

3 Through Others' Eyes and Thinking Otherwise

Sitting unexpectedly on a plate in the middle of the round table in the senior staff dining hall, the cheese starts to sweat. It is that time after lunch when the campus clears, all but mad dogs and English teachers slithering away from the heat behind mosquito-net-curtained beds. For several hours, until the afternoon heat recedes, screeching cicadas are the only creatures active across the shimmering campus. Hunan province is always red and hot, but especially at this time of the year: stifling, humid summer days stretching on into thick, sweaty, insect-humming nights. The iron-rich red earth burns rustily in the heat. Water buffaloes, knee deep in mud, turn the thick soil over between the two summer crops, mixing in pungent nightsoil that has been scooped up from behind the student dormitories and carried across the campus in buckets swinging on poles slung from thin shoulders. The rice here is fresh, succulent, learned, local, though scattered with teeth-threatening stones swept up from farm courtyards where the husks are laid out to dry.

This thick, fertile summer will eventually give way to the clear blue skies of autumn, hazy afternoons full of smoke from burning rice stalks drifting across the valley, as the hard-worked fields have yielded up their second harvest and are about to rest through the cold damp winter. Winter is a hard time – further north, on the other side of the Yangtse River, it is much colder, but they have coal, stoves, pipes, added warmth. Down here in Hunan, it does not freeze or snow, but the winters are cold and damp and there is no hot water or heating. We bundle up in as many layers as possible, balls of cotton and wool, wrapping arms around ourselves and each other as we huddle together. The wind whistles through the broken window panes in the classrooms, students stamp their feet on the concrete floor and clutch their pens painfully in chilblained hands. We plan our classes with breaks to warm up. And then winter slides into spring, when the rain starts in earnest. It rains, heavy, thick, day after day, red soil washing down pathways, floors