All That Divides Us

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Our Chinese guide adores English idioms. He presents them to us like bonbons at each corner we pass in Shanghai, where old men play chess at rickety tables between their knees. When the bus stalls in thick traffic, Mr. Yuan scratches his head, declares, *Gridlock!* and smiles for the first time.

At the park Mr. Yuan makes a speech about Liberation, how before that day signs said, *No Chinese and Dogs Allowed.* He puts his palms together, offers: *Birds of a feather flock together?* This time he doesn’t smile. We clear our throats, look out the window.

Next he takes us to the section where he says beggars, opium addicts, prostitutes once crammed the streets like dead fish. *Redlight district,* he intones, waving to an empty plaza, *now clean as whistle with communism.* We wonder whether to smile or frown.

While we visit the museum, Mr. Yuan stays outside by the bus, chain-smoking. *Like a smokestack,* we could say as we return, looking him over secretly at close range. He is small, young-old; his chiseled face looks *dog-tired.* A former professor, maybe, or a diplomat.

When the tour is over, we ask Mr. Yuan how he will spend the rest of his Sunday, expecting him to tell about home, family. *In the park,* he answers instead, *playing chess.*
He smiles his second smile, almost radiant. Quietly we file off the bus, leaving him in the doorway. We whisper to each other: *Do you think they tortured him?*