

Flirting with China: An American Anthropologist's Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Grandfather would sit me down when my parents left us alone, and begin talking in English, but his thick Russian accent coated every word. Sometimes he described his forced tour of duty with the White Russian army, where he was stationed first in Siberia, then on the borders of Mongolia and China. His descriptions of yurts, cold weather, and strange languages were exciting but the wolf shadows he would create with a candle and his hands and the wall, or his imitations of the howling of wolves, stirred this boy's imagination and generated dreams that became life-long passions. Other times he would tell stories about his move to Brazil or later about working with ethnically based gangs on constructing the railroads in upstate New York. From his stories, I learned enough to dream of future travels to strange and distant places, just as he had in his youth. Too, Grandpa later saw that I inherited a seemingly simple book called "Bases and Empire" about American military expansion - a taboo topic. This book eventually enabled me to question prevailing teachings and beliefs with deeper questions and concerns. He, more than anyone else, set me in motion to venture forth, and to query the ordinary, everyday, truths that most people accepted without hesitation.

In primary school, I learned to read with a picture book that included stories of a Chinese family. Their reverence for ancestors was remarkable, and the picture of a young boy with a pigtail intrigued me. China seemed strange enough, so I decided that one day, just maybe, I would visit China and see what life was really like there. Like most Americans, however, I was subsequently subjected to negative news from the radio, television and newspaper. In fact, during much of my early life, China was ignored, or pictured in an ugly way through politically slanted media accounts. Then during the Korean War, China became very unpopular with almost all Americans. The only images portrayed were of our soldiers being killed in Korea. On

many Saturdays, I would play with a few other friends near the national cemetery and we would watch the stark and solemn military ceremonies as American soldiers were buried. The grieving families would be presented with an American flag at the end, while the attending soldiers' guns spoke their message of futility, sadness, and terror.

Away at the local university, I studied liberal arts, a wide-ranging variety of subjects about all aspects of the larger world. Cornell had built strong links with China in the 1920's and 1930's and had developed a superb library on Asian books and resources. I read freely, often finding older traveller's tales, and then took at least one course in anthropology that exposed me to the wonderful stretch of Chinese history, from the Shang dynasties and the "dragon bones" on to the Han, Sung, Ming and more modern days. It was not long before I majored in anthropology. Too, in compulsory Air Force ROTC classes, one of my instructors told us how he flew on bombing missions right over the Yalu River into China. The US government and the media said that the United States respected the boundary, but in actual fact, the military apparently did not. My beliefs in the media and the pronouncements of the US government were threatened again.

During graduate school at Syracuse, I was actively involved with international students, took more anthropology classes even though I majored in the field of rehabilitation, and read a lot about China. In particular, I recall books about the desperate poverty in China of the 1920's and 1930's, the Long March, and the revolutionary flavor brought by Mao Tse-tung and his colleagues to the people. Although my advanced degrees were in rehabilitation, I regarded myself as an anthropologist because of the many courses and readings I did, my treasured membership in the American Anthropology Association, and my personal aspirations to experience other ways of life.

During the 1967 to 1973 era in the USA, I was happy that I had read about the many changes in China for that knowledge helped me

understand the social changes that were happening in my own country. Then, quite suddenly, we all became fascinated with the thaw in relationships symbolized by the Chinese ping-pong players who preceded the historic visit in 1972 by Richard Nixon. Understanding something about those revolutionary times provided a framework as to political events in the USA, especially where young people simply and justifiably rebelled against the corruption of Nixon, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear weapons industries. We protested too against the trans-national corporations that became massive and greedy monopolies. We were neither well organized nor strong enough to do much in opposition. Thankfully though, the Vietnam War finally ended, and Nixon was appropriately punished.

During the early 1970's, I briefly wore a fashionable Mao jacket, and even subscribed to a weekly China newsletter, the Peking Review, as I remember. I still recall the articles about Mao's death in September, 1976. Like so many others, I found the I Ching and played with that remarkable method of predicting the future and later, the feng shui and Chinese ways to conceptualise space and place. I read of Chinese family structure, tales of travellers, and studies of villages. Of course, like many others, I enjoyed Chinese cooking, especially Szechwan with the hot spicy tastes, and the arrangements of textures, colors, and qualities of foods. And yet, until that time, I had never befriended a person who had come directly from China.

Later, at Duke University, I began reading more seriously about China, and wrote and published articles about the ways in which China ended the hold of opiates and accompanying corruption on their country (Gregory, 1977-1978, 1978). Social change and better standards of living, less corruption, and participation by the majority in setting directions for the country seemed reasonable answers to the endemic problems associated with opiates. Certainly, the methadone, counselling, and jailing of heroin addicts, the so-called "drug war", did not seem to be working well in the United States. My conclusion then was that fundamental social change was essential to counter the abuse of drugs and offer a meaningful life to people.

China represented a positive but distinctly alternative way to approach the fundamental questions: How DO we want to live in this world?

And, through good fortune, I listened to the views of feminist anthropologists and some psychologists, for they were brave enough to couple objective, scientific, views of other societies with their own personal lives, touches of subjectivity, and reflections on experiences. My fascination with other cultures linked closely with my interests in self, relationships, and inter-personal communications.

It was in 2000 that I had the opportunity to actually travel to Beijing and see China for myself. A week-long conference was a special event for urban anthropologists.

In July 2000, my wife Janet and I were privileged to visit Beijing to attend and present a paper at the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences Inter-Congress Conference. The following account summarizes some impressions gained during that week.

We flew from Auckland to Bangkok, and stayed overnight at the Atrium Amari Hotel. Bangkok, if you have never visited, has far too many cars for the available roads, and the lack of planning for highways, housing, office and business space was quickly manifest, even in a brief overnight stop. Zoning laws or regulations to steer and guide development appeared absent. A large number of skyscrapers were unfinished, and from appearances, had been abandoned. The streets were cluttered, dirty, and the canal besides the hotel was filthy, a running sewer. The entertainment sector was filled with excitement, or depending upon how you look at it, sadness and tragedy. Perhaps these scenes set the stage for the journey through Thailand, for me, I certainly saw Bangkok as a conflict site between rich and poor, progress for a few and losses for the majority who had to live in that city. The manifestations of short-term perspectives, quick financial gain for a few, disregard of the majority of people, conflicts between Western and Thai ways of life, and so on were many. I was reminded of the long history of Siam, then Thailand, and the colonial rulers through that history. The failure of the people to manage their own society for themselves was evident.

The flight to China on Thai Airlines began early in the morning. Much of the trip was clouded over. At one point, we flew over flooded land and what must have been a large river system – and we crossed an extensive area of muddy water stretching almost as far as the eye

could see. Then the clouds closed in again. As we neared Beijing however, the clouds cleared so that I was able to see dozens of circular ponds, then later the clouds opened again enabling us to observe flat fields covered with water – obviously rice paddies. The size and scale of these fields was enormous, each paddy carefully laid out in a far larger pattern of land use. From these first appearances, the planning and thought that went into the design of these ponds and fields was enormous. The scale and organization of agriculture was far greater than I had imagined.

The Airport was sparkling new, equipped so we heard for the 2008 Olympics, with numerous signs proclaiming such. The efficiency of the processing system was such that we made our way through baggage and customs quickly. The sheer numbers of people contrasted sharply with our airport of departure, Auckland. The difficulty of travelling without knowledge of the local language appeared to present a problem. However, that was not so for long, as J. and M., two college juniors, stood next to a sign about the IUAES. They quickly greeted us in flawless English, introducing themselves and telling us we had arrived at the right place. Further they stated that they would see that we had transport to the hotel, and that all was well. Friendly, cheerful, and proud, they were part of a welcoming group – college students who volunteered their time to greet those arriving for the conference, then to serve as translators and helpers. Needless to say, we were deeply impressed with the thoughtfulness of our hosts, the planners and organizers of the conference, and of the Chinese people. They could not have picked more friendly and well-prepared students than these two young women. Additional students were also on hand and were likewise busy greeting and orienting other visitors.

We soon met a colleague from India at the airport, the chairperson of our session and a friend via e-mail correspondence and previously written and published articles in a journal he edited. And, along with other arriving guests, we were soon organized and on board a bus. J. and M. began pointing out interesting sights for us, asking about our backgrounds and sharing a bit of their own lives, and answering endless questions we raised. The ride from the Airport to Beijing itself was a deep surprise, for

the broad streets had big bicycle lanes and huge banks of trees, planted in rows, extending for miles and miles. In fact, no Western Airport I had ever seen had banked the airport road with trees like this. The number and size of the plantings was simply amazing – a wonderful idea that those in charge of Western airports or other transport systems would do well to emulate.

We talked non-stop with others on the bus as we rode into and through the city. The sights were fascinating. J. and M. pointed out when we asked about unusual starbursts of wires pointing from poles along the road, that these streetlights were designed to resemble fireworks displays and that they would be lit up at night. The inner streets that we glimpsed were packed with Chinese people, small shops, housing, entire rows of houses, office buildings, but everywhere, it seemed that there were side roads along the main road for bicycles. We learned that something like 9 million bicycles, perhaps 3 million official cars and 3 million private cars, operated in Beijing along with many, many buses.

The population of Beijing is somewhere near 12 million, although perhaps 3 million additional people are present at any given time, however they are not permanent residents. It is a big and densely populated city. The colours, sounds, sights and shared stories went by quickly, as we tried to learn a few words in Chinese while J. and M. practised their English with us. From what we noted, they were excellent translators, and had obviously been polishing their skills for a long, long time. But even more intriguing were their personalities – friendly, interested and engaged in ways that differed from young people in the United States and New Zealand, our own countries. They were curious about us, our divided loyalties to two countries, our lives, but they were also willing and able to share their ideas, their knowledge, and their wisdom.

Our hotel, the Olympic, was close to the more famous Friendship Hotel, to the west of the center of Beijing. The IUAES committee sign-in table was near the entrance and we went through the signing up and registration process. We wanted to schedule an additional tour during rather than take the previously arranged tour at the end. Given our limited time, we would not be able to fit in all of the conference and the tour, so accordingly, we scheduled a visit to the Great Wall. To see this remarkable site, we talked with

J. – the tour guide with an American accent. Janet asked him where he had studied in the United States, he replied that he had never left China. In fact, J. studied with three different American teachers in China and ended up with an accent that was so distinctively American that we were just plain amazed. He talked with us about and then arranged our trip to the Great Wall, which our previously scheduled flight would not allow us to see.

We secured a fourth floor room, not plush, but satisfactory, with a splendid view of a neighborhood market, the main road looking north, and lots of interesting street scenes taking place down below. The hotel was cool, in contrast with the near 100 degree Fahrenheit temperature outside. We also met up with a colleague from New Zealand, and then explored the hotel. Food, as we found out, was served three times a day in two large restaurants, semi-cafeteria style. We talked with the eminent and well-known anthropologist, Dr. Walter Goldschmidt, met an old teacher of mine from Syracuse and now France, Dr. Aidan Southall, and began a dizzying round of meeting people and then listening, learning, and participating.

The opening ceremonies took place in the neighbouring Library – a giant of a building, that we learned, housed one of the greatest collections of books and documents in the world. The speakers included Dr. Fen, at age 90 one of the doyens of anthropology and Sinology, famed throughout the world. Though he did not read his own paper, one of his students presented his profound ideas. Dr. Goldschmidt and Dr. Southall both presented papers about Urban Anthropology. The distinguished panel included these speakers, plus Yang Houdi, president of the China Urban Anthropology Association, and the past and current President of the IUAES. Following the opening addresses, we returned to the hotel and began attending meetings. We sat in a wide variety of scientific sessions, met numerous people from all over the world, and at the restaurants, tried most interesting Chinese dishes while engaging in conversations with people over the delightful meals.

On our tour day, we went with a fellow from Nepal in a taxi, as arranged by J., to the Bedaling section of the Great Wall. This stone monument is one of the wonders of the world, originally 10,000 or so kilometres, now around 5,000

kilometres remains. The wall was built about a thousand or more years ago, and must have consumed the efforts of millions of people for many, many years. On the way, we were unable to get off at the chosen exit as there had been an accident, apparently several cars were involved, and it looked as if at least one was back-ended. The taxi driver, who spoke no English at all, negotiated very strongly with one of the guards or security people to get us into a different locale, and park so that it was convenient for us. We walked past a group of shops, set up for tourists and visitors, with many interesting souvenirs. Most of all, we saw people, hundreds, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. Chinese people obviously visit the wall frequently as an excursion, sightseeing venture, or fun activity for families.

We bought small plastic cards, then used them to enter the gates and walked with masses of people all around onto the wall. The steepness, the rather rough surface, and the scale of the wall are such that it is not as easy as it appears to walk along. Plus, the weather was quite warm, and the sun was hot. In any case, we walked, climbed, strolled, climbed some more, and took pictures. Others were busy taking pictures too. In fact, when I stopped and rested while Janet and our Nepalese friend plodded ahead and upward, people began asking me if they could take a photo of their family members with me besides them. I began wondering, is it my beard, my white hair, my age, my western appearance, or am I handsome? In a few minutes, probably 50 people asked me through gestures and smiles to be featured in their pictures – I seemed to be more popular than the camel adjacent to the wall, a camel on which children could sit for a photo!

Later, we took buses to Tianamen Square. Police escorts with flashing lights led and followed our procession of four buses loaded with conference participants. The entourage began winding a path way through vehicles, red lights, and anything else in the way – a long trip through the heavy traffic of downtown Beijing. We watched the roadside for interesting activities, such as the small shops, flash big buildings, bicycle traffic, and people scattered about virtually everywhere. Our guide on our bus gave a personalized and positive report on the various places we were going to see, the

places we passed along the way, and stories based on her own life and observations. She discussed China's one-child policy candidly, and explained patiently when questioned. Her helpful travelogue mixed the personal and the professional, the passionate and the informational, in a most pleasant style. The square was "10 times the size of Red Square in Moscow," she stated, with obvious and deep pride. Indeed, when we got there, Tianamen Square was truly immense. We saw the long lines waiting to see the tomb of Mao Tse-tung, and then walked about the square. Immediately dozens of street people assailed us, trying to sell us postcards, the little red book of Chairman Mao, umbrellas, stamps, interesting unique items of all sorts, and much more.

Following Tianamen Square, we went to the neighboring Forbidden City on foot across or under the road. The sheer size of the walls, the vastness of the area covered, was marvellous to behold. Nothing can prepare one for the scope of this closed, walled, palace, or in reality, a series of eleven major palaces, and perhaps a couple hundred smaller palaces. The architecture and design was impressive, the scale immense, the crowds extensive, and the magnificence of the entire venture was beyond any expectations. We walked with J. and M. again. One woman in our tour collapsed in a faint from the heat, and Janet helped out although a doctor was soon called and she was carefully tended. Our New Zealand friend walked with us and we took numerous photos of her, our selves, and the beautiful palaces. In our limited time, we could only walk quickly along – perhaps a couple of kilometres through these fascinating structures and spaces.

Then we went with our buses and police motorcade to a restaurant noted for Peking Duck for lunch. The food was excellent, intriguing, and most welcome. The variety was almost endless. We met new people and talked about mutual interests and research and our respective countries. After lunch, we were transported back to our hotel, for a rest and for preparation for the next visit.

Later in the afternoon we went to the partially completed Center for Ethnic Minorities. When completed, representatives of some 50 or so ethnic minorities will reside in mini-village compounds. Each compound will be built with authentic materials from the region in which the

people currently live. Some 20 or so compounds have already been set up – remarkably different houses in style and material, to portray life as it has developed in diverse places – Tibet, Mongolia, Southern China, and in border regions. This tour again involved an extensive walk, in heat approaching 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and with heavy smog. However, we examined this remarkable project, obviously important both politically and culturally, but nevertheless, a most intriguing feature of modern Beijing.

In the early evening, we were entertained by dancers and singers, the many peoples of the ethnic villages. The beauty of the costumes, the gracefulness of the dancers, the remarkable music, and the richness of the overall presentation left us wishing for more or perhaps, for that moment in time to last forever. The concluding dance was a ritualistic splashing of water as a way of celebrating and cooling off. Giant pots of water, virtually all the dancers and performers, and a hot audience combined so that almost everyone was properly splashed and cooled off. I joined right in, both splashing others and getting soaked in return. The tension release, the good humour of all involved, made this a wonderfully spectacular closing event. We piled back into our buses, tired and happy, enthused, and totally intrigued with the marvels of China.

More scientific conferences followed, and we took our own turn at presenting our paper to an audience of about 40 or 50 people. Through the excellent chairmanship of our colleague, the series on children and the rights of children was extremely well received. In fact, one of the evening television shows we watched back in our hotel room included pictures from the conference, and an interview of the President of the IUAES.

During our days of conference papers, we made brief side trips from the hotel to the Beijing Aquarium, the zoo, along the canal, to a local shopping center right besides the hotel, and to a couple of other shopping centers some distance away. The street scenes were ever fascinating, the goods in shops were intriguing, and we enjoyed simply observing people. At least four or five times, Chinese individuals approached me to begin a conversation in broken English, saying that they wanted very much to improve their knowledge of the English language

as well as talk with someone from overseas. During the conference too, several Chinese individuals talked with us, sharing a bit of their personal life, inquiring about our lives and interests. I only wished more time had been available to pursue such conversations and to make friends with each of these people.

All too soon, it was time to depart. On the ride to the airport, we again marvelled at the spaciousness and grand scale of this facility. The flight began with an opportunity to look down from the sky and notice hundreds if not thousands of communes – densely packed groupings of houses and buildings, surrounded by huge fields and land used for agriculture. We continued back to Thailand and our flight took us into the night, to pass through a couple of thunderstorms of truly gigantic proportions.

In the future, we would love to return for an extended visit. China has a very long history, and the wisdom accumulated from that tradition is enormous. The peoples of the world can learn a great deal from study of those times and the views of Chinese scholars, leaders, and writers. Unlike most Western countries, China has had enormous experience with changing its entire social, economic and political system, not just forcing or encouraging individuals to adapt to what exists but changing the system as well. Chinese leaders have made hard decisions and had the determination to carry out massive social action to deal with fundamental social and economic problems. Examples include the development of the Great Wall, the efforts to eliminate opiates, the establishment of communes, dealing effectively with hunger and starvation, and currently, the building of the Three Gorges dam, establishing and promoting the one child policy, and the on-going work to tame the Yellow River. China has not allowed the rich-poor gap to flourish as with the rest of the world that seemingly has no solutions to the sad rise of a few hundred billionaires and at least a couple of billion people living virtually without money. That is not to say that problems have disappeared, for China has suffered hurts and misfortunes and the people have known grief, sadness, and loss.

The future for China looks like one enormous opportunity to play many roles within the world community. The Olympics in 2008 symbolises this opportunity, but membership in the World Trade Organisation will stimulate new links with

the rest of the world too. The recent speech by Hu Jin-tao, a future leader, on Western television indicated that closer ties to the United States are wanted, if conditions warrant. We in New Zealand, with links from the Kiwi, Rewi Alley, and his many years of helping, need to expand too. I am proud that my own university in New Zealand is accepting hundreds of students from China now, and that we are planning for more exchanges in the near future. Wouldn't it be wonderful if thousands of young people could enter an exchange by travelling to China from the West, while thousands of Chinese young people travel to and live in the West for a year?

As with any opportunity, there are dangers, and the different points of view about human rights is but one. All too often humans appear to be unable to transcend their own limits, to love one another, and to respect those who are different. Problems of flooding, famine, desertification, wild fires, and other natural disasters are still another issue. Dust storms, global warming, and pollution are dangerous to all populations. In fact, there are sufficient problems for us all to seek to create better environments, conditions, and opportunities. Given the precarious world in which we live today, including the dangers of new technologies, the political, military, and economic rivalry and conflicts, the variable weather and climate, and related environmental issues, China seems to be firmly headed in positive and productive directions.

As an anthropologist and deeply interested and passionate person, I have fulfilled some of the wanderlust instilled by my grandfather, and my teachers and mentors. Today, I have nearly a dozen Chinese friends, with whom I correspond by e-mail, and I delight in those exchanges. The richness of ideas and conceptual frameworks seemingly has no bounds.

Yet my passion for travel, for China, or for my own countries, is not blind. Each and every country, culture, society, and group has both positive and growth promoting attributes, and some major problems to face up to and deal with. The gap between real and ideal continues, building to tension that directs and enables us to work to solve these many important issues plaguing peoples and their environments.

I recognize that anthropology, indeed, all science, is more than just an objective rational

examination of what is "out there." I especially appreciate the contribution of feminist anthropologists who have added the more subjective focus, the careful attention to personal relationships and communications between people, and to the involvement of the self. Given globalization and new technologies, the value of these innovations is evident, for all of us in each and every country, can communicate, reflect and engage in exchanges. Indeed, the fate of our world depends upon our linking together, appreciating diversity, respecting our many abilities, and getting down to the business of solving problems. We not only can, but we desperately need to share our most profound ideas and best information, as well as our hopes and our aspirations, with each other.

One day, I hope to return to China to continue learning.

KEY WORDS China. Anthropology. Traveller's Tale. Subjective

ABSTRACT Anthropology has sought to become an objective science, focusing on the lives and lifestyles of people around the world. More recently, a move by feminist anthropologists has opened the way for subjective views, for conveying feelings and personal involvement, and for examining relationships between anthropologist and studied group, has emerged. This account is an examination of my own personal and life-long intrigue with China, culminating in attendance at the IUAES meeting held in Beijing in 2000.

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