

## 五十五

That morning I wandered  
the streets all alone  
in a Lanzhou museum  
a dinosaur bone  
some caveman graffiti  
inscribed on a bow  
there were apsara flying  
in warm desert glow



## Chapter 55 – Dinosaurs, Fairies, and Noodles

Gansu is kind of like a big Minnesota – at least that’s the geographic position it occupies in China. In size, it’s actually a little bit bigger than California. The capital of Gansu Province, Lanzhou, is located on the banks of the Yellow River. In 2012, Lanzhou was designated as a Special Economic and Administrative Zone. When we visited Lanzhou’s Gansu Provincial Museum (甘肃省博物馆 Gānsù Shěng Bówùguǎn) in the early 2000s, to see the famous Flying Horse of Gansu (馬踏飛燕 Mǎtà Fēiyàn,) our middle schoolers were not all that impressed. What they were most taken with was a completely intact ancient Huang He elephant skeleton. The movie, Jurassic Park, was not even a decade old and was still fresh in the minds of these middle-schoolers. On a later trip, we visited the Zigong Dinosaur Museum (自贡恐龙博物馆 Zìgòng Kǒnglóng Bówùguǎn,) China’s first special museum dedicated to dinosaurs.



A May 2018 article in Smithsonian.com called China the “the epicenter of paleontology.” A portion of that article likened the scope and magnitude of recent Chinese finds to those dinosaur discoveries in the American west in the late 19th century.

It was at the same museum, we saw our first “apsara” in an exhibit on the northern silk road. The word “apsara” was new to me. Like fairies, apsara inhabit both the sky and the water and are found in both Buddhist and Hindu cultures. In both cultures, apsara are female. In the images we saw, they were young, playful, nubile, and appeared as graceful dancers and gifted musicians. Chinese call the nymphs, 飞天 fēi tiān.



At one time, Lanzhou La Mian (拉面 lāmian) was the largest fast-food franchise in China. The character 拉 (lā) means “pulled”. 面 mian means “noodles”. The noodle recipe is simple: water, flour, and salt. The right amount of salt is the critical ingredient to get the noodle dough to the proper consistency. Lamian chefs then do their magic by stretching and folding and pulling until the initial rectangle of dough becomes beautiful thick tasty noodles. Lanzhou lamian is made by putting slices of beef, turnip, scallion, and cilantro into a special broth. Many people like to add chili sauce to make these noodles even tastier.

With a population of about 3 million, Lanzhou is not a particularly large city, but it is a gateway city to China’s west. It also serves as a major hub of the Belt and Road project linking China’s prosperous eastern region to Central Asia. Formerly one of China’s most polluted cities, it has taken great strides towards cleaning its air by planting trees on the eastern edge of the Gobi desert.