

Poetry in Suining: just a way of life

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How shall I remember Suining, in the province of Sichuan, China? Maybe as a place so far from my own, so distant and yet so beautiful, that it will seem to me a fairy vision within a dream.

From the very first day, Suining was a gift for our eyes.

In a hotel with a tree's name (conifer) protected by two stone guardian lions, a spinning table tray surprised us with a welcome party of unknown dishes, arranged like little works of art. And so were they, indeed.

Everything made in China, I suspect, has that secret intention: to be or to become a work of art. That's why poetry (in the form of words, music, dance, dresses, garments, pictures, drawings) seems here so natural, so inescapable and always present, as a habit. Or, better, as a way of life.

In the very core of massive power: the huge, tall buildings for a proportionally enormous population, you can always find the traces of an exquisite subtlety. As in the porcelains of the Museum from the Song Dynasty, there is a calculated mixture of varied practical uses and charm.

That same charm flourishes and overflows in the traditional dances we had the fortune to see on several stages. Most of the dancers (I was told), were not professionals, as they seemed to be, but just school students, or adults working in different institutions (even in hospitals). The amazing results can only be explained by a very hard discipline, and mostly by a deep love for the artistic forms, the historical characters and the poetry these dancers and performers incarnate.

Love for both poetry and for poets, cherished and considered national heroes, is not so frequent in contemporary nations. One of the highlights (or perhaps THE highlight?) during the Suining International Poetry Week was the ceremony before Chen Zi'ang's memorial. All foreign poets bent down in reverence three times, and offered a chrysanthemum: the typical Chinese flower to pay homage to the dead.

This ancient (and very touching) ritual, made me reflect about the present place of Poetry in our Western societies. We poets (and writers in general terms) have become less and less important, as if we had nothing significant to tell to our human fellows. Yet, poetry can change the whole vision of our world, the perspectives over reality. And it can create another reality, valuable in itself.

These few but very intense days shared with colleagues of writing and affliction, have recalled the memory of this place almost lost for us. By listening to each other, in the garden of Chen Zi'ang's old home, we all recovered a sense of belonging. We felt ourselves as members of a universal community beyond borders and frontiers. What was lost in translation came back to us in the choir of our different languages. Mandarin, English, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, built an intimate symphony. Although we mostly couldn't understand each other, we knew that a powerful current of meaning made the difference between these words and mere noise.

That sense of community was reinforced when the majority of poets had departed. When our "last supper" took place, only three of us were left: a Russian poet (Olesia Nikolaevna), a Dutch poet (Erik Lindner) and myself. Notwithstanding, we were in the best company: that of our Chinese hosts, and my husband, who was my travel companion.

The spinning table tray began to move again, the dishes rolled like planets and offered their tasty treasures to everybody. We talked in English, Chinese, Spanish. We encountered in translation over the perfectly round table, in a joyful fraternity. Men and women, younger and older, ordinary employees and high authorities.

But the best moment arrived when the cheers began. “Hele”!, said Mr Hu Liang, our main Chinese host, while lifting the tiny glass full of liquor. It was the first time of many.

Thanks to Mr. Hu, we learned a new way of celebration. We, the foreigners would take with us as a precious gift his “magic word”, not less powerful than the words of poetry. Indeed, his “Hele!” was an act of poetry in itself, capable of transforming the sadness of farewell into the promised happiness of future meetings.

Hele!, dear people of Suining. Hele! And thank you, so much: for your affectionate welcome, for your generosity, for your faith in what words can do to change the world outside and inside us. To turn our hearts to Poetry, as a way of life.