

Do You Understand?

By Jae Wooten

“*Ting de dong?*” the woman asks as she pulls herself through the door frame. She is tall for a Chinese woman, with a coil of stone-gray hair haloing her head like a cloud of smog and a cornflower dress. She looks me straight in the eyes, and suddenly I am reminded of a time I once encountered a snake warily coiled inside a chicken coop, its form bulging with three distinct ovular lumps.

“A little,” I reply, ashamed of my accent.

“Good,” she says. She doesn’t smile. They hardly ever smile. “Where are you from?”

I hesitate.

“America,” I say and wait to see if I am instantly transformed into a bomb-dropping cowboy, a Hollywood movie star, or a trade pirate with *ren min bi* flowing through my fingers like granules of sand. All I find in her gaze is an unwavering candor that pulls my spine straight up and to attention.

“Tourist?” she asks.

“Student,” I say. That word means something here.

“Ah, good,” she says. “Would you like me to tell you about this place?”

“Yes,” I say, and without warning a stream of words begins to pour from her mouth as fine and fluid as silk from the worm’s tail. What I manage to make out is the sad story of the writer who once inhabited the confines of the courtyard we stand in. He was in school here, she says, in Beijing. He was training to be a doctor, but he wanted to write. He was married to a woman from his hometown. They were not in love. He was tied here by respect for his family. He would write at the desk in the room to your left by lamp light in the evening. It’s right there.

I stand in rapt attention as she continues and, for those moments, there is no greater shame in my heart than the fact that I can only make out a quarter of the meaning that lies behind the smooth flow of tonal shifts and guttural stops issuing from her lips. A group of Chinese

university students, glistening with focus unmarred by binge drinking and Facebook, files in through the door behind my back. She beckons them over with curling fingers attached to a downward-facing palm.

“Please join in,” she says. “This is an American student.”

They all glance me over briefly, the not-so-rare white elephant. They’re young and urban. They’re hard to impress.

“*Ting de dong*,” she says, pointing at me. They take a second, more thorough look, and I have the distinct feeling they see something in me that isn’t there at all.

The woman continues her tale, her eyes lighting up like dark stardust, finishes and kindly directs us all onwards to other venues. The pack of students heads one way and I head the other, next door to a boxy, postmodern museum complex. After viewing the glass-cased exhibits upstairs, I head downwards, into the building’s gut. The hold around the stairwell is smattered with square-matted ink-block prints depicting scenes straight out of some sort of Hell: men and women, their bodies writhing in pain, their faces contorted into primal screams.

I see pictures. The writer as a baby in his mother’s arms, the family garbed in traditional robes. The solemn-faced young man in a class portrait amid jars full of formaldehyde and wire-strung skeletons. The second wife, with her hair cut short like a little boy’s and her eyes serious and wet like a freshly shucked oyster. His writer’s circle in 1927: 15 members. A Chinese man on his knees, hands tied, sack pulled firmly around his face, a sword-wielding Japanese soldier poised to sweep his blade downward. The writer’s circle in 1937: eight members. The intense-eyed old man.

These images stick to the inside of my head as I make the two-mile trek back to the language school I attend, but what startles me most is not their content, but how far they diverge from the near-pervasive look of optimism on the faces of the shit-on-shoe construction worker and Gucci-clad nouveau riche alike. “A New China,” was the country my textbook cover had informed me I was living in. A country where mysterious, wild-haired Caucasian women dotted billboards and merchandise packaging like geisha on Arizona Iced tea bottles and where teenagers sported T-shirts featuring Homer Simpson, Michael Jordan, and “fuck you” written in fancy cursive. A country where so much hard, steady work was accomplished that I often wondered where they kept the invisible meat grinders the inefficient must have been tossed into. A country that seemed to be pulling every stop it could to obtain the place it desired in the world. A land of growth and opportunity. A country with a future. A future like America.

That evening, as I sit across the dinner table from my best Chinese friend, Ge Lin, our conversation hits a serious note.

“Do Americans really have more freedom than us?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “We do. But people don’t know how to use them. We are spoiled.”

She gives me a look of profound disappointment.

“Be careful,” I say. “What you do. This country is developing very quickly. But there are problems with development. It’s not all good.”

Her eyebrows raise in skepticism.

“I think making money is a good thing,” she says. “I think being poor is very bad.”

I nod.

“In America, we don’t know each other. People don’t care about one another. We’re lazy. Our power won’t last.”

For some reason, I feel like my country deserves the fate I’ve just doled out. Maybe it will save us.

“Americans seem to spend tomorrow’s dollar today,” she says. “*Ting de dong?*”

I don’t say anything.