

Lisa Carducci

AS GREAT
AS THE
WORLD



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As Great as the World

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About the Author

Lisa Carducci, born in Canada, earned a M.A. in Linguistics and completed the Ph.D. programme from the University of Montreal. After a career in teaching, in Canada and China, she worked for the Overseas (French) Programmes of CCTV, and is now working for *Beijing Review*.

She has written more than 30 books in four languages, and almost 2,000 articles on a variety of topics, published in several countries.

In 2001, she was granted the Friendship Award of the People's Republic of China.



↑ Old lane at first sight.

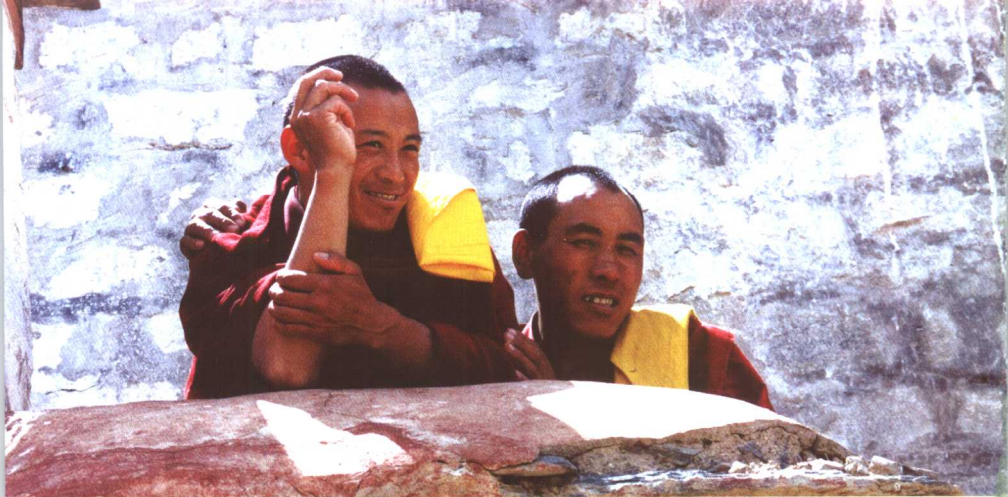


↑ The merciless character "cha" (Beijing, Xidan).

↓ Discovering life in a Beijing *siheyuan*.

↓ Learning from Ronald.





→ Door Guardians and couplets to welcome the year of the Horse 2002.

← Tibetan children reading the *Beijing Children's Weekly*.

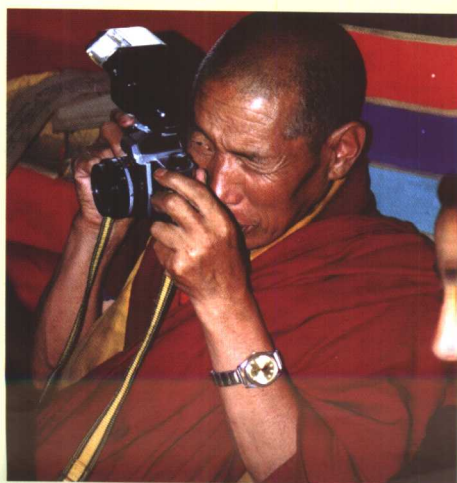


↑ Horse Race festival in Anduo, North Tibet

→ Planting trees with a group of volunteers.

← Contemplating contentment (Xiahe, Gansu).

↓ Birds on an outing to the park.



↑ Monks don't just pray.



↑ Enjoying a local specialty in Mizhi (Shaanbei).



The author and her husband Du Jinsu at Zhenbei Tai (Shaanxi).

(Photos by Du Jinsu, Olga Cassetta, Lisa Carducci and Xie Feng)

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Introduction

Three reasons led me to China: curiosity, writing, and teaching. The first time was in 1985. My study in linguistics placed me on the path to the Arabic and Chinese languages. Which of these two would I learn? I was hesitant. If I was interested in Arabic poetry, I had never, on the contrary, approached Chinese culture. Before deciding, I thought I would see for myself – in the country itself – what did these people look like?

So I went to China... and fell in love with the land at first sight. A “coup de foudre”! It seemed incomprehensible to spend only one month in this country – in this world, I should say – where there was so much to discover. I wanted to live here for at least one year. Back in Montreal, I offered my skills to the World University Services of Canada, which then would have found me a teaching position, but this escaped me at the last moment. Probably, the time was not yet right.

In 1989, I was on my sabbatical and dedicated that time to painting and writing *Stagioni d'amore* (Seasons of Love), a novel about reincarnation. One of the four lives I describe is set in China. Just as I had been to the other countries in the book – Italy, France, and Canada – I wanted to do the same for the Chinese section, and I landed here on February 14, Valentine's Day. I went back on May 31.

In October 1990, I applied for a position in Poland, and was immediately accepted. Meanwhile, I asked myself, "Why Poland, since I've always wanted to go to China?" I advised the Polish organisation that I would sign a contract at the last minute and only if I didn't receive an invitation from China, as China was my first choice. Things were clear. The deadline was June 3. Well, on June 3, at 10:00, the postman brought a registered letter: the invitation from a foreign language university in Beijing.

Didn't Einstein say – rightly so – that events wait for us? This is what some call chance, luck, or destiny.

And here I am in Beijing. I immediately felt at home. Moreover, I am Italian on my father's side, and was born in Canada; I had till then spent my life divided between two worlds – my body in Canada and my spirit in Italy. I don't know how the miracle happened, but once in China, I felt, for the first time in my life, repatriated. My soul and body were in the same place. This feeling was so satisfying that I wanted to prolong it, until my roots had deepened in the soil of the Middle Kingdom.

Of the 30 books I've written so far, two-thirds were published after I arrived in China and half concern China or are inspired by her. Poetry, novels, short stories, essays – I wrote first in French or Italian, but my recent works are in Chinese or in English. I also have written almost 2,000 articles in newspapers and magazines of a dozen countries. At every opportunity, I speak of "my" China. Just as a couple's love depends on respect, I believe that wars result from a lack of respect between nations, and such lack originates from ignorance. China has given me so much that I cannot remain silent. I will then share with you, Readers, my humble experience. It will remind you of memories, make you smile,

surprise or even shock you ... perhaps. I don't pretend to bear the truth, since truth belongs to each person as he or she perceives it. What I wish to do is to invite you to reflect, in order to have a better understanding of China, this exciting China, an extraordinary land.

The Daily Life of a Foreign Expert

Housing

Let's go back to 1991. At the Foreign Language Institute No. 2, as it was then called, I had a furnished apartment in the foreign professors' building on campus. I especially appreciated the large front and back balconies that allowed me to grow tomatoes, basil, garlic, and even green beans in pots. I was fond of my apartment, which was very comfortable during summer, but winter seemed so long, because we had heat from 6:00 to 8:00 a.m., since we were supposed to be in class then, and in the evening, until 10:00, when it was time to go to bed. In the afternoon, if we stayed home to prepare lessons or mark the students' work, we had to tolerate the biting cold that found its way through our woollens, scarves, and gloves (even inside, yes!), because there was no other way to heat the place. It was the same for hot water: two hours in the morning and three hours at night. The classrooms were not heated, either. We had to keep our coats, boots, and gloves on while teaching. It was still tolerable for the teachers, who could stand and move around, but the students, who were seated

and immobile, would freeze on the spot.

A new building was constructed and I spent my second teaching year there. It was modern, well-lit and... overheated. Windows – had architects forgotten about us humans? – were sealed shut and students would fall asleep during class probably because of the lack of oxygen and fresh air.

Also, when in 1993, I moved to the Friendship Hotel following a change of work, I could not rid myself of a reflex: associating the faucet to the clock. I programmed any activity that required water, such as showering or washing my hair or clothes to the clock. How good it was to enjoy hot water 24 hours a day again, just as I had before coming to China!

The Friendship Hotel is a State establishment, where foreigners enjoy comfort and protection. It was for our protection from intruders that the Chinese were not allowed to enter without a clear invitation. When a friend visited, we had to go to the main entrance and confirm that person's arrival. At the entrance of each apartment building, the visitor, accompanied by his or her host, had to sign and leave an ID card. At 22:30, all visitors had to be out or a call from our "caretakers" would remind us – and sometimes not too delicately.

The *Yayuan*'s (Garden of Elegance) "red gate" is, for me, a symbol of the reform and opening-up policy so often mentioned since 1980. I had the chance to experience the most dynamic phase of it, the last decade of the 20th century. In 1993, the gate I had to pass to enter my living compound was closed and locked at 23:00. If a resident returned late, he or she would humbly ask the night staff to open the red gate. One day, the door was closed at 23:00, but not locked. A year or two later, it was only half-closed, then, not at all, and finally, in 1999, it was left open. For the old residents, this "space" remains the "red gate." Sometimes, we designate an

appointment to a newcomer at the “red gate”; he or she seeks it but will never understand.

Transportation

During my first trip in China, one of the images that most impressed me is the number of **bicycles**. In 1997, I went to Amsterdam. A friend took me to a bridge, stopped, and waited for my reaction. “What am I supposed to say, or see?” I asked. He pointed to the bicycles. “Oh! You forgot that I live in China. This is nothing new to me.”

What impressed me most about the Chinese bicycles is that they were all uniformly black, of the same size, and the same model. At that time, people didn’t steal bicycles, so there was no need to lock them up.

Before coming to Beijing I had never ridden a bike, except for a few disastrous attempts that had left bruises as large and dark as big eggplants on my body. But, once here, to do as everyone else, I tried to learn. I rode only on campus grounds, from one building to another. Only once did I dare to pass the gate and ride on the street toward the post office. I didn’t pay attention to the distance, which was covered in a few minutes, and even passed the post office to continue for 3 or 4 kilometres before making a U-turn. But, one thing I realised is that I was a public danger on my “vehicle” and that I had better give it up.

At those times, bicycles were used to transport the whole family: father on the saddle, mother on the back, with the baby in her arms or in the bamboo seat in front of the handle bars.

There were as many bicycles as citizens in the city but this has changed. Cars have begun to wander into the bicycle