

AH, HǎINÁN!
A nostalgic romantic vignette



"*Wǒ ài nǐ.*" Those are the only words in Chinese I can still remember. However, everything else about those magical days in Hǎinán many years ago seem forever fresh. I was part of some incongruous youth exchange between my hometown in Hawaii and "friends" in the People's Republic.

Perhaps I was too young or too naive to understand why such exchanges even existed. No doubt many of the sixteen-member joint delegation had pecuniary interests at the forefront of their minds. A few were interested in language exchanges. Fresh out of college and without a job, at that time I optimistically believed that peace would come naturally if people simply relaxed, shared freely, laughed, and danced. My father urged me to attend this event to "broaden my horizons" and help me find a "purpose in life." I already knew art and poetry were related to my purpose in life, but parents were not convinced. When did give me a free airline ticket and some spending money, how could I refuse? My father believed that this trip would be part of a valuable "growing up experience" that would somehow help become more cosmopolitan. "Everyone should study abroad for a while." he said, "It helps you discover who you are."

Hence a few weeks after dad's proposal, I was with a small exchange group. Although their ostensible goal was to promote economic trade in the name of "peace", the opening speeches by the flaccid bureaucrats made me yearn for the mountain slopes of this tropical island. As the ceremony wore on, I dreamed about the not-so-distant cliffs of Tiān-yá or chances to chill out on a beach somewhere in Sānyà.

Yawning, my eyes wavered across the hall to the Chinese delegation. There I noticed a demure dark-haired young woman in a stylish changpao sipping a watered-down cocktail while politely pretending to be interested in the lieutenant governor's speech.

Instinctively, she felt my gaze and we smiled with a mixture of irony, resignation, and a tinge of sassy defiance. I did not know that she was the vice-mayor's daughter or that protocol declared visitors and island residents should avoid getting "too close." All I knew is that over the next weeks days I couldn't stop thinking about this lovely person. I imagined us as deep friends who had known each other many lifetimes, and allowed myself to believe that "karma" (a foolish euphemism?) had somehow brought us together once again. This Qióngzhōu Strait beauty was constantly at the forefront of my awareness, though part of me made futile attempts to ignore her. Logically, I knew there were too many differences for this relationship to have any future. Yet what was a "future" actually? House payments? Whining babies? Years of petty jealousy? "Do most people who marry actually have a future?" I asked myself.

Naively, however, I believed no difficulty was insurmountable if there was love. Though my Chinese was quite limited and her English was shaky at best, Yàhuī managed to teach me some important things about love. By the end of the goodwill study-tour nothing else seemed important, so we managed to spend one evening together.

Now whenever anyone talks about "foolish love" or the impulsive shortsightedness of youth, I feel a nostalgic tinge for Yàhuī's hesitant yet exploratory kiss. We often floundered for words, but I could sense in her an intelligence beyond words. Nor was I immune to her charm and grace. Her "futureless" love is the only thing that has given me any hint of a future for the last thirty-three years.

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