

not gone according to plan. He explained to the class that they would have fifteen minutes, and then he told them to "write about anything you want."

The students wrote. At the end of the hour Adam collected the papers. They had written about anything they wanted, and what he had was forty-five shopping lists. I want a new TV, a new dress, a new radio. I want more grammar books. I want my own room. I want a beeper and a cell phone and a car. I want a good job. Some of the students had lists a full page long, every entry numbered and prioritized.

It wasn't exactly what Adam had intended, but nevertheless there was a great deal of Sichuan in those lists as well. The next time, Adam explained very carefully that they should "write about any subject you want to write about."

That worked better. Ker put his head down and wrote. And Adam and I kept plugging away, learning from our mistakes and trying to fit into the local routines.

# 城市

## THE CITY

THERE ARE NO BICYCLES in Fuling. Otherwise it is similar to any other small Chinese city—loud, busy, dirty, crowded; the traffic twisted, the pedestrians jostling each other; shops overstaffed and full of goods, streets covered with propaganda signs; no traffic lights, drivers honking constantly; televisions blaring, people bickering over prices; and along the main streets rows of frightened-looking trees, their leaves gray with coal dust, the same gray dust that covers everything in the city.

There are no bicycles because Fuling is full of steps, and the city is full of steps because it is squeezed close on the mountains that press against the junction of the Wu and Yangtze Rivers. Narrow streets also rise from the riverbanks, switchbacking up the hills, but they are cramped and indirect and too steep for bicycles. Automobile traffic tangles on the sharp corners. And so the long stone staircases are the true boulevards of Fuling, carrying most of its traffic—shoppers descending the stairs, pausing to browse in stores; porters climbing up, shoulders bowed under the weight of crates and bundles.

Virtually every necessary good or service can be found along these stairways and their landings. There are shops and restaurants, cobblers and barbers. One of the lower stairways is lined with Daoist fortune-tellers. Another staircase is home to a group of three dentists who work at a table covered with rusty tools, syringes in mysterious fluids, and pans of cruelly defeated teeth—a sort of crude advertisement. Sometimes a peasant will stop to have his tooth pulled, after haggling over the price, and a crowd will gather to watch. Everything is public. A haircut comes with an audience. The price of any purchase is com-

mented on by the other shoppers who pause as they pass. For medical problems one can sit in the open air and see a traditional Chinese physician, who has a regular stand near the top of one of the stairways. His stand consists of a stool, a box of bottles, and a white sheet with big characters that say:

**To Help You Relieve Worries and Solve Problems!**

**Particular Treatments: Corns, Sluggishness, Black Moles, Ear Checks.  
Surgery—No Pain, No Itching, No Bloodletting, No Effects on Your Job!**

Fuling is not an easy city. Old people rest on the staircases, panting. To carry anything up the hills is backbreaking work, and so the city is full of porters. They haul their loads on bamboo poles balanced across their shoulders, the same way freight was carried in the south of China in the 1800s, when the English referred to such laborers as "coolies"—from the Chinese *kuli*, or "bitter strength." Here in Fuling, as in all of the eastern Sichuan river towns, the porters are called *Bang-Bang Jun*—the Stick-Stick Army. They have uniforms (the simple blue clothes of the Chinese peasantry), and the weapons of their trade (bamboo poles and loops of cheap rope), and they tend to gather in packs, in companies, in battalions. To bargain with one stick-stick soldier is to bargain with a regiment. Their jobs are difficult enough without cutthroat competition, and they look out for each other; there is no formal union but the informal bond of hard labor is much closer. During midday, when most people rest, the stick-stick soldiers can be seen along the midtown streets, sitting on their poles, smoking, chatting, playing cards; and in their leisure there is an air not so much of relaxation as of a lull in the battle.

Most of them are peasants who have farms in the mountains outside of Fuling, and usually there is a wife or a brother tending the land while they try their luck carrying loads on the docks. There is always an especially heavy flood of stick-stick soldiers during the winter, because that is the light season in the countryside. But never is there any shortage of these men, and there is something eerie in their silent ubiquity. They stand five deep in front of television stores, staring at the wall of screens. If a foreigner eats at a streetside stand, ten stick-stick soldiers will gather to watch. If there is an argument on the

docks, they will cluster close, all of them dressed in blue, holding their bamboo poles and listening intently. Occasionally a small variety show will stop in Fuling and pitch its tent on the river flats, fronted by an advertisement featuring more or less undressed dancing girls, and invariably there is a lost regiment of stick-stick soldiers gaping at the marquee. An auto accident is not truly an auto accident unless a company of stick-stick soldiers arrives to gaze at the damage. They are quiet men—even the most grisly wreck sometimes fails to inspire them to words—and they never interfere. They simply watch.

But to see them work is to understand why they so often rest, because in a hard city there is no harder job. For a load they generally make one or two yuan—there are slightly more than eight yuan to the American dollar—and routinely these workers carry more than one hundred pounds up the staircases. They are short, stocky men, their bodies shaped by the hilly city and the nature of their work. In summer, when they go without shirts, you can see where the bamboo poles have burnished the skin along their shoulders like leather. In hot weather they are drenched in sweat; in winter their bodies steam. Below rolled-up trousers their calves bulge as if baseballs have been tied to the backs of their legs.

Fuling is a city of legs—the gnarled calves of a stick-stick soldier, the bowed legs of an old man, the willow-thin ankles of a *xiaojie*, a young woman. You watch your step when climbing the stairways; you keep your head down and look at the legs of the person in front of you. It is possible, and very common, to spend a morning shopping in Fuling and never once look up at the buildings. The city is all steps and legs.

And many of the buildings are not worth looking at. There is still an old section along the banks of the Wu River, where beautiful ancient structures of wood and stone are topped by gray tiled roofs. But this district is shrinking, steadily being replaced by the nondescript modern buildings that already dominate the city. There are a few tall ones, seven or more stories, but they are cheaply made of blue glass and white tile like so many new structures in China. And even if you built a beautiful new building in Fuling, it would quickly fade beneath the gray layers of dust.

The city is different from the land in that, apart from the small

old district, there is no sense of the past. To travel through the Sichuan countryside is to feel the history, the years of work that have shaped the land, the sheer weight of humanity on patches of earth that have been worked in the same way for centuries. But Sichuanese cities are often timeless. They look too dirty to be new, and too uniform and ugly to be old. The majority of Fuling's buildings look as if they were dropped here about ten years ago, while in fact the city has existed on the same site for more than three thousand years. Originally it was a capital of the Ba Kingdom, an independent tribe that was conquered by the Chinese, and after that nearly every dynasty left it with a different name, a different administrative center: it was Jixian under the Zhou Dynasty, Fuling under the Han, Jixian under the Jin, Hanping under the Northern Zhou, Liangzhou under the Sui, Fuzhou under the Tang, Kuizhou under the Song, Chongqing under the Yuan and Ming, Fuzhou under the Qing, Fuling under the Republic of China that was founded in 1912.

But all of those dynasties have passed with hardly a mark left behind. The buildings could be the buildings of any Chinese city whose development has swallowed its history. Their purpose is simply to hold people, the more than 200,000 people who spend their days climbing the staircases, fighting the traffic, working and eating, buying and selling.

**DAWN.** A cool morning, the city covered in haze. Retirees practice *taiji* in the small park near South Mountain Gate, the central intersection. Fuling is relatively quiet—as quiet as it gets. There is a steady stream of traffic, and already many of the drivers are honking their horns; but the roads are not congested and the noise of the city is not yet overpowering. It is a pleasant morning.

The retirees are lined up neatly in rows. A radio plays traditional Chinese music, and the old people move slowly, gracefully. The park is tiny—not so much a park as a lull in the city. There are stunned bushes and exhausted flowers and broken-hearted patches of grass. But all of it is well cared for—vandalism of public property is not a problem in Fuling. The problem is the air, the coal dust that blankets the city and chokes the greenery. Few things are more pathetic than a tree

in Fuling, its leaves gray and dull as if it were just taken out of the attic.

The roar of the city rises as sunshine fills the haze in the eastern sky. It is a mottled medley of sounds: honking horns, roaring television shops, blaring cassette tape stands, the uneven buzz of streetside salespeople calling out to the passersby. East of South Mountain Gate there is a sudden reprieve, a completely different strain, the soft but piercing music of an *erhu* played by a blind man.

*Erhu* means "two strings"—that is all. It is a simple name for a simple musical instrument: a cylindrical wooden sound box covered by python skin and topped by an upright handle with two strings stretched taut along its length. It looks something like a crude two-stringed violin. But that pair of strings has a rich soulful range and the *erhu*, played well, makes haunting music.

Today the blind man is playing well. He is about forty years of age, but his face looks older: tanned and creased, his eyes pinched shut. He wears dirty blue clothes and green army surplus sneakers. He sits on a low stool, and next to him is a cloth covered with poorly written characters. His nine-year-old daughter stands nearby with a glass jar half full of money. A small crowd has gathered, because the *erhu's* music, despite the blaring horns and the noise of rushing passersby, is powerful enough to make people stop and listen. They read the words on the cloth:

#### A Brief Story of a Household

At twenty years I was married, and at twenty-two I lost the sight of both eyes. Eleven years after marriage I had a boy child, and then on December 2 of 1988 I had my second child, a daughter. My wife and I shared the care of the two children, tried to survive on the land of our household. But our family was short of hands, and we had trouble, because grain and money were unreliable. The woman had to drag all of these people behind her by the strength of her own effort, and indeed finally she was unable to continue living. For this reason, we were forced to flee on January 8 of 1996.

Because of my two lost eyes, I was not able to live from day to day! On March 2 of 1996 I was forced to send my son to live with his mother's father. My son was fourteen years old, and without money we could not send the boy to school. I hope that all of you uncles and aunts, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, will extend your

warm hands to help me! My heart extends ten thousand thanks! I wish you success in your work! Happiness and a long life!

Above all of this the *erhu* plays. Effortlessly the music rises and falls, the voice flowing from the snakeskin-bound box, never drowned out by the rushing cars, the stream of pedestrians, the nearby television. At last the man stops. Gently he lays down the *erhu* and takes out his pipe. With his fingers he feels the rough roll of tobacco, and then he calls for his daughter. She lights the pipe, carefully. The blind man inhales deeply and sits back to rest, surrounded by the rising roar of the morning city.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Shakespeare with Chinese Characteristics

IN FULING I taught English and American literature. I also had classes in writing and speaking, but most of my time was spent teaching lit. There were two sections of third-year students, and I taught each of them four hours a week. Our textbooks started with *Beowulf* and continued through twelve centuries and across the ocean to William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

It was a great deal of ground to cover. The Peace Corps suggested that we not be too ambitious with such courses, given our students' backgrounds and the fact that many of them had relatively low levels of English comprehension. It was recommended that we use literature to introduce important grammatical points, but this was an idea I didn't like. I knew that I was an uninspired teacher of the language's technical aspects, and I also knew that Shakespeare is an even worse grammar instructor than me. And I had studied literature for too long to use it as a segue to the present perfect tense.

But I still had some concerns. The students, after all, were from the countryside, and it was true that their English—and especially their spoken English—was sometimes poor. On the first day of class I asked them to jot down the titles of any English-language books they had read, either in the original or translation, and I asked what they would like to study in my course:



I enjoyed Hai Ming Wei, *The Old Man and the Sea*. I mostly want to study Hai Ming Wei.

I mostly want to study Helen Keller's and Shakespeare's work.

I've read Jack London and his *The Call of Wild*, Dicken and his *The Tale of Two Cities*, O. Henry and his *The Last Leaf*, Shakespeare and his *King Lear* (and that made me burst into tears).

I'm most interested in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. I don't know which periods it belonged to. I like Jane. I think she is a very common women, but she has a uncommon seeking. She dared to resist wife of mother's brother and brother of cousinship. She is a progressive lady.

Shakespeare was the greatest of all English authors. I had read some of his works. *Romeo and Juliet* is a dire story. Romeo and Juliet love each other. But there was revengefulness between their families.

And I have read "Farewell, Weapons," which was written by Hemingway. He was a tough man, but he killed himself.

I looked at their responses and thought: I can work with this. For the first week I assigned them *Beowulf*.

I TAUGHT on the fifth floor of the main teaching building. There were forty-five students to a class, all of them pressed close together behind old wooden desks. The room was their responsibility. They washed the blackboards between classes, and twice a week they cleaned the floor and windows. If the cleaning wasn't adequate, the class was fined. That was how everything worked at the college—students were fined for missing morning exercises, for skipping class, for failing examinations, for returning late to their dormitories at night. Very few of them had extra money to spend in this way, and so twice a week the classrooms were diligently and thoroughly cleaned.

Each room contained about fifteen more students than could comfortably fit, and it would have been claustrophobic if I hadn't been able to teach with the door open. Fortunately, there was plenty of

space outside—the classrooms were high above the Wu River, the same view that I had from my apartment's balcony: the fast-running Wu, the jumbled city, the muddy Yangtze and the dark shape of White Flat Mountain.

That was what I saw to my left as I taught, and at the beginning it was distracting. But there was always a good breeze coming off the rivers, which kept the room from becoming unbearably hot. If things got quiet—if I had the class doing a writing assignment, or if they were working smoothly in small groups—I'd gaze out the door at the traffic on the rivers: the little two-man fishing sampans, the crowded ferries crossing from one bank to the other, the barges bringing coal and gravel north from the upper Wu, the big white tourist boats slipping down the Yangtze toward the Gorges. There was something deeply satisfying about teaching with that view, and I liked watching the routines of the city in the same way that I liked listening to the routines of the college. During class I used to look down at the traffic teeming on the rivers, at all of the fishermen and barge captains and dock workers, and I'd think: I'm working, too. The city was moving and I was a small part of it.

At the beginning we read very little from the literature textbooks, because even the summaries were difficult, but it wasn't hard to get at the material from other angles. Often I told the stories, acting them out with reluctant students I grabbed as "volunteers," and the classes loved this—in a country where foreigners were often put on television simply because they were *waiguoren*, a room full of students was completely entranced by a foreigner performing *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Other days I gave them writing assignments; for *Beowulf* we talked about point of view, and they wrote about the story from the perspective of Grendel, the monster. Almost without exception the boys wrote about what it was like to eat people, and how to do it properly; while the girls wrote about how cold and dark the moor was, and how monsters have feelings too. One student named Grace wrote:

The warriors said I am a monster, I can't agree with them, but on the contrary I think the warriors and the king are indeed monsters.

You see, they eat delicious foods and drinking every day. Where the foods and drinking come from? They must deprive these things from peasants.

The king and the warriors do nothing but eat delicious foods; the peasants work hard every day, but have bad foods, even many of them have no house to live, like me just live in the moor. So I think the world is unfair, I must change it.

The warriors, I hate them. I will punish them for the poor people. I will ask the warriors build a large room and invited the poor people to live with me.

In college I had been taught by a few Marxist critics, most of whom were tenured, with upper-class backgrounds and good salaries. They turned out plenty of commentary—often about the Body, and Money, and Exchange—but somehow it didn't have quite the same bite as Grace's vision of Grendel as Marxist revolutionary. There was honesty, too—this wasn't tweed Marxism; Grace, after all, was the daughter of peasants. She didn't have tenure, and I had always felt that it was better if people who spoke feelingly of Revolution and Class Struggle were not tenured. And I figured that if you have to listen to Marxist interpretations of literature, you might as well hear them at a college where the students clean the classrooms.

The truth was that politics were unavoidable at a Chinese college, even if the course was foreign literature, and in the end I taught English Literature with Chinese Characteristics. We followed *Gawain* with a ballad about Robin Hood, and I asked them to write a story about what would happen if Robin Hood came to today's China. A few followed the Party line:

Robin Hood comes to and settles in China, leaving his own country. On landing in the territory he is impressed by the peaceful country and friendly, industrious Chinese. He knows that the bright pearl of the east is distinct from England in many aspects. Englishmen have no freedom, no rights. They are oppressed deep by their masters and exploiters and live a dog's life. Moreover, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. He hates such exploiting classes who lead a luxurious life based on plundering the poor cruelly. But he does not seem to be adequate to overthrowing the rule.

However, in China people are masters of the country, serving country is serving people. Some of the people are allowed to get wealthy first through honest and lawful labour [which] does not

widen the gap between the rich and the poor, but leads the people to common prosperity. Robin Hood knows deeply the fact that it is unnecessary to take something away from the rich by force as he did in England, but China still needs justice and bravery. Cultural and ethical construction should be fastened to development.

But most of them kept Robin Hood busy stealing from corrupt cadres and greedy businessmen. Often they put him in the booming coastal regions, in Shenzhen and Guangzhou and Xiamen, where reforms had freed the economy and materialism was king. In their stories, Robin Hood stole from the rich and gave to the peasants, and almost invariably he ended up in prison. Sometimes he was executed. One student had him successfully reeducated over a fifteen-year prison term (upon his release he became a detective). But almost always Robin Hood was caught; there were no illusions about the idealized green world of Sherwood Forest. There are few trees in China and the police always get their man.

I had them debate about whether Robin Hood was a good role model for today's China, which split them right down the middle. Some said that he was like Mao Zedong, a revolutionary against injustice; they compared him to the heroes of the Long March and said that China would be nowhere without people like Robin Hood. Others answered that he was a Counter-Revolutionary, the sort of person who would stir up trouble and disturb the economy. They pointed at what had happened during the Cultural Revolution—do you want constant Class Struggle with Robin Hood in the middle?

Within ten minutes they were no longer debating about Robin Hood. They were arguing about China, and they were arguing about the political dogma with which all of them had been indoctrinated. Things quickly became heated. I sat in the back, listening to the mess of contrary ideas they had been taught. Revolution was good—all of them knew that. Mao was a hero and the Long March had led to Liberation, which was the greatest moment in Chinese history. But Counter-Revolution was bad—Tiananmen Square protesters, pro-democracy activists; anything that agitated for change was bad and against the Revolution. To be faithful to the Revolution, you should support the status quo and the Communist Party—that was how you

remained Revolutionary. Or was it? Robin Hood tangled them for an exhausting hour, every student speaking at least once, some of them angrily, and sitting in the back I wondered how you could ever make sense of it all.

ONE THING that I came to understand very early was that Fuling Teachers College served a dual purpose. It trained teachers, but like any Chinese school it was also an educational extension of the Chinese Communist Party. Each Fuling student carried a red identity card at all times, and on the front page of the card were eight "Student Regulations." The first three were as follows:

1. Ardently love the Motherland, support the Chinese Communist Party's leadership, serve Socialism's undertaking, and serve the people.
2. Diligently study Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, progressively establish a Proletariat class viewpoint, authenticate a viewpoint of Historical Materialism.
3. Diligently study, work hard to master basic theory, career knowledge, and basic technical ability.

It wasn't by accident that academic study came third. The top priority was political: these students were being trained to be teachers, and as teachers they would train China's next generation, and all of this training was done within the framework of Chinese Communism. Everything else was secondary—and if it contradicted basic theory, it wasn't taught.

First-year students of all departments studied Marxism-Leninism, and during their second year they took a course in law. Third-year students studied Building Chinese Socialism, oblivious that the city across the Wu, with its booming private businesses and bankrupt state-owned enterprises, was a testimony to the Dismantling of Chinese Socialism that was happening all across the country. This was the strangest part of it all, the way students could study and believe in Communist courses while free-market contradictions sprang up all around the college. And they did believe in what they were taught—most of the stu-

dents were patriotic and faithful in the way they were trained to be. They took their political meetings and rallies seriously, and they coveted the chance to join the Communist Party. In every class perhaps 10 percent would have that opportunity; in the English department, there were eight Party Members out of ninety third-year students. They were some of the best in the class—the brightest, the most talented, the most socially adept.

The second rule, which emphasized their duty to “authenticate a viewpoint of Historical Materialism,” explained a great deal about how political theory worked in China. I never gained more than a vague understanding of what Historical Materialism means—it has something to do with Class Struggle—but authenticating was the key. Not investigating, or contemplating, or analyzing—simply authenticating. They did whatever was necessary to prove the theories correct, ignoring complications and contradictions, and in the process they carefully used the appropriate terms. A few times I asked students to explain what some of these phrases meant—Historical Materialism, the People’s Democratic Dictatorship, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—but they were never able to answer in clear and simple language. It was, as Orwell would say, a case in which words and meaning had parted company. All that mattered was that students used the correct terminology and the correct political framework as they viewed the world around them.

Often it was difficult to see exactly where Adam and I fit into this vision of education. Adam taught American Culture, which used an English-language textbook entitled *Survey of Britain and America*. The book had been published in 1994, and often its portrait of America was hardly recognizable—for example, the chapter on American religion didn’t mention charities, communities, or schools, but said quite a bit about the Jonestown mass suicide. Another particularly vivid chapter was called “Social Problems.” Part of it read as follows:

The American society is developing very fast scientifically, while the spirit of the society is becoming more and more hollow, and the society itself more and more corrupted. . . . Many social scientists claim that premarital sexual relations were not unusual among both young men and young women before 1960’s. But what is different

today is the open acceptance by many young people of a single standard for both sexes before marriage. Some Americans say this is only casual behavior; others may find such an excuse that premarital relations are the natural result of romantic love. This sounds even more ridiculous. The "new morality" is nothing but "immorality." This is the so-called "American civilization."

Homosexuality is a rather strange social phenomenon that most people can hardly understand. It widely spreads. One reason for this may be the despair in marriage or love affairs. Some people fail in marriage and become disappointed with it. So they decide no longer to love the opposite sex, but instead begin to love a person of the same sex as a return of hatred to the opposite. Another reason may be that some people just want to find and do something "new" and "curious," as the Americans are known as adventurous. So they practised homosexuality as a kind of new excitement. Through this, we can see clearly the spiritual hollowness of these people and the distortion of the social order.

The chapter outlined a number of additional problems—racism, sexism, drugs, religious fanaticism—and then it gave the fundamental reason for America's flaws:

However, the most important reason is the capitalist system of America. In this capitalist society, although science and technology is highly advanced, some people are suffering from spiritual hollowness. Thus they start to look for things curious and exciting. Therefore, only when the American capitalist system is ended, can all these social problems be solved.

It was not an easy book to teach from. The biggest problem was separating the wheat from the chaff: it was important to tell the students that things like racism and sexism were indeed major problems in America, but at the same time they needed to know that for many people homosexuality was not an issue (and it was also good if they realized that Capitalism does not cause homosexuality). In the students' minds, though, the book was either correct or it was wrong. There was no middle ground, and they had been taught not to question official texts.

Teaching as a foreigner was a matter of trying to negotiate your way through this political landscape. It was an acquired skill—over time, Adam and I gradually learned how to minimize the politics, to find subjects and ways to approach them that didn't trigger the standard knee-jerk reactions. It was easier for me in literature class, especially when we started working on poetry, which simplified everything.

By rights it shouldn't have been simple—the first poem we studied was Shakespeare's, and I didn't make it particularly easy. I defined the form of a Shakespearean sonnet and gave them Sonnet Eighteen in pieces, broken apart line by line. We reviewed poetic terms and archaic language, and I divided them into groups and told them to put the poem in order. Even though I gave them the first line, I figured it was an impossible task; my goal was simply to make them struggle with the bare bones of the poem until its form felt somewhat familiar. But they were never suspicious of impossible tasks, which was part of what made it so easy to teach in Fuling. The students would work at anything without complaint, probably because they knew that even the most difficult literature assignment was preferable to wading knee-deep in muck behind a water buffalo. And so the groups studied their broken sonnets while I gazed out at the sampans and barges on the Wu River.

Within an hour they had it. Some of the groups were merely close, but in each class there were two or three who nailed it:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
 And every fair from fair sometimes declines,  
 By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.



And they understood the form of the poem; just as they had put it together, they could take it apart. They could scan its rhythm—they knew where the stresses were in each line, and they could find the inconsistencies. They read the poem to themselves and softly beat time on their desks. They *heard* the sonnet. This was something that few American students could do, at least in my experience. We didn't read enough poetry to recognize its music, a skill that educated people lost long ago. But my students in Fuling still had it—nothing had touched that ability, not the advent of television or even the pointed devastation of the Cultural Revolution.

As time went on it almost depressed me. The Chinese had spent years deliberately and diligently destroying every valuable aspect of their traditional culture, and yet with regard to enjoying poetry Americans had arguably done a much better job of finishing ours off. How many Americans could recite a poem, or identify its rhythm? Every one of my Fuling students could recite at least a dozen Chinese classics by heart—the verses of Du Fu, of Li Bai, of Qu Yuan—and these were young men and women from the countryside of Sichuan province, a backwater by Chinese standards. They still read books and they still read poetry; that was the difference.

Verse never seemed to bore or frustrate them. The only stumbling block was language, the new vocabulary and the English archaisms, and with these they had infinite patience. We reviewed Sonnet Eighteen carefully, until at last we distilled it to the notion of poetic immortality, and I asked them: Was Shakespeare successful? Did the woman live forever? Some of them shook their heads—it was four hundred years ago, after all—but others hesitated. I asked them where the woman had lived.

“England,” said Armstrong, who answered most of my questions.

“And when was that?”

“Around 1600.”

“Think about this,” I said. “Four centuries ago, Shakespeare loved a woman and wrote a poem about her. He said he would make her beauty live forever—that was his promise. Today the year is 1996, and we are in China, in Sichuan, next to the Yangtze River. Shakespeare never came to Fuling. None of you has ever been to England, and you have not seen the woman that Shakespeare loved

four hundred years ago. But right now every one of you is thinking about her.”

There was absolute silence. Usually Fuling was a riot of horns and construction projects, but at that moment in that classroom it was completely quiet. There was respect and awe in that silence, and I shared it. I had read the poem countless times, but I had never heard it truly until I stood in front of my class in Fuling and listened to their stillness as they considered the miracle of those fourteen lines.

A moment later I asked them to describe what they saw in that silence, Shakespeare's woman through Chinese eyes:

Her skin is as white as snow and as smooth as ice. Her long hair is like waterfall; her eyes are so attractive you will never forget after you see her. She is plentiful, she is tall. Her little mouth as red as roses, and her eyebrow is like the leaves of willow. Her fingers are so slender that scallions can't compare with them.

She looks like a slim and graceful lotus that is beginning to blossom. Her long hair is like a waterfall. Her elbow is like a crescent moon. Her mouth is like a red cherry. She has bright eyes. She is as gentle as water.

She is slim, with long black hair. Her eyes are big and bright, full of soft and shyness. Her brows are like two leaves of willow. Her lips seem very active. Her skin is white and soft, like cooked fat.

Her hair is just like golden wave. Her skin is so smooth that you will suspect it is made of marble. Her waist is as soft as watergrass and her fingers are slim as the root of onion.

She has natural, plain beauty as a woman in the countryside. She is as pure as crystal. She looks like a floating poem.

In our imagination, she is very beautiful and have something of melancholy. In Chinese history, there are four beauties, maybe, she looks like one of them—Wang Zhaojun. For us, we can't find some description about their beauty, because their beauty is beyond description. We can only say: they are very beautiful.

THERE WAS AN INTENSITY and a freshness to their readings that I'd never seen before from any other students of literature, and partly it was a matter of studying foreign material. We were exchanging clichés without knowing it: I had no idea that classical Chinese poetry routinely makes scallions of women's fingers, and they had no idea that Sonnet Eighteen's poetic immortality had been reviewed so many times that it nearly died, a poem with a number tagged to its toe. Our exchange suddenly made everything new: there were no dull poems, no overworked plays, no characters who had already been discussed to the point of clinicism. Nobody groaned when I assigned *Beowulf*—as far as they were concerned, it was just a good monster story.

This was the core of what we studied in that cramped classroom, and on the good days we never left. But there was always a great deal that surrounded us: the campus and its rules, the country and its politics. These forces were always present, hovering somewhere outside the classroom, and it reached the point where I could almost feel the moments when they pressed against us, when some trigger was touched and suddenly the Party interfered. Occasionally students wrote about how Shakespeare represented the Proletariat as he criticized English Capitalism (because of this theory, many Chinese are familiar with *The Merchant of Venice*), and several pointed out that Hamlet is a great character because he cares deeply about the peasantry. Other students told me that the peasants in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the most powerful figures in the play, because all power comes from the Proletariat, which is how Revolution starts.

I had mixed reactions to such comments. It was good to see my students interacting with the text, but I was less enthusiastic about Shakespeare being recruited for Communist Party propaganda. I found myself resisting these interpretations, albeit carefully—in light of my students' backgrounds, I couldn't bluntly say that the peasants in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are powerless buffoons who provide comic relief. But one way or another I always tried to answer the readings that I felt were misguided. I argued that Hamlet is a great character not because he cares deeply about the peasantry, but rather because he cares deeply and eloquently about himself; and I pointed out that Shakespeare was a Petty Bourgeois Capitalist who made his fortune by acquiring stock in a theater company.

For the first time I came to understand why literature so often slides away toward politics. I had struggled with this before; at Princeton I had majored in English, and after graduation I had spent two years studying English language and literature at Oxford. My original plan had been to become a professor of literature, but over time I became less enamored of what I saw in English departments, especially in America. Part of it was simply aesthetics—I found that I couldn't read literary criticism, because its academic stiffness was so far removed from the grace of good writing. And I could make very little sense of most criticism, which seemed a hopeless mess of awkward words: Deconstructionism, Post-Modernism, New Historicism. None of it could be explained simply and clearly—just as my Fuling students stumbled when asked to define Historical Materialism or Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.

But mostly I was disturbed by the politicization of literature in the West: the way that literature was read as social commentary rather than art, and the way that books were forced to serve political theories of one stripe or another. Very rarely did a critic seem to react to a text; rather the text was twisted so that it reacted neatly to whatever ideas the critic held sacred. There were Marxist critics, Feminist critics, and Post-Colonial critics; and almost invariably they wielded their theories like molds, forcing books inside and squeezing out a neatly-shaped product. Marxists turned out Marxism; Feminists turned out Feminism; Post-Colonialists turned out Post-Colonialism. It was like reading the same senseless book over and over again.

And I resented the way that English departments constantly tinkered with the canon, hoping to create a book list as multicultural as the fake photographs they put on the covers of their undergraduate brochures. It had always seemed to me that with regard to literature there was some value in establishing and respecting a cultural foundation, and now in China I saw what happened when these roots were completely ripped up. For years the Chinese had mined literature for its social value, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when all operas were banned except for a handful of political works like *The Red Detachment of Women*. Even today there was much that had been lost. All of my students knew Marx; none of them knew Confucius.

But at the same time I came to see the reason for such politicization