

## 07 XIAN, XIAN!



Now Xian was indeed smoggy and foggy, but it was my favorite of all the cities we visited in China. We took an overnight train from Beijing, leaving at 8:29 pm. Our guide took us to a small soup market on the way to the train station so that we could buy snacks and drinks for our dinner on the train. Myrtle and I were in cabin 6. After we had eaten and settled down to sleep, I saw Myrtle creep from her bunk and retrieve something from her handbag before slowly and quietly pulling back our cabin door and stepping into the corridor. I heard a few furtive movements, and our door moved slightly on its

track. Then Myrtle returned to her bunk and was soon asleep. How she can fall asleep on a dime continues to amaze me. But I could not sleep because I wondered what she had put on our door. I quietly left the cabin to find out. She had attached a paper next to our cabin number, and on the paper she had written 666. When taped next to our cabin number, it would seem our cabin number was 6666. OK then! The lucky sixes. I decided to leave well enough alone and returned to my bunk to sleep.



We arrived in Xian at 8:00 the next morning and went directly to a lovely hotel complex to refresh ourselves and have a hot breakfast. As we passed into the hotel courtyard, there were a few Chinese people doing their morning Tai Chi exercises. I was enthralled by the slow, graceful movements and stood watching until Myrtle grabbed my sleeve impatiently and pulled me along, muttering, "I'm hungry! Come on!"



It turned out that Tai Chi was to be on our day's agenda. After breakfast we gathered in the courtyard and our guide explained that many years ago Tai Chi started as a way to protect and herd a family's geese as families moved from place to place. "Today it is considered a type of martial arts," she said. "There are five different styles. Following the Tai Chi Master, we will do the beginning style of 24 forms using standard style. Next comes more forms in higher styles, but we will not attempt more than the beginning style. You must do the movements in the correct sequence."

Our guide told us to stand about six feet apart in several rows. The Master said something to our guide, and she instructed us to stand quietly and breathe deeply. With a slow and stately movement, the Master began to raise his arms. We all copied his movements. Form followed form, and I did quite well for the first twelve or so movements. Then as the forms became more complicated, my arms and feet, mostly feet, sometimes got confused. I would glance over at Myrtle, and of course she was doing the form perfectly. Sigh. But it was a great way to start our first long day in Xian.

On the bus the guide picked up her microphone and began her lecture. "1.15 million years ago there were ancient civilizations living in this area, probably from the Yellow River Valley. They found Homo Erectus here. It is believed that the earliest people in this region were organized around matriarchal societies. There was no class system and no private property. The Patriarchal Society came with the concept of private property. Then came the class system with males becoming the most powerful."

I guess dear Myrtle could not resist. She gave out a loud "BOO," that I think sort of woke everybody up. I heard two women mutter, "Amen." There were more females on this trip than males, and there was no response from the males. Our guide continued.

"This area is known for its advanced pottery skills. The earliest pottery found here is dated 8000 years ago. Society was matriarchal then with no private property, as we have noted. Human remains have been found here in the Shaanxi Valley near the Yellow River dating to 6000 years ago, and the first painting on pottery is dated to that same time. As the earliest humans began to lose their nomadic ways, the concept of private property arose, and men seized land and power. This brought in the class system and a patriarchal society.

There are five main dynastic periods in Chinese history: Zhou, Qin, Tang, Sui, and Han. During the Zhou Dynasty the first capital was established here in Shaanxi Province in the 21<sup>st</sup> century BC. Many bronze vessels with beautiful patterns have been discovered dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> century BC. These are believed to have been for storing grain. Musical instruments date to the Zhou Dynasty 2400 years ago, but one of the most famous and beloved Chinese musical instruments, the erhu, originated in the Tang Dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty was the most liberated period for women. Empress Wu Zetian ran the country for 40 years. She abolished the class system and instituted many reforms. The Tang Dynasty was the most prosperous period of Chinese history, from 600-900 AD. Our beautiful pagoda was built then, and today Tang architecture is recognized as unique with its unusual roof structure. There are 73 emperors' tombs here and 4000 satellite tombs for high-ranking relatives.

The cruelest of all Chinese Emperors was Qin Shi Huang, founder of the Qin Dynasty that ruled from 770-BC to 206 BC. Shi Huang was the first emperor of a unified China and is considered the most powerful emperor in Chinese history. He is famous, of course, for commissioning the terra cotta warriors and for building the longest section of the Great Wall of China. Many rulers before him had built

sections of the wall to keep out marauders and enemies, but Qin Shi Huang built over 5000 kilometers of the wall, linking the walls of three northern states to form a defense against the Xiongnu. It is believed that Shi Huang used over half the population of China to build the Great Wall and the terra cotta soldiers and his tomb, turning them into slaves and using brutal measures to control them. He also standardized the units of currency, measurement, and character to better control his sprawling empire.

Many improvements were made in social and economic structures during the Han Dynasty 212-BC – 200 AD: animal husbandry and improved agriculture with iron implements, the making of paper, the invention of printing, gun powder, and the compass. Commercial and political travel on the Silk Road routes grew rapidly, with camels becoming very important.”

Myrtle and I thought our guide’s lecture was very interesting, and several times during the lecture I had to grab her hand to keep her from reaching around the seat to bop the man behind us, who was snoring annoyingly. He woke up with a snort when the bus erupted in a loud cheer at the guide’s announcement that there would be an opportunity tonight for a 2 ½-hour full-body massage at a massage parlor, clothes on, cost of \$45, followed by a Hot Pot dinner of shrimp balls, crab, lamb, beef, ham, veggies, Chinese fried rolls, and different sauces for dipping. Yum! My mouth was watering already!



Five of us women opted for the massage, which was heavenly! My dear Myrtle was altogether too noisy, however. Her groans of pleasure were a bit unnerving. When she first began moaning, my therapist froze for a moment, then resumed his massage with what seemed to be determination to elicit moaning from me! Then I noticed a few moans from the other three women, and before you know it, moans of pleasure perhaps more suited to a bordello were bouncing around in that room! And all the therapists were male! Honestly! I tried to be mortified, in between my lovely moaning.



As we walked back to our hotel, our guide told us that acupuncture and massage are used a lot in China. “In China many physicians do not want their children to become physicians,” she said. “In medicine they get a BS, MS, and PhD, and only those with a PhD in medicine can practice in a hospital. It is hard to make a living as a doctor. We have a saying ‘Doctor = no life.’ The retirement age in China is 50 for women, 55-60 for men, to make opportunities for the young.” She said lots more in that vein, but I was so chilled out from that long, luxurious massage and our immersion in the busy, vibrant, glowing and glittering streets, that my

brain went into a kind of stupor, and I followed the group like a zombie. Myrtle even looked at me and said with a smirk, “Jojo, did your therapist provide a little extra service and send you to heaven?”



That was rude of her, most assuredly. But as we ate our fill of the ambrosial offerings of the hot pot dinner and listened to the celestial harmonies of the court musician, my level of contentment reached such a zenith that I could have forgiven Myrtle for almost anything. Almost.



The next morning our group of ten was split up into three groups for an overnight stay with a local family. Myrtle and I and a married couple were assigned to this house, where the grandmother holding a little girl met us at the door with huge smiles and a happy “Nihow! Nihow” with deep bows. Of course Myrtle immediately became the favored child with her expert Nihowing and her brilliant smile.

We stayed with this farmer’s family, and I was surprised at how modern the home was, with a nice sitting room and entryway, everything clean and simple, the tile floors gleaming. Upstairs there were two bedrooms with two beds each, a coatrack, and a tiny nightstand. As the grandmother showed us around, we could tell that she was especially proud of the television, which she turned on to demonstrate, clicking through the channels and inviting us to watch a program if we wished. I counted 28 channels. We learned that seven people lived in this household: husband, wife, son age eight, aunt, baby daughter age one, and the father’s parents. I was keenly interested in the bed used by the grandparents. Their bedroom on the first floor had the old Kang bed of stone with a place underneath to have a fire for warmth. Cornstalks are burned under the cement beds in the winter for warmth.

Myrtle and I were assigned to one bedroom upstairs. While I lugged my suitcase through the door, Myrtle abandoned her suitcase and plopped with an “Ahhh” on one bed, only to leap up immediately with a little shriek. I heard the suspicious crinkling noises of plastic as she began to pat and press on the bed. “Are we supposed to sleep on plastic?” Myrtle hissed? It took me over ten minutes to get her calmed down, mostly by repeating “You’re going to make us lose face, you’re going to make us lose face!” Finally I said, “OK, then go downstairs and sleep on that sofa in the front room!” “Oh, that probably has plastic under its cover as well!” she huffed. It is true the mattresses seemed very new, and they were wrapped in plastic that did crinkle and crackle when you sat on them, and they were very hard. However, as I reminded Myrtle quite sternly, she would probably resort to the same strategy if she were on a limited income and needed to protect her beds from messy and careless tourists.

When the grandmother had got the married couple settled, she came into our room and with a flourish brought out from a nearby chest two electric blankets that she plugged in, pulling our hands to the mattresses to demonstrate that we would sleep on warmth. That proved to be the case. That night we slept on those electric blankets and had the most wonderful, fluffy duvets to cover us. The guide said the duvets are stuffed with cotton batting. I was astonished at how snug and warm we were all night, despite no heat in the house. I did not hear the baby cry one time until morning.

Now, there was something new about how the baby was dressed. Her little trousers were cut out around her bottom, so that her bottom was bare! I could not help wondering if she felt cold. When our guide saw me staring, she whispered, “It is common among farmers to cut out the backs of babies’ trousers so they can relieve themselves when the parents are not there to help them. That also cuts down on laundry.” I could just see Myrtle gearing up to ask where the pee and poo go, so I distracted her by pointing out the small window, through which I could see a donkey carrying a load of corn. Meanwhile our guide informed us that we were invited to join the grandmother in the kitchen to make the noodles for tonight’s meal as we waited for the rest of the family to return from work and school. As we traipsed down the stairs and walked to the kitchen, I know Myrtle’s eyes, like mine, were quietly darting here and there, on the lookout for telltale little deposits. I report happily that there were none.

Unlike the rest of the house, the kitchen, though clean and orderly, was very rustic and almost primitive. It was also cold. Our guide had told us that we would be expected to keep our jackets on in the house since the temperature would be about 50 degrees indoors. “In the winter, everyone wears a jacket in the house,” said our guide. For the evening meal we were offered our choice of beer or coke and were served a thin, pancake-like rice cake in which we wrapped noodles, greens, and a bit of scrambled egg. We were also served a thick wedge of what tasted like bread with a side order of roasted peanuts. This was the dinner where I wanted to show my language skills, an endeavor that fell on its face, as we have already seen.

Everyone in the family was most courteous and attentive to us, always smiling and wanting to make us feel comfortable. After the meal they wanted to take us to a community dance being held in the village central square. It would be circle dancing and fan dancing. As we walked to the central square, the air was so hazy and smoggy that I felt like we were enveloped in a giant cloud of dust and fog! Perhaps wishing to forestall negative comments about the air quality around us, the guide said quickly and quietly, “The dust in the air here is actually smog coming from burning coal. Today is the first day the villagers are allowed to have heat in the house, so today is unusually smoggy.” That soupy smog is very visible in the following photos. Nevertheless, the dancing was interesting and enjoyable.



The next day we went out walking through the village. “This village,” lectured our guide, “is considered an example for other villages. It was started in the 1950s and has had the same Governor for the last 30 years, whom the villagers love. There are about 297 families in this model village, but not all are qualified to be a host for our tour company. Currently 76 families are qualified to be hosts for us. The families need a refrigerator, a certificate of hygiene, proof of good cooking, and they need to take lessons on how to interact with tourists.”

“I lived in this village 30 years ago,” continued our guide. “At that time you did not buy a house, but you paid rent for houses provided by the government. Rents were low. I moved back to Xian in 1982 when tourism was just starting. I shared with my in-laws at first, then my husband and I rented a farmer’s house. There was no running water and no toilet. There were rats at night on the roof. We stayed there 1 ½ years. Then we shared an apartment with another young couple, where we had running water and a toilet. The travel company I worked for provided our apartment for very low rent, 2 yuan per month. I had to live where the company told me to live; there was no choice. The apartment we were given was on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, with no elevator and no heat. In 1993 I left that tour company, so I needed a new apartment. We moved back in with my in-laws. We were eight people together in that apartment then, and we stayed there two years before I found a new apartment on the first floor. It had heat and was provided by my new travel agency. In 2000 we moved into a 90 square meter apartment for 1,100,000 yuan, \$15,000 U.S. dollars. We had to pay a 30-40% down payment. The apartment belongs to the hospital where my husband works, so it is subsidized and cannot be sold on the open market if my husband leaves his job at the hospital. More than 50% of my generation live in subsidized housing. But now today the young generation needs to buy their own apartments – there is no more subsidized housing. Everything is increasing rapidly in value.”

She stopped to let us all gather around her, and said, “We will visit another model village now that is also a farming village, so that you can learn how the farmers live in this area of China; and we will visit a school.”

We followed our guide along a narrow road and were soon coming into the town center of another village. Our guide asked us to gather around, and she began her lecture. “In this area there is a longer winter than summer, and winter can go to minus ten degrees. There is often snow. The summer is dry and hot, with temperatures reaching 110 degrees sometimes. Yesterday was the day they authorized turning on the heat, as I mentioned. They are allowed to use heat from November 15 to March 15.”

As she talked, my attention was caught by the sight of this corn drying.



Isn't this an ingenious way to dry corn? All I could think about, besides how many hours it took to thread all those ears of corn onto that rope, was how heavy those ropes must be! I stayed far away from them in case they decided to fall; and I turned my attention back to the guide.

"In this village live 1000 people. The village was started in 1989 and is now a model for the other villages. The farmers build and own their own houses. They are allotted 2000 square feet per person of land which is usually not enough land to support all the needs of a family. So most of the villagers also have other businesses or jobs. Some villagers are busy with tour groups. From our tour company alone an average three groups per week come to this village. In our company we decide what villages to visit and what houses to select as home host families by using trip evaluation forms. Our company selects only the best families. Village elders may try to apportion guests fairly among families, but our company sometimes disagrees with village elders because our company wants only the best families.



Here you see a man who owns a coffin-making business. There are eighteen private businesses in this village. There is a good sewing factory and a small seed-processing plant. Some farmers rent out their land. If a family has two children, they can have a 12,000 square foot farm (3000 square feet per person). Every five years the land is reshuffled to account for newborns and deaths. Village life is considered a good life. If there are two daughters in the family, only one can marry into a village family; the other must marry outside the village. Boys can always marry within the village, and they

also get their own piece of land upon marriage. The village encourages studying in youth by giving university scholarships to the best youth. They also provide a kind of retirement for those who are 60+ years old. They also hire cleaners for the streets so the village stays clean. Three years ago they started having tours staying overnight. This village ancestry is 600 years old, all relatives of one another in one way or another."

I was glad Myrtle did not start arguing about what an unfair marital system they had here, and I soon discovered that her attention had been fixed on the coffin maker sanding his wooden coffins. For some reason, this process fascinated Myrtle, and she kept commenting on the beautiful shapes of the coffins and how much more elegant they were than the standard western rectangular shape. After a few minutes, she walked up to the man doing the work, flashed him her brilliant smile, and asked if she could lie down in one of the coffins to try it out. At least I imagine that is what she was trying to say. She was consulting her Chinese language guide sheet and sort of miming lying down. The workman bowed to her and stared in puzzlement. Without further ado, Myrtle climbed nimbly into one of the coffins and lay down with her eyes closed and her hands crossed on her chest. The workman leaped back and muttered a string of words that I surmised might have been a long curse or a long prayer, take your pick. The woman in the neighboring work stall screamed and started to sort of wail. Our guide came running, and soon there was quite an audience all watching the blond foreigner who had laid down in the coffin and died.

Understanding in a flash that our guide would probably be in a whole lot of trouble when the news got out that one of her charges had been murdered by a coffin in Zian, my latent and too-often-lagging wits came roaring out of the murk of my sluggish mind. With firm purpose I strode up to the coffin, gently pushing people out of my way. I stood over the coffin, looked up to the sky with a deep breath, then passed my hands over Myrtle while hissing at her, "Get up, you idiot! They are going to lynch our guide because you have died in this coffin!" At that, Myrtle frowned, opened her eyes, saw all the people around the coffin staring at her, then yawned once, stepped out of the coffin, bowed prettily while chanting "Nihao," then turned to the workman and bowed deeply with a radiant smile on her lips. Our guide understood that this would be an excellent time to get her ducklings out of there. She smiled warmly at the workman, passing some yuan into his hand, and quickly led us away. I looked back once and saw the townspeople gathered around the coffin maker, who seemed to be writing on a pad and taking money from people.



We also saw women rolling out these long ropes of noodles that seemed to be about six to eight feet long. They hung them on racks to dry. I wondered briefly if the noodles would taste smoky from the constant smog in the air. But they were beautiful noodles. Mostly I was flabbergasted that those women could roll out noodles to that length without having them break. We also visited some artists and artisans' homes and saw how some of the villagers supplemented their income by creating works of art depicting their rural lifestyle. Several women started an art business here about ten years ago. There

were only a few ladies at first, but now over 2000 people in the village and surrounding areas are doing this artwork and selling it to tourists. The villagers also encourage the children to learn these arts and crafts. Everyone in our group bought paintings, which were very reasonably priced because there was no overhead and no cost for a store. The paintings, priced from 100 yuan for a small painting to 260



yuan for a large one, were created and sold right in the farmers' homes. The first artist's home we visited featured wheat stalk painting by a man in the family. It was beyond my comprehension, dear reader, how he could achieve the delicate artistry of his work. We visited the home of a woman who has been an artist for over 30 years and is now world famous, with two books of her paintings plus many postcards for sale. She will have an exhibition in Singapore next month. She also does paper cutting.



We visited a primary school and talked to the children and watched them play in their courtyard. There were 360 students and 22 teachers in this school, and it was in session from 8:00-11:30 am and 1:00-5:30 pm. We arrived about 4:15 pm. It was a parent reporting day, so we couldn't see the classes in operation. Our guide told us it is common in country village schools like this to have many more boys than girls. "Some of the classes here might have 20 boys and ten girls," she said. I heard a few gasps in our group, and I was glad nobody spoke up to cause discomfort for our guide.



The following day we went to the famous Big Wild Goose Pagoda site. On the way there our guide lectured on the bus. "The Big Wild Goose Pagoda Temple is very famous in China. It is a Buddhist Temple. A Chinese monk named Xungzang went to India during the Tang dynasty and came back revered for his learning. He brought back 600 Buddhist scriptures from India that he had translated into Chinese. The temple is named for a wild goose that saved the monk's life when the monk was dying of thirst. The goose cried out, thereby showing the monk the way to a spring. There had been a five-story pagoda on the site we will visit today, built by the Sui Dynasty in 589 A.D. In 648 A.D. the Crown Prince Li Zhi ordered a renovation to that pagoda to honor his mother, who had died unexpectedly when he was nine years old. This new pagoda, still five stories tall, would house the scriptures brought back from India. The renovation was finished in 652 and the temple complex held 13 courtyards with 1879 elegant rooms. 500 monks lived and worked in the temple complex; and it is said that when the Crown Prince Li Zhi became the Tang Emperor Gaozong, he paid honor to his mother's kindness by facing the Big Wild

Goose Pagoda twice a day from his quarters in the Hanyuan Palace. The temple then became known as the Temple of Kindness and Grace.

After the Tang Dynasty fell, the temple complex went into gradual decay. Between 701 and 704 a new 10-story pagoda was built; and other pagodas followed over the years as decay, war, and earthquakes destroyed the pagodas. What we will see today is the seven-story pagoda built in the later Ming Dynasty. The pagoda is architecturally significant because it was built with layers of clay bricks held together with sticky rice juice in the bracket style, which made a very strong structure without the use of cement. The simple and solemn appearance of the pagoda make it a good example of traditional Chinese architecture.

In this complex you will see many Buddhas, some over 1000 years old; and you can pray to the Past, Present, and Future Buddha. Such prayers are usually accompanied by the lighting of incense or candles. It is believed that the aroma and fragrant smoke of incense purifies the atmosphere and brings a pure mind and heart to the one offering prayer. The incense is also considered a way to spread kindness and love to distant places and to remind us that human life is transient. You may explore this temple complex on your own. Be back on our bus in three hours. The name of your bus is ‘Your Two Legs.’” This, as you can imagine, brought forth a few hoots and giggles, with a smart aleck in the back calling out, “Can I borrow somebody else’s legs and hire a rickshaw?” Our guide by that time was already down the bus steps.



Of all the incense burners we saw that day, this multi-level one was my favorite. I stood near it so long admiring its bells and dragons that Myrtle got annoyed and went her own way. When I caught up with her, I found her lighting incense and candles with a smile on her face. She grabbed my hand and informed me that a divine voice had told her we were supposed to visit all the Buddhas in this complex and light a candle or piece of incense before each one. I looked at her in alarm. “Myrtle, there are many Buddhas here. How can we possibly visit every one? We must be back on the bus in less than three hours.”



As usual, Myrtle did not listen to me, surprise, surprise. She just dragged me along with her, walking so rapidly we were almost trotting. "Myrtle!" I hissed. "This Buddhist complex is supposed to be a haven of peace and tranquility. We should NOT be running around like this." "JoJo," she responded, "with this many Buddhas in one place, I know he just HAS to listen to my prayer." "Since when do you pray?" I asked with a snort. "Today I have become a Buddhist," she answered piously. OK then, whatever.





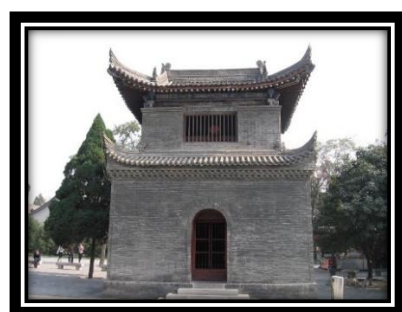
So we trotted around. After a half hour I was a little lost and more than a little tired of this marathon. Then we came upon this lovely little goddess. “Oh, Myrtle! Stop! I like this one,” I said. “That’s not a Buddha, dummy,” she replied. “Well,” I said a little testily, “I like this one.” Just then a small group of people came around the corner and I heard a voice saying, “Now the next statue we see is not a Buddha, but it is said to be the most loved of all Buddhist deities.” Quick little Myrtle spotted the speaker before I did. And what do you think she did? She stuck her finger into her mouth and made a rude gagging noise and jerked my arm to pull me away.

Well, dear faithful reader, I was not in any mood to be jerked around anymore that day, especially when I had found my favorite Buddhist deity. I jerked my arm back just as rudely and turned to listen to the speaker, who happened to be – yes, you clever reader you, you guessed it! The speaker was none other than ObOff, the self-proclaimed Cantonese Scholar. She was leading a small group of enraptured people, who all seemed to be Chinese! My goodness!

“This famous goddess is Guanyin,” ObOff said reverently. “Her full name is Guanshiyin which means ‘The One Who Perceives the Sounds of the World.’ When the Jesuits were in China, they called her the Goddess of Mercy, and that name has stuck and is used by the people today. Buddhists celebrate Guanyin’s attainment of Buddhahood on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the sixth lunar month. There is a Buddhist belief that when you die, if you are loving and pure of heart, Guanyin will place you in the heart of a lotus.” At

these words there was a communal sigh, and I found myself sighing with everyone else. How beautiful! To be placed in a lotus! What could be better? Then I brought myself up short by thinking, “Well, exactly what is so wonderful about spending eternity in a lotus? Sounds a bit boring to me. Hmm.” But then ObOff continued. “After you have spent a short time in the arms of the lotus, you will go to the western pure land at Sukhavati, which is commonly referred to as the Land of Bliss.” OK, then, I can dig bliss!” ObOff continued her lecture. “Guanyin has miraculous powers to assist all who pray to her. We know this because it is stated in the Pumen chapter of the Lotus Sutra and the Karandavyuha Sutra.” By this time I could not help being quite impressed by ObOff’s erudition, and I was sorry Myrtle was not around to hear that all her prayers would be answered right here at Guanyin’s shrine, that she did not have to go running all around this complex to get her prayers answered. I remained at the shrine after ObOff and her students left and I lit both a candle and an incense stick.

I had trouble finding Myrtle then, and just when I was about to give up and go to the bus alone, I spotted her lighting one more stick of incense. I ran up to her and quickly related the excellent news about Guanyin, gloating a bit, I am afraid. Myrtle just looked at me with a sulky sniff. I took her arm and told her we had to go to the bus. She pulled her arm away impatiently and told me to go ahead, that she would catch up in a minute. I reminded her we had about five minutes to spare. She just told me huffily to go on. I did, and as I turned around once to look where she was going, she was streaking down the curved pathway that I knew led to the shrine of Guanyin. I could not help laughing out loud then. I walked back to the bus through the serenity and tranquility of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda complex, past the garden of pleasure, past the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower; and I stood on the pathway for a quiet moment, just breathing and grateful for gifts I could not name nor describe.



To be continued . . .