



Reflections on a Sojourn in China Loanne Harmeling, Christmas 2008

Loanne Harmeling, a history teacher at Bainbridge High School near Seattle, spent the 2007-2008 school year teaching English at the Jiangdu Middle School, Jiangsu Province.

People have asked me how my year in China was. It was all I have to say here and much more. It is difficult to describe the day-to-day stuff. People get up in the morning and go about their routines, go home at night, and sleep and do the same the next day. Their lives are different in the material sense and different in the freedom to move and in freedom of information and analysis. But China is changing and China is huge. I can only speak with some authority on my little corner, and a little, but less so, based upon my travels while on the other side of the world. I am happy to be home, but my year away added much richness to my life...

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Just a year ago I was teaching Chinese children to sing the “12 Days of Christmas,” “Frosty,” and “Jingle Bell Rock” – they liked the last one the best. Then it was off to Shanghai to have Christmas with good friends, the Davidsons, Jack [Regan], and his friends Ding and Wei Yuan. We went to dinner at our favorite Italian place, De Marcos (the shrimp Caesar is wonderful), to see a Russian dance company perform “The Nutcracker” at the Shanghai Opera House, and then to Xintiandi for hot chocolate and desserts. It was a wonderful evening and it seems like a lifetime ago. Then the next day the fast train whisked us back to work. Today I knit by a warm fire, friends at my side, and look forward to spending Christmas with my family and friends here. I very much enjoyed my year in China, but



*Loanne Harmeling and Jack Regan
(Yangzhou 2001-2002, 2003-2004)*



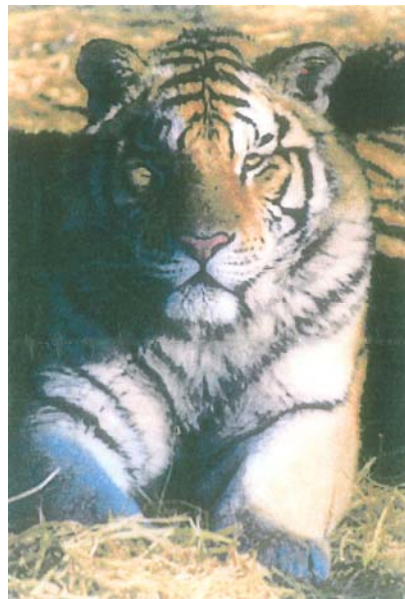
Harbin ice sculpture

I am very much enjoying being home.

In January, Sue [Kelly], Cecile [Perraud] and I flew to Harbin to experience the Ice Festival. Harbin is in northern China, north of Beijing and heavily influenced by the Russian people and culture. It is COLD there, hence the ice festival. The ice sculptures were intricately carved statues of historic figures, buildings, and literary masterpieces: Alice in Wonderland, the Great Wall, Dumas, the Taj Mahal, Disneyland and the Forbidden City. We road a gondola across a frozen river, one made famous by a huge chemical spill not too long ago, and rode a horse

cart back. We ate frozen fruit kabobs on a stick in 20 below weather. The four toes on my fight foot finally returned to normal a month later.

We saw beautiful tigers at a breeding reserve and toured Unit 421, where the Japanese conducted experiments on captured Chinese civilians. I don't think I will ever understand man's inhumanity to man. While time has passed, and forgiveness is also human, I better understand the depth of animosity some Chinese feel for the Japanese. It was a point of discussion with my Chinese students. There is plenty of hatred of one group by another in all parts of the globe. We should deeply consider the message of Christmas, regardless of personal religious beliefs, or the lack thereof.



Since January is the New Year's holiday in China, we had a month off. Instead of sticking around in chilly Jiangdu, Sue and I headed south, to Cambodia and Vietnam. We left as the snow started to fall on one of the coldest winters seen in China in a long time. Our friends there had a miserable holiday without power or running water. Below the Yangtze public buildings are not heated, and few of the poor have either heat or hot water, except as comes off of the stove for tea. My students studied in down parkas, ski pants, scarves, and fingerless gloves. They kept their hands warm by wrapping them around tea bottles. Will the world be able to supply the people of China and other parts of the world with heat, hot water, and light? At what cost?

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The woman whose remedy cured Loanne's cold, Zhou Zhizheng (left), and her daughter, Zhao Qian

Eventually, I returned to work. It was good to see the kids again. They really did make progress with their English while we were there. There are many of them I miss, even today. We spent some time reading Dr. Seuss books, to help with their pronunciation. We also wrote, learned vocabulary, engaged in improv. We laughed a lot and learned to reply to each other in casual conversations on campus. My Chinese improved, with the help of the students, my good friend Amy [a Chinese teacher of English at Jiangdu Middle School], and the mother of one of my students, Zhou Zhizheng, who taught me to knit and cook. She also makes a mean Chinese cold remedy: garlic, ginger, green onions, red sugar and vinegar... boil in a wok and drink it down.

Repeat before bed. I awoke in the night, sweating buckets, and smelling Chinese... of garlic,

onion, and ginger... and I finally understood what was so different between my students there and here... the smell of ginger and garlic from every pore.

We took a couple of other little trips, one to Yangshuo to see those famous granite peaks rising up from the rivers and lowlands. These are the hills on every Chinese scroll. I went with Cecile and her husband, Ron, from Connecticut. Cecile was a fellow program member, who taught and lived in Beijing. We had a great time riding bamboo rafts down the river, between the jutting mountains. We hiked up one to get a view of the land, and rented bicycles, riding for hours along rutted paths and through villages lost in time.



In June we traveled to Ningxia and had a magnificent time. We stayed again at an eco-lodge, ate local food, visited sheep ranches, an old section of the Wall, almost reduced to a sand pile, toured an ancient fort built to guard against the Mongol invaders, rode speed boats through the marsh, donkey carts over rutted trails, and camels through the dunes. We climbed the dunes at dawn to see the sun rise, and listened to a wonderful concert by a horse-head fiddle player and his entourage of dancers and throat singers. Our fellow travelers included expats from around the globe: a nasty Australian who blamed the mess in the world on the U.S., yet worked for the World Bank; a couple of arrogant Germans; and gracious Norwegians. Also in the group were our friends from the Vietnam trip: Renuka, from India and her friend from Brazil, as well as Linda, the woman from Bainbridge, all of whom work for IBM in China.



Sandwiched in between all of these adventures was the daily life of a Chinese teacher, classes of 60, although only two a day, and night classes three times a week. We prepared lessons, graded notebooks, and tutored individual kids, some who were preparing to study in England or Australia, but none bound for the United States. We had conversations with the Chinese English teachers. We were well treated by our hosts and by the community. The people in stores and shops

never failed to be gracious and helpful to these foreigners in their midst. We never wanted for food or clothing, even if our taste buds and clothing choices were limited. While Jiangdu is home to about a million, foreigners in China are few and far between once the big cities and big

businesses are left behind. I very much enjoyed riding my bicycle through the countryside. I discovered roads to nowhere as the central government plans and implements the transportation, communication and housing grid. I also discovered roads to unnamed villages and saw the local



A new road near Jiangdu

agriculturalists threshing grain with flails – and by laying it on those newly laid roads to nowhere, and letting the few cars on the road do the threshing work. I found Buddhist temples my Chinese peers had never been to and the local cemetery with the monolith honoring those locals who died defending themselves from the brutal Japanese forces during World War II. Nanjing is not far from Jiangdu and the Rape of Nanjing was repeated in city after city as the army advanced toward the capital. Nanjing was close by and another favorite weekend

destination. I saw Sun Yat-sen there, also lying in state. Mao, Ho (Chi-minh) and Sun, all on display. What a curious culture. The Rape of Nanjing Museum, Purple Mountain and the [Nanjing City] Wall are all sites to see.

We traveled a lot and tried to see as much of China and Asia as possible. The Chinese don't travel much, and when they do, it is in big groups. I found it very amusing to see tour group after tour group, identified by brightly colored baseball caps everywhere I traveled. I marveled that they would find such travel satisfying. The reality is, there are no other options. Few Chinese own cars, hence few driver's licenses. In addition, licenses are limited to certain geographic areas. A person with a motorcycle license in Jiangdu is not licensed to drive in Yangzhou, 45 minutes away. The highway system is expanding, but most of the traffic is bus and truck. While some do have cars and licenses enabling more independent travel, it is the exception. Hence, the only way for a Chinese person to travel is via bike, taxi, bus, train and plane. It takes FOREVER to get from point A to B, even flying. The system requires extensive links between modes of transportation. Vacations, like ours, scheduled personally, are rare. Holidays are government controlled to certain national dates. So, most Chinese let the tour companies do it for them, traveling in big groups on big buses as they begin to be able to see their land, efficiently and economically. They are starting to venture out, but compared to the population as a



Grain laid out on a country road

whole travel is still rare. We saw more of China than most Chinese will ever see and they both envied us and relished in the stories of their land and sites.

On June 21st I bid my Chinese friends a very tearful goodbye. So many are sorely missed. I hope it is not a goodbye. While I desperately missed my friends and family during my year away, I do also miss now the smiling Chinese faces, their eagerness to learn, and their enduring graciousness. While Skype and e-mail keep us connected, it is not the same as evening dances at the bank, knitting in the sunshine with the Chinese chattering away blissfully, the laughter, and the sincere desire to learn about the world, and to speak English. The children ran TO class. There is much that I came to understand from the Chinese, and I am a better person – more gracious and kind, I hope; a better teacher – more thoughtful; and a better world citizen – much more aware of our place, of both the fragility and the potential that is ours to make what we can of tomorrow.