

A Manicure

By Winnie Tong

I sighed as I walked into a cool air-conditioned beauty parlor, leaving the hot dusty afternoon behind.

The sounds of street vendors selling food and trinkets faded as glass doors closed behind me and I was greeted by a sharply dressed receptionist: "*Ke guan, qing.*"

My mother and I went on a vacation together for the first time in China, summer of 2007. It was the first day I was going outside by myself. My protective relatives had repeatedly cautioned me about the dangerous world outside. So, I decided to do something relatively safe. I went to get my first manicure ever.

I saw my manicurist setting up for me, a twenty something man with a hygienic cloth mask covering his nose and mouth. Honestly, I didn't think he would do a great job. He was young but scrawny, with a wrinkled white tee and an unkempt air about him. I watched him take simple items out of his plastic 'tool kit': a nail clipper, a file, and various colored bottles. All alone, I felt a bit jittery. But, I put on a confident front and glided over to sit down.

"*Ni Hao,*" he greeted me, "Are you visiting? Singapore?"

I was surprised that he could easily tell I wasn't a native born Chinese. There's nothing specific, he told me. It's in your whole aura. The man started working methodically and I started to wonder what was wrong with me. He soaked one of my hands in a plain bowl, while he cut and filed the nails on my other hand. After some silence, he tentatively started a conversation.

My manicurist seemed to be a typical young Chinese male, shaggy in appearance, unmarried, unfettered, yet not rich. He worked full time and had several years of experience. I didn't dare ask him if he felt sitting in a salon for that long emasculated him. He did have a pair of long pinky nails. I told him that I was indeed from abroad, from America, and that China is quite fascinating to me, as a Chinese American interested in her heritage.

I thought my manicurist smirked, but with only his eyes exposed, I wasn't sure.

"Of course, China looks good to you. But do you know, there are so many unemployed out there?"

I said impatiently, "Of course, doesn't every country have that?"

“Indeed,” he said, “but China has so many people. Those vagrant men called *liu mang* are mostly unemployed. They are not bad people. They just can’t find good jobs.”

I shrugged in assent: “Too bad we can’t fix it, right?”

He sighed. “The gap between the rich and poor is great, and still rapidly increasing.”

I interjected: “It’s not really something that you can change. If you could, it would take many people, and resources that are not available to you. Why don’t you focus on your goals instead? What do you want to do?”

“If I could,” he said, “I would want to do something with computers, maybe create a great videogame that everyone will play, and earn lots of money.”

He said it so naively that I wanted to tell him his goal would take excruciating work to achieve. Before I had even continued, he sighed and shook his head: “That’s just a dream, and it can never happen.”

“No,” I told him, “it is possible. There is always hope.”

And he looked at me.

“You are from America, what you have been taught is, there are dreams, and they can always be reached. Here, small things make us happy, like doing well in business for a day or watching China’s team beat other teams in soccer. But I cannot stop working, because I will have nowhere to go. And I am lucky. Some people work and still are not paid.”

He paused. I didn’t know what to say. I could feel his sadness, almost as if he were passing a little bit of his burden onto me as he held my hands, putting on the final coat of polish. What could I say to this man, and to all the others?

I had thought of myself as American and Chinese, but now I realized I had only touched the surface when visiting China. I prided myself on being in tune with my Chinese heritage, but I was just an intruder. I had no idea how different the mindsets of the Chinese people were from the perspectives of an American girl. I got a manicure in China because price is lower. I felt guilty. I’m used to feeling the world fair one minute and unfair the next, but for that instant, I felt that the world was completely unbalanced.

“Finished,” he declared. Jolted, I stared at my pretty polished nails that had taken more than an hour to do. I wanted to tip him. My mother had given me more money than needed. But, would offering my money acknowledge his weakness and insult him?

I guess I was a coward. I thanked him instead.

"It's possible to achieve your dreams," I reiterated. But, it seemed that he had retreated into his shell. He took off his mask, and I could see his face. It was tired, but maybe not as tense as before.

Perhaps that was my imagination. My manicurist briefly nodded at me: "Sure, maybe that will work," he said, and turned to the next customer. I wish that I had changed his mindset, but I know that's not realistic. He had told me, we are from two different worlds, and initially, I didn't want to believe it. Yet, now I could see how our lifestyles are completely separate.

Safely back at the apartment, I wanted to tell my relatives about my experience. They barely nodded. My mother patted me, and went back to laughing and chatting with our relatives. Maybe, my manicurist, who I had overlooked as an average man, had just been trying to shock me, to show me how foreign I was, how ignorant I was of the real Chinese situation. But I, trying to masquerade as both Chinese and American, and truly neither, how would I know?