

5 POP RICE MAN

Outside the gate of my apartment block there is a narrow avenue, which runs from one of the main streets of Nanchong, and alongside the campus walls of North Sichuan Medical College. Each morning just before classes begin, a collection of skilled workers set up shop on the road shoulder in an attempt to eek out a livelihood from one of the country's poorest social groups, the Chinese college student. Shoe menders, dumpling hawkers, bicycle repairmen, fruit sellers, and key cutters squat daily over the same dusty concrete until the dinner hour rush subsides and the mandarin orange sun drops behind the hills toward the Himalayas.

At first glance with their tattered blue Mao suits and blank stares, they could be mistaken for homeless beggars; the same beggars who expose their particular disability in hopes of eliciting pity upon the masses that flood by daily. But, even the beggars have work hours and lunch breaks and pride. The real homeless at one time or another turned from peasant blue to soiled black: rotting dark clothes and barefoot, long dreadlocked hair and charcoal skin of leather. I've seen one hanging from a lamppost in the city center shouting incoherently; watched another scoop rice out of the gutter's drainage grate; witnessed yet another strolling pant less down main street with a smile. When I first saw the pop rice man near the gate combing the area for combustible trash, I grouped him with the soiled black and continued on my way.

He looked as if he just finished his shift at the local steel mill and exited without passing through the locker's showers; or as if he was beamed from a different era, a Dickens' novel. When I returned, the children had already begun to gather and buzz with anticipation. I purposely avoided the crowd for two reasons. First, there are very few things an elementary school child would rather do than yell out a hearty hello to a foreigner. Also, if it was anything interesting like say a fight or a traffic accident more adults would have circled.

The explosion occurred as I lifted my bicycle through the opening in the gate. It was loud and sharp, like that of a public bus backfiring. Kids screamed. Smoke rose. I quickly walked to my first floor apartment, secured my bike, threw on a jacket and returned through the front gate. To my surprise, the children had already dispersed and the same smear of a man poked along the brick wall that encloses the street in search of fuel. It is from the noodle shop directly across the street that I absorbed the process of one of the oddest professions in town.

From his spot on the narrow sidewalk lie the tools of his trade: a cast iron vessel (the size of a large flower vase or a shrunken scuba tank) with a pressure gage on one end and a clamped lid with handle on the other, a rubber mat made from sewn tires, a sack of rice, a pair of gloves and red plastic bags.

After collecting enough waste paper and loading the canister with rice, he begins rotating the vessel on a spit over the flame while kneeling on the mat. The rotation is slow and even so as not to waste a btu. The pressure rises and the children stop and collect. A loud boy mocks the `kaboom' and excited giggles ensue. When the man reaches for his gloves the kids in the first row push back against the semi-

circle in excited fear. The tank is lifted from the flame and smothered in the rubber. Small ears are plugged. Clamp released. Distant heads turn quickly. In the cool and humid air of December, the pop rice man disappears in smoke as if he was shot out of a cannon back to the industrial era from which he came. A moment later he returns, bent over at the waist, wrestling to pour out the soft white fruit of his labor. A small bag goes for about 30 cents.

My noodles already eaten, I stare out over the street from the open faced shop and think back to the time before my arrival when I was told that my life would resemble that of a fish in a glass bowl. Really though it is much more like that charred cast iron tank. No one gets to see inside. No one would want to. I am heated by the garbage of the day, week and month that pressurizes toward explosion.

Earlier, while pushing in to mail a letter at the city post office, a hand slipped into my front pocket and tickled my wallet. I shoved the frame of a man away. Frustrated with the lack of orderly lines, having my mail opened and read, and packages lost, I squared up the petrified pickpocket and hurled a right hook in his direction. He staggered to the glancing blow and promptly peeled away from sight. My spew of swear words followed behind him. I stood alone, raging. With everyone watching, I wish I could have disappeared even if only for a moment. I was embarrassed by my method of release. To punch a desperate thief is not why I joined the Peace Corps.

Almost six months ago, when I first started studying Chinese during training in Chengdu, my teacher on the first day of class named me Qin Fen () or 'Work Hard.' Many Chinese people think it's a strange sounding but admirable name. It implies a hard nose, a non-thinking work ethic like that of the Foolish Old Man who decided to move the mountain. Am I becoming my Chinese name as a self-fulfilling prophecy?

The pop rice man is not a daily squatter like the others on my street. He's a specialist and his rounds will bring him through in another few days or so for more explosions. I, too, feel relieved but know my time here holds more frustration. How I deal with that frustration needs to be controlled. I need to be a little wiser.