

## The Echo of Laughter

By Natalia Martinez

It happened in Hangzhou several weeks earlier. She had returned – a prodigal child – from the polluted and hot Nanjing to the slightly less grimy and cooler Shanghai, only to run away again the following

day. She has been gasping for fresh air, but was welcomed instead by the unexpected freedom of lotus gardens at the end of wooden walkways and the ever-present calm of nearby water. They rented yellow bikes and ventured into the maze of traffic to trace the outline of The West Lake, nestled in the urbanized city, crowned with whispering trees.

Escaping, dodging, they had half-circled the lake when the lightning first heralded the oncoming downpour. Soon, the rain began to fall in fast diagonals, racing down from the darkened clouds. Her contacts shifted, her vision blurred, and her clothes were edging dangerously close to transparency but, feet firmly planted in the pedals, water streaming down her face, bike skidding, she smiled broadly through the fat drops.

Even if only for the forty-five minutes they spent in a battle against the elements, grinning at each other, being pointed out by the reasonable citizens who had sought shelter, the past couple of months

floated up and away, and life seemed full, bursting, brimming with surprises, boiling over with moments of fulfillment, joy, and instantaneous laughter. She felt her body exhale, turning the past

year – full of difficulties and contradictions – into what resembled a group of tiny, crooked word magnets on a refrigerator: words that has once made coherent sentences but that had since ceased to match up with reality.

In a single instant, the collision of those earlier burdens and the present moment seemed disarmingly and unavoidably simple. She had been bound by mediocrity, she had been afraid, she had dreamed of vacations in Greece and a paved suburban driveway to call “home.” But now, several leaps of faith and surprises later, she was a breathless “thank you” away from moving halfway across the globe to China. The risks she had taken had gradually accumulated to enrich more than her photo album; she had finally begun to gather an understanding of the ineffable interdependence between hope and hardship, effort and fear, strength and weakness.

Pedaling faster, she was flooded with sensory memories, from the colors of dragon fruit on her

plate, to her students' ardent debates about the assimilation of "Western" values in Shanghai. "There are twenty-two Starbucks in this city. *Twenty-two*," she heard each word enunciated in careful, practiced English. Once more, she saw KFCs go by from her taxi window, scattered in so many corners of Beijing that the Colonel began to look like a Chairman Mao caricature, penciled in white against a coincidentally red background, and she mourned what resembled the tactless imposition of one culture on another.

She pictured the willow trees at the Yu gardens swaying in Shanghai's July heat, surrounded by stone dragons on rooftops above and schools of koi in the ponds below – delicately framed by such symbols of power and luck. From the corners of her memory, she heard the saxophone player's weekly concert on Nanjing Lu, his sensual, guttural sound spreading in waves over the heads of eager tourists and casual shoppers. And she smiled at the thought of a friend's use of "wen rou" when describing a woman, mounted on the back of an old bicycle, peaking with a polite smile from under her skillfully balanced umbrella.

She was back there again, staring at Beijing's *hutong* district from above, with its courtyards and overlapping roofs – charming to the tourist's eye alone. And, in awe of the Great Wall, meeting a group of schoolchildren being herded along the walls of their past, instructed on the might of the empire and the Mongolian invaders' obvious underestimation.

"Silly Mongols."

She belonged here, in China, with her hair two shades lighter from the sun, eating Asian pears and bargaining in crowded night markets, reading a novel on the lawn of Jing'an Park. She dug her Holiday-red toenails into the dirt, ate *bao bing*, and laughed with the taxi drivers. She existed here seamlessly, flapping her white skirts behind the rented old bike, strolling quietly along the French Concession, soaking up everything her students taught *her*. Those fried noodles bought on side-street corners, those bundles of brightly-colored joss sticks burning in temples, those fillform needles vibrating in her skin, those overwhelming neon lights and thudding karaoke rooms – she wrapped them all up and took them in without trivializing them, without seeming coarse or common or overdone. Miraculously, without turning into a cliché.

After all of that, having allowed the controlled chaos of this country to strip from her mind all falsehoods and mediocrities, she stood by the edge of life and looked unrecognizably calm. One step, and she was in. She had been merely observing, helpless, until the hands of her students

and friends had reached out, their smiles pulling her into the refreshing waters of souls afloat.

She paused on a street corner of rain-soaked Hangzhou and, upon meeting the gaze of the Chinese man to her left, knew with sudden certainty that at least one of her laments matched up with one of his, one of his pains reflected one of her own. Their losses were different, but the scars they had left could be placed onto each other and, skin-to-skin, they would become indistinguishable. And, thankfully, at least one of her joys were mirrored in him too, similar and shining in both. They might as well have been holding hands, for they were tied to each other, tethered really, through the mere fact that they felt, they thought, albeit in different languages. A certain blissful communality was reveled, distinct from the illusions and delusions she had previously upheld as facts.

The stranger shifted uncomfortably from one leg to the other under the stare of the strange, American girl, then stepped forward, leaving their small group to pedal away, to more moments, more strangers, more of everything.