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奇異果小姐

‘Miss Kiwi’

(non-fiction)

Translated by Darryl Sterk

For a time while I was studying in England, my hobby was collecting obituaries.

Reading obits had nothing to do with “desiring melancholy, like most English people” as Virginia Woolf put it in “The Mark on the Wall.” I’d been reading the newspaper to improve my English language facility, but at that time it was mostly too difficult: editorials, reports, and interviews require the mastery of a lot of vocabulary, to say nothing of knowledge of current affairs and culture. An obituary, which plainly recounts a life, was the most appealing and interesting part of the paper.

The obituary that made the deepest impression on me was about an actor. It’s a pity I can’t now remember his name. All I remember is that he was a Jew who fled to America and ended up playing Nazi roles in the movies, because he looked ‘Eastern European.’

“To make ends meet in a foreign land, he had to play a character he’d left Europe to escape, a role he found detestable. Is there anything more ironic?” I thought sympathetically, not knowing at the time that a few years later I would be living the same kind of life.

After graduating from college, I went to Kraków because I wanted to live in Poland. After a year of language courses, I didn’t know what to do, but didn’t want to go back to Taiwan, or to return to England for a Master’s degree. One day I heard the “China-Poland Cultural Arts Exchange Foundation” was looking for talented bilingual individuals. The name sounds official, I know, but it was actually founded by a Polish Sinophile businessman. I applied and was hired.

My primary role (at least according to the contract) was to help plan exhibitions, to make arrangements with Chinese people, to translate documents, and to teach the boss, as well as my coworkers, Chinese. To an arts graduate without much work experience, this seemed like a good job. But there are, as they say, no free lunches in this world, and after a couple of months on the job, I came to discover how big the gap between ideal and reality could be.

Take the ancient Chinese technology exhibition, for instance. I'd never been much interested in antiquity, China, or technology, and since I no longer had to prepare for tests, I had detached myself from such things. But there needed to be an English-Polish bilingual brochure for the exhibit, and the person in charge quit right in the middle of it. (I heard the boss thought her style was too literary, not colloquial enough.) And so the job fell to me and another colleague. What else could I do? I read everything I could find on the astrolabe (astronomer's inclinometer?), clepsydra (water clock), and the double-bladed plough (good enough) and tried to describe everything in a colloquial idiom. (Later I discovered that editing Wikipedia was the best way to learn how to write colloquially.)

After a lot of time and effort, the exhibit opened, complete with bilingual texts. Finally I didn't have to edit anymore. I thought my life would be easier, but the boss seemed worried that I might not have enough to do (which was actually true). So he arranged for me to give Chinese tea ceremony and calligraphy demonstrations at the exhibition. He also gave me a bunch of new jobs to do at the office: write introductions to Chinese culture on the company's official website, plan Chinese cooking classes, edit Chinese language calendars of Polish scenery, translate the ingredients for bottles of male potency pills ("Includes caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), a powerful Yang enhancer"), and to prepare proposals for future events—on ancient Chinese architecture, Chinese nose pipes, Chinese dinosaurs (not fossils, but battery-powered rubber models that could turn their heads, wink, lay eggs, swim, and say "Nee Hao"), although in the end none of these exhibitions came to anything.

Of all the unbelievable tasks I was assigned, the one I resented most was peddling an orientalist cliché. I couldn't understand why I had to wear a cheongsam while steeping tea or doing calligraphy. I'm just not a cheongsam kind of girl. I especially hated wearing the one they provided, which did not fit me right. Putting it on was like wrapping pork

and glutinous rice in bamboo leaves for the steamer. I complained to my coworker and she said: “Aiya, they’re here to see you. You give the exhibition a more oriental atmosphere.” “Doesn’t that mean I’ve turned into a kiwi fruit, which people are attracted to just cause it’s fresh and exotic?” (In Taiwan we call the kiwi the *chee yee*, which means “fresh and exotic.”)

Yes, I played the role of Miss Kiwi in real life. The exhibition-goers were pleased to see me wearing the cheongsam and writing names with a Chinese brush. Their eyes would light up. During the tea ceremony people would raise their hands and ask how to correctly steep the perfect cup of green tea or Oolong tea. (To be honest, in private I just throw the leaves in a mug and pour in boiling water.) Flanked by Polish matrons and mademoiselles, I hawked Made-in-China cell phone covers, fans, wallets and lucky biscuits in a bamboo kiosk lit with red lanterns, but the person people saw wasn’t me. The person they saw was the mysterious Orient I represented. A lot of them were happy to buy a little piece of the Orient for a cheap price and take it home.

When the year’s contract was up, I left that company. Yet although the work was filled with many terrible memories, I am glad I had a job like that. It kept China in my face so much that it motivated me to learn more about Taiwan, just to keep my psychic balance. I started trying to get to know Taiwan, my unfamiliar homeland, which I had left in such a hurry. I even did my homework, using Polish to write a lot of essays about Taiwan culture (like the Wang Yeh Boat Burning Ceremony, the Eight Infernal Generals, and Taiwan film) to stick on the company website.

Because of these experiences, I feel a lot closer to Taiwan now than I did when I first went abroad. And that, I think, is the most precious legacy of my short life as Miss Kiwi.