

Susan Fischer's China Journal

11/21/01

Well, we've arrived, relatively uneventfully. The plane had enough empty seats so everybody could have at least two seats to themselves. The food was god-awful, even by coach standards. The rooms in the hotel are lovely, all mod cons, and we would definitely recommend it again. It seems to be conveniently located, around the corner from a friendship store as well as the Silk Alley shopping street, and near a number of American outlets (e.g., Starbucks, which a number of the students and Patty flocked to ASAP). The bus from the airport took a somewhat roundabout route so that we could see a bit of the city by night and get oriented, but I think we were mostly too knackered to appreciate it.

First culture clash, and it was internal to me: Since the food was so lousy on the plane, we popped into the hotel coffee shop to grab a bite to eat and get a little re-hydrated. 3 of the students just wanted a bowl of rice. ***But, horror of horrors, they wanted to put soy sauce on it!!*** I was fascinated and surprised at my own vehement reaction to this Chinese no-no (you can put food with soy on it on rice, but not soy sauce by itself). Hopefully, all Chinese will just think "oh, those silly Americans." The waiters had very limited English vocabulary, and if one deviated from that, they were lost. It's going to take us all a while to get used to Chinese-English accents; I've learned how to say "hello" and "thank you" in Chinese, and don't expect to be able to learn much more.

And so to bed...

11/22/01

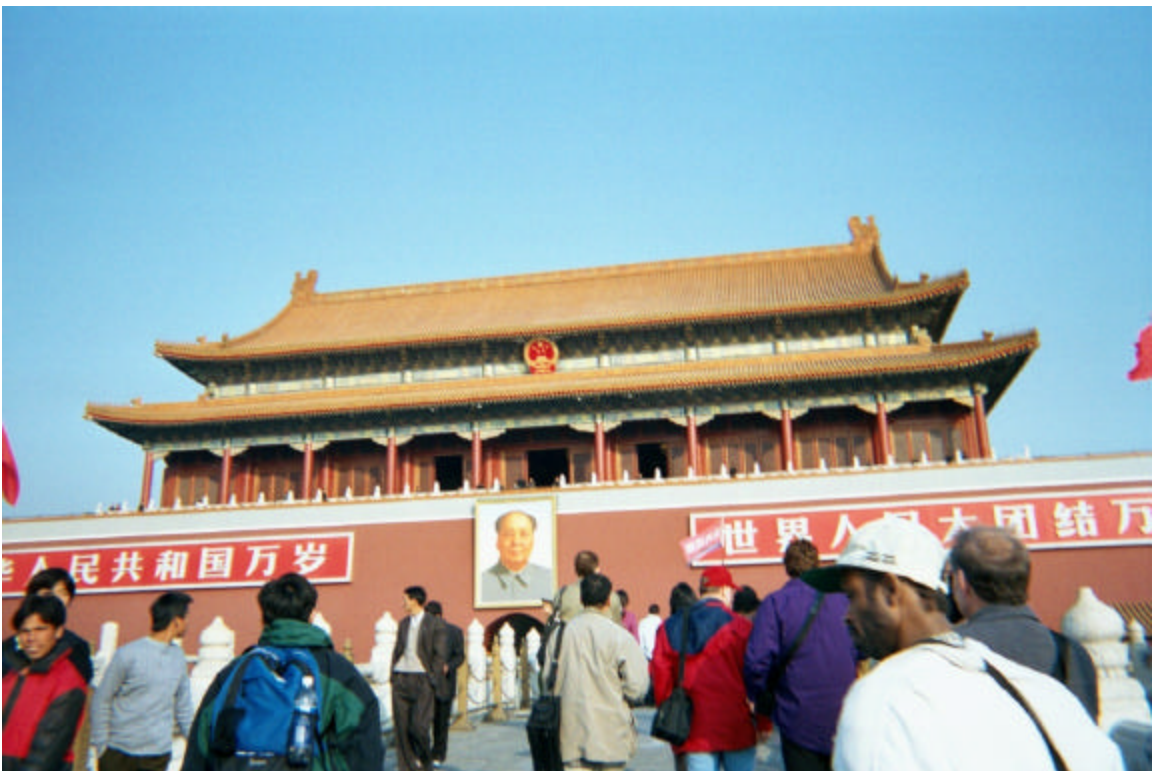
Too tired to do a journal today, so this is actually written on the 23rd. Today we had the first day of our tour; I felt sorry for Patty and Smitty, as they had to work almost the whole day, and the guide's Chinese English accent was sometimes difficult to understand ("vendors" became "wonders", for example). I was exhausted at the end of the day; I can just imagine how they felt. They ate dinner in the hotel separately from the rest of us, who ventured out to what turned out to be a very good Shanghainese restaurant (with Haagen Dazs for dessert).

During the day, we did many of the standard city things: Tien An Min square, the Forbidden City, and a few more places that I can't remember. This was our first real day in Beijing, so we appreciated the opportunity to get out.. We also went to a place where they make up jade into jewelry or other things. It was beautiful, and I'm a skilled bargainer, but in the end, I decided to wait and buy something later if I really wanted one.

Here's a sight you wouldn't see in a US city: a bus had broken down, and everybody had to get out and push!!



Tien An Min Square was a huge open space; one can imagine throngs of millions fitting there. Here are a couple of photos.





Especially in Tien An Min Square, but also at most tourist stops, we were often surrounded and practically accosted by “wonders”. I learned one more Chinese phrase; it almost sounds like the English phrase “ ‘s okay”, but it means “go away.” We tried a number of tactics to avoid the vendors, such as all pretending to be deaf; I tried speaking French instead of English to them, but nothing worked very well. We sometimes ended up buying something to get them off our backs, but this was sometimes a mistake, as we would then be accosted by more vendors as easy marks. Later on I asked our guide about welfare systems and social safety nets. She explained that there were plenty of jobs to go

around, so anyone who didn't have a job was to blame if they were poor (it's true that there are lots of jobs; often manual labor is used instead of machines, e.g., for digging the foundations for a new office building). So I imagine that some of the beggars and vendors we saw were genuinely out of work and trying to make a living or were "professional" beggars. I have to admit, however, they when 4-5 approached at once, they were more than annoying.

Another "classic" place we went was the Forbidden City. It was a little like a Russian matrioshka doll; every time we entered a courtyard, there was another nested inside it. Some of the stones are ancient. One of the things that struck me was the mixture between high and low tech. You see people with video cameras, but you also see incredible attention to hand-worked detail and someone with an old broom....





11/23/01

This was one of the most amazing days of my life. Seeing the Great Wall has to be the biggest highlight of our trip. It's so **old** and so **huge**! We walked along the wall for quite a distance, getting to a point where we could see some of the old part that has crumbled into disuse. As usual, we were besieged by vendors selling postcards, "silk" scarves, and other paraphernalia. I ended up buying a few postcards, as well as a hand-sewn picture of part of the wall (done in granite; we could watch some people doing the craft). Look at this weathered soldier; he looks like a stoic statue.



And see how thick the wall is, and how far it goes.









Below is the town at the foot of the entrance to the Great Wall. It's pretty similar to a Japanese temple town; these often occur at the foot of a mountain as well.



11/24/01

Today, we had a fascinating trip to the old city, including rickshaw rides and a visit to a real Chinese family (they supplement their income by hosting foreign guests) In the old city, everything is organized around courtyards, and several families (related or not) will

share a four-sided compound. This family keeps pigeons; they live in a 47-square meter dwelling, including a kitchen, living room, and 2 bedrooms (equivalent of a Japanese 2LDK). Very crowded, but extremely clean. They have a Western toilet, as do most families now. They also have a pet Pekinese dog, which would be illegal if the authorities knew about it.

One fascinating thing was the use of charcoal as fuel. In the US, we're pretty used to briquettes, which look like little pillows. In Japan the charcoal still looks like wood except that it's all black. In China they apparently process powdered charcoal (US briquettes are made this way too), and then put it into a standard somewhat decorative mold. The result is a cylinder about 2" thick and 6" across. This standard size enables it to be used as fuel in cooking stoves as well as in heating. It also stacks easily and can be transported in those stacks.



In the afternoon, after the tour, we went to the Silk Alley and had fun bargaining. Bob Baker is a real pro; I thought I was good, but learned some lessons from him.

11/25/01

This morning about half of us, me included, went to the "Sunday Market", a short taxi ride away from the hotel. Part of the area was a flea market, where people pay to lay down a blanket and sell off their old things (not all junk: one person was holding an auction of some gorgeous jade statuary, such as an elaborately-detailed ship about a foot long). Another part was permanent small stands, organized into sections: for example, one[outdoor] corridor was only art, especially Chinese paintings and scrolls. Another was furniture, another was stonework, and 2-3 were mish-mashes of lots of different

stuff; mostly antique-store kinds of things. In this corridor, we happened to meet two brothers (who have stalls in this area) whose parents are deaf, and we stopped to chat with them for quite a while.

After lunch, we were picked up by the TUT bus (which had already picked up the Japanese contingent from the airport) and had a 2-hour ride to Tianjin. Out of the city, it was fascinating to see how people live; admittedly, this was only a glimpse from the bus window, but it was still quite telling. For example, we would pass both trucks and bicycles that were so laden down with goods and other things that we wondered how they managed to go without bursting a tire. On a highway, the bike lanes were almost as wide as the [sum of the] car lanes. The bikes below are on the TUT campus.



We arrived at TUT around 5:30, and I had just enough time to unpack before an informal dinner. After dinner, we had a formal meeting with President Bao and several other administrators; we were also joined by several Chinese deaf students. A couple of things were different from what we had been led to expect: first, the computer with internet connection was in the meeting room, not in Bob's or my room. It worked very fast, BTW). Secondly, there was a **towel problem**. The only towels in our room were of the Japanese variety (about 12" X 24"). I had brought my own Japanese towel, so gave the students a quick lesson about how to dry off with a postage stamp. Towels were speedily provided the next day.

The TUT people were also gracious in setting up a water cooler in that meeting room so that we didn't have to keep buying bottled water.

11/26/01

Observation: Our formal meeting last night could have been held in Japan, with one exception: although there were Chinese-style teacups at every place (mugs with lids), they didn't serve tea!! Even at dinner, they didn't; all they had were soft drinks, and this morning people had to ask for tea. (They had soft drinks for breakfast too: shades of that George Segal movie¹) Today we had a tour of the campus, including the new lab, which is very nice (some things have changed since the original plans; we are not meeting in the lab every day, but rather in the meeting room in the international house. The internet access is not in Bob's and my rooms, but rather in the meeting room, which is good). We had lunch and dinner back here; the American and Japanese students were disappointed that the Chinese students weren't at meals; however, the meeting in the lab provided a wonderful opportunity for the students to begin to get to know each other.



In the evening, there was an incredible performance of traditional Chinese dance by a number of deaf students, as well as a kung fu demonstration that made me want to go back to see *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* again. They clearly had put a lot of effort into this performance; I hope they have another chance to do it.

¹ After my return, I learned that Chinese people don't always drink tea at the drop of a hat the way Japanese people do and also that Chinese people themselves sometimes have soda for breakfast! So what I thought was bending over backwards to accommodate young Americans turned out to be customary.



The visiting Japanese students did a traditional Japanese dance in return:



11/27/01

Today we went to the culture street, where we found more bargains; Julie found someone who would do calligraphy on a scroll for 10 Yuan each (about \$1.25!), including the scroll, and she wanted six.



After the culture street, we went to lunch at a hot pot restaurant (Jim had gone there too) and had a memorable meal. I had to change my policy of trying things 3 times before giving up, as they served tripe which I actually liked even though the 3 previous times I'd had it (in a Chinese restaurant) I couldn't stand it; this time it was pretty good.



We also stopped off at another shopping mall with food; we entered one store that had fabulous dried fruits and other things. I bought a pound of dried hawthorn berries. Others went on to the TV tower, but I went back to the dorm to nurse my cold.

Dinner was also special (breakfast was traditional Tianjin specialties); we had Peking Duck, one of my favorite dishes (I didn't eat bugs, but later in Dalian, I did; even so, had lots of interesting food like jellyfish) . After dinner, our students finally had another chance to interact with their Chinese counterparts; they were very happy.



11/28/01

Another overwhelming experience: we visited a school for the deaf across town. The school goes from preschool (around age 2) through high school. Altogether there are about 370 deaf students, some of whom live on campus, and the school is partially attached to a hearing school. Everyone does morning exercises together. After our tour and a KFC [!] lunch, the students gave various performances, including this dance.



Then there was a math game in which we all participated (each female was worth .5 and each male was worth 1, and we had to form groups as quickly as possible whose members' values added up to a particular number, such as 4.5). We were truly touched when, at the end of the performance, each person was given a memento by the student who had made it. I was given a small photograph and a painting of a rooster (my Chinese Zodiac year). We were embarrassed that we didn't have more gifts. Later one of our group (Liz) remarked at how guilty she felt because the gifts she had brought (not enough) were bought whereas most of the gifts we had received from Chinese students of all ages were hand-made. I remarked that maybe it was like the old days in the US when kids were ashamed of their home-made clothes even if they were of better quality than store-bought. It certainly seemed that the Chinese student appreciated the gifts that our students had brought..

All of the youngest students we saw wore the red kerchiefs of the Young Pioneers, a Communist equivalent of our Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. As we got to the older grades, fewer and fewer students had the kerchiefs.



Sort of in exchange for the performances we viewed, the Japanese students in our group performed a dance, and Nathan did a break dance; he's very good!

In the afternoon, we went to a Buddhist temple; they were having a ceremony that we thought was perhaps a funeral, but was in fact was an ordinary service.



We had to be back by 3:30 so that the bus could be used for another purpose, It was nice to rest some more. For dinner, we had lo mein with various toppings.

11/29/01

Another traditional breakfast, that included a gooey soup that had what looked like tortilla strips in it; delicious. Also some Chinese crullers. Then we went to a museum that used to be the compound of a high-ranking family just outside of Tianjin. Getting there was half the fun; the bus passed small farms, as well as people selling things like bicycle seats from small carts. When we arrived, we had to walk through several blocks of tiny narrow streets full of picturesque views. This felt to at least some of us like we were seeing the real China, rather than just cities and new buildings. The museum had a number of fascinating exhibits, including new years paintings full of symbols of long life, wealth, and many children, rather ironic as Nathan pointed out, since Chinese families are now limited to only one child.

More things that surprise me: We take so much for granted in the US: telephones that work instantly, having hot water and electricity all the time (here in the dorm we have the latter but not the former), water that is drinkable right out of the tap; it makes me thankful for what we have at home. On the other hand, I've had more interesting Chinese food on this trip that I've had anywhere outside, at least, of Hong Kong.

After the tour, Bob (our chief of protocol), Dr. Zhang from TCT, and I met with President Bao for a sort of private farewell ceremony.. Then we went to the lab. Interestingly, one of the staff wanted to find out the schedule for the Voice of America broadcasts in China. So I got onto Google and did a search. Later that evening was the farewell banquet. There was much taking of pictures.



There were also formal and informal exchanges of gifts. As in the case of the deaf school, we were embarrassed that we had generally brought such impersonal (and not enough!!) things, as opposed to the handmade gifts we were presented with. For example, one art teacher gave me a peach pit and a walnut that had been sculpted into miniature statues; exquisite and painstaking workmanship.

11/30/01

Having bathed the night before, I used the leftover hot water in the pot (twice a day we were given a thermos of boiling water for tea etc; Patty and I used it for our morning coffee) for a quick wash, skipped breakfast, and got on the bus with the rest of the folks. On the way back to Beijing airport, we observed children sleeping on the back of bicycles while their mothers were presumably on their way to work, and were surprised that they didn't fall off; the interaction among bus, bicycles, and pedestrians was hair-raising; makes me understand the behavior of many Asian drivers in the US a little better.

The flight was relatively uneventful; as on the trip over, we had empty seats beside us to make the trip easier, and the food was again inedible. (In retrospect, I realize that I talked a lot about food on this trip; I only gained a couple of pounds, which was a relief given that the food was so delicious)

General reflections: Although China was originally set up to be egalitarian, I find it very hierarchical and reinforcing of traditional gender roles, which made me chafe a bit. On the other hand, getting to know this great group of students was a high point of the trip. They were truly excellent representatives of NTID and superb goodwill ambassadors.