

六十二

“Assalamu Alaikum”
heard more than “Ni hao”
Was this really China?
If so, where was Mao?
A lake named for Heaven
felt just like my home
Lake McDonald in Xinjiang
a picture, a poem



Chapter 62 – Assalamu Alaikum

“Oo-loo-moo-chee” is more or less how this far western Chinese city is pronounced in Mandarin. Ürümqi is the name of the same city on most English maps of China. In Pinyin and in Chinese characters, it looks like this: 乌鲁木齐 Wūlǔmùqí. Located a little north and west of the center of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. It sits among a group of oases on the northern edge of the Tianshan Mountains. it’s been said that Urumqi “is not the end of the world – but you can see it from there.” The estimated population of Urumqi today is 4 million, by far the largest city in far western China and what has been called “the most inland major city in the world.”



Although Xinjiang has historical Chinese claims going back to the Han Dynasty where China called the area a “protectorate of western regions”, most understand China’s legal claim to Xinjiang to have manifested itself in the Qing Dynasty as a result of the Dungan Revolt of 1884. The name “Xinjiang” actually means “new border” and refers to any area previously claimed to be a conquered region of China and was lost and then regained.

Islam has played a major role in Xinjiang for a millennium. The majority of people living in Urumqi now are Han Chinese, but close behind are the Hui and the Uyghurs who are Sunni Muslims. In many ways, Urumqi feels like a Uyghur city. In 1949, only about 5% of Urumqi's population was Han Chinese. There are several other ethnic groups including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Mongols, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Tatars in Urumqi. Walking through this modern city, I received many more smiles when I greeted people with the traditional "Assalamu Alaikum" greeting than I did when I tried to open a conversation with "ni hao." But Urumqi also felt Chinese. Most of the stores and goods look the same as those available all over western China. I thought Urumqi to be a really nice amalgamation of people unlike any other city in China I had ever visited.



A little over 100 km due east of Urumqi is a lake called 天池 Tiānchí (Heavenly Lake). Located in the Tianshan mountain range, it receives the same snow melt as do the karezes in Turfan. Surrounded by glacial peaks, the Tianshan range really did remind me of Glacier National Park in Montana and Heavenly Lake reminded me of a smaller version of Lake McDonald in Glacier. On a small tour boat I asked the tour operator where people swam. She was adamant that no one could swim in Heavenly Lake. It was much too cold. When I told her about swimming in Lake McDonald, she assured me that it could not have been the same. No one could

survive swimming in Heavenly Lake. I beg to disagree. Walking down a manicured path beside Heavenly Lake we eventually began our descent down wooden steps alongside a beautiful stream which turned into an amazing rainbow shrouded waterfall. The splashing water and the crisp air breathed new life into all of us before boarding the bus back to a birthday banquet in Urumqi.

On the north shore of Heavenly Lake lies a temple dedicated to Xīwángmǔ. Although the story of 西王母 Xīwángmǔ (Queen Mother of the West) predates Daoism, no one truly knows her origin story. Time is imperceptible to her (“a thousand years, like a cricket’s chirp.”) First appearing in oracle bone inscriptions 1500 years before the birth of Christ, Xiwangmu was revered as the Western Mother and the Goddess who controlled the secret of immortality. Some incarnations portray her as having the teeth of a tiger early in her life. She was said to have lived in a palatial paradise where gods and humans could come together on a peak in the Kunlun mountains. She was later described as a Daoist master who enamoured King Mu at Turquoise Pond (thought to have been Heavenly Lake) in the Zhou Dynasty. She visited the Emperor Han Wu Di in a chariot made of purple clouds. But neither King Mu nor Emperor Han Wu Di was able to complete her teachings which would have allowed them to attain immortality. She is also mentioned in the Journey to the West where she had a peach tree garden which only blossomed every three thousand years.

