

2023

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Linda Ma
lm0165@mix.wvu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Ma, Linda (2023) "Strawberry Soju," *Calliope*: Vol. 35, Article 35.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol35/iss1/35>

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Strawberry Soju

Linda Ma

I've heard people complain that San Francisco looks gloomy. Not to me. Despite the fog that rolls in from the bay to cover everything like a soft, cottony blanket, the city is vibrant and alive. The cold sun peers hopefully through gaps in the clouds, illuminating the tourists and locals milling around below. I breathe in the salty, chilly ocean air and can't help but smile. My body feels light.

For lunch, we buy dim sum in Chinatown. CASH ONLY, reads the restaurant sign in red block lettering. My brother orders in broken Chinese as I look on. Everything is freshly made by a surly woman who tallies up prices while packaging food with superhuman deftness and efficiency. The woman hands us several boxes, offers a scowl in lieu of a goodbye, and shoos us out the door before shouting at the next customers. I carry the shrimp dumplings back to the car, watching as they steam up the flimsy clamshell container. We eat our lunch on the beach huddled together against the cold breeze, surrounded by squawking seagulls and hordes of people. I close my eyes as I pop the last dumpling in my mouth.

One day, I think, maybe I'll move out here. Just for the food.

The line of cars going into the Alameda County Fairgrounds for the 626 Night Market is a gleaming snake languidly extending for over a mile, and the sidewalk teems with people waiting to get in and spend hundreds of dollars on overpriced Asian food.

“Okay,” my brother says with a sigh. “We'll park far away and walk if we have to.”

“Fine by me,” I shrug. I'm tired, but I don't complain.

It's been unbearably hot since we left San Francisco. Every step sends up puffs of dust on the narrow path, and the sun continues to beat down on our backs and the backs of the multitudes of marketgoers walking in tandem. I fall uncharacteristically silent as we pass more and more people leaving. They carry strange mementos: a half-eaten tornado potato on a stick, a giant, oddly shaped cup of boba. Two middle schoolers run past us, talking excitedly in Korean. I catch glimpses of people as we move along—Gucci sunglasses perched atop a middle-aged woman's head, a Nikon camera slung around a man's neck, burnished silver rings on a scarred hand.

A carefree group of Asian Baby Girls, or ABGs--the rebellious, privileged Asian teens that adopt all the characteristics their parents are against--saunter by in a swirl of perfume and laughter, hair bleached blonde and brightly colored acrylic nails gleaming. They wear tiny tops and fake lashes heavy with glue and mascara, batting their eyes at the rowdy groups of guys behind them. They are a cultural phenomenon, one that I've never seen back in West Virginia. I shrink back from them, pluck at my plain shirt distractedly, an ugly duckling watching swans drift by.

I can't help the sharp flicker of irritation that runs through me, the bitter sense of unfairness at the girls' easy confidence. The feeling swells in my stomach, spreads through my chest like poison, and robs me of my breath.

We exist in different worlds, I think to myself.

I can't pinpoint when the separation happened. Perhaps it was when I started begging my mom for Lunchables and ham-and-cheese sandwiches instead of the fried rice and egg-tomato stir fry she would pack for school. When I had grown tired of the pointed questions from classmates. Or did it begin during that memorable world history class in sixth grade, when my

ancient teacher, ironically named Mrs. Young, conducted a deep dive into “disgusting” foods sold at Chinese markets, sharing her opinions with us with a barely contained glee?

Maybe it was those moments where I sat there alone in heavy silence surrounded by people, fervently wishing that I hadn’t been born Asian, that made me different from these Californians who have embraced their culture and even dared to rebel against expectations. Time slows and stops as I scan each girl’s heavily made-up face, only finding a naivete that I couldn’t comprehend. *Yes, I think, as a lump forms in my throat. That would certainly do it.*

After another hour of waiting in line, we are finally near the night market entrance, packed tightly together as we shuffle towards the gates slowly. I take a deep breath in and wish I hadn’t. It smells strongly of people, that rancid, restless smell that overtakes all else in crowded settings.

I don’t know if I say it to fill the silence or to explain my feelings, but I blurt out, “I’ve never seen so many Asian people in one place in my entire life.” Except I say it too loudly, and a few heads nearby turn.

But it’s true, and I can’t wrap my head around what I’m seeing. There’s too many people around me. Too many bodies, conversations, and too much unfamiliarity. My heart is racing, and I feel a trickle of sweat down my back. But when I order my feet to move so I can step away and process the whirling in my head, they won’t budge. I’m meant to be here in this night market crowd, and I know it.

“This is Cali, dude,” my brother mutters back good-naturedly. “That’s why I keep saying you need to move out and see the world more.”

The sweet, artificial smell of strawberry soju drifts over from a short, heavily perspiring young man who wears a loud shirt emblazoned with anime characters and a lopsided bucket hat. He makes a show of taking big swigs from a clear flask, looking around to make sure people see. I nudge my brother and he raises his eyebrows comically. I shake my head and inhale again, the faint fruity scent lingering in the air.

“So, what foods do you want to try while you’re here?”

I was prepared for my brother’s question, which came shortly after I arrived in Sacramento, right behind the hugs and hellos. I smile and open my Notes app, scroll to the list I typed up, and then hesitate. I don’t want to ask for too much. My brother drives a Corvette now, but he still lives like we always have. He still saves plastic bags in a battered tote bag. Houseplants are being propagated in empty Yoplait yogurt containers above the kitchen sink, clashing with the expensive stainless steel appliances. And I suddenly remember that he’s still paying off student loans.

“Ummm—”

“Don’t worry about it. This is your first trip to California. It’ll be a treat for us both.”

“Okay... if you’re sure.” I read out my list tentatively, and my brother beams in approval. Korean barbecue. Vietnamese food. Sushi, and I mean *good* sushi. Jollibee fried chicken. Soju. Dim sum. There’s a lot, all from the food tour videos on Youtube that I like to watch. “We don’t have to get anything on the list, we can stay home and cook—I really don’t mind,” I hasten to add.

My brother ignores me and types furiously on his phone for a second. “Let’s have Jollibee tonight. And soju goes well with chicken, so we can knock two off the list.”

Half an hour later, we’ve picked up our food and headed to a tiny supermarket. I wait in the car, inhaling the smell of greasy fried chicken, and once my brother comes back with the soju, we drive home. We line the green glass bottles up and sample them, discussing the merits and flaws of each flavor like seasoned sommeliers. Green grape, grapefruit, original. The last one we try is strawberry. I straighten up so I’m sitting primly on the couch with my legs crossed. I lift the shot glass up to my mouth with my pinky up. Next to me, my brother cracks up.

“Not bad,” I sniff disdainfully. “Notes of cough syrup, mellowed out by the alcohol. Kinda gross when I put it that way.”

Actually, the soju tastes familiar. Like the sweet strawberry jellies I used to eat when I was little, the ones that come in a cup and you have to squish the bottom and slurp up the whole thing like a caveman. Of course it was a hit with the kids. One time, mid-slurp, I choked on the jelly and swallowed it whole, and so I never tried to eat them again. The strawberry soju has a bitter aftertaste that the jellies didn’t, but I don’t mind it. And once I have a few chicken wings followed by more shots, I decide that I like it after all.

The cloudless blue sky is streaked with muted oranges and purples when the gate finally opens up ahead and we are ushered in. The muffled sounds of laughter and pop songs being blasted over the speakers grow in volume and distinctness as we round the corner. The whole market is suddenly in front of us, neat rows of little stalls bearing signs with eye-catching colors

and LED lights. Booths proudly display T-shirts, plushies, and stickers, while others even have carnival games.

My eyes flit over the sizzling yakitori, juicy steamed pork and vegetable buns, and Hot Cheeto-crust corn dogs all sold next to each other, an amusing and odd assortment of flavors. The customers form long lines that stretch across the asphalt and wrap around nearby tents. A rich, smoky aroma tickles my nose, alerting me to a stall selling spicy charcoal-grilled lamb skewers. My stomach growls in response. I look around for my brother, only to find him already striding towards the tent.

After the skewers, we buy steamed buns and jjamppong, a Korean seafood soup that has thick, bouncy noodles and broth that's the color of fresh chilies. On the other end of the market, we find a stall selling passionfruit sugarcane juice that is so sweet and so cold that it makes my head hurt. Or perhaps it was the price. Seven dollars for a small cup, and even more bewildering is the fact that people continue flocking, jostling for a place in line.

So this is California.

Walking around the night market, I can't help but marvel at the faces in the crowds. The few fair-haired individuals stick out like sore thumbs, and the majority of people share similar facial features to me, their dark hair made darker by the night. I wonder if they save plastic bags like we do. I wonder if their families make dumplings for Lunar New Year like mine does, and if their parents bring them plates of sliced fruit instead of saying "sorry" after arguments. Excitement flares, but it's replaced by dread when I remember that I'll have to go back to West Virginia, where I will be reminded that my Asian heritage will be what defines me and binds me,

instead of being something to celebrate and treasure. I blink rapidly and see my brother looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“Just enjoy your time here,” he says gently. “Remember it when you go back home, and visit me again when you miss it.”

The rest of my California trip is pleasant and uneventful. Somehow, the night market stays in my mind, so vivid that I can close my eyes and return to the smell of smoky lamb skewers, loud music, and laughter. On the plane ride home, my head uncomfortably wedged between the plane seats, I dream that I’m waiting in the crowd to enter the night market again. Though we are strangers, we breathe the dry air in unison, taking the same shuffling steps towards the bright lights in the distance. I am nameless, faceless, comforted.

I wake up with a start as the plane lands. I retrieve my possessions at the baggage claim, heaving a large, beat-up suitcase towards the exit where my ride awaits. I’ve filled it with various snacks from numerous trips to the Asian supermarkets in Sacramento before I left. Nestled between the honey butter potato chips and instant ramen, carefully covered in bubble wrap, are a few bottles of strawberry soju.