

Flood Myths and Intersections

By Noah Eppler

When I arrived in Beijing, a flood of unfamiliar and alien elements overtook me. In the space of fourteen hours, during a flight from Detroit to Beijing, I traveled from familiarity, comfort, and understanding to a world of rock-solid beds, meat buns for breakfast and ethnic homogeneity. Jet-lagged and exhausted, sitting in the backseat of a taxi with no seat belts while the late Sunday sun ignited the sky with fiery reds and pinks, I witnessed aesthetic conformity as I had never



seen before: entire street blocks covered in buildings that looked the exact same, some like faux-futuristic steel and stone structures straight out of Disney's Tomorrowland, circa 1950, each crowned with red mandarin characters that blazed in the twilight (and while on that topic, the fact that I departed from my hometown of Evansville, IN at 8:55am on Saturday and arrived in Beijing at 3:50pm on Sunday further compounded the "Twilight Zone" effect of that moment).

The flood continued. One night in Beijing, two other EA's and I travelled to the Wong Fu Ting square, where we witnessed a live performance of street Beijing Opera. There, at the end of a long road and in front of a modern office building, stood a man dressed in women's clothing, performing on a small proscenium stage. For my capstone project for my theater major in college, I conducted research in cross-gender casting in seventeenth and eighteenth century England. After the Restoration, the notion





of a male actor performing as a female character had gone by the wayside, and theater artists at the time reserved the practice only for comedies. I never thought I would, in my lifetime, see a male actor perform as a woman and be taken seriously as an artist. Yet here, at this intersection of both physical and metaphysical properties (for it was an intersection between ancient and modern), I witnessed the dreamy trance of a man embodying two spirits in a performance space.

This intersection between ancient and modern has evinced itself to me several times since that night in Beijing. Xianju (in the Zhejiang Province, where I teach), has shopping malls and hotels, and every classroom at the middle school I teach at is equipped with touch-screen boards. Yet, Xianju also has temples that overlook the Yong'an river and trees with pink petals that scrape the water's edge. A few weekends ago, a co-worker and her husband took me to the Xianju Flower Festival, where





each year different institutions (including my school) from around the county erect massive straw statues that depict either ancient myths or life as it was here centuries ago. The sculptures reside in a massive field filled with yellow flowers, and the roads are covered in stands selling food and trinkets. One particular set of statues that struck me portrayed an ancient flood myth, where Da Pu and his men, after warding off a mighty leviathan, placed their staffs in the ground and directed the waters to the ocean.

Another one that stood out to me was a sculpture of glass cubes stacked on top of each other, which unlike every other work did not involve any straw. Like the Wong Fu Ting Square, this statue is representative of that intersection between ancient and modern so ubiquitous here in China. As the flood waters settle and I adjust to life in China, I continue to recognize the innate beauty of this intersection. After all, my name is Noah, an ancient name associated with a flood; it seems like this journey is destiny.

