the dead pass through this place on their way to the afterlife. The legend dates back to the Han dynasty, when two imperial officials—Wang Fangping and Yin Changsheng—abandoned the splendor of court life and came to Fengdu to devote themselves to Taoism. Because their names, when spoken together, sounded like the phrase King of Hell, the hill above the city became known as the home of Tianzi, the mythical King of Hell. It is said that immortal spirits dwell there, judging the fate of the departed. Each soul, before its future is determined, must undergo certain trials: crossing the Bridge of Despair, where its virtue is weighed; facing the Mirror of Retribution in the Passage of Torments, where it is decided whether the soul will be reincarnated at once or suffer punishment before reaching the Wheel of Rebirth.

Every land has its own beliefs. Death—terrifying to most—and the uncertainty of life beyond it, for those who accept its existence, have given rise to countless myths and doctrines that have shaped, and continue to sustain, the deeper meaning of many re-

ligions. We, wishing to grasp something of the faith of those who acknowledge the power of Tianzi, climbed the hill to the City of Ghosts.

Entering the site, we beheld a temple unlike any we had seen before. Graceful colonnades with intricate ceiling paintings and tiled roofs of distinctive design immediately caught our eyes. Particularly striking were the roof corners, adorned—as in other temples—with dragons, except that those of the central sanctuary ended not in dragons but in geese, their necks stretched skyward. It was a magnificent architectural ensemble that—had it not been dedicated to the god of Hell—might easily have served as a gateway to Paradise. Yet we could not forget where we were: scattered everywhere were fearsome statues of demons and ghosts, which we visited after the temple itself, all proclaiming that the passage of unworthy souls through their realm was anything but pleasant.

At the foot of the steps leading to the temple stood a metal structure resembling an elongated brazier with unusual handles, where the faithful lit their incense. On its surface was engraved the Greek key pattern. Inside, statues of the Buddha predominated, along with a colossal figure of the Emperor of Heaven.

Once back in the courtyard, we saw—among other sights—the Buddha Tree, symbolizing the one beneath which he sat and yielded to his serene, enlightening meditation, and a pagoda of striking elegance standing proudly on one side of the lush grounds surrounding the sacred buildings.

When we returned to the ship we went directly to the dining room for dinner, whose flavors, different from those of lunch, once again delighted our palates. Afterwards, to the sound of local music, we attended a presentation of traditional embroidery and a fashion show featuring modern interpretations of garments sewn from beautiful multicolored or monochrome silks, often decorated with sequins. These lovely clothes, reflecting China's long tradition of textile artistry, could easily find a place in anyone's wardrobe and were available for purchase—if, of course, one found the right size.

After a day rich in striking and singular experiences, we sipped a citron-flavored tea and retired to our floating cabin. That night we slept dreamlessly in the moist, rocking embrace of the Yangtze.

Yangtze – Second Day

Our second dawn on the Yangtze found us seated at a table overlooking the river, savoring a generous breakfast as the morning broke gray and overcast, with a light drizzle misting the air. As we gradually entered the vast complex of the Three Gorges, the landscape unfolded in astonishing vistas that made the journey nothing short of enthralling. By the time we reached the Three Gorges Dam at dusk, we felt that without this passage we could never have grasped the soul of the country that was hosting us.

The first gorge, Qutang, is the shortest of the three, stretching for only eight kilometers. Here the waters, running far deeper than before, surged through the heart of the gorge at greater speed, carrying our vessel—thankfully without danger—in their powerful rhythm. Along the banks we occasionally saw markers indicating the river's depth: in some places it reached 140 meters, with projections that, as the water level rose behind the Three Gorges Dam, it would one day climb to 176. Such a rise would irreversibly transform the ancient natural landscape and the lives of those who dwell in the region.

At certain points the rocky passage narrows to barely fifty meters. As we slipped within a hair's breadth of the sheer or softly wooded slopes, we felt the breath of the rain-soaked earth and, more than once, a shiver of awe. Nature, indifferent to our presence, had adorned some stretches with luxuriant growth while leaving others bare or sparsely covered, as if to display the immense natural reliefs it had carved with such artistry. As we followed the river's course, these giant "rock paintings" appeared and vanished in silence, imprinting a unique and wondrous scenery on our minds. Many stirred the imagination, tempting us to guess their shapes. As everywhere, people delight in giving human form to nature's creations, and here the geological oddity known as the Hanging Upside-Down Monk does indeed suggest the figure of a man suspended in mid-air.

Near the exit of the first gorge, our guide pointed out Meng Liang's Ladder—a series of notches cut into a cliff where wooden stakes once projected, forming a perilous path for travelers who crept along the very edge of the abyss. Nearby we glimpsed another type of passage typical of the gorges: stairways hewn directly into the rock. Across from the ladder lies the Coffin Gorge, where the ancient Ba people placed their dead in niches in the cliffs. Ac-

according to a centuries-old belief of passing boatmen, these hanging coffins contained the bellows of Lu Ban, a legendary carpenter or blacksmith who aided the mythical Great Yu when he carved the river's channel through the mountains. Rich in strange geological forms and scenes of infinite beauty—yet dangerous to traverse—it was natural that the gorge should give birth to such haunting myths. Human beings, vulnerable before both beauty and the hidden perils it conceals, create stories to explain what they cannot master.

After a brief run through more open waters, our ship glided past the walled city of Wushan, built high on a terrace, and entered the enchanting second gorge, forty-four kilometers long, known as Wu Gorge—the Gorge of the Witches. No witches appeared, but the place was, throughout the passage, more magical than any spell. Deep, gently wooded ravines; vertical cliffs plunging sensuously into the water; other walls etched with fantastic karst formations fed the imagination. Waterfalls, patient yet powerful, carved the slopes and poured their ceaseless bounty into the river.

And the peaks—one after another—rose like a dreamscape, lost in the mist, lifting their prayers to the foot of the sky. The mind, spellbound, began to

fashion stories of its own and to understand something of the artistic creation of China, which has handed these eternal forms to eternity through its art. I know not why, but whenever I behold such beauty I feel an inner fullness, a bliss beyond measure. Lines of C. P. Cavafy came to mind—born of another occasion but perfectly fitting the splendor I gazed upon here in China’s gorges:

“So much have I gazed upon beauty
that my vision is full of it.”⁽¹⁵⁾

On some of the peaks the guide drew our attention to formations resembling, for example, the figure of a woman or an androgynous traveler striding along the mountain. He told us of the Twelve Misty Peaks of Wushan—the same name given to the gorge—each with its own poetic title: the Peak of the Flying Phoenix, the Gathering of the Immortals, the Sacred Spring, the Fairy, the Climbing Dragon, the Emerald Green Curtain, and others besides.

On one of the peaks—the Fairy Peak—legend speaks of the spirit of Yaochi, daughter of the Queen Mother of the Western Paradise. Like other children born to fulfill a mission, Yaochi came to aid the

(15). C. P. Cavafy, *Poems*, vol. I, p. 83.

Great Yu in his mighty undertaking. She drove the wild animals from the region, helped the people with their crops, and taught them how to use herbs for healing.

Through such myths I realized once again how deeply people love to credit their greatest achievements to gods or to mortals whom, for their benefactions, they later deified.

And everywhere along the river ran the signs of human life: ships ascending and descending the current; long, narrow wooden skiffs ferrying passengers—boats that invited you, at first sight, to take up brush and paint them; fishermen straining with nets or hooks to pull small freshwater fish from the dark-green waters; and, on tiny terraces along the slopes, houses destined to be submerged forever as the water level rose.

At the boundary between Wu Gorge and Xiling Gorge, near Badong County, satisfied from our mid-day meal, we boarded a smaller vessel to navigate the Shennong Stream, famed for its beautiful gorge, which is slowly disappearing beneath the rising waters of the dam. It will not vanish entirely, but part of its former charm is already lost, for the once-turbulent current, flanked by limestone cliffs adorned with majestic karst formations, has been transformed

into a placid, navigable channel.

Even with the changes in the landscape, we were fortunate to glide between these rocks, which still moved us with their austere beauty. Riotous vegetation of bamboo and other native plants shaped the springtime scene, harmonizing with the intricately carved escarpments and casting miraculous reflections upon the watery mirror. In some places the vertical cliffs leaned toward the river as if in intimate embrace, their contours sparking endless interpretations.

The area around the Shennong has been inhabited since ancient times. Evidence of this lies in the coffins wedged into vertical fissures of the limestone cliffs, in places that seem altogether inaccessible. Seeing those clefts and coffins, one cannot help but wonder how those people managed to lay their dead in such perilous resting places. They fashioned the coffins from single tree trunks with diameters approaching ninety centimeters, and it appears they once built an aerial network of plank walkways to reach the sites.

Besides the coffins that remain in their original niches, others have long since sunk beneath the rising water, and still others have been removed for archaeological study. How could those who established this

burial custom have imagined that a time would come when, as has happened elsewhere, the silence of their afterlife would be disturbed for so many reasons?

But let us leave the dead in their cliffs. The journey pulsed with life: travelers, fishermen, tilled fields, and hillside dwellings gave vivid testimony to human presence along the Shennong's course. At the spot where we paused to transfer to wooden sampans for a further excursion, activity was lively. We chose not to take this side trip. While we waited for our fellow passengers, we examined the moored boats and cast curious glances at the wares of the local vendors. My companion struck up a conversation with a few smiling village women. Some knew a handful of English words, but most of the exchange was in the language of gestures. After some laughter and the obligatory bargaining, he bought a few small items to support them.

What intrigued us most was that when he told them where we were from, they did not say Greece or Hellas but Xi La—a name we had first heard from a young woman in Beijing, who, when we asked about our country, said she knew of the 2004 Olympic Games and had heard of our beautiful islands. At the time we could not understand how these two syllables related to Greece. Some months after our return, how-

ever, I learned that the Chinese render Hellas with two characters (希臘). Chosen for their sound, the first means “hope,” and the second corresponds to the month of December in the traditional calendar. Yet together they signify “the other great civilization.”

I was delighted by this discovery for two reasons: first, because I much prefer Hellas to Greece as the international name of my homeland; and second, because the Chinese—one fifth of humanity—chose to call my country Xi La, a name derived from Hellas and not from Greece, and one that links our nation to that noble phrase, “the other great civilization.”

With our souvenirs in hand we reboarded the ship and, seeing the Shennong from the new perspective of the return, bade farewell to its enchanting course. The journey back, now familiar, seemed shorter. Our transfer to the Sunshine China brought fresh excitement, for before long we entered the last of the Three Gorges—Xiling Gorge, eighty kilometers in length—which throughout its course continued to justify our decision to travel the Yangtze, delighting the soul with idyllic scenes while also revealing human activities that scarred the environment.

“Look,” I said to my companion as another such sight came into view, familiar yet never quite the same. “Another loading station for lignite—another

source of pollution for the river!”

“Yes, and larger than any we’ve seen so far,” he replied. “It even has enormous concrete silos where the coal is collected, then funneled through the usual metal chutes into the ships. And the workers—how I pity them! Instead of using dump trucks to tip the lignite easily and in a fraction of the time into those silos, from which it could be channeled straight to the ships, they keep the men atop the trucks, unloading the ore with shovels—as though China were some underdeveloped country!”

“What can I say! It surprises me as well. Perhaps, given the huge population, this is a way to ease unemployment—or maybe it’s a convenient survival from the Maoist period.”

“Quite possible! Don’t you remember in Beijing those ten workers struggling to uproot a single tree while an excavator could have done it in minutes?”

“Indeed I do! We were so astonished. In the end, as the proverb says, ‘Every place has its own customs, every neighborhood its own ways.’ But let us enjoy the beauty of the gorge. After all, the idyllic images far outweigh the rest—especially since Xiling, more than the other two gorges, is filled with smaller, labyrinthine side gorges whose beauty we can glimpse only where they join the main river,

leaving the rest to our imagination.”

These smaller gorges, each tied to local legends and stories, bore names that to us sounded wonderfully strange. One, for example, is called the Gorge of the Sword and Army Stratagem, linked to Zhuge Liang, the celebrated embodiment of Spirit and Wisdom. It is said that when Zhuge Liang served as prime minister of the state of Shu in southwest China, his realm suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the northern kingdom of Wei. When a new attack threatened one of his cities, he ordered its evacuation, leaving the gates wide open and only a few old men sweeping the streets. When the advancing general Sima Yi arrived, he found the city deserted and Zhuge Liang calmly seated on the battlements playing his zither. Seeking to divine his opponent's intentions from the rhythms of the music, Sima Yi concluded that strong forces must surely be hidden within—otherwise the gates would never be left unguarded. What he never learned was that the city was in fact empty and defenseless. Zhuge Liang's stratagem averted yet another defeat and saved the city from destruction.

And what can one say of the gorge called the Ox Liver and Horse Lung? What a name! Why such a baptism? Perhaps some rock formation recalls those

organs, or some event involving the animals—both of which, after all, represent two of the twelve creatures of the Chinese zodiac. Who can tell? Whatever the reason, the name alone makes the gorge intriguing.

As we sailed through a place known as the Kongling Shoals—also called the Gate of Hell—our guide explained that dangerous reefs once lurked beneath these waters. Before the river level rose with the building of the dam, many ships had foundered here, until one of the most perilous reefs was blown up by the People's Liberation Army, which also deepened the channel. Farther downstream he pointed out the Mountain of the Nine Dragons, at whose foot stands the ancient and largest temple of the entire gorge complex: the Huangling Temple, adorned, not by chance, with a statue of the Great Yu himself, the legendary creator of the gorges.

The final stretch of the voyage unfolded pleasantly. At the appointed hour, as the river began to broaden—a sign that we were nearing the Three Gorges Dam—we made our way to the dining room. There, in the presence of the captain, who thanked the travelers for choosing the Sunshine China for their Yangtze journey and expressed the hope that they would one day return aboard the same ship, we

enjoyed a sumptuous Chinese banquet—a fitting conclusion to this unforgettable passage.

The ship, gradually reducing speed, approached with great caution the Three Gorges Dam—the largest dam in the world. We hurried out onto the deck and, when I saw at arm’s length the immense lake spreading to our right, a tremor of awe seized me. As the lights shimmered on the water, multiplying their reflections, a faint sense of danger unsettled me, and my mind began to weave dark scenarios.

“I’m afraid,” I said to my companion.

“There’s no reason,” he replied. “So many people make this passage every day. Relax and enjoy the experience. One doesn’t come to the Three Gorges Dam every day!”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’ll try.”

He continued filming those truly unique scenes while I, recalling Heraclitus’ maxim—*Blax anthrōpos epi panti logō eptoēsthai philei* (“the foolish man delights in being alarmed at every word”)⁽¹⁶⁾—checked my fears and regained my composure. Well then, I thought, since I am no fool, let me savor this moment of the voyage without childish

(16). *Heraclitus, Fragment B87.*

anxieties. Beside us other vessels moved into position, one behind the other, ready for their descent to the river, which is abruptly interrupted by the dam but continues its journey to the sea beyond.

The descent is accomplished by means of five massive ship lifts—there are five more for the upward passage. When our turn came, our ship advanced into the first chamber along with several others. Passengers on both our vessel and the one beside it stared in amazement at how tightly the ships had been brought together, while exclamations of wonder, a few startled cries, and bursts of laughter rose from every side. Along with passenger boats there were freighters carrying lignite.

Once the chamber was filled to the prescribed number, two enormous gates behind us, driven by gigantic pistons, swung shut—each gate thirty-eight and a half meters high and twenty and a half wide—while the depth of the water beneath us reached one hundred and forty meters. The watery floor of the lock began to sink, and in scarcely any time we had reached the next level. Then two more gates, like those that had closed behind us, opened ahead, the ships moved forward into the second chamber, the gates closed again, and down we went once more—and so on until we reached the level of the river

itself.

During the entire descent, enclosed as we were in these successive aquatic elevators, I felt time slow to an almost unbearable crawl. Though surrounded by fellow travelers making the same passage, my thoughts wandered into shadowed realms, summoning the journey of Odysseus to the Underworld.

“You know,” I said to my companion, “I feel as though I’m traveling to the realm of the dead—like Odysseus!”

“Oh, come now! There’s no need for such thoughts!”

“I’m not afraid,” I answered. “In fact I feel a kind of calm as I recall the Nekyia of the Odyssey, where Odysseus descends to Hades.”

“Calm, while thinking of so macabre a subject?”

“Yes—because Odysseus went down to the Underworld, but he returned. He gained the experience of death, yet lived! An experience that enriched his adventurous voyage. There he even met the soul of his mother, who had died while he was away. He grieved and was deeply moved... Shall I tell you

(17). Homer, *Odyssey* 11.204–208.

something of what Homer⁽¹⁷⁾ writes about that encounter?"

"Tell me! I'm listening!"

"These were his words, and within myself I longed

to clasp my departed mother's soul.

Three times I sprang toward her, eager to hold her,

and three times she slipped away like a dream, like a shadow,

and deep within me she made the pain sharper."⁽¹⁷⁾

"It is truly overwhelming to have such an experience!"

"Indeed! And the most overwhelming thing of all is to taste, here in the Upper World, the knowledge and the sorrow of death."

"I do not know how that could happen, but it is, in truth, overwhelming!"

"Perhaps—if one lives with an awareness of life's transience and of the nothingness that death brings. Perhaps. I cannot speak with certainty, but that is what came to me in this moment."

"All right—come, let's return to the present. We

are about to meet the river again!”

“What a pity, though, that it has been cut in two like a dangerous serpent!”

“It has fallen victim to technology and to the modern needs of humankind. With the Three Gorges Dam, a new era begins—for the river, for the people, for the entire country. Time will tell whether this new age will be better than those before.”

“Ah, there is the Yangtze once more! Tonight we shall sleep again in its embrace!”

“Yes—after experiencing a descent! Not to the Underworld, but from one level of the river to another. Come inside now. There’s a program of local music and even a pantomime performance!”

“Wonderful! Let’s go!”

Yangtze – Shanghai

Dawn found us facing the colossal dam, and after breakfast we visited its design and supervision center. The Chinese proudly described the monumental effort of seven thousand engineers and forty thousand workers who planned and built this project, presenting it as a triumph of engineering and related sciences as well as proof of their country's immense constructive capabilities.

The sheer numbers alone are dizzying. On June 1, 2003, when nineteen of the twenty-two sluice gates were closed, the water rose within days to the required operating level of 135 meters, allowing most of the thirty-six generators to begin production. The central reservoir filled with thirty-nine billion cubic meters of water. By 2009, when the dam was scheduled to reach full operation, the water level was projected to stand at 175 meters, the reservoir completely filled and covering an area of 634 square kilometers. Built of white stone, the dam itself measures 2,316 meters in length and 183 meters in height, while the waters it contains stretch for some 600 kilometers, with a width that in places exceeds one and a half kilometers.

But the staggering figures do not end there. Be-

cause of the dam's construction, millions of people have been—or will be—forced to abandon their homes as the waters slowly engulf them. Thirteen cities, four hundred towns, 1,352 villages, and 1,283 archaeological sites will be buried forever beneath millions of tons of water, while thousands of hectares of farmland—roughly two-thirds of the fertile soil of the Yangtze valley—will disappear completely.

The cost of construction was expected to exceed twenty-five billion dollars, while the annual output would reach 18,200 megawatts—equivalent to twenty-six nuclear reactors or ten large hydroelectric plants.

As we listened, amazed by these figures, my unruly mind leapt to the magnificent choral ode in Sophocles' *Antigone*⁽¹⁸⁾, which speaks of the awe, fear, and admiration inspired by human achievement. It praises the material, social, and spiritual conquests of mankind, yet reminds us that, though man has discovered cures for incurable diseases, he has never found escape from death.

“*Sophón ti to mēchanóen technas hyper elpíd' échon, tote men kakón, állote ep' esthlón herpei*”⁽¹⁹⁾, I whispered.

(18). *Sophocles, Antigone* 361–364.

(19). *Sophocles, Antigone* 365–366.

“What are you saying?” my companion asked.

“Nothing—nothing! I’ll tell you later, when we’re back on the ship. For now, let’s listen to the rest of the presentation; it’s nearly over.”

Indeed, a few minutes later we re-embarked. The journey toward Yichang, where we would disembark, remained engaging to the very end. The weather, noticeably improved, revealed the beauty of the landscape in a new light, and we stored away these final images of our Yangtze passage.

“So, tell me—what were you whispering before?” my companion asked.

“You know, as I listened to all those details about the technological marvel of the Three Gorges Dam and gazed upon it, some lines from *Antigone* came to mind.”

“I was almost certain,” he said, smiling, “that after so much justified pride—if pride it is—in this Chinese achievement, some ancient sage would enter your thoughts. I wasn’t wrong! Go on then—how does *Antigone* connect to the famous dam?”

“Not the whole tragedy, but its first choral ode speaks of mankind’s achievements in every field, of his inability to conquer death, and of his failure to free himself from evil. I’d recite it all if I remem-

bered every line, but the ones I whispered say that man has devised ingenious skills beyond all expectation, yet sometimes they lead to good and sometimes to harm.”

“Indeed. And what matters is that, though thousands of years have passed since Sophocles, man has neither conquered death nor escaped evil. Yet he continues to invent his arts.”

“Exactly. Even the greatest technological feats—such as the Three Gorges Dam—contain both good and ill. Think of it: while its builders hope to spare millions from the river’s devastating floods, if that hope proves true, the beauty of the gorges will nevertheless be irreparably altered, as we have already witnessed. And the forced displacement of so many people—though not imposed by a foreign conqueror but by the state itself—will have lasting effects: on the traditions of which they were bearers, and on their inner lives, as farmers are transformed into city dwellers in those rapidly rising towns that now sprout across China, built at a pace sustained by an abundant and inexpensive labor force.”

“I agree completely—especially since this immense dam, together with that breakneck urban expansion, is already creating vast environmental problems, as though humanity cannot develop the

productive powers of a place without destroying the very environment, the most vital home of all.”

“Mmm, beautifully said! That is exactly the warning Chief Seattle⁽²⁰⁾ once gave to U.S. President Franklin Pierce when asked to sell his people’s land. Speaking of the white man’s attitude toward the earth, he said, among other things, that the earth is not his brother but his enemy, to be conquered; and once he conquers it, he moves on, his greed driving him to devour the land and leave behind a desert.”

“And already, in some places, it has become a desert.”

“And that is not all. In the vast Yangtze valley, where a great civilization once flourished, priceless remnants of that culture have been, or soon will be, drowned beneath the rising waters. However many have been saved for museums, nothing can ever mean the same. You cannot confine such cultural wealth within museum walls, nor transplant the earth itself with all it bears—and above all, the meanings those things embody. As Seferis⁽²¹⁾, inspired by Makriyannis, once wrote: ‘The earth has no rings for them to lift it on their shoulders and

(20). *Texts of Modern Greek Literature, Secondary School Anthology*, p. 19.

(21). *George Seferis, Poems*, p. 263.

carry it away.’ Now the people have been uprooted from their ancient homes, and with them the way of life that grew there. What centuries created has been sacrificed on the altar of development.”

Indeed! And what kind of development is it that destroys and pollutes the environment and creates the homeless—people who, having lost everything, must begin life anew with state support always uncertain?

“Whatever we may say,” my companion replied, “time will tell.”

Pensive, we arrived at Yichang, where we disembarked while the ship continued its voyage. At the landing point cars waited to carry passengers onward. They were unmarked as taxis, and lively bargaining over the fare to various destinations filled the air. In the end we chose the car of a woman whose face, serious and sun-browned, suggested that in addition to transporting travelers she also worked the land. Driving us safely through villages and along roads bordered on both sides by cultivated fields, she brought us to the airport, where before long we boarded the plane that would carry us to our final destination: the legendary Shanghai, China’s most populous city.

By late afternoon we had arrived and immedi-

ately took a taxi whose white seat covers gleamed with a cleanliness unmatched by any vehicle we had encountered elsewhere in China. Nowhere else had we seen such immaculate order in public transport as in the taxis of Shanghai.

The broad eight-lane roads leading toward the city center, together with the immense buildings looming in the haze of twilight, gave a clear sense of its scale and eased the movement of both locals and visitors.

Our hotel, the YMCA Hotel, stood out for its Western-style architecture and, newly renovated, offered every necessary comfort. Located in the old city, it provided a convenient base for the sight-seeing we had planned during our two-day stay.

After depositing our luggage, we set out for our first walk. Along the way we passed the familiar street cookshops, from which rose a medley of enticing aromas—but we resisted. Instead we chose a restaurant, where we enjoyed an excellent meal of soup, salad, and meat grilled in the Chinese style, accompanied by wine. Afterwards we returned to the hotel, our bodies demanding the rest they had earned.



Shanghai – First Day

Early in the morning, after our usual preparations, we made our way to the dining room, where the only limit to breakfast was one's appetite. A generous array of fruit, dumplings, salads, and eggs—boiled in various sizes or cooked in a dozen different ways—tempted us. Eggs, a favorite food of the Chinese, can be bought almost anywhere, often boiled with herbs. That morning we noticed a sight that seemed to confirm their popularity: while in other countries one might see people pocketing fruit, slices of bread, cheese, or sweets to eat later, here we watched a well-dressed Chinese gentleman filling every pocket of his jacket with eggs. I have no idea how many he managed, but given the ample capacity of a man's pockets, the number was surely not small. There was nothing blameworthy in it—merely one of those vivid images that lodge in the mind and later demand to be recalled.

Rested and well fed, we set out into the streets. In the morning light everything looked different. Shanghai—home to one of the world's largest ports—was already awake, though like every great metropolis it lives in a perpetual state of partial or total wakefulness. As we walked, we gradually dis-

covered the city's many faces: its distinctly Chinese character, its colonial past, and its contemporary embrace of both national and global realities.

Our first stop was People's Square, in the heart of the city, and more precisely the Shanghai Museum—one of the four premier museums of China. Opened to the public in 1995, it houses 120,000 objects from every historical period of the country. The museum itself embodies Shanghai's modern identity, occupying a building of striking architectural conception. Inside, a magnificent atrium floods the interior with natural light, and an elegant staircase leads visitors to the upper floors.

On the first floor, which also includes a shop for collectors of authentic museum replicas and other treasures, the Wu Po-Ching Collection of ancient Chinese bronzes holds pride of place. Most striking among these are the ritual vessels adorned with tao-tie motifs of the Shang dynasty—fantastic animal masks without lower jaws, linked to the shamanistic religious system of early China. On the same floor we were especially drawn to the Gallery of Ancient Chinese Sculpture, evoking the celebrated cave reliefs of Dunhuang, Longmen, and Yungang. Particularly moving were the gentle stone and wooden Buddhas and Bodhisattvas striving toward the

longed-for nirvana—release and liberation—as well as other Buddhist figures that carried us into the timeless spirit of Buddhism.

Upstairs we were captivated by the splendid Chinese ceramics, ranging from the Neolithic era to the late Tang dynasty, remarkable for their multitude of decorative themes and colors. Dominant symbols guide the initiated toward a deeper communion with the people who created them. Among these, the dragon and the phoenix represent the emperor and empress respectively; the peach, pine, turtle, and bamboo symbolize longevity, often accompanied by the relevant ideogram; and the bald-headed God of Longevity has his place as well. Favorite motifs also include landscapes, flowers, and historical or religious scenes, sometimes enhanced by poetic or prose inscriptions rendered in flawless calligraphy.

Each ceramic piece in the museum's collection tells a story of its own, and to single out one is to risk slighting the rest. Yet it would be unthinkable not to mention the brilliantly glazed horses of the Tang dynasty; the deep green wares; the multi-colored doucai vessels; the enormous vases of the Qing; the fragile Ge wares of the Song; and the exquisite blue-and-white qinghua ceramics. The doucai pieces of the Qing dynasty are distinguished by their green,

blue, and red enamel designs on a white ground, while the qinghua—blue and white—wares are created with cobalt, a technique introduced from the Middle East and perfected during the Ming and Qing periods.

The third floor is devoted to Chinese painting, a serene space where the lighting brightens as one approaches each work. This arrangement protects the pigments, which fade under prolonged exposure. The superb landscapes, painted by artists who favored allegory over strict realism, convey a unique vision of life and a distinctive philosophy that deeply moved us. Chinese painters express the soul of a people who see themselves as part of nature. Yet, given the country's immense modern development, I could not help but wonder whether this bond will endure—or whether it has already begun to weaken irreversibly. Perhaps future artists will depict—whether in nostalgia or in simple recognition—the lost natural paradise and the intimate connection their ancestors maintained for centuries.

On this level of the museum we encountered the Chinese Calligraphy Collection, another form of Chinese painting. Comprising a hundred works, it traces the evolution of calligraphy from the Shang through the Zhou dynasties. For us—and for any

visitor unfamiliar with the language—the pleasure lies chiefly in the visual beauty of the script rather than in the meaning of the words. Even so, we could sense the art's distinct character, moving from precise, disciplined forms to more spontaneous and intricate styles. Completing the floor's displays is the Chinese Seal Collection, which contains some five hundred seals dating from the Zhou to the Qing dynasties.

The fourth and final floor offered a feast for eye and spirit with its Collection of Chinese Antiquities in jade, that exquisite stone so beloved by the Chinese and revered as a symbol of longevity and purity. Equally engaging were the Ming and Qing Furniture Collection, the Chinese Coin Collection, and the Art of China's Ethnic Minorities.

Leaving the museum, we made our way to the old city to stroll through the celebrated Yu Gardens—an experience we could not possibly forgo. For the Chinese, gardens, along with painting, calligraphy, and poetry, represent one of the highest forms of artistic expression and bear little resemblance to those of the West. Designed according to the philosophical principles of Confucianism and Daoism, they are rich with symbolism. Their very layout embodies the balanced and harmonious coexistence of man and

nature: pathways are often uneven, symbolizing life's hardships; circular gates represent unity, especially within extended families; and various reliefs—dragons most prominently—express protection and good fortune. Gold and red accents signify luck and wealth, and the list of meanings goes on.

The Yu Gardens were created by a wealthy family of officials during the Ming dynasty, only to be destroyed first in the First Opium War and later, in the nineteenth century, by French and British forces during the Taiping Rebellion. The Opium War—also known as the Anglo-Chinese War—was fought between Great Britain and the Qing Empire over conflicting views on diplomacy, trade, and judicial rights for foreign nationals. The Taiping Rebellion was an immense civil war in southern China between the Qing dynasty and the radical religious movement of the Taiping (“God Worshippers”), led by Hong Xiuquan, who claimed to have visions revealing that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ. At least twenty million people perished in that conflict, making it one of the deadliest military confrontations in history and the most destructive civil war in human annals.

The ravaged Yu Gardens were later restored, and

some sections—access to all is not permitted—are now compared in beauty to the famous gardens of Suzhou, not far from Shanghai, which were created during the Song dynasty. Passing through the entrance, our eyes—insatiable (as my mother used to say, “That’s why they put oil on the eyes of the dead, so they may finally be satisfied”)—darted eagerly from one marvel to another. Each twist of the winding paths revealed new scenes and fresh aesthetic delights, as though the gardens were staging a continuous cinematic unfolding.

The architecture of the gardens rests on the harmonious interplay of plants, water, bridges, pavilions, artificial rocks, intricate gates, and covered walkways. Close to yet apart from the city’s turbulence, they felt like a sanctuary—indeed, in places they truly were—though visitors, ourselves among them, occasionally broke the quiet with their footsteps and murmurs. Fortunately, at the hour of our visit there were few people, allowing us to savor the walk and treasure every view. We lingered on the bridges, watched the ceaseless play of golden fish in the ponds, studied the variety of native plants, admired once more the traditional Chinese architecture with all its symbolism, and marveled at the artistry of the rock formations, which recalled those we had seen in the Yangtze’s Three Gorges. We happily lost

ourselves in the experience.

As we wandered, cheerful music led us to a pavilion where young women, dressed in brightly colored local costumes and holding traditional instruments, offered visitors a delightful musical interlude. At every turn the gardens rewarded us with new pleasures. Yet outside their walls, the most industrial and commercial city of China pressed forward confidently into the economic conquests of the twenty-first century—a fact impossible to forget even here. The colossal Shanghai Tower, rising 632 meters and slicing boldly into the sky, looked down on the modest Yu Gardens, compelling even the most romantic eyes—intent on savoring their quiet beauty—to glance upward and feel the irresistible pull of the city’s modern face.

For the moment we made our way to the famous Huxinting Teahouse, where—after our tour of the museum and the Yu Gardens—we quite literally revived ourselves with tea. The teahouse occupies a beautiful period building set like a jewel in the middle of a small lake. Built in 1784 by cotton merchants, it originally served another purpose and was converted into a teahouse only at the end of the nineteenth century. We reached it by crossing a zigzag bridge whose very shape, according to Chinese be-

lief, protects the structure from evil spirits, which are thought to move only in straight lines.

Thus shielded from malevolent forces, we entered the teahouse and climbed a wooden staircase to the upper floor. We chose a table with a view of the enchanting waters outside, and in the distance we could see several of Shanghai's towering skyscrapers dominating the misty horizon. We ordered green tea, served in delicate white porcelain cups decorated in blue, accompanied by soy cheese and boiled eggs from small birds. We drank the tea and sampled these unusual accompaniments. The eggs, in particular, carried a subtle, pleasantly spicy flavor imparted by an herb unfamiliar to us in which they had been boiled. As for the décor—dominated by warm wood tones—it was wonderfully atmospheric: graceful old furnishings, charming metal lanterns hung with red tassels, and a white ceiling where two large square panels bore a golden rendering of the Greek key pattern.

When we departed, we paused to watch the golden fish in the little lake and to admire the surrounding buildings before continuing our journey of adventures and discoveries. Our next destination was the Yuyuan Bazaar, still within the Old Chinese City. Something about it drew us on. It was not that

modern Shanghai left us indifferent, but given the time we had, we wanted to spend a part of it in those picturesque lanes with their endless small shops selling every conceivable variety of goods, many of which reflected Chinese cultural identity—even in their imitations.

What we saw there is hard to capture in words. We were captivated—especially I—by the brilliantly colored silk scarves and shawls; by bags of every size adorned with exquisite beadwork in a rainbow of patterns; by inexpensive shoes equally decorated with beads; and by semi-precious stones and pearls dazzling in their multitude of shades. Naturally, in a market where many shops sold similar items, prices varied wildly, and the skilled negotiator emerged the winner. If, for example, you showed interest in something and then walked away, a merchant might well follow you, eager to persuade you to return—offering, of course, a much lower price than the one first quoted. Yet amid this dance of give and take it was easy to be deceived, for among products identical in appearance some were genuine while others were not. How was the unsuspecting buyer to distinguish a silk scarf from a synthetic one when both bore tags proclaiming “silk,” or a real pearl from a clever imitation? Difficult indeed—but... We, too, bought keepsakes and gifts for loved ones, and truly

this was one of the places in Shanghai we came to cherish.

Toward evening we went to the Bund, its very name an Anglo-Indian word for the mud embankment built to protect the buildings that housed Shanghai's economic life before the Maoist revolution. Today it remains one of the city's most iconic landmarks—a grand promenade and the very heart of the colonial period, when Shanghai was divided into zones marking the identity of the foreign powers or local authorities in control. The division into zones—and the reference to Shanghai in Nikos Kazantzakis'⁽²²⁾ *Traveling: Japan–China*, which I had read years earlier—came vividly to mind. Kazantzakis called it the “cursed city,” writing of the Yangtze's muddy waters carrying Chinese soil far out to sea:

“Muddy sea; the Yangtze River

carries the Chinese earth and muddies the ocean for thousands of meters.

Dense fog settles; the ship whistles frantically.

All of us leaning forward, we try to pierce the mist

(22). Nikos Kazantzakis, *Traveling: Japan–China*, p. 49.

to glimpse the famed, the accursed Shanghai.

I look at the map. Like a mottled monster it is divided into zones.

Red is the international settlement, green the French, yellow the Chinese.

When, in 1843, this harbor first opened to foreigners,

Shanghai was a wretched fishing village surrounded by marshes and reeds.

Then came the Whites with their demonic energy: they deepened the river, built wharves, founded factories, banks, exchanges, skyscrapers,

brought strange machines and goods, created new needs for the Chinese to make them customers—

the fishing village became a vast metropolis, and the gentle, contented fishermen were turned into beaten, starving coolies.”

The Bund today, gleaming and cosmopolitan, still bears silent witness to that extraordinary transformation.

The colonial past of Shanghai is still present—not in the old divisions of zones, but in the massive

buildings that lend the city a distinctly Western atmosphere. Similar structures can be found elsewhere in Shanghai, yet on the Bund they stand in a class of their own: imposing, commanding, and, in their slightly antiquated grandeur, seeming almost to challenge the futuristic skyscrapers across the Huangpu River in Pudong, that temple of international commerce where the pulse of modern China beats most visibly.

It was an extraordinary experience to see these two worlds face to face. I do not know whether anything quite like it exists elsewhere, but here the river, though it seems to divide yesterday from today, in fact serves as a bridge connecting the two dominant faces of enchanting Shanghai.

Given the city's history, no visitor can fail to admire the colonial edifices that brought the architectural ideals of neoclassicism to East Asia. Among them stands the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, which, according to a commemorative plaque, began operations under Sir Ronald Macleay, then British ambassador to China, on June 23, 1923. We did not enter, but we read that the interior boasts an exquisite mosaic floor and a stunning octagonal coffered ceiling where, not by accident, appear depictions of New York, London, Paris, Calcutta, Bangkok, Hong

Kong, Shanghai, and Tokyo. On the walls—curiously for a bank—are personifications of virtues such as Wisdom, Honesty, and Truth.

At the entrance two bronze lions stand guard, symbols of strength and authority, which were removed during the Cultural Revolution but have since returned. Flags of the People's Republic of China now fly from the roof, while a red star crowns the dome—a clear sign that the building belongs today to the Shanghai Municipal Government.

Other structures, while retaining their neoclassical heritage, blend it with different architectural currents. The grand Customs House, for instance, rests on sturdy Doric columns and is topped with classical pediments, yet its lofty clock tower unmistakably recalls London's Big Ben. Another building that speaks silently of the city's past is the Tung Feng Hotel, constructed by the British in the early twentieth century. Once home to the Shanghai Club, it boasted the longest bar in the world, where the colonial elite gathered to drink and scheme. Equally storied is the Peace Hotel, with its graceful pyramidal roof, whose nine luxurious suites—each decorated in a different style (Chinese, Japanese, Indian, American, Italian, Spanish, French, German, and British)—have hosted many distinguished guests.

These are only a few of the colonial buildings that adorn the Bund. Notably, all now display one or more flags of the People's Republic of China, a quiet but unmistakable declaration of who holds authority there today.

As evening deepened, the Bund, Pudong, and the river transformed before our eyes. Magnificent lighting revealed the older and newer buildings in a different guise. The Huangpu shimmered with iridescent reflections, while brightly lit boats—tiny floating islands of life—moved lazily up and down the current. Watching them glide past awakened in us a sudden desire for a river cruise, but in vain: we were told that tickets must be purchased the day before. So we remained on shore, gathering a wealth of shifting images and delighting in the sight of kites rising into the night sky. I still remember their beautiful designs, especially one shaped like two fish that seemed to swim not in water but in the evening air. Unforgettable images indeed.

The night wore on, but we were in no hurry to return to the hotel. Leaving the Bund, we wandered once more through the city's narrow lanes. Portable food stalls stood ready—even along the promenade—waiting for late-night customers, and the shops remained open until at least eleven, eager for buyers.

It was striking to witness such activity in a country still officially communist. One would expect such hours in nations where capitalism thrives, yet here, beneath the mantle of communist rule, the most unrestrained capitalism seemed to flourish. Whatever theories one might advance, life clearly makes its own choices.

We had been out on the streets since morning when our attention was caught by a shop where locals stood in a long queue to savor its famously delicious dumplings. Our stomachs clamoring for food, we joined the line behind the others—still it stretched on! As we moved forward beside the glass wall, we could observe the entire process of preparation and steaming: the deft hands of the cooks kneading the dough, filling it, sealing the little pouches, and placing them in round wooden baskets with wire bases. These baskets were then stacked one atop another over a vent of rising steam, which transformed the dough into fragrant, edible spheres.

When our turn finally came, we bought the contents of two baskets, which were placed in special disposable containers. We enjoyed them with the help of chopsticks—the Chinese wooden sticks designed for gripping food. We were by no means experts in their use, but, as the saying goes, necessity

knows no law. The dumplings were far too hot to touch with bare hands, yet soft enough that, with a bit of practice and the absence of forks, we managed quite well. Whether it was our hunger or their inherent flavor, the taste more than justified the long lines of locals and visitors who queued daily for a chance to enjoy them.

Satisfied, we continued our wandering until, after passing through lanes both charming and less appealing—some not particularly clean—we emerged into a beautifully lit square. It was already eleven o'clock when our attention was drawn to a little girl, accompanied by a woman who seemed to be her mother. She was performing acrobatics as though she were a seasoned athlete, clearly hoping to earn a few coins with her skill. Many of her movements she executed while gripping, with her mouth, a three-legged stand anchored to the ground; others she performed stretched flat along the pavement. The suppleness of her body, her simple child's clothing, and her short, untidy hair created a striking tableau. Passersby reacted in different ways: some paused briefly to admire her, others walked past as if seeing something ordinary, and still others—like us—lingered, watching and reflecting.

We marveled at her dexterity, and my companion

playfully engaged with the young performer, finally offering her a generous tip, which she clasped in her tiny fist while making a flurry of grateful bows. Carrying with us the image of this child—Dong, meaning “East,” as she told us—we returned to our hotel filled with mixed emotions. We knew, of course, that Asia is a continent where many children still labor, and that in China countless boys and girls provide their services under conditions far harsher than their years should permit. The little street artist of the square was one of those children who, instead of sleeping long before midnight, roamed the streets and plazas offering entertainment. Yet even her nightly acrobatics would be envied by other children whose youthful energy is consumed in the service of multinational corporations whose products are used by millions around the globe, knowingly or not.

Shanghai – Second Day

Dawn brought our final day in China—how swiftly the days had flown! After our morning preparations, we set out for our destination: Shanghai’s largest airport, which we planned to reach by traveling thirty kilometers in just eight minutes aboard the world’s fastest commercial magnetic-levitation train. Although our flight would not depart until evening, we wanted to see the landscape and experience this extraordinary mode of transport in daylight. At night, when we would actually leave, everything would appear different, and with our luggage in tow it would hardly be easy to attempt the train. So, without delay, we arrived at the ultra-modern station, purchased our tickets, and soon boarded.

The train—sleek, new, and aerodynamically designed—runs not on wheels but on a cushion of magnetic force, making derailment virtually impossible. As a maglev, it operates without a driver and is equipped with technology that continuously monitors its exact position, transmitting data to a central control center where operators oversee every movement by computer. It is also environmentally friendly: silent, emission-free, and three times as energy-efficient as a car and five times as efficient

as an airplane. Remarkably, the energy required for levitation is less than that needed to power its air-conditioning system. Its advantages are many, though the cost remains so high that widespread adoption is, for now, an unattainable dream.

The moment we stepped aboard, we felt the thrill of a singular experience. As the train glided forward, our eyes could scarcely follow the details of the passing scenery, which streamed by in a continuous blur unlike anything possible with other forms of travel. With the landscape almost warping before us, our gaze fixed on the digital speedometer in the carriage, where the numbers climbed past 430 kilometers per hour—amply justifying the train’s nickname, the “airplane without wings.” And all this without a trace of fear. We found ourselves eagerly anticipating the return trip, ready to relive the sensation, knowing that this is among the safest modes of transport: passengers wear no seat belts and may move about freely even at the highest speeds.

The journey back seemed shorter than the outbound ride—familiarity often creates such illusions. In any case, the brief round-trip was an experience well worth having.

Upon our return, after a restorative tea at the Huxinting Teahouse and lively conversation about our

remarkable ride, we spent the remaining hours strolling once more along the Bund and through the Old City, purchasing mostly practical keepsakes. Everything in the old city's market was so enticing that it took real restraint to resist even a small plunge into consumer temptation—a temptation heightened by the strikingly affordable prices. Foremost among the wares were brilliantly colored silks; jewelry of semi-precious stones or strands of beads for creating one's own ornaments; and handbags and shoes embellished with multicolored beads and intricate patterns, not to mention a dazzling array of electronic accessories. These and many other delights did more than invite purchase: they created a vibrant, joyous tableau in which one quickly felt at home, as though taking a daily stroll there. At the same time, the eyes and the spirit were bathed in the beneficent images of the East—images no photograph or other form of recording can fully capture. Only the inner self, once it has lived the experience, preserves that aura intact, guarding it reverently and summoning it back at chosen moments for reasons that mind and soul alone can command.



Nostos – Homecoming

Time, relentless as ever, rushes by—especially when life is beautiful. And we, savoring our final hours on Chinese soil, stored within ourselves every impression we could still gather. Collecting our luggage from the hotel that afternoon and heading to the airport signaled the end of the journey. Not quite the end, perhaps, but something close. For Shanghai's vast, ultra-modern airport—which we had approached at close range that very morning—was itself a remarkable destination, revealing, along with so many other marvels, the modern face of this captivating, siren-like city. How we wished we had more time to discover the many elements that shape its identity. As the plane gained altitude and we gazed down upon the city's glittering nightscape, my heart swelled with joy; looking at my companion, I felt profoundly grateful to have shared with him a journey he had planned so perfectly.

Yet every voyage, since antiquity, carries shifting fortunes: just when you are contentedly recalling its delightful, unforgettable moments, the jealous gods send trials. Such was my feeling soon after takeoff. No, we did not pass between the Symplegades, but we faced an ordeal unlike any I had known—one that

nearly robbed us of the day of our return.

Barely an hour had passed since we left the ground when the huge aircraft, heavy with passengers and luggage, began to toss about like a feather in the wind. Had it lasted only a moment, it would have been the ordinary turbulence of a routine flight. But this time Aeolus, master of the winds, showed no mercy. During the ten-hour passage from Shanghai to Doha we endured a relentless battering.

When the violent shaking began, awe and dread seized me. My mouth went dry with anxiety, and I clutched the reassuring hand of my companion, who remained calm and coached me to breathe deeply with my eyes closed. Doing so brought some relief. As the hours dragged on and the turbulence persisted, I resigned myself to one of two outcomes: either we would crash in some inaccessible land below—perhaps into a jungle—or we would arrive safely. High above the earth, with darkness pressing against the windows, you realize how utterly you are at the mercy of forces dangerous and beyond your control.

At one point, when the tremors eased—only to return again with equal force—the gracious flight attendants served dinner. We accompanied it with a dry red wine whose mellow strength soothed our unsettled spirits. It did not bring sleep to our eyes, but

it offered a sweet pleasure and a calming warmth, recalling to me a saying of Anacharsis: “The vine bears three clusters of grapes: the first for pleasure, the second for drunkenness, the third for disgust.”⁽²³⁾

When at last the shaking subsided, I opened my eyes to see on the digital map that we were already flying above the Indian Ocean. In another hour or two we would land in Doha. Dawn had broken, and as I drew back the window shade a dazzling light poured in. Far below, the Indian Ocean—deep and famed for its tempests—stirred memories and brought to mind verses from the poem “The Monkey of the Indian Harbor” by the seafaring poet Nikos Kavvadias, which I softly recited to my companion.⁽²⁴⁾

Once, in a distant harbor of the Indian Ocean,
I bartered a brilliantly colored silk tie to a
dark-skinned man
and bought a little monkey—
with gray, shadowed eyes brimming with
cunning.

... ..

One day, as I walked pensively with her,
she slipped from my hands and merrily ran

(23). Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.3.103.

(24). http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/arts/tributes/nikos_kavvadias/1

away.

Her greatest virtue was her silence.

Yet she possessed something of the treacherous heart of woman.

“Mmm... disappointment with women—that’s what the poet seems to express,” my companion remarked as soon as I finished the low-voiced recitation.

“With so many ports as his stations, he must have known women of every race,” I replied. “Perhaps some of them—hopefully not all—led him to that conclusion. But poetry, after all, allows poetic license: it can express in this way the eternal and peculiar contest between the feminine and the masculine.”

“Who can say what the poet truly meant?”

“Probably no one. Each reader receives the lines in a different way. Every poem is open to multiple readings! But come—let’s drink our coffee. We’ll be landing soon. Five hours of waiting in the Doha airport, and then the flight home. China has given us the beautiful journey, to paraphrase Cavafy.”

“Now tell me—as only you can—some lines from his “Ithaca”⁽²⁵⁾. Don’t you think it’s the perfect epi-

(25). C. P. Cavafy, *Poems*, vol. I, p. 23.

logue to this voyage, which I hope will not be our last?”

“I’m certain it won’t be our last. Perhaps not so distant next time, but we will travel again—for our souls cannot live without journeys, whether real or imagined. Remember, there are also the imagined ones, which cost nothing! But I digress. Listen now to Ithaca. I’ll recite it in full; it would be a pity to give it incomplete.”

As you set out on the way to Ithaca,
pray that the road is long,
full of adventure, full of knowledge.

.....

Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
you will have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

“Thank you,” my companion whispered. “Thank you for that recitation. And I promise you, as far as it depends on me, we shall take more journeys—both real and of the mind.”

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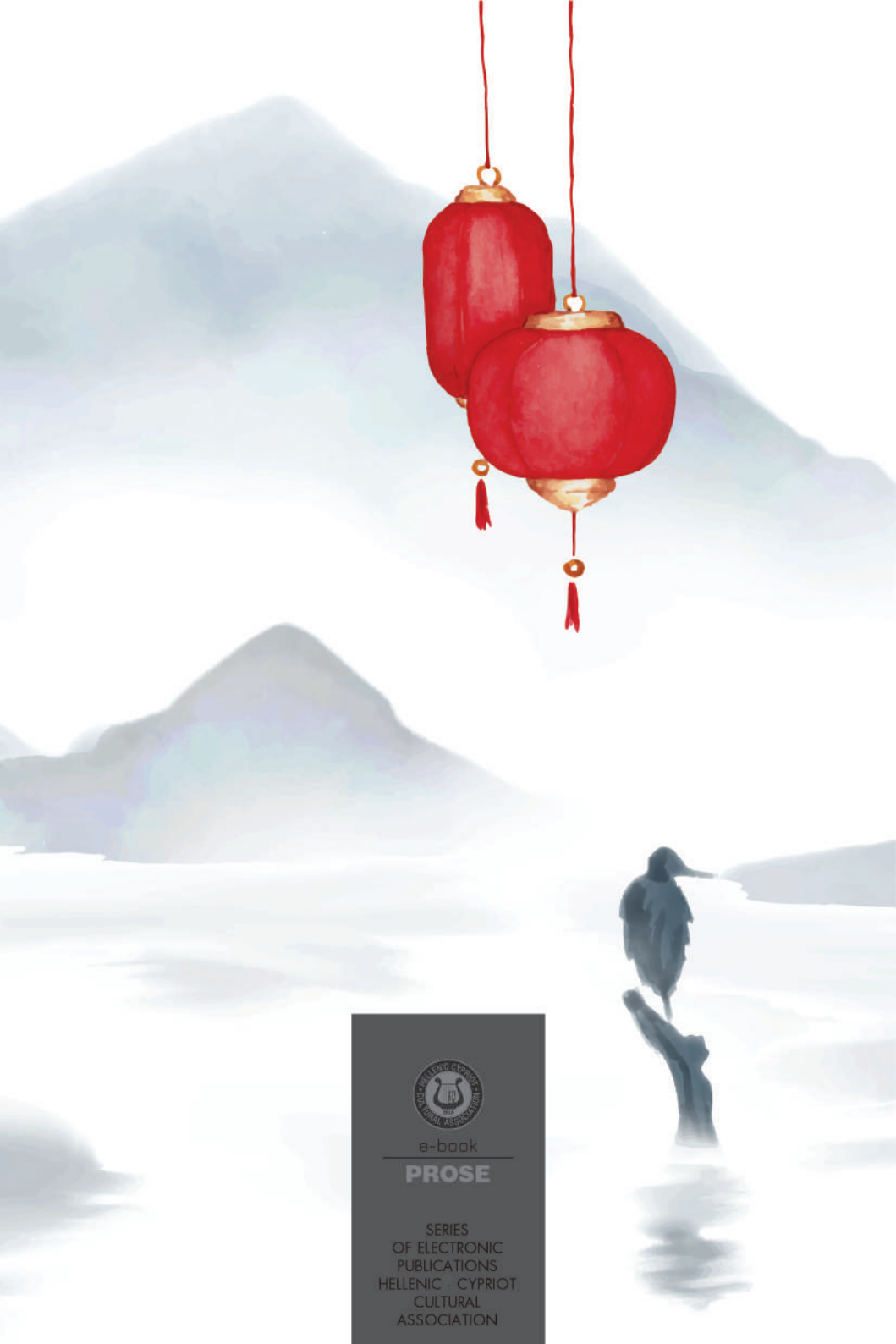
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