



Dispatches From **Shanghai**

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The Mountain

"I will revenge on my father and make a waste to your honor—but give me first the antidote." Rogue warriors in period costumes battle it out as the old Jackie Chan movie flickers in and out on bus's dusty television. At least there are subtitles, I think as I pry my eyes away from the flashing blades to glance around me. The couple on the other side of the aisle has already succumbed to exhaustion, their heads slumped together, their limp bodies swaying with the rhythm of the highway. I turn to the window and watch the countryside passing; farmers in straw hats and ragged Mao-style work pants trudge from field to field or house to house. Corn is hanging to dry on fences. There is still some time before the factories and power plants bloom across the landscape—still some time before we reach Xi'an. I prop my legs up on the seat in front of me and close my eyes, thinking of the mountain.

There is a technique to enjoying Chinese mountain landscape painting. I was taught to begin at the bottom of the canvas, allowing my eyes to trail upward with the mountain's fluid lines until I reach the summit. This is the way to feel the mountain's spirit—to absorb its majesty and calm through the artist's brush. Now it is effortless for me to enjoy paintings like these; I just enter through the mountain's aperture, somewhere near the blank surface of the ground, then I step among the peaks and nooks of the mountainside. I ascend until the mist shrouding the peak converges with the sky and I have achieved something like sublimity. Mount Huashan, one of China's five sacred mountains, is the subject of countless paintings like these.

A shabby town, grimy with dust, straddles the foot of Mount Huashan. Locals hawk sandwiches with pork and thousand-year-old egg, fragile whistles that make bird calls, cheap climbing gloves, incense, and ice cream. I buy a sandwich, some water,

and with some trepidation, I begin the hike through town and up the mountain.

I fare well in my new sneakers, at least compared to the Chinese girls wearing calf-length leather boots with high heels. The stone path ascends gradually at first, then gives way to much steeper passages. This is an amateur climb, but as the amateur up against it I am pushing my limits of endurance. I am focused earnestly on the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other, so much so that I often neglect to look from the paving stones to my surroundings.

As I lift my head I am overwhelmed by a paradoxical sight. First I see the mountains, splendid and vast. The sides of the cliffs almost shimmer in the afternoon sunlight, and I feel for just a moment the profound weight of time. Then I look back to the path, to the Chinese tourists bickering, snacking on fruit and hot dogs, to the children playfully shoving one another, and the porters balancing their heavy loads of souvenirs and snacks for the makeshift shops that dot the way. I turn back to the mountain, but as I do I glance at my watch. Only five more hours until I have to catch the bus. I decide to hike up for a couple of more hours, then make my way back down.

I was overjoyed when I discovered that nearly all of the bookstores in Shanghai have a section dedicated to Chinese art books. I spend hours sprawled on the floors of these stores, unrolling scroll prints or flipping through oversized books of landscape paintings. I am enthralled by the spirit of these paintings and lose all sense of time. Occasionally I am jostled by another shopper and I remember all of the errands I need to complete—the dry cleaning that needs to be picked up, the letters that need to be sent—and will it be Chinese or Italian for dinner? I reshelved the books and make my way out of the store, and into the crowded subway station.