

September 15, 1994 (Vol. 10, no. 2)

Dear Colleague:

For fourteen years I lived an ivory-tower life in Minneapolis--that is, in a luxury highrise condo in which just about everything I needed--laundry, restaurant, barbershop, delicatessen, grocery--were housed inside the building, protected from the elements as well as from street people. When I came to Madison, I thought I would lead a similar Fortress-America existence. Instead, I found myself confronted with something almost like the real world. There are no multi-service condos in Madison, so where I now live I occasionally have to brave the elements to get a loaf of bread. As for street people, they are everywhere in my part of Madison and, indeed, I am one myself. This is the real surprise and difference. In Minneapolis, I never really came close to people other than downtown's upper-middle bourgeoisie and U of M students. Coffman Union at Minnesota is exclusively a student union. The campus itself is isolated from the city by a ring of freeways. UW-Madison, by contrast, is an inner-city university. Of the three-score student unions I know personally, UW's Memorial Union is unique in that at times it looks like a combination of welfare center, a rest home for the elderly, a nursery, a cell for socialist-radicals, a diner for victims of paraplegia and Downs Syndrome, a club for blue-haired ladies, a hang-out for teenagers--and, yes, a place of relaxation for students. Memorial Union is really utopia, where the beauty of physical landscape is quite eclipsed by the beauty of human kindness. Here is a vignette: An ugly middle-aged man with defective vocal cords croaked loudly and incomprehensibly to his companion, who listened and tried to converse with not the slightest sign of impatience in the half-hour I eavesdropped on them in the next booth.

Physical beauty is a signpost tempting us to rise to philosophical and spiritual heights. So say the ancient Greeks. It works for me: our lovely campus and its "limpid, liquid youths" propel me effortlessly to higher thoughts. But what if one aspires to moral-ethical elevation? Then, not physical beauty but ugliness (sickness, old age, suffering) is the only reliable signpost. Unless one is able to face and cross the chill of death, one cannot hope to be a decent human being. In Madison, facing nature from time to time has made me stronger and healthier. Facing poverty and sickness ought to make me morally stronger and healthier. Alas, this has not happened. Ugliness merely makes me afraid: I am, after all, an unaesthetic street person myself. How much easier it is to be a Greek than to be a Christian!

Best wishes,

*Ji-Fu*