

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Beijing Nights

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In this impressionistic portrait of the city, Clarice Cominelli describes Chinese women in the park moving like 'a shoal of old, exhausted fish'.

Illuminated by the light of the autumn sunset, the park is empty, the central square filled only by the stretched shadows of the benches. No sound can be heard, apart from the creak of the oldest trees and the rustle of leaves on the pavement. Sitting upon the branch of a plane tree, a silent magpie looks at the first stars that appear in the sky, longing for summer.

The cold weather is coming back to Beijing, and the days are getting shorter.

The last slice of sun peeps over pines and junipers and it shines upon small figures standing at the entrance to the park. It is the Chinese old women living in the neighbourhood, just in time for their everyday rendezvous. They are covered with thick coats and wear colourful cloth shoes. With the hair permeated with the fragrant smell of fried pancakes, they gently open the gate and sneak into the quiet park. Like a shoal of old, exhausted fish, they slowly limp towards the central square.

The small crowd becomes more and more definite as the people arrange themselves in ordered lines, waiting. Before the lesson starts, you can hear a little routine chitchat, you can see a few warm-up exercises.

The feeble buzz that fills the air suddenly dies out when a new figure ceremoniously walks through the lines and places herself at the head of the group. Like an orchestra conductor during a rehearsal, the lady stretches her legs, clears her voice and pushes the PLAY button on the recorder.

The brief moment of silence is interrupted again, this time by a song that reminds everyone of springtime. It invites the old ladies to reach the edge of the world, leaving behind the everyday struggle to survive and embracing the joy of living.

After some uncertainties, the old women begin to dance with each other, in synchrony. Everybody knows the steps by heart, the clumsiest just have to follow the movements of the other dancers.

The ordinary square welcomes, as every evening, a wonderful show: as if they were guided by the melody, the spirits of the old women get rid of

theirs wizened bodies and soar into the air like dandelion seeds. Finally freed by the weight of the years, the slow school of fish transforms into a swift flock of birds that fly following the rhythm of the music.

The same scene takes place in every park of the capital, from the public garden surrounded by the skyscrapers in the westernised district of Chaoyang to the playground nestled in narrow *hutong* near Xisi Street; every night the whole city of Beijing turns into a stage and gives everybody a possibility to spend time together and enjoy an apparent but yet priceless moment of freedom.

A few hours after the sunset, the lesson comes to an end. The pale moon shines on the dancers who linger a few moments after the music stops, still inebriated by the magical atmosphere. After a while, the souls unwillingly get back into their wrinkled bodies and bring them home. Recalling memories of the past youth, the old women walk along grey streets plastered with red slogans that praise progress.

The park gets quiet again, waiting for another evening to come.