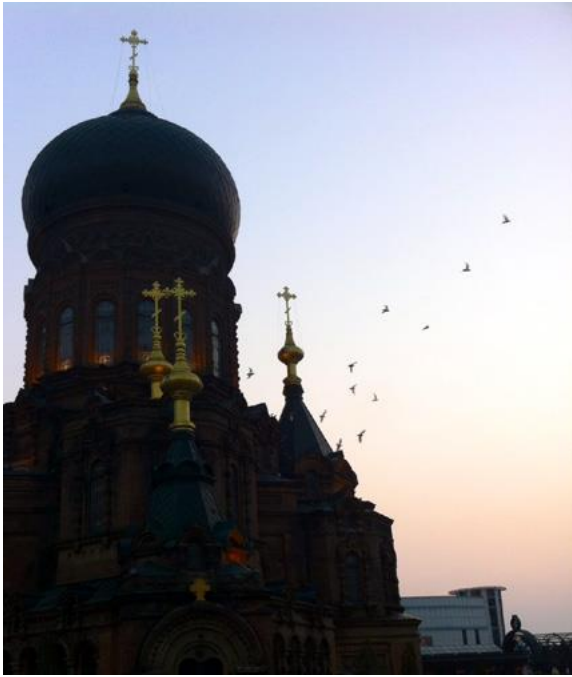


## Blog 43 Harbin



Last Christmas, My mom’s friend from Michigan asked our family if we wanted to join them on their trip to Harbin in the north-east corner of China, to celebrate Christmas and see the ice sculptures up in the north. But since we were not prepared with heavy winter apparel as they were, my mom said “next time”, knowing it’ll be way too cold for us Floridians. As Nanjing’s weather was nearing its highest peak in July (100° F), my mom and I planned an escape trip to Harbin. There, the average temperature is only 75° F during the summer.

Back in 1898, the Russians received concession from Qing China to build the Chinese Far East Railway (Manchurian Railway). As one of the most important cities along the railway, many Russians immigrated to Harbin. Not only did the immigrants help finish building the railway, they also immensely influenced the city with their Russian culture. Our hotel was located on Zhong Yang Street (Central Street) which is Harbin’s most popular tourist attraction. On each side were a bunch of Western style buildings and architecture. When the Russians first came to Harbin, people say they first built churches. St. Sofia Cathedral is one of the more popular and well preserved ones. Standing in front of the cathedral and listening to the western music playing in the plaza, you can see why Harbin’s nickname is the “Eastern Moscow”. From outside our hotel room window, we can always hear the sound of violins and flutes playing western styles of music drifting through the evening air. I was told that Harbin had the earliest access to European classical music in China.



Every night of our stay, my mom and I would always walk the entire length of the rocky 100-year old cobblestone street. One time when we were strolling down the street, I realized the people of Harbin were pretty “artistic”, as I spotted something surprisingly colorful out of the corner of my eye. When I looked at it directly I

figured that it was an electricity box. It wasn't the regular grey box with the wires sticking out at weird angles, but was decorated and painted over to form a picture such as a group of fish, a city skyline and even Charlie Chaplin. It wouldn't be wrong to say that even their electricity boxes were a piece of art.



On the sides of the street, you can often find souvenir shops selling intricately designed and painted Matryoshka's (Russian dolls), foods like Lieba, and smoked red sausages. Lieba is Russian style large round bread derived from the Russian word: Khleb meaning bread. It has been sold in bakeries for over a hundred years and it has become a food commonly found on the dining table of someone from Harbin, along with the Russian smoked red sausages. After two days or so, my cousin from Hong Kong joined us in Harbin. One time, we had lunch at one of Harbin's most famous restaurants called Hua Mei Western Restaurant which serves some of the most authentic Russian delicacies around town! The restaurant was built in 1925 and the owner had been changed multiple times from Russians, to Germans, Poles and Czechs. In 1955, the owners were changed to the Chinese. Restaurant's first floor was designed to have a garden-like environment while the second floor's design imitated the Kremlin in Russia. Walking into such a fancy and elegant dining hall, I felt a little bit of uncomfortable with my shorts and flip-flop. We enjoyed some typical Russian dishes like sweet cabbage soup, beef stroganoff and bliny. I haven't been to Russia, but I've gotten a good taste of the Russian cuisine.



By the last day, my mom and my feet were already really sore. When we passed a foot massage place, my cousin suggested that we go get one to relax a bit. I had never tried one before, but I heard you can really rest there, so I agreed. My mom chose the basic foot massage for me and she and my cousin both picked themselves the “luxury” foot massage. The three of us were brought to a room with three huge lay-z-boy chairs. We turned the TV on to the movie channel and dunked our sore feet into the wooden cask. While we were sitting there, the masseurs started to massage our shoulders and backs. The three masseurs were like secret Kungfu masters showing their hidden skills behind their fake identity. They began pulling our arms, squishing our shoulders, pounding on our backs, leaving us whimpering and our joints cracking. At the time, I didn’t really think the massage was an enjoyment, so I just kept reminding myself that it was supposed to be a relaxing treatment and that I should try to find comfort from it. Afterwards, came the most unbearable part for me: the foot massage. On the outside, I attempted on holding it together lying back in the chair, my hands like talons, clenching onto my sides and not making too much noise. But I was still unable to fully control the giggles escaping out when I felt the tickle coming on. I was trying to pull my foot out of her hands but she kept a firm grip on it, not letting go... We began a game of tug-of-war with my foot. I took a glance at my mom and cousin, but they were completely focused on the TV like nothing was going on. I really don’t understand why this is such a big thing in China.

The fine blend of the Russian culture and Chinese culture was thoroughly displayed all throughout our trip. Though I may not be able to visit Russia itself anytime soon, at least I have an idea, not to mention an amazingly cooled down summer vacation since our next stop was also a city in the North.

