

in a more human light. I realized that part of the power of great literature is its universality: the daughter of Sichuanese peasants can read *Beowulf* and make connections to her own life, and a classroom of Chinese students can listen to a Shakespeare sonnet and see the flawless features of a Tang Dynasty beauty. But along with this power there is a fragility, because it is always tempting to misappropriate the force of a great writer. It's natural to want Shakespeare on your side—and if he doesn't fit perfectly, you can twist his words to serve your purpose. Or, if he absolutely refuses to come to heel, you can expel him from the canon.

All of this was commonly done in China, and yet I was surprised to find that in some ways my students did a better job of avoiding politics than students at Princeton and Oxford. As the semester went on, the political forces outside the classroom seemed to drift farther and farther away, probably because the material was foreign. The literature was so fresh and different that the students usually forgot their standard political guidelines, and we also skirted the hassles of English departments in America. None of my students seemed to care that in the fall semester we read strictly dead white males, just as they didn't care that a live white male taught the class. As far as they were concerned, all of us were simply *waiguoren*.

Instead of worrying about politics, their energy was focused on understanding the material. They listened to the way the poetry sounded, and they weighed the characters in the stories. They took this seriously—to them, literature wasn't simply a game, and its figures were like real people who should be judged accordingly. They studied a summary of *Hamlet*, and after reading it a student named Lily responded in her journal:

Mr. Hessler, do you like Hamlet? I don't admire him and I dislike him. I think he is too sensitive and conservative and selfish. He should tell the truth to his dear, Ophelia, and ask her to face and solve the problem together. After all, two lovers should share wealth and woe. What's more, I dislike his hesitation. As a man he should do what he wants to do resolutely.

You couldn't have said something like that at Oxford. You couldn't simply say: I don't like Hamlet because I think he's a lousy

person. Everything had to be more clever than that; you had to recognize Hamlet as a character in a text, and then you had to dismantle it accordingly, layer by layer, not just the play itself but everything that had ever been written about it. You had to consider what all the other critics had said, and the accumulated weight of their knowledge and nonsense sat heavily on the play. You had to think about how the play tied in with current events and trends. This process had some value, of course, but for many readers it seemed to have reached the point where there wasn't even a split-second break before the sophistication started. As a student, that was all I had wanted—a brief moment when a simple and true thought flashed across the mind: I don't like this character. This is a good story. The woman in this poem is beautiful and I bet her fingers are slim like scallions.

This was what I was looking for as a student—some sign that literature was still enjoyable, that people read for pleasure and that this was important in and of itself, apart from the politics; but often it was hard to tell if this was happening. In Fuling, however, there was no question that the students enjoyed what they read, and I realized that for the rest of my life I would try to think of literature as they saw it. Sometimes, when they were working on an assignment and I was looking out at the Wu River, I'd smile and think to myself: We're all refugees here. They've escaped from their classes on Building Chinese Socialism, and I've escaped from Deconstructionism. We were happy, reading poetry while out on the rivers all of Fuling went about its business.

WE STUDIED *HAMLET* IN OCTOBER, when the weather was still warm but the autumn rains were beginning to settle in the river valley. I divided my classes into eleven groups and they spent a day preparing their scenes, and then they performed the play in the classroom. They pushed the teacher's podium to the side of the room and swept the floor, which was the stage. All of the students crowded their stools and desks into the back and from there they watched.

Acting transformed them entirely—in class they could be painfully shy, but drama changed all of that. Every gesture was overblown, every emotion overdone; they were incorrigible overactors, and after growing accustomed to their shyness it was strange to watch

them shout and cry on the bare stage of the classroom. Sometimes I thought that perhaps it had something to do with the influence of traditional Chinese opera, in which the action is exaggerated and stylized, but more likely it was simply a release in a society where emotions were rarely open. Regardless, it was a strange experience to watch them perform; they were half-recognizable, like the play itself, and both the students and *Hamlet* became something new in my eyes.

Roger played the dead king's ghost, a writhing, howling spirit in a brightly painted cone-shaped Chinese emperor's crown that he had made of papier mâché. In any performance of *Hamlet* it is the ghost that sets the tone for the play, and so it was with Roger in his imperial crown—a touch of China in the class's Denmark.

In the second scene, Hamlet went before Gertrude and Claudius, who were played by Jane and Sally. Romance was always a knotty issue for my students; even the most casual public contact between sexes was taboo, and to play a wife or a girlfriend was too embarrassing for most of the female students. Often they simplified it the way Jane and Sally did, by making the couple the same sex, because in Fuling it was common for friends to be openly affectionate with each other. And so Sally stroked Jane's hair, and Jane fondled the other girl's arm, and then, realizing that Hamlet was glaring at them, Sally said imperiously,

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

And Hamlet—played by Barber, a nervous misnamed boy in thick glasses and a cheap tan suit—replied,

Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.

Jane ran her hand along Sally's thigh. Both of them were pretty girls, their long hair brushed smooth like black silk. Barber scowled. Languidly Jane pressed close against Sally, and then she purred,

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,

And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Don't continue to be sad for your father,

You know that every man must die.

They wrote most of the dialogue themselves—the language of the play was too difficult and they used only the most famous lines, writing the rest in colloquial speech. Hamlet's Act III soliloquy was performed by Soddy, the class monitor, who stood alone in front of the class and said,

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
 Whether it's better to do nothing and suffer,  
 Or whether I should struggle against Claudius  
 And end these troubles. To die, to sleep—  
 No more—and by sleeping to end all of  
 These terrible problems! To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub. . . .

He was a big kid with a lazy eye from the countryside of northern Sichuan, and the other students called him *Lao Da*—Big Brother, a nickname from Hong Kong gangster films, a term of respect that reflected Soddy's authority. But despite his high position in the class hierarchy, he was a relatively poor student. His writing was fine, but his spoken English was bad and he had no confidence in class. Rarely did he speak out or answer questions.

I had never understood why the students respected Soddy so much until the day he stood in front of us and played Hamlet. His English was still poor—he stumbled over the soliloquy, and some of it was unintelligible. But that didn't matter, because now his talent was suddenly palpable; it was as if he had reached out and caught hold of his gift in the palm of his hand, turning it over once or twice, holding it as surely as he held our attention. He was slow, deliberate. He paced the room, and in his movements there were traces of Sichuan opera—a cloak folded just so over the crook of his arm; a wooden stool laid on its side and used as the focus of his wanderings, until he made a palace of that simple prop. But mostly his voice was perfect—he controlled the pace and tone of his speech, the way Hamlet's emotions rise and ebb like a hot uncertain sea. And Soddy knew how to use both noise and silence, to shout in frustration and then let the words resound in the classroom that he cleaned every week. He paced restlessly; he crouched on the stool; he buried his head in his hands; he roared and

shouted; he kicked at the chair; and suddenly he was silent—and then, after the silence was complete, he said, quietly,

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus we want to do something  
 But our thoughts prevent us  
 And lose the name of action—

He was Hamlet and he was *Lao Da*; there was no longer any question in my mind. The students watched with rapt attention and at the end they applauded madly. For the rest of the year, whenever I looked at Soddy, at his square jaw and his cockeyed gaze and his dark peasant's complexion, I saw the Prince of Denmark. That was exactly what Hamlet would have looked like in the countryside of Sichuan province.

IN THE OTHER CLASS'S PERFORMANCE, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern marched before the king, kowtowed until their foreheads nearly grazed the floor, and stood there holding hands while they listened to Claudius's instructions. In Sichuan it was common for male friends to hold hands like that—and certainly you would want to hold somebody's hand if you were being sent off unknowingly to your death.

They loved the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Some of them were annoyed by Hamlet, and they found Ophelia pathetic, but everybody loved Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They loved their hapless prying and they loved their demise, the way the servants are tricked into carrying their own death warrants to the King of England. That was a good touch by Shakespeare—another bit of China in the Bard's Denmark. It was a little like Miao Ze in the Chinese classic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, who betrays his brother-in-law Ma Teng in order to win the graces of the powerful Cao Cao. But Cao Cao, after killing Ma Teng, turns to the expectant Miao Ze and says, "A man so faithless does not deserve to live," and promptly executes him and his entire family in the public square. Or maybe it was like Mao's general Lin Biao, who had tried to turn the Cultural Revolution to his purposes but in the end became one of its victims. In any case, my students knew Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—they had seen those characters many

times in many ages. Even today you could sometimes still find them in the cadres' offices.

The play ended in a flurry of swordplay and kung-fu kicks, Laertes and Hamlet and Claudius involved in what could have been the climax of a Hong Kong martial arts film, until at the end only Hamlet and Horatio crouched in front of the class. They were played by Vic and Lazy, both of them dressed in cheap Western-style suits, and before their scene they carefully spread newspaper across the floor so the Prince could die without getting dirty. The class giggled—but then the scene began, and Lazy leaned against the wall and held the dying Hamlet, and everybody hushed.

Lazy cradled him close, like a child, and yet the contact was natural because Chinese men were allowed to touch each other in that way. Hamlet groaned, tried to speak, coughed out his dying words; Horatio stammered farewell and rocked his friend tenderly in his arms. The class was silent, watching. The actors were small men and alone on the floor they looked even smaller, crouched below the peeling paint and the dusty blackboard. Hamlet coughed again and said,

I cannot live to hear the news from England,  
But I support Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.  
So tell him that—the rest is silence.

And so Hamlet died—and for a moment I almost forgot that I was in a cheerless Chinese classroom, and that Horatio was in fact a peasant's son who liked to sleep and called himself Lazy, holding Hamlet tenderly and saying softly, sadly, Lazily,

Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

THE LATE-AUTUMN MISTS fell over White Flat Mountain and the classrooms grew colder. They weren't heated—few public buildings in Fuling were—and finally I took to closing the door when I taught. The students started wearing coats, scarves, gloves; their fingers swelled with chilblains and their ears turned red. I could see their breath in the

cold crowded room. We read Swift, Wordsworth, Byron. The verses resounded with sweet regularity as we recited them aloud—iambic puffs of steam rising toward the ceiling. Outside, the unmetered wind blew hard from the Yangtze. Beneath their desks the students stamped their feet in the cold.

They begged me to assign another Shakespeare play, and at last I did, partly to keep warm. I summarized *Romeo and Juliet* and they played it. Soddy and his classmates built a balcony out of desks, an unstable tower upon which Lucy stood bravely while Soddy courted her from below. Five scenes later, Grace gave Juliet's soliloquy as she prepared to take the Friar's sleeping potion. Her family was against her, and Romeo had been exiled, and in the middle of the scene Grace began to cry. She was a beautiful, lively girl, one of my favorite students because she always spoke her mind without fear of embarrassment. Chinese girls weren't supposed to be like that—but Grace didn't care. On the day she played Juliet her long black hair was pulled back smooth past her shoulders, and her eyes shone bright with tears, and her breath came out white in the cold classroom.

A few days earlier, when they had been preparing the play, I had noticed one boy standing apart from his group. His English name was Silence Hill. "I am always silent," he had explained back in September, when I first asked him about his name. But he wrote beautifully, a thoughtful young man from a village of 250 people, and he always had a soft smile on his worn face. On the day that I noticed him standing alone, he was smiling and staring fixedly at the text of the play. I asked him what he was looking at, and without a word he pointed at two of Juliet's lines:

My only love, sprung from my only hate!  
Too early seen unknown, and known too late!

"Do you understand what that means?" I asked, thinking he had a question.

"Yes," he said. "I think it's very beautiful."

I paused and looked at the lines again.

"I think you're right," I said, and for a moment neither of us said anything. Together Silence Hill and I stood there looking at the poetry.

# 插旗山

## RAISE THE FLAG MOUNTAIN

THE MOUNTAIN HAS TWO NAMES, Peach Blossom Mountain and Raise the Flag Mountain, and it rises green above the college and the junction of the rivers. In spring and fall and winter, the peak often fades into the river-valley fog, and in summer, when the days burn bright under a violent sun, the groves of peach trees near the summit seem to shiver in the heat.

The blossoms appear in late March or early April, two brief pink-flowered weeks that give the mountain its first name. But almost nobody in Fuling calls it Peach Blossom Mountain, although the origins of the other title are even more fleeting—a single instant during the nineteenth-century Taiping Rebellion, when China's history came to Fuling, marched up the mountain, and then moved on. This was perhaps the only time when Fuling was close to the center of China's affairs, and after more than a century the echo still remains, the mountain's name a memorial to a strange and violent revolution.

The Great Taiping Rebellion was started in the mid-1840s by Hong Xiuquan, a poor man from Guangxi province who, frustrated by failing the Chinese civil service examination four times, decided that he was the Son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ. After that, things happened very quickly. By 1851, Hong Xiuquan was leading twenty thousand armed followers, and he declared that he was the Heavenly King of a new dynasty. His soldiers let their hair grow long, fought without fear of death, and believed a sort of bastardized fundamentalist Protestantism that was based loosely on foreign missionary tracts. In 1853, they captured the eastern city of Nanjing, calling it