

The Eclipse of Ancient Xi'an

by Carol Prescott

During a July trip to China, I visit Xi'an, China's ancient capitol. My first impression is that in the struggle between old and new, modern China is winning. The spire of the Big Goose Pagoda fights for its share of the skyline with dozens of cranes. Taxis, cars, buses and bicycles jostle for right-of-way, the donkey carts banished from the main streets. The picturesque *hutong*, neighborhoods of tile-roofed clay houses built around courtyards, are being demolished to make way for high-rise apartment buildings and a huge soccer stadium. But during a day of exploring, I learn the ancient and modern coexist in harmonious and sometimes surprising ways.

In the morning we visit the tomb of Qin Shihuangdi, China's first emperor – in the 5th Century BC. In advance of his death he ordered thousands of life-size clay figures to be created. These were buried with him in lieu of sacrificing his actual servants and army officers. The pits lay undisturbed for 2500 years until a local farmer found them while drilling a well. Unlike many historic sites in China, which have been reconstructed for tourists, the Xi'an warriors are undoubtedly genuine. Most lie in state, awaiting removal from their tombs. Beneath layers of dirt, some still bear their original paint. I knew of their vast numbers but not their individuality. There are foot soldiers, archers, and horsemen. Each is unique, with a different expression, hair and nose.

The complex includes a movie theater and a museum shop rivaling any in the U.S.. After we buy a small replica warrior and a picture book about the warriors, our guide leads us to meet the farmer who found the tombs. Famous yet dispossessed, he sits near the shop exit. He is toothless and bearded, a long-stemmed pipe gripped in his tobacco-stained hand. He signs my book and smiles as we take photos.

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We emerge from the air-conditioned building into the blazing heat. On the way to the parking lot we pass another old man, sitting at a table, signing books for tourists and cheerfully accepting tips. I turn to our guide for an explanation but she chatters on, pretending not to see this bit of free enterprise.

In the afternoon we visit the Great Mosque, a reminder that Xi'an was once the eastern end of the silk route and is home to the Hui, descendants of Arab traders. Through a carved wooden gate we enter the first of four courtyards. The air smells of cedar and the dust of centuries. Unlike the Buddhist temples we have visited, there are no icons, only polished black granite obelisks, decorated with Chinese calligraphy and Arabic characters. We peer into a temple originally built in the 8th Century but destroyed several times by fire. Today's version is still made of wood but it has been updated with ceiling fans and sprinkler systems. We hope to see some of the faithful, but the buildings in the inner courtyards are not open to tourists, their shutters closed tight against the summer sun and western eyes.

Outside the mosque is the bazaar -- a labyrinth of narrow dirt lanes, tented by brightly colored cloth. The air is heavy with incense. Large wooden racks display seemingly ancient wares: brass rings, jade carvings, porcelain flutes, engraved chopsticks, and, incongruously, green army caps and pictures of Chairman Mao. Despite speaking little English, the vendors deliver a hard sell. One woman wrapped in yellow and red robes and headscarf displays a purse with intricate embroidery. "One dollar, lady, one dollar. Many hours, one dollar only." It is hard to deny this reasoning and we buy colorful tote bags and a delicate lace tablecloth.

Suddenly a woman cries out and covers her face with her hands. I look to see what's happening and am enveloped by an overwhelming stench. A young man is walking down the lane, a long pole balanced on his shoulder, its length bowed by heavy buckets at both ends. The shop women turn their heads away, but we watch in fascination as the buckets bob past, the greenish-brown contents threatening to spill onto the street with each bounce of the pole. As he turns the corner he calls out. I wonder what he can be saying: *Make way*

for the crap carrier? A few minutes later, we emerge from the bazaar back into the bright sunlight of the modern city. There is a tanker truck parked at the curb, a gaping hole awaiting the next delivery of buckets.

It is hard to imagine we will find our appetites in time for dinner, but at the Moslem dumpling restaurant we do. We enter a large hall, steamy, fragrant with savory smells. There are at least fifty large tables filled by Chinese diners. We are seated near the kitchen and can see into a work area containing a dozen girls, clad in identical white smocks and caps tied over sleek black ponytails. They place small scoops of filling onto dough circles then, nimble fingers flying, mold the dough into intricate shapes.

We have been eating at tourist banquet halls for days and any variety in our diet is welcome. But this is more than food, this is art. Every few minutes a waiter rushes over, places a bamboo basket in the center of our table and raises the lid to reveal a surprise –yellow birds filled with savory duck meat, green turtles, pink fish, orange chickens containing scrambled egg, green pods cradling red beans. Basket after basket appears until we lose count. The last course is caramel-colored dumplings in the shape of walnut shells, filled with marzipan.

After dinner we stroll to a large outdoor plaza, surrounded by shops and office buildings. There are not many westerners here, it seems to be a local gathering place. Traditional red lanterns hang next to neon signs. A boombox blares rock music, alternating songs in English and Chinese. Hundreds of people wander about, enjoying the cooler evening temperatures and a beautiful full moon. Plump little boys lead entourages of parents and grandparents. Vendors demonstrate bird whistles and spinning tops. Young couples linger, exchanging brief kisses in the shadows. The girls in their sleeveless blouses, short skirts and platform heels look far more sophisticated than the young men, dressed in dark polyester trousers and white short-sleeved dress shirts. Except for the hawkers, the people do not look at us directly, but give us curious sidelong glances.

We walk to the middle of the square to view a glass pyramid—a small version of the one at the Louvre. But instead of marking the entrance to one of the world’s great museums, this structure covers escalators leading to an underground shopping mall. A young woman, dressed in tight jeans, shiny black boots and a pink plastic jacket steps onto the down escalator and calls for her elderly companion to follow. He looks as if he just left the farm; his white shirt is untucked, blue cotton pants are rolled up above his ankles, he wears woven sandals on gnarled brown feet. He stares as the metal steps roll out from the concrete. He tentatively stretches out one foot, then pulls it back. The young woman, disappearing below, calls again. He steps on, clutching the handrail with both hands. Then he grins, his few stained teeth revealing his delight at conquering this modern challenge.

As we resume walking, a young man shouts and points upward. A shadow has begun to blur the outline of the full moon. The crowd becomes quiet, watching as the lunar eclipse slowly develops. People nearby look at us directly, smiling, nodding, inviting us to join their appreciation of this event.

For these few minutes in Xi’an I am united with all the citizens of the earth, east and west, ancient and modern, as we contemplate our moon.