A Red Light in Western China

A mass of motorcyclists waits at a traffic light. They are bunched together like pedestrians, for the lines on the road have been painted for the cars, busses, and trucks of the world — the vehicles made to transport entire families, whole stocks and supplies — not for the pedestrian or motorcycle. At least, not this many motorcycles. The traffic light is not pictured.

Their faces are all Asian. (When the light turns green, the traffic will flow from the middle-left of the canvas towards the bottom right; in this way, the motorcyclists are more facing us than not). They wear bright summer clothes. None wear helmets. A few have umbrellas attached to the back of their motorcycles, for shade. Most wear sandals. Most share their motorcycles with at least one other passenger.

On one motorcycle in the foreground is a pregnant woman with two children. Her right foot, the foot we can see, is in a sky blue sandal and planted on the ground, balancing the motorcycle. Her right hand grips the right handlebar. In front of her, sharing her seat, is a young boy no more than ten years old, perhaps no more than six. The mother rests her chin on the back of this boy's head, staring ahead, while the boy looks away from us, to the left, at all the motorcyclists around him. His hands grip the twin rearview mirrors that stick up from the head of the vehicle like the ears on a deer that has just stopped in its tracks at the sound of danger. Behind the mother, holding her waist, is the daughter. Somewhere between ten and fifteen years old. She wears white glasses and is looking down, and to the right (towards us), at something on the ground, perhaps her mother's foot, perhaps something smaller that we can't make out. She has a pink bow in her hair, a bright blue shirt the color of her mother's sandals, cherry red

sandals of her own, and a colorful, flowery knee-length skirt. She has her right hand on her bare, right knee, and her left hand on her mother's shoulder.

Just beyond them, an old man sits on his motorcycle with an old woman behind him. She's holding his hips, leaning on his shoulder. A pink umbrella is attached to the back of their motorcycle. The old man is wearing sunglasses and a sleeveless undershirt. Two hands on the handlebars. Cigarette in mouth smoldering invisibly into the thick urban smog.

A green and yellow umbrella also sticks up from the mass. A blue and orange umbrella, too. Others in the distance. Many, many colors. Many motorcyclists. Many more passengers. A cosmic impression: a sea of traffic and little drops of motorcycles.

And above the umbrellas, a monolithic, gray overpass. Truly monolithic. For, in the painting, it replaces the sky. Bottom third, street. Middle third, motorcyclists waiting for the light. Top third, overpass. Roughly, these thirds, (considering the diagonals, the depiction of perspective). Only a faint hint of sky is shown above the overpass, between passing wheels.

Hanging from the side of it, the massive overpass, are two billboards and a sign. The sign says something in Chinese characters, with numbers spliced in, Arabic numerals in the Western (or modern universal) style. The billboard on the left is black and white, with the face of a white woman with light, messy hair staring out at us sensually, not smiling, mouth slightly agape, like she could be currently having sex. Chinese characters, and the French brand's name underneath. The second billboard advertises a Japanese car. The ideal viewer will recall the Rape of Nanking, but conclude, in the final analysis, that the painting is more about contemporary Chinese street life than about making any political statement or historical analogy. Simply a snapshot.