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Report on Faculty Seminar in China, Summer 91

When people ask me, "How was China?" I am still--three months after my return--somewhat at a loss for words. My answers tend to emphasize emotional reactions: "intense", "moving", "poignant." I would not say that I learned great quantities of new "facts" about China, its institutions, its history, although I certainly acquired the desire to know more. Rather, the experience gave a sensory and emotional content to much of what had previously been disembodied and discrete bits of knowledge regarding Chinese antiquity or developments since 1949.

The visual impact of Mount T'ai, of the historical sites in Beijing and Qufu, of the juxtapositions of architectural styles in Shanghai, or of the mass human effort in the wheat harvest, will long remain vivid in my recollection. Nevertheless, I will most value certain human encounters, as restricted as these were given the nature of our trip and its duration. The students who stopped to practice their English on us in various places (including the one who apparently fled at the sight of our guides), the N.G.O. employee in the English Corner in Kunming, with his visions of a cosmopolitan "New New China," the parents and grand-parents who smiled and let us admire the babies in their arms, the sometime black marketeer in Shanghai who'd been fired from CITS two years previously for "political reasons," Hedy Landry's account of the baby exposed in Qufu, the lecturer who cautiously requested that I write a letter to a former teacher of his (reporting that "everything's fine")--all these touched me in various ways and suggested different sides to the scenario of contemporary China.

Two encounters were of particular importance. The afternoon spent discussing what it means to "profess literature" with Liu Ling moved me greatly. Her comments on her master's thesis, a Maoist reading of Saul Bellow (!) and on literary critic Liu Zaifu produced a profound evocation of the dramatic shifts in Chinese intellectual life: what it meant to live in the more open atmosphere of the early-mid 80's, as well as since the events of 1989.

The other "encounter" is more properly termed a particular conversation with someone I'd met at the beginning of our trip. As I waited in the line for passport control in the airport in Kunming, where the previous day I'd been refused permission to leave the country in spite of a family emergency, I found myself discussing families, and changes, and what it meant to be a member of the generation of the Cultural Revolution (or to be an American of the same generation) with our guide, Mr. Li. I will always be grateful for his human concern and efforts on my behalf that day.

In what ways will these experiences better enable me to teach the Core Course? Certainly I have a firmer grasp of the historical and cultural material we'd studied in the spring; the texts now have a context and a set of associations, material and conceptual, with which they make sense. Beyond that, however, it is important that China is no longer an abstraction for me, no longer "foreign" to the extent that it has become part of my experience, has helped me to internalize the goals for our course: not only the appreciation of difference, but also the search for connections.

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