

The Palmist of Shaxi

Shaxi Historic Town complete with city gates in Yunnan, a province in southwest China, is my favorite. This village on the Tea and Horse Caravan Trail is so undiscovered by western tourism that our lovely hotel isn't even in tripadvisor. It is a walkable village, with centuries-old wooden buildings and Ming Dynasty Buddhist temples hosting traditions that are even older.



We are like time travelers who have swooped in for the Taizhi Festival, a once-a-year event when the statue of Sakyamuni (local name for the Buddha) is gently washed, then taken out of the temple and paraded thru the four gates of the old city. This is to insure that He will protect the townspeople during the coming year. The locals organize the events themselves; it is not sponsored or supervised by any organization. They have been doing it the same way for centuries.



The festival is an all-day affair, and we had gotten up early to spend a few hours at the town's main temple watching the devout cleaning the statue and laying offerings at the various altars as well as priests performing rituals and chanting.

Offerings are blessed by the priest and remain at the temple. Food items are never eaten or the objects used again.



Both adults and children take part in a procession around the village. Their dress is historically accurate traditional costumes which are passed down from generation to generation.



By mid-morning I am ready for what the British call “eleven-sies” - a coffee or snack, so make my way to the small main square. It is quiet and I find a nice spot for a cappuccino. Soon others from our group join me and the square also starts to fill as the temple procession is expected to pass this way soon.



I notice him in the crowd as people move aside to make way for a slight, wizened old man. He is flanked by two young women - surely his great granddaughters (!) who support him as he walks. I can tell he is a revered and well-respected person, skin darkened by the sun and facial lines drawn by kindness and compassion. He stops just a few feet away from me and immediately draws a crowd.

He smiles as he gently takes one woman's hand. He studies her palm for a minute or two then tells her something. She seems pleased.

This happens several times - sometimes the recipient is pleased and sometimes not so much.



The old man turns to me. He takes out a pen, points to himself and writes his age -- "84" on his palm, then he hands me the pen. I write "71" on mine. (I am really 70 and 11/12ths but didn't want to quibble). He gently takes my hand, turns it over and stares at it. Then he slowly follows a line in my palm with his index finger.

He takes his pen and writes 100 on my hand, smiles and gently closes it.



XXX