

BOOK REVIEWS

Questions of Heaven

The Chinese Journeys of an American Buddhist

By Gretel Ehrlich

BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 1997
128 PAGES + BIBLIOGRAPHY

I have never traveled in China but have taught its ancient history for over ten years. I have also journeyed to Shikoku, Japan in order to walk the eighty-eight Buddhist temples as a pilgrim; it changed my outlook on life. Therefore, I was curious to read *Questions of Heaven* because I wondered if Ehrlich's Chinese experiences would be similar to mine. They were not. For the most part, Ehrlich is disappointed and frustrated that her idealized expectations of her journey through two provinces in China clashed head-on with the realities of 1995 China, a country Westernizing as fast as possible and destroying its ties to the past without much thought. What made this book rewarding to me was her candid and eye-opening views of China which certainly washed away my naive concepts.



Back in 1991, Ehrlich traveled to New York City in order to see the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, "Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art." She was so moved by the medieval landscape paintings that she decided to walk the four most sacred Buddhist mountains in China, hoping to find "the threads of a once flourishing Buddhist culture." It seemed like a wonderful idea especially since several years earlier, she had successfully roamed the mountains of northern Japan, following the preserved trails of the poet Bashō.

Starting on page one, the reader quickly senses that Ehrlich's idealist vision of walking the mountains in order to find some sort of enlightenment will not happen. Indeed, Ehrlich's first view of Emei Shan, a 10,167-foot peak "is obscured from view by reefs of black coal dust and gray smog mixed with rain clouds." Getting to the mountain base seemed to be an arduous journey, one filled with too much pollution and dust, too many people and cars, and a poor road system. While the driver drove slowly through a seemingly endless mass of humanity with nothing beautiful in sight, Ehrlich read ancient poems and looked at ancient landscape paintings, trying somehow to make her vision of China square with the harsh realities outside her car windows. When the driver noticed what she was reading, he smiled as if to say, "if that's what you came to China for, you're a thousand years too late."

What made this book rewarding to me was her candid and eye-opening views of China which certainly washed away my naive concepts.

During her two-day walk up Emei Shan (one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains) in Sichuan province, she explained the sights and events which constantly disappointed her. Throughout the climb, one can imagine Ehrlich asking herself—Where is the ancient culture? When will I walk through time and reach the sacred Buddhist holy place which up to now I have only read in poems, seen in landscape paintings, and dreamed in my head? When Ehrlich finally reached the top of the mountain, she saw a paved parking lot, three Las Vegas-styled hotels with masses of tourists wandering about, and a lone Buddhist temple padlocked. That evening, in her miserable, cold hotel room, she was overcome with emotion and cried. Ehrlich cried because no one cared that Emei Shan was now just a tourist trap and devoid of any spiritual meaning . . . cried that her expectations of a spiritually enlightening experience had been denied her . . . cried because she now realized that the old values gleaned from history books were gone. By the end of chapter one, she was disillusioned, perplexed and frustrated.

In chapter two, she set off to visit the Wolong Panda Preserve, "wondering if the panda, the international symbol of animal preservation" was being well taken care of at the Hetaoping Research Center. En route, she digresses to discuss the demerits of Mao's rule, visits a Daoist temple where the monks were "lackluster, sour faced and rude," describes intensive human labor going on near the road, denounces the deforestation of China, until she finally arrives at the Center. But she was disappointed again by what she saw—pandas that looked sick, but probably from incarceration, not illness. "Finally, I could not bring myself to look into the eyes of another caged bear, and we departed." By the end of the chapter, Ehrlich sadly realizes that the China of her dreams has ceased to exist in China.

Although by this time Ehrlich was no longer interested in walking the other three sacred mountains, she took a train from Chengdu to Kunming, a 24-hour ride. This gave her plenty of time to realize, with a sense of defeat, that almost everything of value had been purged in China, the heart taken out of the culture and its people. She wondered if their once-great culture could be restored again despite a "vacillating political climate and desperate materialism." At the end of the chapter, she admired the nearby Yi villages which had been isolated from the changes imposed by Mao and Deng, where their rich culture was preserved, and where the people were in touch with their past.

Ehrlich next took a 17-hour car ride to Lijiang which caused many hair-raising moments for her and her guide. Lijiang is an isolated mountain town on the border of Yunnan and Xizang (Tibet),

with an ancient culture. She walked up to a nearby Tibetan monastery in the mountains where she enjoyed being in nature and surrounded by horses, found her first decent Chinese meal, and for the first time exclaimed, "I could breathe and feel and smell and hear."

She also meets Xuan Ke, an ethno-musicologist who speaks English. Xuan was willing to describe his life story to Ehrlich, including his twenty years of imprisonment during Mao's era. She also heard his group of musicians play Naxi or Daoist music, a living tradition of folk and ceremonial music from the eighth and ninth century. At last, Ehrlich found an oasis of ancient culture. Later, she flew to London to visit Xuan and to listen to Xuan's Naxi orchestra perform before an appreciative audience. Before the troupe returned to China, Xuan turned down an opportunity to stay in London. The book ends with Ehrlich marveling at Xuan's commitment to return to Lijiang in order to preserve what is left of his culture.

Prior to reading Ehrlich's book, I, too, thought it would be easy to find the old, traditional ways in China if I traveled there. Her dreams of walking up the sacred mountains were my dreams; consequently, her disappointments throughout the book became mine. Perhaps all Chinese history teachers should read her story, if only to balance the cultural graces of the past with the grim realities of the present.

As an Asian Studies teacher at Iolani School, my tenth graders spend an entire year examining the ancient cultures of China and Japan up to the twentieth century. Now I will assign my students this book in the last weeks of the course so that I do not send them off wearing rose-colored glasses about China. In our semester-long twentieth-century Asia course, Ehrlich's book would also offer an important point of view and generate good discussion about the cost of Westernization in China. At the college level, this would be an excellent book to begin a course on China for all students, even those who have not had a background in Chinese history, because Ehrlich offers just the right amount of accurate historical information.

Grete Ehrlich's *Questions of Heaven* is a revealing book about contemporary China. The book is well written, filled with insights ranging from ancient history and philosophy to current economic and political developments. It includes a bibliography about the many topics mentioned in the book, and the credits pages are a good resource. Yes, the book can be read quickly; it is only 128 pages. But read it softly and gently—taking the time to ponder on her experiences and to grapple with her thoughtful ideas; you and your students will be rewarded immeasurably. ■

JEFFREY HACKLER has a Bachelors Degree from Brown University and a Masters Degree from the University of Hawaii. He has taught at Iolani School in Honolulu, Hawaii, a coeducational, college-preparatory school for grades K-12 for seventeen years. He teaches a U.S. History course, but his passion is teaching a full-year Asian Studies course to tenth graders, primarily the Ancient Histories of China and Japan up to 1911-12. He spent his sabbatical (1994-1995) living in a fishing village, Horie, outside of Matsuyama, Shikoku, Japan absorbing the culture. During the spring, he walked the 88 temples pilgrimage, roughly 900 miles in 50 days, and hopes one day to publish his diary.



SYRACUSE
STUDY ABROAD

Planning to Study Abroad?

Syracuse has your ticket!

- ~Business Programs in Hong Kong
- ~Semester and Summer programs available
- ~Traveling Seminars to Beijing, Guilin & Shanghai
- ~Language instruction in Mandarin available at all levels.
- ~Generous Scholarships & Grants
- ~Internships available
- ~Direct enrollment into City University, Hong Kong

For more information contact:
Syracuse University
119 Euclid Ave
Syracuse, NY 13244
or 1-800-235-3472
or please see our website at
<http://sumweb.syr.edu/>
dipa

