

# Reflections on China

by Emily Plec

## **Prelude**

How can a U.S. American university professor visiting China for the first time absorb the ancient and modern, the old and new, the traditional and the changing nature of Chinese culture and civilization? Is it possible for her to know China only from the fragments floating across the Pacific Ocean to home? Is it possible to know China only from the media images and articles filtered through an American lens? And which China might she know? Would it be the China I have experienced in Beijing and Shanghai? Yes and no.

To know China from U.S. media is to know only how the U.S. media – including its corporate and government interests – understands China. According to U.S. media: China is labor, China is manufacturing, China is communist, China is increasingly capitalist, China is dangerous, China is Other, China is non-threatening, China is international partner.

To know China from experience is to make friends, to affirm mutual commitments to learning and to cultural connection, to learn about Chinese culture from those who live and shape it, and to become a student of the country rather than a tourist in it.

I look forward to becoming a student of China, a friend to my Chinese colleagues, and an advisor to Chinese students at WOU.

## **PDX – PEK**

We flew into a new city face-lifted from the ancient empire. Still known to my airline ticket as Peking, the city that will host the 2008 Olympic Games appears against a pale blue sky. It feels, for a moment, like any industrial town in the Midwest. After a tour of the PEK airport parking garage, we head off to the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Philo Yang, our gracious host. Our local expert and guide, WOU graduate student Yulin Kang, filled the next four days with exciting trips to infamous sites, great food, and the best company.

I notice:

Bicycles piled with a dozen or more electronics boxes – bungeed and strapped together in a great architecture, the rider an acrobat upon his seat. Necessity begets balance, I think.

I adore the ease and comfort with which the young girls hold hands. So genuinely bonded and kind, a sisterhood imagined and made through temporary touch.

I belong in a culture that knows the full culinary potential of the mushroom. I love cold red rice soup. The stems of things are good. Chopstick proficiency really IS a matter of practice (sticky food helps, though!).

Some of the young women wear tight jeans with studded belts and so much black, their hair teased and ratted as though they are preparing to audition for an '80s glam rock band.

Everywhere in Beijing there are boys and young men in military or police uniforms. It is hard to tell the boys from the young men, though degrees of vacancy in the eyes, protrusion of bones, pallor and posture give some clues. I was struck by their sheer emaciation and wrote the following after a tour around the city:

### **Tiny Soldiers**

The boys come starving from the villages  
Bones protruding, convex cheeks,  
lusterless eyes.  
Their purpose unclear  
Their presence unmistakable  
They come to the city to serve  
and be served  
Perhaps a bowl of rice  
a broth of discarded bones  
like the ones beneath  
the flapping shirtsleeves  
and holding up loose regulation trousers  
the faded green of their uniforms a pallor  
not unlike the skin concealed  
Belts clinched and notched so small  
My heavy American thighs may be larger in diameter  
than this police presence  
Having never known hunger, I cannot know them  
Having misunderstood poverty, I cannot imagine them  
Yet they are here  
Everywhere  
Guarding a question mark  
What the future may hold







