



DIVERSIONS

Toy Story

TOYS WITH A MADE-IN-CHINA provenance aren't always cheap, mass-produced bits of plastic. In Beijing, a smattering of artisans is keeping the age-old traditions of handcrafted toys alive, and their intricately painted kites, colorful cloth animals and hand-painted clay figures are more than mere objects for children's entertainment—they also showcase delightful aspects of China's enduring folk culture.

Four years ago, a friend showed Liang Daxing a photograph of a traditional cloth pillow fashioned into a toy tiger. The image stirred Liang's memories of his time in China's barren, dirt-poor Northeast, where he was packed off for re-education during the terrible years of the Cultural Revolution. A master tailor, Liang, 59, was due to retire until he saw the photograph. It inspired him to hold onto his needle and thread, and delve into the old craft of making toys from spare cuts of fabric. Today, he sells the fruits of his labors from a cubbyhole-sized store

just across from the Confucius Temple in Beijing's historic Dongcheng district.

Unlike the simple, machine-made playthings on display at Beijing's overrated Panjiayuan Market, Liang's creatures are expertly fashioned, intricate designs that are very much one-of-a-kind. "It used to be only foreigners who were interested in buying these toys," the former tailor says. "But I've had many more Chinese customers in recent years, such as young couples who want to celebrate the

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birth of a child." In what is fast becoming another Beijing tradition, Liang's shop will soon be cleared to make way for a new development. But after that happens, he will remain available to make tigers on request. Just give him a call at (86-136) 8351 4421—but make sure you ask a Mandarin-speaking friend to help you translate.

Just down the street, at 38 Guozijian, is the family-run Shengtangxuan, tel: (86-10) 8404 7179. This dusty, cramped store has a small collection of minute, elaborate cloth and paper kites, and Beijing opera masks. But its prime claim to fame is Manchurian clay toys. The Tang family has five generations of toy making behind it, and members still faithfully use the same methods as their Manchu ancestors. Among the collectibles are wobbly headed lions (complete with fluffy manes) and figurines of a rabbit god worshiped in Beijing since the Ming dynasty. The little ones will adore them, but adults will find them hard to resist too—craftsmanship this good belongs on a living-room shelf as well as in the nursery. —BY JENNIFER CHEN

AMUSE BOUCHE

Arabian Bites

AS CORELIGIONISTS, MUSLIM Indonesians and Moroccans share many cultural similarities, but it's a rather different story when it comes to food. For years, Indonesians have been turning up their noses at the aromatic joys of meze, kebabs and tagine, but the recent opening of three Moroccan restaurants in the capital Jakarta indicate change is underway.

"This is the closest you'll come to Morocco in the region," says head chef Sezai Zorlu of Maroush, arguably the foremost of the trio. Nestled in South Jakarta's Crowne Plaza Hotel, its giant brass doors open to reveal lavish tapestries and paintings, ornate lamps, plush cushions and elaborate place settings, with virtually every item flown in from Marrakech. Most of the ingredients are imported, too. "As a matter of fact," says Sezai, "the saffron we use in our rice, lamb and chicken dishes costs more per gram than gold."

Mercifully for diners, Sezai's use of the fabled spice is a workable compromise between flavor



and affordability. Meals of mixed starters, entrée and dessert can be comfortably had for under \$30. Afterwards, guests can head to the champagne bar and enjoy the one Moroccan delicacy about which there is no debate in smoking-mad Indonesia: 12 flavors of imported tobacco, drawn through handblown glass *shisha* pipes. For reservations call (62-21) 9290 1313. —BY JASON TEDJASUKMANA