

Report from Beijing: Adventures, Impressions, and Anecdotes from the Far East

The following are bulk emails I sent from China, mostly during the first semester I taught there. Often I make the same mistake most people do, namely, come to premature conclusions. That said, I leave them unedited here for the sake of people being able to read the impressions as they occurred.

V1, Thursday, September 9, 1999

I taught my first classes yesterday, from 2-4 and 4-6PM. I am in an un-air-conditioned room (like all the classrooms), on the second floor; temperature here in Beijing was about 93. The heat was, to say the least, distracting. On top of that, I've ever taught two classes in a row before, so when the first was over, it just hit me: I have to do this same class all over again... in this heat. Ugh.

The best part came at 5PM. They have these loudspeakers all over campus, where they play, during meal times, this loud, elevator-type music for about an hour. Well, right at 5PM, in the middle of the lecture, this stuff starts up - and of course there is a speaker right outside my classroom! Thank goodness I'm as loud as I am...

Their English skills seem to vary; some are very good, others, barely passable. I don't know how that's going to work out yet. Many (most?) of them bring these little calculator-type things to class, and they can spell in an English word and get a Chinese translation. Very neat.

People's reaction to us (me) varies. Most people seem to pay us no mind - a little surprising since Caucasians stand out here quite a bit (in fact, there is a group of American students here from somewhere; I noticed them from about 100 yards away because of their blond hair). Others are just openly staring (my hair may have something to do with that I suppose).

The food, wherever you go, is cheap - really cheap. I can eat out every night, be very full, and sometimes take something home, and rarely pay much more than \$1. There is a little farmers market I have been going to for these little breads too - partly for the bread, partly to just go there. It's right on campus.

In fact, there is a lot on campus, including apartment buildings and a little ghetto area. I guess when they built the university they just let people stay where they were - the best idea, since housing here, like in Russia, is in such short supply.

Me and the other political science professor too a walk out of the campus area the other day, going down these little alleys and stuff. This was where the ghetto was most evident. Row houses of sorts; 1 story, 1 room, about the size of a small bedroom; sometimes this doubled as their shop (selling stuff, fixing stuff). Lots of this.

V2. Sunday, September 12, 1999

Several new experiences today [Friday]. First, I went to the dry cleaners and actually communicated the fact that although I was leaving 2 shirts and 2 pairs of shorts with them, I wanted to get the shirt back today. Fortunately this was made much easier by the calendar that they have on the wall.

I also got my bike today. I could have bought a decent one for \$20-30, but I decided to just pay the \$50 deposit through the college office and use one of theirs (mostly because it was easier). It's a girls bike (most are here), it has a bad seat, a bell, and a basket - just like all the other bikes here. And it has a seat that's WAY too low (I may have to do something about that).

OK - so this makes it a good time to talk about traffic here. The fact is that it's a zoo - and that makes it terribly exciting (for me anyway...). Cars, pedestrians, and bikes all share the same roads (except the major roads), and it's really just a matter of finding your way thru it. Forget traffic lights, hand signals for bikes, right-of-way — none of it applies. This may sound scary (or, it may not...), but if you pay attention, it's fine.

Today [Saturday] me and this political science guy Dick went more toward the center of the city (Beijing is like 30 miles across - and we are on the outside part of it) to look for a printer and a power cord for his laptop. Well, just when you thought you knew and understood how many people had and ride bikes here (lots - remember?). Wow - in any given block, hundreds of bikes, either parked or with people riding them. Finally, on the subject of bikes, people use them to transport stuff, meaning that you see a lot of them with the carts or trailers hooked up to the back; today we saw these 3 guys hauling one of these that was piled at least 8 feet high with stuff.

Another interesting anecdote from today: Several people approached Dick and I, rather furtively, motioning to us to follow them, to sell us 'CDs,' which, after following one of the guys for about a block, they finally produced: Porno CDs... I laughed, shook my head, and left.

The beginning of each semester the freshmen participate in army drills. So, on campus, in the big soccer field across from my house, the line up and march (and stuff) several hours a day. About 1000 of them (or more?) - quite a spectacle. (By the way, they play soccer on this HUGE field that has 6 goals altogether; the interesting part is that it's a dirt field - in other words, no grass).

Sept 19: Yesterday was the Great Wall. WOW! First, just being there was almost enough. It was about a 2.5 hour bus ride (small bus; VERY cramped; lots of stops). We (the poli sci guy, Dick, and two students he met) took the cable car about halfway up the mountain, and the walking...

We picked one of the four spots that are accessible from Beijing that is less commercialized (we heard about the least commercialized after we had the plans made). The Wall here is much less preserved - meaning it really doesn't look exactly like the pictures.

Still - breathtaking. The view was unbelievable... Spent about 3 hours up there walking (really, climbing). At the end I went alone up this last section that was about a 70 degree incline and really broken down. It was like scaling the crest of the mountain. Then I just sat and looked for a few minutes. Of course I took lots of pictures.

I teach 2-2 hour classes in a row, the same class. For the record? 4 hours in a row is just grueling. It's also a bit tough language-wise: I am constantly on watch for what words I am using, having to make sure that I'm not getting into vocabulary that is too advanced (with the exception of political science type terms that they have to know).

Cab rides are a blast. I have to take them a lot, but the good news is that it's usually only a few dollars, even for a 30 minute trip somewhere. Anyway, these guys are masters - they make US cab drivers look like amateurs. They will go through a red light as often as they will stop, drive between lanes - basically drive wherever and whenever they want. I find myself congratulating them (to myself - they all speak Chinese - can you imagine?) on their moves all the time.

I haven't really gotten into a regular diet yet. Everything is fairly cheap, but difficult for me to order, I don't know what's in it, and it usually has a lot of vegetables. They have these little things called Jiaoze (pronounced 'jowdze') that are like raviolis; I get them a lot. Then there is always rice. There are places to order dog, and I will definitely be doing that before I leave.

The house keeper (maid) is great. She comes in every morning at 8:15, without fail, unlocking the door if she has to (in other words, whether I'm in bed or not), to bring me the thermos of hot water (water is boiled, and hot water is available from 7-9AM and 8-9PM). Anyway, she comes in with a big smile on her face, talking a mile a minute, telling me all sorts of things - and I always answer her. The problem (but I guess it really isn't one) is that neither of us understands anything the other is saying...

The city is still going mad trying to get ready for the 50th anniversary party - construction everywhere, signs and banners, people with arm bands on, regular staff (like in the cafeterias on campus or the staff here at the Guest House) are now wearing nice jackets (not Mao jackets) as part of their uniform. Lots of cleanup - stuff like that. I wish I could be downtown, but it is a country of 1.2 billion people, this is the capital, and there's only so much room down there (actually, to be in the city center on the 1st [October] is by

invitation only). They say that there are hotel suites available overlooking where the festivities will be - going for several thousand dollars. Oh well.

The first time I went to Tiananmen Square was the Saturday night before the 50th anniversary. The place was (and has been ever since) a madhouse. Thousands of people there, spotlights, a laser light show, people flying kites. The mood was electric - not just because of the 50th anniversary, but because Tiananmen ("the peaceful gate of heaven") is the center of the country - like the Liberty Bell, the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, etc., combined into one place (and the place is HUGE - it's the biggest public square in the world). We didn't get there until 9PM or so, and ended up staying all night, this to be there in the morning (5.40AM) to see them raise the flag in the square - something all Chinese people want to do once in their lives (in fact, there were about 5,000 people there the next morning for this).

Across the street from Tiananmen is the Forbidden City, which I went to see about 2 weeks later. It's not so much a palace (which I was expecting) but a HUGE compound, with, they say, 9,999 rooms. I have to go back: At the very end of the walk through, you get to the gardens, which seemed like a whole other tour unto itself; I didn't see much of that.

I bought a guitar here the other day. I had been wondering if I should bring one, and didn't, but after about 3 weeks I started to regret that. So I went and bought a decent one (which I may just leave here) for a little under \$50.

V5, October 30, 1999

I got a cold. To be expected I suppose, even though I haven't had one in a few years. There are probably all sorts of germy things that my immune system isn't used to. Fortunately, it was only a head cold - lasted just 2 days, and it was over.

I have been to the Forbidden City; I am not quite sure what to say about this place. It's across the street from Tiananmen, a huge compound, within which all of the emperors lived; there is not much to actually see - you have to imagine a lot. In other words, there are no palaces or riches on display - that stuff, for the most part, is gone. It's just the grounds and the buildings. Nice, but there isn't much more to say about it. I do have pictures of course...

More eating experiences: I had "hot pot" the other night. They have these restaurants where every table has a kettle set into the table (some with oil, some with water and spices - mine was water). Then, you order meat, veggies, noodles - whatever, and they bring this stuff to you on different plates. The rest is simple: You cook it yourself - drop it in, and when it's done, fish it out (with your chopsticks, of course). The stuff is all thin sliced, so it cooks fast. Interesting and fun dining experience.

I almost forget to talk about ordering fish in restaurants. You know how some restaurants have tanks with live lobsters in them - you pick your lobster? Yes - you guessed it. You pick your fish (in many restaurants) from the tank. They take it out and do it... of course, being someone who doesn't like fish, I haven't had the experience. The other thing is that some of the tanks they have contain some very interesting things - I went to one place where I couldn't identify most of the 15 or so forms of life in the tank... I don't even like to think about it actually.

Well, the cold that I had about 10 days ago and was almost gone seems to be back with a vengeance. Of course I am very happy about that... probably has something to do with the fact that I was outside sightseeing (the Summer Palace) yesterday, and the weather has definitely turned.

The Summer Palace is actually far more than a palace - it's the grounds and estate where Emperors vacationed. It's got a lake, several bridges, of course many buildings and stuff; one cool part is the Marble Boat, built right next to the shore and made - you guessed it - out of marble (no, it is not functional). It is about the size of a small paddle boat (2 tiers). Don't really know what it was used for, and you can't go on it.

Actually, most of these tourist places you can't go in the really cool places; I think it has something to do with the fact that for most Chinese, just being there is significant.

I have discovered the world of video CDs - movies on CD Rom that you play on your computer. They are pirated; you can actually hear the voices of the people who are recording it in the background of a few. Anyway, it's a cheap way to watch a movie (\$2.50 apiece), and a great way to pass the time later at night...

V6, November 11, 1999

The big news has nothing to do with China. I got a toothache last week, and when I went to the dentist (English-speaking), found out I need (1) a root canal, or (2) extraction of the tooth. Since there is nothing left on that side of my mouth, I opted for the root canal. \$1000. Fortunately, they take credit cards, and fortunately, I am here making a little money and spending less - so I guess I can afford it, even if I don't like it. Ugh...

Everything I heard about buying stuff from people on the streets was true: Bargain. First off, lots of commerce is conducted in market stalls, sidewalks, and little shops the size of a large closet (in some cases, it where they live as well). Everyone says bargain at these places, and often you are surprised at how low you can drive them. So we leave the Summer Palace (this was a few weeks ago), and there are about 12 stall set up next to each other; I think they are connected somehow (this is a detail). Anyway, I stopped and looked at a Chinese military officers cap and asked how much it was. It was about \$35 (280 Yuan) - much more than I had on me at the time. So I said (in my rudimentary Chinese), "Too much; I don't have." After a minute, they went down to about 180Y, still more than I had (I had about 60Y), so they started asking how much I would pay for it. By this time I had changed my mind about wanting it, so I said I didn't want it. This was (1) where it got REAL annoying, and (2) where I learned the lesson. We started walking away, and this guy would not leave me alone. I must have said "I don't want" at least 20 times; still he is following, badgering. It almost got fairly nasty. However, in the end, he was offering the hat to me for 40Y (about \$5). So the lesson in bargaining? Walk away...

Another tip when YOU are traveling in Beijing. The cab drivers will never admit if or when they don't know where someplace is. I work at one of the 2 locations of China Agricultural University - the lesser known one, as it turns out. So a few times, the driver has taken me almost to the wrong campus before he believes me that we're going the wrong way (the root of the problem is when you give them the card that has your destination on it - in Chinese, of course - they only look at the name of the college. You have to INSIST they read the whole thing). So this happens to me last Sunday. What should have been a 30 minute, 25Y ride ended up being 90 minutes and 55Y. I only had a 50, so I was kind of at his mercy. He says he'll only charge me 45; I say 25. Finally I settle for demanding he give me 5 more (he had given me change of 5Y already). He refuses - smiling - for about 3 minutes, and then I started to act as if I was memorizing his driver ID number (all the cabs are government run); he had 5 more Yuan in my hands in less than 10 seconds. The tip: Pretend you will report them if they screw you (they have other ways to do this as well - like not turning the meter on - so they can keep the whole fare).

There seems to be a halfway decent chance that I will be asked to come back here in the spring. IF they offer political science, and IF they haven't hired someone already to do that, I am probably in. I will probably know in a week or two. We'll see. It's a fairly exciting and challenging job, as it turns out, because their English skills are NOT on par with those of a foreign student in an American university. So you have to figure out different ways to say things - in simple language - which is good for teaching anyway. Some of the weirder moments are when they ask you to define a regular word - like the other day, I had to define 'naive.' (Actually, they rarely ask; they have these language calculator translators; now, when I see someone open their's up, I know what's going on, and just ask them).

I went to the Great Wall again this weekend. This time we went to a section that the "Lonely Planet" guide calls the Wild Wall. No one here has ever heard of the place. And that's good, because there is NO ONE there. At all.

V6, November 11, 1999

Well, it looks very good for my chances of teaching in the spring here - all but certain. But officially we are still waiting. If I get it means that I will come back in Feb. (as planned), come back to China near March 1, and be here until July 15. We'll see. It would be nice to have a full year of teaching employment, even if I'm not getting rich at it. I have to say that things are generally going OK. Not being able to cook gets to be a bit of a pain, time-wise anyway (have to go out to get something every night).

There is going to be a picture printed of me playing guitar with a bunch of students in the school newspaper. I'm going to try and get a few copies; it's in Chinese of course (they do a good job with that

Chinese language thing here...)

Chinese students are a very different breed than their American counterparts. First of all, the level of maturity is a bit less. This is a cultural thing, due in large part to the fact that individualism is most definitely frowned upon. This of course may change a bit with their move to a market economy, but in general, the maturity level is that of a high school - or even middle school - student.

They also have a very different style of learning here, which makes them less well prepared for an American college education. Specifically, they are memorizers. Unbelievable memorizers. It boggles my mind the fact that they can all memorize whole pages of text - word for word - and recite it back on a test (which means you have to be careful not to ask questions that lend themselves to this type of answer). It also (with the above, about individualism) means that they have a tough time grasping the idea of independent thought.

On the plus side of things, they are exceptionally polite (unlike American students). In addition, the way the university system is set up here means that only the top 1% of high school students go to college, so we really are teaching the cream of the crop. Their study habits reflect that.

OH - I almost forgot to mention: The lettuce crop is in. What? Well, heaven only knows where this stuff comes from or what it is (it looks like romaine lettuce, but I can't be sure), but it's everywhere. On trucks, outside of stores, outside apartments, on street corners - everywhere. Not in boxes. Just piled up - neatly - but piled up. Interesting method of storing the harvest...

From the "miscellaneous things you take for granted" department: You would not believe the things that you run into everyday (sometimes literally) that are built under the assumption that most of the population is 5 foot 6 or 8 inches tall at most. Chairs, desks, doorways, beds, blankets, how high they trim tree branches hanging over the sidewalks...

The varieties of vehicles one sees on the street here is incredible, especially when you remember that this the capital city with 12 million residents of a country of 1.1 billion people. You can see many things pulling carts or wagons, like horses, motorcycles, mopeds, these little 3-wheeled things, or bicycles; it's amazing how much of a load some of these will be dragging behind them (like a lot more than most people would ever put in their pickup trucks). You see some of these bizarre vehicles without carts as well; the most peculiar are just big enough to fit one person, sometimes with a seat facing backwards in the back for a passenger, and again, sometimes have 2 wheels, 3, or 4. There are plenty of rickshaws downtown (with annoying drivers who prey on foreigners; I haven't ridden in one because the Chinese person I was with made it sound like this was one of the most distasteful forms of conspicuous consumption one could engage in); there are also things that look like motorized rickshaws as well. Most of the unusual vehicles drive in the bicycle lane (on every major road except the highways, which does NOT mean you won't see them there).

So yeah, my finger was broken. Guess that'll learn me. The bone is almost completely healed, and now it'll take a little while for the sprain / strain to heal. Best part? The entire trip to get an x-ray was 40 minutes - at the campus clinic - and about \$2.50. Imagine THAT in the States.

V7, November 25, 1999: Special Holiday Edition

Happy Thanksgiving! Nothing really happening for holiday here - in fact I taught today. We do get Christmas off, so that's nice (also projection I guess...).

OK, for the record: The "lettuce" (referred to in issue #6) is bok choy - a cabbage used for a lot of things. I thought the presentation was better with "lettuce."

Food: Do NOT order fried chicken here (unless you are at one of the many KFCs). Two things about it. One: They serve the whole thing... feet, head, etc. Two: Its cut randomly; in other words, they don't separate the pieces, they just cook the whole thing, and then cut it up with a cleaver any way that seems convenient at the moment. Difficult eating (difficult identifying WHAT you're eating). But the best part? The fried head...

The smog and dust (which is brought to you courtesy of the Gobi desert - not an after dinner treat) makes almost every day in the city hazy. In fact, some people who are outside all day (and others) wear surgical masks over their mouths to filter some of the crap out. Interesting sight, to say the least.

Pet Lovers Beware: The following segment may not be suitable for all audiences. On Saturday, Nov. 20, I (we) went to a Korean restaurant, and I ate me some dog. Yup. Served cold; marinated before cooking;

kind of shredded. The waitress got a kick out of me asking what kind of dog it was. Turns out, a big yeller dog (in the language of the Walt Disney classic). This is the main type that gets served. My Chinese companion refused to ask what the dog's name was. Oh yeah: What did it taste like? Like dog..

The Bicycle Incident. One day I was at the local grocery store and these two women who teach English came in. One thing led to another, and we went down the road a bit to where there was another market I had not been to. They had their bikes; I did not. One suggested we go Chinese-style, meaning that I should ride one on the rack on back of the bike. OK. We do that. On the way back, we do the same thing, except we switch bikes (the other girl's being a bit bigger). We get to the next stop light and I sort of stopped fairly quickly; she started to get off, and as she did, her foot kicked the kickstand down and into the wheel. To make this long story shorter, the wheel immediately bent to about a 35 degree angle. Destroyed. Luckily we crossed the street to one of the many roadside bicycle repair guys, who was able to replace the wheel (it did take 3 hours...).

The other day I went to Fragrant Hills. It's a mountain-park, and is northwest of the city (as I am), and is another resort-type place where emperors hung out and stuff; lots of temples; right after they won the war Mao stayed there waiting for about a month before he made his entrance into the city. I am not the guy to explain all these things; I only know the VERY brief versions of what they are, and I don't see more than a fraction when I go. If you really want more info on any of the places I have (not) described here, check out:

<http://www.beijing.chinats.com/index2.htm>

<http://www.chinavista.com/travel/virtualtours.html>

<http://china-window.com/beijing/tour/>

<http://zinnia.umfacad.maine.edu/~mshea/China/china.html>

One thing of note about the Fragrant Hills trip. We walked up (a REAL hike up a REAL mountain). We were going to take a cable car down (might shoulda taken one up...); lots of people up there trying to convince you to take a horse ride down (same price as the cable car). No, no, no I say repeatedly ("BU YOW" - I don't want). Then I saw the camels. Mongolian camels to be more precise. That was it. So we rode down the mountain on Mongolian camels. Took about an hour. It was a much better idea than it was reality, camel rides, especially downhill, being very bumpy, and very hard on bony behinds... Still, quite cool.

The comparative politics class is going well so far. The best part is that I have mostly 3rd year students, unlike the American politics classes which were mostly sophomores. What does that mean? They can speak and understand English MUCH better. It's like I'm teaching college again. Nice.

Lots of sightseeing and event type stuff this week. I have, I suppose, a relatively light schedule, at least compared to some other weeks. In fact, it has struck that my time here has been in one sense the least hectic in the past 5 or 6 years. Besides copy-editing the book (which only took 3 weeks), no research projects, fairly light work load. Almost like a working vacation.

The other thing I did this week was go to the Lama Temple, an actual Buddhist Monastery in operation. It's in the center of downtown, has the largest Buddha in the world, and was built a few hundred years ago. It was VERY touristy - by far more westerners in one place than I have since I have been here (all the westerners are interested in the Tibet stuff). Unlike other places of interest, here you could go in, but no pictures allowed: It's a place of worship, and people were doping just that. Actually I only spent about an hour there because of that - I was a bit uncomfortable.

V8, Dec. 11, 1999

In one sense it's been a pretty quiet couple of weeks here. About two and a half weeks ago I developed a very very bad head cold (not flu - no headache, fever, etc.). It started very slow, but within 4 days I was completely out of commission; couldn't breathe. I canceled classes, and basically did nothing for about 5 or 6 days; didn't even leave my room for 3 days.

The people here are pretty funny. It was, after all, a cold, but like everywhere, everyone has THE cold remedy. And they all tell you. And everyone wants to check on you and nurse you... nice, but after all, it was only a cold. For example, one of my students offered to take me to the doctor (imagine something like that in the States?).

Even better. The college administration (of course - there are NO secrets on this campus) got wind of

the fact that I was pretty sick, would not go to the doctor, and so on. So, I was the subject of their Friday afternoon meeting, and all 4 of them trooped over to check on me that evening.

The point is, I guess, that it's all very nice and well-intentioned, but the idea that a 41 year old could not take of himself is a bit much. I was helped out a bit by a colleague who took some of my classes and brought me some food - which was nice.

So, this week has been work work work. Catching up on lecture stuff, grading 60 papers and 60 exams... Just lots of work.

Smog, by the way, is always a problem here in Beijing. The sun only shines THROUGH on windy days. But those windy days bring the dust (Remember? From the Gobi Desert). I have written about all this before. Well, like everyone warned, it's all worse in the winter. The reason? Not too complex to understand... everything is heated with coal. So yeah - MORE smog.

Anyway, I'm sorry I have no juicy 'living in China' stories for ya'll in this issue; only boring news about meself. More will be forthcoming, we can be sure of that. Until next time, 'tsaiy tye' (bye bye).

We do get Christmas off by the way; it's on a Saturday...

V9, Dec. 20, 1999: Special Holiday Edition

Happy holiday greetings from Beijing!

Went to the dentist to finish my root canal last week. He thinks I should get it bridged almost immediately (to preserve the job). I am thinking about how to do it (meaning manage the finances), since I have nothing left on that side of my mouth. I think I am going to try and go for it.

Finally getting real winter here; about 5-20 degrees. On the very windy days, in other words, very cold (which I am less used to than I used to be. Yeah: No shorts these days. There was snow on the ground one day last week, but I guess that's rare.

Classes are going OK. Gave the first exam last week; I think about 6 or maybe 8 will wash out, which will work out good (they are from the same class, which is too big). No class today (so remember, don't come): It's the day Macao (that tiny Portuguese colony near Hong Kong?) gets returned to Chinese control.

It looks like I will be coming back here in the spring. They have offered me 3 classes, along with some computer work, for a total salary of 4 classes; this means 10k for 5 months (like the current arrangement). I will still be returning in January (the 25th), and I go back around March 1 (they buy the plane ticket again). I will be here then until around July 15.

Lots of Christmas shopping this week, although I don't really know why I thought I had to get it done now... I am going to be here another few weeks. Anyway, a LOT of VERY good bargains (nice things, good prices). Very very happy with that.

They (the administration of the college - our 'family,' as they like to call themselves) are having a Christmas party for us on Christmas Eve. Food, games, songs, etc. I am in charge of music... printing lyrics, learning a few songs on the guitar.

Not much else happening. It's pretty cold, meaning that doing anything is really a project. I have been mostly working, watching movies (video CDs on the computer), and taking care of little things (everything takes more time here, remember). School is really going to step up in time now, with appointments with students, discussion groups, and so on.

Christmas Day

Went to the "company" Christmas party last night. It was OK. In attendance were all of us foreign professors (about 8 or 10), as well as about 50 or 60 Chinese who are connected in some way or another with the college or the university we are part of, or are their family. It would be easy to be critical; I won't be. It was a nice gesture, but having it on Christmas Eve (as opposed to earlier) was a bit odd; in addition, it almost seemed as if it was an excuse for them to have a party. In spite of that, there are a few people who were genuinely interested in making sure we had a good time.

The party was at a little restaurant about 30 yards from our building. There was PLENTY of food (like most Chinese banquets I have been to, at least as much, if not more, was left over than was consumed), a few games were played, an origami folding session, some Christmas song singing (for which I played guitar

and sort of led), and a present exchange. The affair started about 7PM and went until about 10. Again, all in all, it was a nice affair.

The day itself was very nice; very warm compared to the past few weeks, sun shining. No snow, but I guess snow is unusual here in the city. I went out in the morning to get a few last minute gifts for a few people here, got a haircut, and went into several places looking for things for people at home. In other words, it was like Christmas Eve day at home, and it felt like it. Christmas day not much happened.

New Millennium News.... Or, How About, "Happy New Year!?"

Well, I am sure glad that I am not in the states for all the Y2K media hype, scares, and so on. Good heavens, it must be torture.

The whole world is going crazy here. My room was broken in to this week - really - by a completely inept student who was trying to steal the upcoming exam off my computer. I only caught the stupid son of a _____ about 7 different ways. His case is now in limbo while the administration decides what to do (my idea? Tell him to walk away from this school forever - no questions - and we won't call the police). Of course he fails the course, no questions there.

The other exciting this happening (this week also, no less) is that one of the profs here (I use the title only because that's what others call him) got in to a fist fight (actually, not a fight - he just hit) another professor. WAY out of hand.

Oh: Go to this site: My book is already being advertised (with the incorrect number of pages, and with no price, but what the heck).

<http://info.greenwood.com/books/0275967/0275967603.html>

My original plan for the 31st was to go to the Great Wall, until I found out that everyone - especially the younger drinking crowd - also has the same idea.

So I went downtown. We went down about 8.30, got a quick bite to eat, and then walked over to Tiananmen just to check it out. We wandered about there for about an hour, then went about 12-15 blocks down to a place (a very fancy hotel - the first place we came to) and got out of the cold. We had a couple of cups of coffee there (at Y32 per - roughly \$4; oh well, it's only once every thousand years), and then, about 11.30 headed back to the square.

Got there about 11.40, and waited. There was really nothing going on there - the real celebration was at a new place they were opening (all the government big shots were there). There were, of course, many thousands of people at Tiananmen, but there was no clock, no fireworks (which we were expecting). Actually, the only way we actually knew it was 12.00 was there was a group of people about 40 yards away who popped and sprayed champagne; I have to believe they had a radio or something (since 4-5 bottles of champagne is expensive to be spraying around for no reason).

The real excitement came trying to get a cab home - with the rest of the damn city. We ended up walking for 90 minutes before we got one. Ugh. A bit cold by then.

V10, Jan. 4, 2000

There is, as I have mentioned, hot water here (on this campus) only from 7-9AM and 8-10PM. In addition, there is no real sink to wash dishes in, and no real washing machine (that is worth the trouble to use). Thus, what has evolved for me (and a few others, without us ever really talking about it) is the use of the bathtub as an all purpose washing basin. Clothes, dishes, all get soaked throughout the day (or 2), and then all finished off during the shower. It may sound a little... something (I don't know), but actually works out well once you get the hang of it.

One day I was walking to the store and saw, along the side of the road, all these bird cages. People just have these pet birds; I don't really understand it, but they were out showing them to each other. Then, about 3 weeks ago, I was on my way to class and saw a guy with a bird in his hand (don't know what kind, about the size of a sparrow). Anyhow, he was throwing these two little balls (about the size of marbles) up into the air (30 yards up), and the bird was flying off to catch them and return them; he would give them a little piece of food to get them to drop the ball, and do it again. Very very cool. I am told that it's an old tradition in China to do this (the Emperors used to).

Karaoke, if you were wondering, is NOT dead. And thank goodness, huh? What we have learned here is that it's always a good time to Karaoke. Dinner parties, lunch parties, anytime. And the best part? All the American songs are the really gross ones, and even better than that, they are often translated wrong, or with sections of the song (like one line) just missing.

Those of you with children: You should never complain about the cost of diapers again. Ever. I am told that if one wanted to buy disposable diapers here in China, it would cost the equivalent of \$600 a month. Really. The fact is, no one uses them (or cloth diapers) here. All children's pants are made crotch less, so that whenever the child has to relieve him or her self, they just squat down. And yes, that means wherever they happen to be (on the street, in a restaurant!).

The campus is a real community; like a small town. Many people, after they go to college here, will find work here and spend the rest of their lives here. There are stores, a cleaner, tailor, kindergarten, school, an open air market. We even have our own ghetto.

V11, Jan. 17, 2000

This is the final Report before I come home next Tuesday... Hope you enjoy!

The saga concerning the student who broke into my room has been concluded. The silly son of a gun denied everything until very near the end. They called his mother, and she traveled to Beijing from Tianjen (not far, but not near here). After the first meeting with him, her, and the administration he was still denying everything. This all changed overnight; his mother evidently talked some sense into him (the next plan had been to fingerprint the disk).

So, Friday morning he admitted everything. After lunch on Friday the dean called me, and asked if he and the mother could come see me. Of course this was the last thing I wanted to do, but something told me I should. Ugh. If I never do something like that again it will be several lifetimes too soon. The mother was apologetic and self-deprecating to the point of tears. "I am so sorry; I have raised a terrible son; I am a terrible mother" was the tone of the meeting. It really was awful.

The kid himself called me the next day, asking if HE could meet me before they left; I did, and mostly listened as he apologized and so forth. I don't know his official status; he is almost certainly gone from the school (definitely for this semester), whether expelled or asked to resign. One gets the sense from the way they handled him that if he had been a bit more forthcoming about his misdeed they might have been a bit more lenient. Which is also a bit interesting, but not an issue, because he wasn't. Anyway, it's over (I think).

[Update] Well - not really. I have since gotten 2 emails from the mother - understandably distressed - asking me to intervene with the people at Denver so that the kids might still have a chance to get into college somewhere. I have made it clear that I have little to do with the situation at this point; moreover, I feel like I already did the kid a favor by not calling the police.

It actually snowed here last week, and the snow stayed on the ground. The first day it was delightful: All these kids were running around as if they had never seen snow before - playing, laughing, etc.

One of the things I still shake my head at in disbelief is the fact that bicycles are year-round transportation here. The first thing to get over is how cold riding your bike is in the winter. But, I guess if you bundle up you can get over that. The other thing, however, is riding on the snow and ice. For whatever reason, even though we all (most of us) have driven a car in the snow, I cannot imagine riding a bike in the snow. One little mistake and - wipe out. One day here about a month ago I watched two students (and came upon a third, afterwards) take a corner that was covered in black ice. Boom. Just like that. I don't guess I would like that so much.

More on Chinese students, which gives some insight into Chinese culture. Most of these kids have decent language skills; it's far better written and reading skills than speaking and listening. This, I am told, is the result of how they learn it (few English speakers - they learn it from books). Anyhow, perhaps the most frustrating thing as a teacher (and something you have to learn right away) is that if they do not understand something you say to them (in class, one-on-one), they probably will NOT ask you to repeat it or explain it - even if you explicitly ask if they understand. This means that lectures and conversation are very hard work, constantly adjusting your language (simplifying), having to define words, and most of all, watching reactions to see if you can discern confusion.

In class, in the beginning, at a very simple level, this became easy: When you saw a student pull out their electronic translator, you knew you had used a word most of them (since if you saw one of them do it, there were at least 5 more...) probably did not understand. Now I just stop when I see these things come out and ask the student what word. Actually, it's kind of like a game now, where I try to explain to them that they have an English speaker whose job it is to explain things standing right in front of them. (These little translators are especially bad when they look up political science type words, because they give students the common definition, which often misses the real meaning I am using. Example: "Confidence," in a Parliamentary system).

On the one hand it would be easy to say that if they don't understand, it's their responsibility; on the other, Chinese culture is such that they take shyness to a new level, so one does have to adjust, and begin to consider it part of the job to actively try and see where there is a lack of understanding (which is, after all, what teaching is). The worst part is perhaps when you explain rules (when papers are due, no talking until after the exam) and they don't understand THAT, and you have to decide if, and how severely to penalize them or how to deal with it if they break them.

One more thing about driving: The old line about women drivers? Believe it or not, less funny here than in the U.S. Why? Almost no frame of reference. There are lots of cars here (of course not as many as in the U.S.), but almost no women drivers. Rough guess? Maybe 1 in 30 - 50 - 80?

As I mentioned, many daily tasks that we just do in the states (shop once or twice a week, throw laundry in a pile - or not - to wash occasionally, more) cannot be taken for granted here. I have to go somewhere every day to buy food for example. Not a big deal, but 10-20 minutes; I have to rotate the underwear and socks in the wash bin every day - rinse, and so on; little things like this add up to a sizeable chunk of your day eventually. Even getting drinking water, which as I probably mentioned once, gets delivered to you in these large thermoses. Well, we have it better than most, because ours is delivered. Most people have to boil their own water; the students go somewhere to get their thermoses (yes, you own your own) filled; where, I don't know, but you always see these kids walking around with them.

One interesting note on speaking English with Chinese people: You have to get used to listening fairly closely to context. This is because they do not have separate pronouns for 'he' and 'she.' So, in conversation, even with the very best of them, they will sometimes use 'she' when you know they are referring to 'he,' and vice versa (also with 'his' and 'hers').

It has been, they say, colder than usual here in Beijing this winter (-5 to 15 degrees for the past month or so). What is especially interesting is snow removal: It is all human. There is no salt or sand for the roads, no plow that I have seen. On the smaller roads, alleys, and sidewalks, you see little armies of people with brooms, scrapers of various sorts, doing the snow removal by hand.

One of the main reasons I mention this is because it reflects an obvious reality of China: Labor is abundant, and thus there is a visible lack of mechanization. Human power does a lot of heavy work, because why not? They have plenty of it. Several small buildings on campus have been demolished in the past few months, a several hundred yard long (3+ foot deep, 2 foot wide) trench has been dug (for something - I don't know what yet), fields graded, and more - all without any (or much) machinery of any kind. They just send a crew out, and they start working. It's an interesting contrast to what we are used to that you don't really notice right away.

V12, April 8, 2000

Well, it's been busy here, getting 3 classes underway and finishing the last of the book. Hopefully I'll be sending these little tidbits out with more frequency now that things have settled down.

I have already mentioned the fact that depending on where you are, people simply stare at you because you are a foreigner. But there really is no way to understand the fact that Chinese people have been largely secluded from foreigners for a few thousand years until you experience life here. There is a cultural superiority (yes, we might as well call it racism - that's what it is) that affects many things that you might never think about.

For example, my girlfriend live in an apartment that actually belongs to another women in her office (this women lives elsewhere, but because housing is a prized commodity, she does not want to let the campus

administration know). The neighbors think that Sharon is this women's sister. About a week ago, the women was talking to Sharon, and she mentioned that a few neighbors had told her that her "sister" had been having a foreigner in her house - this out of concern for her, naturally.

I expected something like this to happen. It took a long time for her to even invite me to her house; then, I had to be careful leaving (so no one would see me); even now, she gets a little uneasy when we are going in together.

Another example of this is trying to use their language. The overall reaction is that non-Chinese people simply could not learn their language. Reactions vary; sometimes people laugh; sometimes they pretend they don't understand; it's always the case that if you are with a Chinese person the person you are talking to will look at the Chinese person you are with for confirmation. Now it has to be said that the subtleties of the language are many (same 1-syllable word pronounced 4 different ways - 4 different meanings), however, contextually it's most often the case that it would be hard to imagine you are saying anything except what you are (example: saying to a cab driver, "turn left," as you are pointing left).

My language skills, by the way have improved somewhat. Here is a good one - this has happened a few times. I get in a cab, and tell the driver very conversationally where I want to go (I pick inflections up from listening to people). I do not have to use the written instructions much anymore. Anyways, I do this, evidently, so similar to a fluent Chinese speaker, that the driver inevitably begins talking to me, at which point I have to laugh, excuse myself, and explain that I don't speak Chinese! It's really very funny.

Sharon and I went to a fashion show last week. Yeah, you heard that right, a fashion show. She got free tickets from a gal at work. It was at the Workers Gymnasium, an indoor arena which holds (I am guessing) maybe 10,000 people (not nearly that many were there...). It lasted about 90 minutes, and consisted of music, modern dancing (like a show), and the fashion thing. I didn't really see much - we were way in the back (thus the free tickets); we rented binoculars, but she used them for most of it. It was, I guess, an interesting way to spend an evening; I had never been to one, and now I never have to go to another one.

I am now really in the big time. First, my book is now listed at Amazon.com. You can search by my name, or the title, "Modern Presidential Electioneering." Be warned, however - sticker shock: \$65! Good thing I get free copies, because I couldn't afford it otherwise!. It's due out, according to the press releases, July 30. In addition, I have branched out to writing for the college newspapers (both colleges - International College at Beijing, and the university we are housed in, China Agricultural University). One article was about American presidential elections and how they ought to pay attention to them, the other about the Russian presidential elections (well, I might as well write about something I know about, right?).

Well, I thought you had to be in the middle of SOMEWHERE (like the US, the Middle East) to have dust storms, but here in Beijing we have some. Boy oh boy - it's like a thunderstorm except with dust instead of rain. One these days (several now) the weather web sites report that winds in Beijing are around 20-25mph, but I KNOW they are gusting up to 60. In fact one day last week they closed the airport yesterday because of the wind and dust. As I mentioned in an earlier Report, the wind AND dust are courtesy of Mongolia's Gobi [sp?] desert (not the after dinner taste treat).

The real excitement this week was the student of mine who, after coming late for an appointment (that she had made with me - not the other way around), started yelling, screaming, and crying - right in the hall outside my room - after I told her we would have to re-schedule. She had first walked into my room (twice - once while I was in the bathroom - with the door open) without an invitation. She claimed, among other things, that the appointment time was "hers" (not mine!), that she had every "right" to it, that she had a "right" to walk into my room because it is a "public place" (I thought it was my home?), that foreign professors do not know what good manners are, and many other things.

I one sense I was lucky because it was SO completely over the top wacked out that I couldn't even get mad; it was almost like I was watching a very bad movie. Anyways, I am reporting the incident to the dean in case she tries to make trouble (for me or the college) later.

The other major incident (actually, that same day) was the fact that the Ministry of Education has kicked out this younger (29) professor because of the relationship he has been having (after having been warned by everyone) with a student here. This is strictly against the rules. Her father is some big shot also, so he was making trouble too. I guess his visa was revoked, and he has to leave by Monday. Harsh, but he knew

the rules...

V13, April 30, 2000

Well, Jeff (for those who don't know, a friend from Syracuse) and Al's (my stepfather) visit has now officially concluded. There were at least several highlights. On their very first day I sent them to Tiananmen square, a seemingly safe and harmless way to start the visit. It's as easy as pie - get in a cab and say "Tiananmen." Bingo. Well, while they were there they noticed a group of a dozen or so people unfolding a large banner. Turns out these people were from the Fan Lan Gun (sp?) "cult," or more generously, religious sect. They are banned - the government does NOT like them.

Before they knew it the square was filling up with several vans and a few hundred enthusiastic security police. They began beating and dragging these people off, and then turned their attention to the other people in the square, looking for people (Westerners) with cameras. You guessed it: They took Jeff and Al into the back of a van and confiscated the memory chip from Jeff's digital camera. "Detained," mind you, not arrested. About 15 minutes later (and some real nervousness on Al's part - understandably) they let them go.

Welcome to the People's Republic!

We also went to the Great Wall together (with Sharon), as well as visiting what is known as the Big Bell Temple, a minor tourist attraction (near where I live) that has holds the largest bell in the world - 46 tons. I stood underneath it (in retrospect, I am glad it didn't fall...), Jeff rang it (paying \$12 for that privilege), and we also have photos of me making mischief by standing on top of it. Al got several suits made, and we spent quite some time on 2 different days shopping for silk, pearls, and other stuff; they made out like bandits, in part because of my unrelenting bargaining approach. In all it was a wonderful time.

Some things just touch your heart. I have this student, a senior, whose aunt is dying. The student came to me and explained that she wanted to go say goodbye to her aunt, and to do that she wanted to see if she could schedule her mid-term exam for a few days earlier (she did not insist). I agreed. When she came back we met to go over the exam. After the meeting she thanked me profusely, and then gave me a little box of cakes her family had made for me to thank me. This was a bit more than I expected (to say the least), since she had to carry these things on the train for a day or so. But to top it off, the aunt (who is dying) sent back a bottle of cologne to give to me.

When we took Al to get his suits made I got yelled at... You have to surrender any bags you might have at the counter, and when you do that they give you a little tag (claim check type thing). I had a hold of this thing for almost an hour, thinking, "I'm gonna lose this...". Well, I was right. When I went to get my bag Sharon told me I would have to pay, so I was expecting that; it cost me about \$0.35. What I was NOT expecting was to get scolded by the old lady working behind the counter. Ay yai yai... Some days, glad I don't speak the language!

Oh yeah: If you didn't know, I am getting married! The details of when and how are a bit sketchy still, but here's the scoop. I met a women here right after I got here. She is Chinese, and she works at the college. Her English name is Sharon; her Chinese name is Shen Heng Lei (pronounced "shoon" [like book] "hung lay"). She is 24 years old (25 in August). Her hometown is Urumqi, the capital city of the province of Xinjiang, which is in northwest China. This is where her parents, university instructors (semi-retired) live. She has one sister (older), a rarity in China these days.

She has been in Beijing for about 6 or 7 years now. She attended and graduated from the university that ICB (where I am teaching) is part of, China Agricultural Engineering University, with an engineering degree (in electronics). She has little if any interest in this field. After college, partly because of her English language abilities, she started working for ICB as an administrator. Right now she is currently responsible for a great many things, not least of which is academic affairs (programs, schedules, etc.).

We began seeing each other the last week of September, and things progressed from there. There are many things to figure out, but we will probably have everything ready to get married - here - by mid-June (hopefully), and then we will start the visa process. We will almost certainly have a ceremony of some sort in the States as well for family and friends, even though we will already be married when we get there (which will be anywhere from 6-12 months after we begin the visa process - hopefully shorter).

The logistics of this are a mess, but have not taken away from the happiness I (we) have when

thinking about our future together.

We are traveling to an area called Three Gorges next week for an actual real vacation ; we have a week off for Laborers Holiday. It's a beautiful are of China on the Yangtze, and I'm sure I'll have lots to tell about it when we get back.

V14, [No Date] 2000

Well, I am back from vacation, obviously... Aside from a few glitches and a late start, we had a terrific time. The late start is easily explained. You really do have to get the airport ½ hour before the flight time here - they simply won't let you past the first of several gates. We were 25 minutes early - 5 minutes late. So we went back home, went to Behai Park and went and got a real engagement ring.

The trip to the park was instructive. The whole week last week was a national holiday - Laborers' Holiday. That means that almost everyone was on vacation. The crowds everywhere (airport, traffic, etc.) were a mess. Behai Park, for example, sold something like 350,000 admission tickets by 4PM that day... So the lesson? Don't go on vacation in China during Laborers' Holiday week (or Spring Festival, for that matter). EVERYONE was on vacation (all 1 billion...).

The next day (Tuesday) we made it to Yichang, where we were picked up and carted all around by a student of mine and his family. Lei (Sharon) had asked this kid's advice on making arrangements for the tour. His mother and he proceeded to map out our week. It was very nice of them to go to all the trouble they did (we probably would not, for example, have gotten tickets on this boat without their help), but it was a bit smothering. At a certain point on both Tuesday and Wednesday I hit my limit of how much I could take of being herded around, told where we were going, when and where and what we were eating, etc.

It's like a big (real big, obviously) family here in China. Nice, but awfully smothering. My frustration in this regard was, thankfully, the only real one for the week. Next time we pick a city where she doesn't know anyone.

The positive thing from this was we got into several restricted areas of the Three Gorges Project, the largest dam in the world (still under construction). This was very interesting. The trip itself, Wednesday to Friday, was splendid. We took a river boat up the Yangtze river, through the Three Gorges, which are the Chinese equivalent (albeit of a lesser and different quality) of the Grand Canyon; a side trip was taken through the 'minor' three gorges. There is a ton of historical stuff associated with this trip, most of which eluded me (naturally), but the scenery was unbelievable. Just the fact that I was there was a bit overwhelming.

They are much less accustomed to seeing foreigners in Yichang. I thought I had gotten used to the stares, but the stares in Beijing are nothing compared to what Yichang was like.

Now to a few other things... As you know, this is a Communist country, and one of the things that means is that everyone is supposed to have a job. So, for example, you see people (mostly older folks) sweeping streets everywhere - even the snow in the winter. The interesting variation I noticed on this recently is that there are actually people out sweeping the highways!

Fall, 2000

Well, I saw the Gobi desert. Not sand, as such, but as desert as anyone would want to get. Hot. Hot. Hot. Hot. Hot. Nothing grows. Nothing. It was a trip to Turpan (lots of stuff on the net about Turpan if you are interested), and it took all day (until 11PM). I will have more details about this in a forthcoming "R.F.Beijing." Saw the remains of a 2000 year old city, an old mosque (not really the highlight for me), the grape growing region, and an old underground irrigation system. Overall, very nice day; one of the more interesting parts for me was just looking out the window while we were driving there (her sister and brother-in-law run a tourist place, so they took us).

A REAL interesting interlude: We were approaching this museum part of Grape Valley, and a guy was in front, borrowing a sitar from the guy who was playing it in order to have his wife take his picture. Well, I was near the end of a roll of film, so I took this guy's picture also. The guy went crazy, started yelling, etc. My sister-in-law (and mother-in-law) started right back at him, screaming; quite a scene. I finally dropped my bag and said something to him, and he started yelling at me, threatening; I was sort of egging him on, daring him

to try something (he was still about 20 feet away). This of course might have proven to be none too smart, because he was about 250 pounds, but I was too incredulous to care. The fact is that this brave (and mighty childish - he was upset that I took his picture) soul was more bluster than anything, as evidenced by the fact that most of the 'fight' was conducted with my sister-in-law (who was FURIOUS, and stayed that way for 15 minutes afterwards).

. . . We are (all) back from Dalian, from a wild weekend of movie making (actually, TV series). Real nice time all the way around. They paid for everything for me (room, transportation, food), and I got paid \$300 for the weekend. This included Sunday, when I showed up, did nothing but wait, and was told at 1PM that I was done - they knew I was itching to get out and do something with Sharon, Jeff, and Annie. So they let me go, and paid me for the full day. Nice. Lots of nice people there. Unlike the commercial experience, if they call again, I will work with them. They treated me very well, and delivered on every promise they made.

The story is about the Korean war. They are doing 30 45-minute episodes - a documentary sort. I am a fairly major character in episodes 26-7, a negotiator at Pujmonjon (wherever that city is on the 38th parallel). I had several pieces of dialogue (15-18), and several non-dialogue bits as well. The best part of the dialogue is that they didn't record sound - they will dub Chinese over it later. This meant I didn't have to worry about memorizing their horrible and stiff bad English lines exactly.

So - I will soon be the idol of billions.

Sunday we went around Dalian. It is without a doubt the most beautiful city I have seen in China (out of 4...) - developed, clean, and so on. Very nice. On the sea. We went to a park/recreation area Sunday afternoon where, among other things, we all went up in an ultra-light aircraft. Very very cool. Only cost about \$18 for a 10 minute ride. Took a train back Sunday night, arrived in Beijing at 6.45AM, and was teaching class at 8.00. Just like that.

The train trip: Cramped, crowded, tight... get the idea? The only reason they do it, I'm sure, besides the fact that they have few other choices, is that they are trained as kids to do it. Thank goodness for cars.

A funny story from the train trip home from Dalian. I had the foresight to bring instant coffee packets with me, which worked well in the hotel; however, I forgot a cup for the train. So, I get up Monday morning on the train, maybe 6AM, and start thinking about how to get a cup. I know a woman will be coming by selling fake coffee which is not worth the (mostly) water it is made with. So I wait...

She comes by, and I stop her. I motion that I want a cup. She refuses; I take money out; she still refuses, and keeps walking down the aisle. She gets about 5 feet away, and I think, I'll buy the coffee. I motion to her that I want a coffee, and she hands me the cup... Victory! She starts to pour the coffee, and I tell her I don't want it, and hand her a 10 Yuan bill (for the 3 Yuan coffee). No. She takes the cup from my hand; I start arguing with her for a second, but realize quickly she is programmed, so...

Fortunately, the family sharing the compartment with us (remember I said it was a crowded train trip?) took out cups they brought (veteran train riders), and gave it to me. We all laughed...

Well, I gave an exam this week. Nothing remarkable about that, except for a not-so-minor detail. You see, at noon and at 6PM, they play campus radio over loudspeakers mounted on poles throughout the campus. Last year this was amusing and interesting, but little more. The first class to take the exam this week, however, meets at 6PM in a room that has windows which open directly into one of these lovely speakers. I was just a little (OK, a lot) annoyed. Closing the windows only helped a little. To make matters worse, in the second class, someone left their beeper in their bag (up in the front of the room); someone was beeping every 3 minutes.

Campus news: We have had several days of no power and/or water in the past few weeks; Saturday, no power all damn day. Ugh. They are 'fixing' everything for the once-every-five years inspection. Great. They are also building walls and fences everywhere, including around the new basketball courts... this makes sense, right? Make it real nice, then prohibit the use of them. Jeff's theory is that they, as a society, have 'wall issues.'

A few weeks ago we went to see Disney on Ice... did you know that Mickey, Donald, Goofy, and friends, all speak Chinese? Unbelievable! Actually, it was fairly impressive. Disney is quite the operation: All of the Western skaters were lip-syncing the Chinese words extremely closely, something you know they had to practice a LOT.

Got in a bike accident last week; the jerk ran right into me - I saw him coming and stopped, because I knew he was headed for me, and there were too many people around for me to get out of the way. So, the cheap front rim is now bent, which I didn't know until he rode off. Probably cost about \$8, but the best part is that all of the bicycle repair people have been thrown off campus because they are getting ready for the 5-year review (the bike people are unsightly...). So it's not fixed yet.

Went to the Halloween party the other night, and made a spectacle of myself - all for the benefit of the students, who really do not have any idea of how to enjoy themselves unless someone is telling them how. That aspect was very interesting - they just sat there waiting for people to tell them what to do. I was highly imaginative, dressing as "Kitchen Man" (see picture); of course I didn't really give the costume (as such) any thought at all until that afternoon.

Happy Holiday Greetings: Christmas, 2000

Just want to take a few minutes and relate our Christmas holiday activities and stuff... so, strap in! It was a great couple of days.

Christmas Eve day, Sunday, started in a fairly non-orthodox way. Lei has a friend who was getting married. This, of course, is not as unusual as it may sound, since Chinese don't celebrate Christmas. We got there (the reception - remember, no church weddings) at about 11AM. There was LOTS of food there, and Lei got to see several of her old college friends.

There were about 150 people there. Of course, I am the only foreigner. Not too uncomfortable though, really, until I hear the bride's uncle, who is the master of ceremonies (so to speak), mention that there is a foreigner (as if people didn't already know...), and every head in the room turns to look at me.

Gets better. He comes up a little while later and asks if I will come up front and say a few words to the bride and groom (by the way, I met the bride once, at our wedding, and never laid eyes on the groom before). OK, I'm game. about 20 minutes after that I get up to go to the bathroom, and coming back into the room I am walking down a corridor, facing the stage area. As I am walking I am looking straight at the uncle, who seems to be looking at me also. No accident. He had already asked Sharon if I was ready, and he was onstage announcing me. So I walk into the room as if I am making some grand stage entrance.... everyone is watching, clapping, and so on.

Sharon came up also, I said a few words of congratulations. Then they wanted me/us to sing a song. The Karaoke guy, however, says he doesn't have any English songs... So we sang Jingle Bells together.

So how's that to start Christmas? Performing Jingle Bells for a room full of Chinese people at a wedding???

We left there about 1:15 and went back to campus, where the faculty were having a Christmas dinner. Not everyone was there, as some people travelled to other cities. Turkey, ham, potatoes, veggies, roasted chestnuts (!?), the works. It was pretty nice; about 15-18 people there. We ate, talked - usual dinner stuff. Finished up there about 4:30PM, and went up and took a nap, inviting any and all up to our room for a continuation of festivities that evening.

We of course got to bed fairly early, after leaving cookies out for Santa.

Christmas morning we got up about 8:30, found the stockings that Santa left, and then went over and got Jeff to start opening presents. Santa was very very good to all of us. Lei got some new boots, a very nice skirt, a photography book of the US, some perfume, and other little assorted goodies. I got a nice raincoat, a basketball, sneakers; Jeff got a book about the Great Wall and some Starbucks coffee. We finished this about 11AM, and relaxed for a while. Lei warmed up to Christmas very well: Her comment after the presents were all opened was 'we should do this every day!' Indeed.

That afternoon we had a leisurely lunch at the canteen here on campus and took a (long) nap. That night we went to a very nice Italian restaurant for supper. Then, we went to Jeff's campus (on the west side of Beijing) for a party that was organized by the students. Jeff dressed as Santa (he's almost big enough for the part) and gave little gifts to all of his students. We got there late, in time to watch them play a few games and dance a bit. We got home a little before 10PM.

All in all it was a very full couple of days, without being at all hectic. Nice.