

Reflections Under a Starry Night

In movies, I have seen night skies saturated by uncountable stars that peek out of the clouds and wink their secrets; in art, I have seen Van Gogh's masterpiece; in science, I have learned about their complex makeups and distance from the human world; in the Bible, I have read about how God made the stars and set them along with the sun and moon in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth (Genesis 1:16-17). However, until I was thirteen-years-old, I had never seen stars that I could not count with my two hands.

Growing up in China's capital, I was used to dark gray night skies—not pitch black because street lamps would always subdue the darkness. As every child had their why questions, mine was over why the stars were hiding. I did not quite understand my parents' response: the city's light chased the stars away, and there was a thick barrier between us and the stars. I did not tell anyone that, from a very young age, one of my New Year's resolutions was to see an actual starry night. My wish was fulfilled that one summer when my dad took me to climb the Great Wall and we stayed the night at a rural hotel. My limbs were hissing from all the moving about during the day, for we covered the round-trip between two checkpoints. However, Dad refused to let me go to bed. He kept talking to me and even turned on the TV until ten o'clock.

“Put on your shoes. Let's go take a walk.”

“This late?”

“Just trust me on this one.”

It was a decision I did not regret. At first, I clung to my father because it was so dark that I could not even see where I was stepping, so he turned on the flashlight. We walked farther and farther away, until even the hotel's dim light receded. When he turned off the flashlight, I looked up at his insistence, and I understood the definition of the word “breathtaking.” God spilled a bag

of diamonds and forgot to pick them back up. Although individually their light was faint, they gained strength in numbers and cast a silver halo over me, my father, and the surrounding area. The shimmering rays latched onto the night mist and drifted down in eddies of silver. I was convinced that I had found *shi wai tao yuan*, what the Chinese call Xanadu. Now I was the one begging for a few more minutes, knowing that when we got back home, the stars would go hiding again, but Dad did not want me to catch a cold.

Ever since that magical encounter, I became acutely aware of the street lamps saturating Beijing, and even if there were no lamps, the halos from distant skyscrapers easily overpowered my shy friends. I also learned that the barrier was made of PM 2.5 emissions. Of course, I understood that the lamps ensured safety, but what about the skyscrapers? Why do they, human creations, take precedence over God's creations? Why do they operate twenty-four-seven and deprive the stars of a chance to shine?

As I got older, I found answers. From the Industrial Revolution to the present day, there has been and will always be a compromise between environmental protection and economic progress, and men have chosen the latter nine times out of ten. We think the blessings of nature are eternal, and we believe we can create out of steel, concrete, and plastic enduring monuments of human success. Both reasons are grossly wrong. The blessing of seeing stars, blue skies, and breathing clean air is extremely rare in many countries nowadays, and human structures will all fade away sooner or later, either like ancient civilizations' ruins or America's Rust Belt. Even skyscrapers will inevitably meet this end.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote in Volume 10 of his journal, "We, too, are out, obeying the same law with all nature. Not less important are the observers of the birds than the birds themselves." Thoreau's second line speaks of an equal and mutually respectful relationship. Just

like how society cannot be constructed without mutual relations, our world will disintegrate if we do not view nature as our cohabitants. Thus, the stars should not take the sidelines while the PM 2.5 barrier takes center stage, and no one should learn about stars from movies, art, science, or the Bible rather than their own eyes.