

– Xi’an –

Our journey began in Xi’an, the capital of the Tang dynasty. A breathtakingly fast high-speed train brought us from Beijing to Xi’an. We arrived on a searingly hot day in July; the temperature reached thirty-nine degrees Celsius. On the road, the tarmac glistened and oozed out its black heat, while the city roared in full force with an immense river of traffic. I had booked a traditional-looking hotel online, thinking we should taste more of the old China. When we reached the hotel, we had to squeeze ourselves in between a gang of businessmen all wearing black suits with alcoholic flushes. They spoke at high volume, while coughing and hawking. Was it a gathering for people with respiratory illnesses? I could smell their odour of strong cigarettes from several metres away. With NO SMOKING signs in the lobby, they stood by the hotel gate fuming away while cracking loud jokes. They spoke Shanxi dialect and I could vaguely make out that their laughter was to do with

food and women. How familiar all this was; men in suits, chain-smoking, looking for girls – the kind of stuff that came with the recent wealth from the ‘Chinese miracle’. Where were the women though? As usual, women worked. The receptionist and the manager were women. They gave us the key after taking our bills.

Our room reeked of smoke everywhere, even the white bedding. We wanted to venture out immediately. We jumped into an air-conditioned taxi and set off to find some famous landmarks.

An hour later we were standing by the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda. Moon, my child, hid under a pomegranate tree near me, sucking an ice-lolly, her chestnut-coloured hair tangled in sweat. Beyond the deafening sound of cicadas high up in the tree, the heat formed a shimmering layer of pink fog above the pagoda. Sweat was dripping from my eyebrows, obscuring my vision.

Everyone in China knows that Xi’an is one of the oldest cities in the country. It’s our Rome or Athens. Over a 2,000-year period, it served as a capital for several dynasties, though it was called Chang’an back then. Traces of the Tang are everywhere. Like many other old monuments, the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda of today is not original. Built

at the beginning of the Tang in the seventh century, it was restored in the eighth century, then rebuilt in the sixteenth century after an earthquake. Constructed of brick and wood, the facade displays elaborate sculptures and carvings on the eaves. We joined a swirl of tourists around the tall tower, but we were not allowed to enter because it is too fragile for touristic multitudes.

‘What a huge tower! Was it for the Emperor?’ Moon asked, squinting in the sun. She was, after all, born and bred in England. She had never experienced this climate, nor such crowds massed around her.

‘No, it was built to store the translations of Buddhist sutras from India.’

‘Did the monks go all the way to India?’

‘Yes. It took them years, even a lifetime. The journey was harsh. They had no aeroplanes or trains like we have now, only donkeys and horses, and their own feet!’

There was not a single puff of wind. I feared the child might get sunstroke. Hopping from the shadow of one tree to another, we managed to exit the park.

Once outside, we leaned on the ancient city walls, enjoying the small respite offered by the

shade. The wall, I read, was fourteen kilometres in length, mainly built in the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century. But the original was Tang. Xi'an is a great palimpsest on which many cultures have written their lives. This is very different from Rome or Athens, which are full of original ruins. Nothing in China can remain as ruins – the government either recreates the supposed original or builds something totally new. Ruins cannot exist under communism.

The view from the old city wall was spectacular. In front of me was the inner-city Xi'an while behind me was the ever-sprawling new Xi'an and suburbs. Because of the mist and fog, I could not see the Qinling Mountains nor the Wei River beyond the city, but I could see layer upon layer of temples and highrises, markets and streets, parks and lakes, ring roads and highways. I felt the vibration of 13 million city dwellers – the noise, the colours and the energy. I heard Moon's voice behind me:

'Mum, what was Xi'an like during the Tang?'

Yes, what was it like during the Tang? Was there a similar vitality and energy? I asked myself as we descended from the city walls. We needed some spicy ramen with smoked tofu before we could go on.