

Eight Academic Years of Life in China



Tianjin Spring Bike Repairmen

**Year Seven of Eight
recorded by
Paul MacFarlane**

Castro Valley and Portland, Tuesday, September 2, 2014

===== The End of August =====



Well, it's the end of August. The back-yard geraniums that had bloomed in

June when I arrived are now blooming again to commemorate my imminent departure on Saturday, Sept 6.



Time to migrate to the East, the Far East (by traveling west).

It's been an odd summer. As many of you know, my feet all but broke down completely, so I didn't do much. I didn't feel like standing up, let alone getting out. On the other hand, between two physical therapists and one podiatrist, I have a plan to regain my walking abilities. So far it's working. My hope is that by December I will once again be walking laps around the Tianjin University campus, as I often did with my friend Jeanne. These circuitous routes also gave me many of the photos that I've included in these messages over the last few months.

Before I depart America, I would like to post a few more pictures of it, particularly for those overseas who wonder what there is to do in America without having to walk too far! County Fairs are not the only things happening!



===== Roll on, Columbia =====

I spent a wonderful two weeks in Portland, visiting my mother and sister and some foot specialists.

Portland, of course, is situated at the end of the Columbia gorge, a gigantic canyon filled with the Columbia River, one of the largest rivers on America's western end.

The roads ascend the cliffs, and follow them along. Close-passing

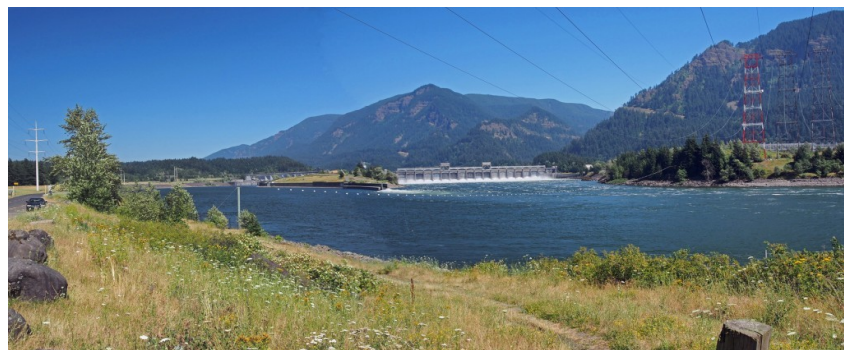
logging trucks proved a bit hair raising in their speed, weight, and width.



Well, maybe walking along the road at that location was not the wisest idea. It reminded me of my father telling me of his adventurous youth, driving such trucks through some of the nearby forests, and how a fully-loaded logging truck (like the one in the picture) is not easy to stop. They also kick up quite a breeze when they pass by your ear.

The Columbia River, because of the steep cliffs, is a great place to build a dam. In fact, there are about a dozen dams along its course, and another two dozen on its major tributaries. Unlike the situation in California, water is not stored to assuage the thirst of the land. In Western Oregon, it rains all the time!! Instead, the dams mainly generate electricity. And in fact, about two-thirds of all electricity in that part of the country comes from dams.

The dam pictured here is the Bonneville Dam, the closest one to Portland. It's actually a dam complex. The picture shows the high-tension electrical wires.



The closest white water in the river is the entrance to a "fish ladder" that allows migrating fish to pass through the dam to their spawning grounds upriver. I still remember coming here as a kid to see the fish climbing the ladder.



And in fact, we stopped to watch the ladder-climbing fish. There's even a viewing chamber with a glass wall in the side of the ladder to watch them close up. And as shown in this picture, I'm not the only one who goes wild with a camera at times like these.

Most of the fish were salmon, of course, but

we also saw many lampreys. Lampreys are the cutest fish this side of hagfish. They attach themselves to other fish with their sucker mouths. A ring of sharp teeth penetrates the fish's scales and the lamprey feasts a la Dracula on the fish's blood.

Interestingly, lampreys also use these sucking mouth parts to hold onto the glass in the viewing chamber, to take a break in the swift-moving current, like the fish in the picture. It held onto the glass and let its long body wave "in the breeze" like a banner on a windy day. If you want to see the teeth, just click on the picture for the full-sized version.



And here are the actual electricity-producing turbines. People on organized tours, in fact, are allowed to walk out onto one of them. If you look close you can see the bridge to it.



Unfortunately, no groups were operating at the time we arrived, so we could only view them from the floor above. Without people in the picture, it's hard to appreciate the scale of this apparatus. But luckily, somebody came riding across the floor on a giant tricycle when I snapped the picture.

It was a lovely trip that day. Besides the dam and the impressive views, highlights included some new pajamas for me from the world-famous Pendleton mills, located on the Columbia's Washington shore.

===== Powell's Books =====

And speaking of scale, for decades, I've been trying to snap a photo that truly imparts the immensity of Powell's main bookstore on Burnside Street. My favorite picture so far shows just the corner of the building. I snapped it on a cool winter's evening a few months ago. Powell's was an early



adopter of coffee-browsing bookstore culture. The thought of that warm coffee just on the other side of the glass wall was overwhelming on that

chilly evening.



This summer, I snapped a photo from the other side of the building. Its size is more apparent in this shot, but there's little warmth in the composition.

Pictures taken inside also fail to demonstrate the immense size — the books are stacked so thick and tall that a photographer can hardly

step back far enough to view more than a case at a time, except at the staircases or through the windows. Here are some examples.



Powell's Books is still one of the great independent booksellers. Book lovers should heed the call if they're headed towards the Northwest.

==== Rock & Roll: Ed's House of Gems ====

Only a few blocks from our home in Portland is **Ed's House of Gems**. For people who like rocks, fossils, and shells, it's like a museum where everything is for sale.

It's stood at that location since before I was old enough to remember. Ed's provided the



Nautilus shell that I used in class for many years. It's where I bought a Jurassic-Park-like piece of amber with insects inside. And let's not forget the trilobites.



They have rocks in every stage of



finishing – from just dug out, to smoothly polished, to mounted as earrings and brooches. And also every stage from cheap to expensive.

It's really a wonderful variety in all respects. And in the years since I visited it as a kid, they also added a back room, lockable at night, full of their most unusual items.



I can't say enough good things about them, and I don't even work for them. Well, they deserve all the free advertizing that they can get. If anybody from overseas (or underseas) ever comes to visit us in Portland, plan on a trip to Powell's and to Ed's.

==== Bay Area Highlights =====

And actually, I did have an overseas visitor in the Bay Area this summer — one of that group of Tianjin journalists which I've been so lucky to know over the years. She was here in the Bay Area for only three days, but we really took in a lot.

And I had a newly-purchased telephoto lens to try out. Here, for example, is an American Great Egret, caught stalking fish (and catching them) on San Francisco Bay.



Despite my having taught elementary school for so many decades, it was my first trip to Crab Cove in Alameda, a place full of crabs and the creatures who consume them.



Some of the birds, like the egret, can be seen all year round. Others, I was lucky to spot, like this group of Pacific Golden Plovers, wending their way by, on their annual migration.

Besides the birds, there were plenty of invertebrates, from crustaceans to worms, as well as a

double-helping of ground squirrels, who climbed right onto the picnic table to snatch the food given to us by our neighbors up the street the previous evening.

The squirrels who attacked our table were considerably fatter than the lean one in this picture. I didn't think they deserved a picture, however.



Anyway, there's also a visitor center with living fish exhibits. I can see why so many elementary school classes have visited there over the years.



We also took in the Oakland Museum. It has three levels for art, nature, and history.

And I have to say, it's odd to visit a history museum and see exhibits of items that I remember from real life, such as the Doggie Diner sign in the section on California Car

Culture.

We stopped by Fenton's in Oakland for the East Bay's premier ice cream experience. Amazingly, and probably for the first time since I was in high school, I found a parking space in their tiny lot.

I did take a picture of the ice cream itself, but there's no need to torture and tempt the readers of this message with the image of an item beyond their reach.



Did we ever get to San Francisco? Yes, and the highlight was the beach, Ocean Beach, south of Cliff House.

The naturalists among you would have noticed a shoal of Vellela Vellela, also known as "By-the-wind-sailors" which had washed ashore.

I dropped into "docent mode" to explain these little creatures to some passers-by. What looks like an individual animal is actually a colony of tiny anemone-like creatures, similar to the Portuguese Man-o-war, but not so dangerous. Their sail is constructed by specialized members of the colony, and it does indeed catch the wind, enabling the entire colony to move about the ocean's surface to reach new food sources. Usually, they're found far out at sea, but this time, the wind had blown them onto shore.



We also visited other parts of Golden Gate Park, including the AIDS memorial garden, and the Japanese Garden. I was disappointed to find, though, that the arboretum, formerly free and open, now charges a rather expensive entrance fee.

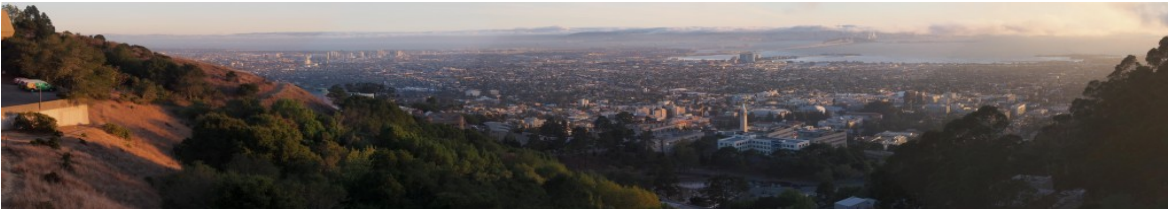


And speaking of expense, I discovered that there are no longer any toll-takers on the Golden Gate bridge! If you don't have the electronic payment system attached to your car, then it snaps a picture of your license plate, and you get the bill in the mail a couple weeks later. And it's \$7.

Did we ever get to Chinatown? Yeah, but not to the San Francisco version. We actually tried to get there, but it's simply too difficult to negotiate that neighborhood in a car, let alone find a place to park, let alone one that doesn't cost an arm or a leg.



So we visited Oakland's Chinatown, instead. Arguably, it was a better choice anyway, because it's not so tourist-oriented. What you see are ordinary people leading normal lives. And the traffic is a little bit heavy, but not bad. Parking was easy to find, too.



Our final stop was the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley, with its magnificent view of almost the entire bay, framed by fog falling through the hills from the outer coast. Again, those with quick Internet connections can click the panorama and enjoy the view for themselves.



The final shot for this post is a shot of Castro Valley's beloved Lake Chabot, taken from a slightly unusual vantage point, the trail along the top of the hills, which my feet have healed enough to enable me to reach. My friends the Smiths call it the "dog path," because dogs can be walked off leash there. Indeed, most

of the strollers I encountered had dogs with them, and all of them were friendly.

Tianjin, Tuesday, September 30, 2014

===== The End of September =====



I've been here in Tianjin now for three weeks precisely. We've given two weeks of instruction so far. It's time for an update.

My feet are gradually, very gradually, improving, but far from normal yet. However, I understand the situation better, so I hold out hope for full healing. I figure, I have two parents whose feet still work normally. Yes, they're still only in their *early* nineties, but still. They give me courage to persevere with this, on the theory that the problems are mechanical and not organic.



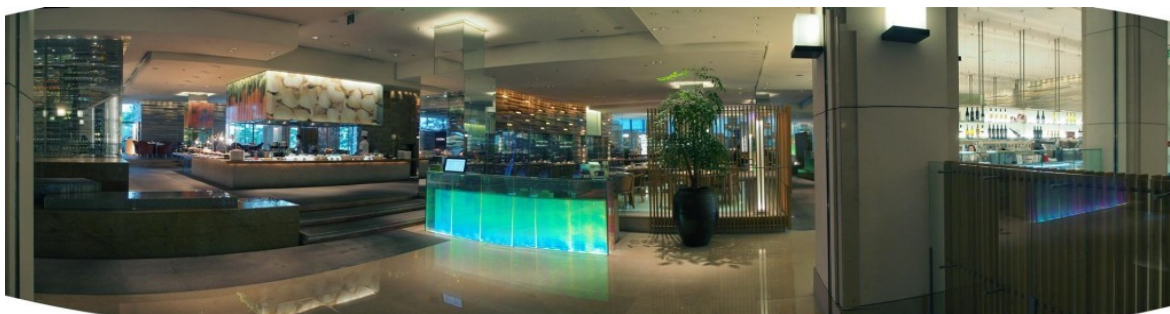
Hardworking Students

It's amazing, though. No matter how disgruntled or out of sorts I am, put me in front of a class of students, and all my problems disappear. It's the same here as it was back in America. My class schedule is great this year, too. I have four sections which I see once on Tuesday and once again on Thursday. So I'm going from 8 am to 5:30 pm on those two days

(with a 2.5 hour break for lunch). And that's it. As I always say, compared to any public school job in America, be it elementary school or high school, it's like playtime on holiday.

So I am also holding office hours and movie nights on Fridays. They are really the highlight of my week. It's nice to always look forward, not to the weekend, but to the day *before* the weekend.

The Flight to China



Breakfast Bash

My flight here was smooth. Well, there was one hangup. The airline put me up at the Hyatt Hotel next to the airport in Korea, and treated me to both dinner and breakfast buffet. Naturally, I over-ate, and paid for it with a sore stomach later.

It was worth it, though. Here's a picture of their buffet area, taken right before it opened for breakfast. Food counters are spread out over three large regions. Yeah, it was sweet. And sour. And tart. And salty, and every other possibility you might think of, from Italian to Asian and everything in between.

And the air was clear all the way to Tianjin. I even saw Dalian when we passed it. And with the change in airline picture-taking rules, I could now take a picture of all those red and blue roofs that blanket the plain near the Tianjin airport.



Roofs and river

The River in the background is called the Hai He. It connects Tianjin to the coast and the Bohai Sea. The highway in the foreground does the same thing.

Just upriver from that view, you'll find some heating towers, and no, it's not a nuclear plant.



Salt and Power

It's a combination coal-fired electricity / desalination plant. This region of the world is just as much a desert as Southern California. The desalination plant is not profitable yet, but every little bit of fresh water helps to keep the local aquifers from depleting.

London's ***The Guardian*** recently [wrote a story about it here](#).

Off to the right from the plant sprouts an apartment ghetto. They spring up all over the broad plain like mushroom patches. The whole wide area looks like some architecture department's project sandbox — a patch of skyscrapers here, a pile of factories there, a hotel/shopping complex way over there, and an airport . . . Oh, yeah, the airport.

On top of everything else, while I was away, they went and opened a brand-new airport terminal. It dwarfs the "old" Terminal 1, which will now serve international flights only. I mean, they finished Terminal 1 just six years ago. Before that, the old facility wasn't much more than a tower and some portable stairs for boarding the plane from the tarmac.

Terminal 2 was crowded with planes that day, while ours was the only plane pulling up to Terminal 1.

[There's a story about Terminal 2 here](#).

I found a cab to town, and sat wondering about all the new and strange

buildings that I saw all along the way. Honestly, it's even more fascinating than the crystal-growing experiments we used to do in junior high.

It's a Great Hall



Arriving at Tian An Men square, Beijing.

On Sunday, a small number of us took part in the big banquet / reception for "foreign experts" at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. It's the huge conference center on the west side of Tian An Men

square. It was the same room where Nixon and Zhou and a whole bunch of ancillary personnel commemorated their very public meetings in 1972. It's where they took those famous pictures of Zhou and Nixon clinking glasses. *Gan Bei!!*

This would be my second meal in that hall, probably as many as Nixon ever got! The day was overcast, but the pollution was not too bad.

On my first trip, five years ago, I wrote this:

*We each had to show our original official invitation and a passport to enter. Everyone was dressed up. Even I wore a tie, for the first time in probably several years. After passing through metal detectors at the door, we entered the building. It was huge. Really huge. We filed into a giant room with a giant staircase. We followed the stairs up to the second floor and then into one of the biggest ballrooms / dining rooms I've ever seen, big enough to hold two or three football fields, surrounded by cream-colored columns. The ceiling was about two stories above the floor, and we marveled at the engineering necessary to make such a giant flat ceiling hold itself up with no supporting columns in the middle. Yes, they don't call it the *great* hall of the people for nothing.*



The hall was built in only one year, back in the 1950's. It still stands strong.

In 2009!, They wouldn't let anybody bring in cameras, so I had no pictures. Everyone but me snapped away with their cell phones, though. My phone back then was too cheap to include a camera. Well, by now they must have realized it was silly to ban cameras while allowing cell phones, right?

You've guessed the answer to that one. But now, my cell phone's camera is almost as good as the camera I had back then, as long as I don't mind waiting a few seconds for the picture to actually take after pressing the button. Of course, the phone manufacturer (Samsung) placed the lens right at the spot in the phone where it's most natural to grip it and cover it with oil from one's hands. <sigh>

The good news — the food was excellent. In fact, I'd say that, except for the mass meals prepared by my acquaintance Amy ("The Genius"), at First Pres. Church in Berkeley, it's the best food that I've ever had that was served to about 1600 people. (Actually, it was 185 tables, most with ten chairs, and mostly full). I copied the menu for the curious:

The Menu

Hors d'oeuvres (Black Pepper Duck Breast, Anchovies, Flavored Chicken, Marinated Bran Dough, Cauliflower, shredded vegetables, vegetarian spring rolls, and bread). They also had some delicious little cakes.

Main Courses:

Soup of Scallop and Bean Curd Slices
Stewed Beef
Kung Pao Turkey (yes, turkey)
Assorted vegetables
Sauteed Salmon
Sweet Sago and Pumpkin
Vegetarian Curry Fried Rice



And for dessert, they served melon (like cantaloupe) and watermelon.

The schedule

Well, we entered the hall at 5:00 pm. The servers even tucked in our napkins for us. They provided a large glass for drinking and a small

glass with a dollop of wine for toasting. Dinner itself was served after the national anthem, the toast to China, and the featured speaker.

The high official came out on the stage. His speech was printed in our programs, both in English and Chinese – a convenient Chinese language review, which we studied, as the speaker read his own copy out loud. And yes, like most such speakers here, he read it slowly and clearly without glancing up from his lectern. One got the impression that he'd rather be home with his grandkid, but by gosh, he'd do his duty faithfully and somehow get through this. Everyone appreciated his efforts.

The dinner was great. I usually don't like stew, but this stew was marvelous, pungent, and full-bodied, and best when poured over the rice. The salmon was another stand-out. Well, I always do favor salmon.

And then, as 7pm approached, the servers were suddenly filled with nervous energy. They feverishly collected anything left empty from each table. And when the hour arrived, every guest stood up as one and prepared to exit. Some detoured through the bathrooms, while others ascended the stairs of the vast podium. I did both. And while standing on the latter I got the following panorama.



The Great Banquet Hall

Next to each table stands one of the servers, their presence and stature clarifying one's apprehension of this wonderful room's vast scale.

Well, I have a few days off, so I should be able to write another email soon. That's all for now, then!

I do hope to hear from you sometime! Even just a line or two would be nice.

-Paul

The end of the holiday

Tianjin, Tuesday, October 7, 2014

===== The holiday and Monsoons end =====



The life of Riley.
Ten days of
holiday in the
fall, when most
public schools
in America

endure their longest non-
holiday slogfest.

I've mainly been sleeping. I
spent some time studying
Chinese, though not enough. Oh, and I did hold a movie night on Friday
– old episodes of Roseanne and Cosby.



And there were a few lunches with friends – some of you know Professor
Ji. He's had some health challenges in the past, but lunch last week
showed him in great shape – practically buff. And his daughter Linda
attended movie night!

So tomorrow, Wednesday, everybody goes back to work, except that I
don't have classes on Wednesdays. I'll have to lounge another day.
Yeah, life is tough. And I'm fully and overly-prepared for class on
Thursday, having planned two hours worth of activities to somehow fit in
95 minutes, the way all public school teachers in America do.

I'll have four such sections every Thursday, with a repeat every Tuesday.
No classes at all on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. Yeah, just two
preparations a week. As I (probably too) often say, mine is a life of ease
compared to any public school teaching job in America. Well, I'm
actually retired, anyway.

As for planning, all my PowerPoint presentations begin with a recently-
snapped shot taken somewhere on campus. This new blog format was
meant (in part) to facilitate the display these two-pictures-per-week,
and include them in more regular communications to friends and family.
But I've posted none so far this fall, so its time to deal with the three-
week backlog.

===== Pictures for the week of September 15 =====

This is our well-known architecture building, designed by a member of the university faculty many years ago, and recently refurbished with a new and better-attached facade. It won an award for its design back then, but I think it resembles one of those huge 1970's audio speakers. Here it seems to rise from the swamp like a lotus.

No water shortage here. And not many mosquitoes, either, particularly compared to my first visit in the summer of 1998. I wonder how they accomplished that?



And that blue sky? Much more common this year, partly the result of fewer automobiles. On each of the five weekdays, cars with license numbers ending in 2 particular digits can't drive in the city during worktime hours.

Also, cars without a Tianjin license plate are similarly banned. So out-of-towners all flock in during the weekend. Thus, Saturday and Sunday are a bit more crowded than before, but on balance, traffic flows smoother.

It also flows smoother from stepped-up law enforcement, even though the police seem no more active than before. But new high-tech cameras line the streets. If they pick up rule-breakers, they automatically note the license plate and mail out a follow-up fine. Thanks to those cameras, one of my car-owning Dutch friends found out the hard way that drivers can't pull into the bike lane when making a right turn. So, yeah, traffic and pollution are improving in Tianjin.



Sophomores in uniform

These blue-clad students just left their military drills and are headed to dinner. Every year, sophomores undergo a week or so of military training. Last year, I got a great shot of the exercises themselves – tightly packed squadrons of young men and women marching this way and that, across the parade

ground of our campus track-and-soccer stadium.

It always struck me that those bright blue camouflage uniforms don't really blend in with anything. So I Photoshopped the picture to impose a camouflage pattern on everything. If the camouflage can't match the background, then make the background match the camouflage. You can click on the picture to see what I mean. Actually, the blue still stands out amid all that distortion.

Some of those sophomores march with plastic toy automatic rifles. At least, I hope they're plastic toys. I noticed this year that only the women carry them. Well, perhaps that's wise.

===== Pictures for the week of September 22 =====

An annoying bike parking strategy

This sudden September downpour fell the same day as the photo at the top of this email. Everybody dashed under a Coca Cola umbrella or stood under the eaves of the general store by the north gate, my favorite place to shop on campus. In fact, it was the first place that I ever shopped on campus back in 1998, when I bought that "Beijing" brand suitcase.



That store has the widest selection per square meter of any I've ever seen. If they don't have what you're looking for, then you probably don't actually want it, anyway. And you can assuage any disappointment with snacks from the windows that wrap around the ground floor. They even sell hula-hoops.



The shot also includes an item that nobody wants — the all-too-common Thoughtless Biker. You don't see him in the picture. (It's usually a him) because he dashed into the general store to get an umbrella, leaving his bike clogging the entrance. In fact, two such clueless bikers had left their bikes completely

blocking access. One bike was moved so I could exit the store before taking this picture.

Where's a good scarecrow when you need one?

One of my favorite birds is the magpie, a crow relative. Old-world magpies are a bit bigger than those in America, but otherwise they look and act the same.

These two had discovered ripening corn ears in our campus cornfield. Actually, not everybody here is aware that the campus even has a corn field. It's located by one of the two campus shower facilities, a place with water so hard that soap won't lather. (according to one of my students who only uses the other facility).

===== Pictures for the weeks of Sep 29 and Oct 6 =====

Running the Gauntlet

Back in the old days, this spot between the universities was occupied by ramshackle buildings for employees, plus a shoal of small shops and restaurants. Our favorite jiaozi restaurant occupied this spot. It's entrances north to Tianjin University and south to Nankai university still exist, sort of,

because a road still provides mutual access along the same path. The photo shows students traversing that path, shaded by an overhead fortress of a building.



The buildings in the background stand on Weijin Lu, one of the city's principal arteries. The asphalt road could easily be extended out to there, and probably will be some day. But for now, such an extension would only provide additional easy access to the two campuses, and where's the sense in that?

For the national holiday, the weather's been absolutely magnificent. It always is. Maybe that's why they have it in October.



Monumental Kids

The fine days brought out swarms of ordinary people onto the campus. Old people, working people, kids, and infants. One of the nice things here is the atmosphere of a complete community, particularly on holidays and weekends.

The picture for Thursday's class shows some skaters on the main square of the campus interrupting their revelries to mark the passage of a toddler through their raceway.

The monument in the background bears a portrait of one of Tianjin University's early leaders, and another bunch of kids plays under his benevolent gaze.

Beiyang Square

Years ago, this square was a much more natural area. I mourned the loss of the soft earth, hills, grass, trees and bushes in exchange for this level hard-surfaced floor.

However, I have to admit that the openness of the new configuration attracts activity of every sort, from campus clubs displaying their projects to late-night line dancing. This bonus picture, taken the same day, shows the overall layout.





Holiday players

The picture makes the campus look like it's right in the heart of the city. Which it is.

I wonder how much of a normal community will flock out to the new campus out in the middle of those red-and-blue-

roofed industrial buildings in the countryside, like those shown from the air in my previous post.

So here's a closing nostalgic shot of that same square again, at sunset, full of celebrating people.

It was the close of a beautiful day.



===== With apologies to Monet =====

Claude Monet once told how he was gazing into his dying wife's face when he realized that he was also analyzing the changing colors in her complexion as she slipped away. He was appalled at his own behavior.

Sometimes I feel like that. Everyone does not have to be taught. Yet thoughts and strategies arise in my mind unbidden.

It's been quite a while since I've sent out any thoughts through email. The picture shows Aiwan Lake, the closest pond to my apartment. The once-abundant summer lotus



bloom has shriveled into scribbles. The willows, last to turn yellow each fall, blaze through the water under the retaining wall. Above the wall stretches a straight street, mysteriously plagued by drainage problems.

I recently had dinner with an old friend of mine, who actually grew up on these grounds. It was an exciting time. In this small patch of park, he and some other boys once discovered a buried stash of old coins, sequestered perhaps fifty years before, but never recovered.



Things have changed so much since those days that he feels a bit of two minds when visiting the campus now. Yes, it's the same place. No it's not the same place.

The lakes are smaller, for one thing. Turtle Pond hasn't seen a turtle in years. They don't even call it that, anymore. The canals are gone. That road along Aiwan Lake is actually an old filled-in canal. In the old days, it was part of a watery network that ran for miles. Not only could you sail across campus, you could even sail out to the distant "Water Park," Tianjin's answer to New York's Central Park.

My friend's father (who is actually a bit younger than me) is the man who named Aiwan Lake. It comes from two characters that mean "love" and "evening." It's meant to honor the pensioners who lived (and still live) next to it. As I ride my bike to class in the morning, I can glance through the iron fence and see those old guys, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, sometimes with younger men, practicing their Tai Chi to warm up in the coolness of morning.



The old guy just stepped out

On the edge of that pond, for many years, lived an old man in a small hut. At least he lived there during the warm-weather months. He embodied the spirit of Aiwan. I took this picture of his hut during the spring of 2009.

He raised ducks and geese on the pond, grew roses and other flowers in a stone

flowerbed, and studied Japanese in his copious free time. Most times that I passed the hut, he seemed to be hosting visitors. I used to write about him when I first arrived here, and about his ducks – Moe, Larry, and Curly. Yeah, Curly was the first to go. In the grand scheme of things, isn't it always Curly who's first to go?

clean and clear

This old man was not the last to go, though. One day, I suddenly noticed his tent, crushed to the ground as if flattened by a steam roller. It remained in that state of shock for weeks, until one day, it finally picked itself up and wandered off to who knows where.

Neighbors fed the remaining ducks. They reported that the man's daughters had fetched him. So now he lived with them. So I guess he's doing okay. His departure seemed to mark the passing of an "old guard" — not just the person himself, but a way of life. Now, all the ducks have

vanished. Maybe they're off visiting the turtles.



I snapped this picture at the same spot this week. The "new guard" here is parents walking their kid to kindergarten. I wonder, though. Will they walk this plane much longer?

Our university's big move to the countryside, involving thousands of people, is coming soon, probably over the summer, but

nobody has officially announced how it's to be done. Nobody knows precisely who's staying. Nobody knows precisely who's going. We only know that most are moving on, a few will remain, while a fortunate even fewer will make Lotso™ money from developing a large piece of this old campus into a business park. In fact, it's the same piece where my friend once lived and grew up and discovered buried treasure.

Some teachers have purchased homes out near the "new area." They won't be as convenient as the homes they have now, if only because they're located much further from their job site, and a heck of a lot further from the city. There's not much public transportation out there, yet, either. "Some day" there will be.



But, whatever. Shouldn't the burgeoning automobile fleet take care of such minor details, and tide everybody over for a few years? It's too far for walking, but driving's no problem. Hmmm. Where have I heard that before?

plenty of space at the water park.



Well, the thought of the "water park" inspired me to stop by there over the weekend. What a great perquisite to living in this city!

When I first saw it in 1998 it was surrounded by a high fence, and it charged an admission fee. That all changed a few years ago. The fences dropped, leaving a little short frill of painted ironwork that

even oldsters could vault. It makes the grounds seem an accessible part of the city, and not a walled-off facility.

A swelling in the corridor.

And vaults aren't necessary to gain access. The ticket kiosks were shuttered. Now anybody in the city can wander in without cost, and so, many of them do. And at the same time, the landscaping and structures have been upgraded.

These new facilities attract a constant flow of strollers whose warm presence is what gives the place its real meaning. There aren't quite so many now that the season is turning colder, but there are still plenty, their presence dwarfed in the picture by the huge expanse of the grounds.

lots of corridors

It's a place for birdwatching. It's a place for you and your twenty friends to practice ballroom dancing. It's a place for clubs and organizations to set up displays. It's a place for just you and your one friend to hang out.



It's a place for men to gather around unending public games of chess. And if it rains, you can all duck under some of the traditional long corridors, spacious enough to conduct rainy-day dance sessions or almost any other activity.

And adjoining the water park is an amusement park for the kiddies. The ferris wheel appears in the picture above. There's also a double-decker carousel, a little Casey Junior type mini roller-coaster, and even my childhood favorite – the bumper cars.



Bumper Cars – the old stand-by

And all this festivity is riddled with snack and souvenir shops, including the venerable favorite — cotton candy. Little plaster statues of cartoon-like characters overrun the place, blazing smiles of amusement and friendship.

There is only one plaster human figure among them, a character that I had hoped would have disappeared by now. Alas, he was still lurking out there this weekend.

First glimpse of a foreigner

The sole human plaster figure sprawls on his back just inside the park entrance. It's a blue-eyed foreigner, fat and drunk but not afraid of further intoxication.

In fact, he's drinking beer from a bottle when all the time he could have had draft! How daft.

I don't know. I watched people taking souvenir portraits with it, and reflected that for many kids, this would be their first contact with the apparition of a foreigner. To me, it mars what's otherwise a superlative experience in a well-thought-out park. But maybe for most folks it's just not that big of a deal.



The general oversees the construction of the ramparts.



I had also come to the park that day to snap a picture of an equestrian statue, located just down the block from the entrance. It's General Nie Shicheng. He led the Chinese Army in this area about a hundred years ago. The general had come up in conversation recently because of his role in the "Boxer Rebellion,"

when he also lost his life to a foreign bomb right here in Tianjin.

It always seems odd to us Californians to actually stand at the location a major event featured in a high school history book so long ago. To us in California, except for the Bear Flag revolt, history is something that mostly takes place out of state, Jedidiah Smith notwithstanding.

Yet here I was. Tianjin stood literally in the middle of the Boxer rebellion, whose major actions took place just north and just south of us. For those Californians who may have forgotten the event, think of an army of Bruce Lees. You can learn more about the [general here](#).

Well, I think I'll close now before I give in to the dark side of pedantry. Actually, you've been spared. I've written quite a bit more than what appears here, but I kept erasing it. Meantime, the government continues its stepped-up blocking of ever more web sites and Internet access from outside the country, so you could be forgiven if you thought you hadn't heard from me because of that.

I hope then, that you enjoy the pictures and that it might give you some insight into what life's like here "on the ground."

===== Winter Blows In -- Clear Air for now =====



Twigs over the old dorms

Well, I don't have a lot of Sinological insights at this time. I can post some recent pictures, though. So . . . the weather? No precipitation, but last week, winter blew in with a cold and clear vengeance. Lows at night sank to the upper teens and lower twenties (Fahrenheit). The nearby ponds are growing a thin skin. But the wind did clear out the pollution, just like it does for San Francisco back home.

The wind also blew most of the remaining leaves off the trees. I took this picture today to show the result. The old dorms are slated to be torn down in order to construct the new business park. And if you've ever seen the inside of one, well, maybe they deserve to go. But on the outside, they have a wonderfully substantial character.



I'll be sure to snap some pictures of them this year while they still rule over the north part of campus. Yeah, they don't even have showers, though they do boast laundry rooms with sinks large enough to serve as showers in a pinch, at least during warm weather.

Building 26 – five coordinated pieces.

I snapped this picture about a week ago. It's the building complex where I hold classes. They take place in the left-hand branch. I really like the brick-like facade. The reddish brown is handsome and hides the soot. Some of my Chinese friends, though, find it less appealing. Perhaps they like the older, smooth-white-tile-clad models which are more common.



A couple weeks ago, the cedar standing at the entrance to building 26 was wrapped in traditional green plastic to withstand the frigid winter winds. The tree is now a couple years in this new spot, having been

moved about ten blocks from its old location. It looks kind of scraggly, but it turns out that this is what an Old World cedar usually looks like. Yes, the famed cedars of Lebanon would look just as skinny and withered as this one. If you want to see an impressive cedar, then, I guess you better see the ones in California.

===== An update for those who know our campus =====



The campus “hotel” where, back in the old days, I spent half a dozen summers, is now mostly devoted to foreign student housing. But the old restaurant, which had been

shuttered (or rather, bicycle locked) for about five years has finally been opened. It’s now a Western-style coffee shop called Gloria Jean’s. It even has good burgers. And it turns out to that Gloria Jean’s is an international chain, founded in Chicago and now mostly located in Australia.

Man, how could I not have heard of a chain that big? And then, today, I discovered (in a news article) something else I should have noticed by now — Samarium, element 62. It’s more common than tin, yet I’d never heard of it. I guess the world is still big, and waiting to be explored.

===== The Previous bout of Fresh Air =====



Our last long period of clean air blew through back in October. It was artificially induced, because of the APEC conference, a gathering of about two dozen heads of state, including our own. As was the case for the Olympics, which involved considerably more people, it was deemed proper to take extreme measures to blue out the sky.

October Fishing on campus.

I guess it goes to show the way of the world, though. For the sake of

two dozen individuals, who spent hardly any time outdoors, who also have the wherewithal to pack up their home atmosphere and bring it along with them, if they so desire, the air was cleaned and a new term was coined – “APEC blue” — suitable for any temporary pleasantness that you just know won’t last.

Anyway, they shut down gobs of factories across four different provinces, forbade automobiles with certain license plate numbers from driving, and gave rather lengthy out-of-season vacations to many workers in the capital. One of my friends got ten days off work, which is not too shabby in the labor climate here. I don’t know exactly how many other workers benefited from this bonus break, but they were numerous enough to drive up hotel prices in not-so-near Thailand.

I guess it’s nice to be reminded that some people in this world count as much as millions of the rest of us, especially when the collateral benefits of their presence breathe so nicely.

===== Baseball where it counts

=====

The Poster for the League

It was nice to see one of my home town teams, the San Francisco Giants, do so well this year. And it was interesting to see that team member Tim Lincecum, the pitcher at the top of his game five years ago, is now the “old man” of the pitching staff, coaching and cheering on his younger colleagues. Yeah, he’s all of thirty years old.

Back then, analysts had predicted that anybody like Lincecum, who put so much of his soul into each pitch, would burn himself out in five years, and they were right.

Still, while it lasted, it was brilliant.



Before the wind came up



Well, the San Francisco Giants may be a dynasty, but I'd credit the Tianjin Lions with an even greater achievement – survival. When baseball left the Olympic stage, support dwindled for the Chinese Baseball League. And when the main sponsor absconded with his company's funds and left the country, it seemed like baseball's fate was sealed.

So this is a league, and a team, that really knows how to fight. 2014 marked their first baseball season in two or three years.

They'd crawled back from the abyss. They'd lost a few franchises, and quite a few players who needed to find other jobs in order to survive, but the top two teams remained — Tianjin and Beijing.

This year's season was delayed and abbreviated – just a few weeks at the beginning of fall, mainly because certain people of power hadn't received sufficient grease on their palms. But all that no longer matters, because the players finally took to the field again.

And they even figured out a new batting strategy based on local atmospherics. If you hit a high fly, the ball gets lost in all the pollution! Unfortunately, the wind came up for the second game in the series that I saw. It laid bare any flying objects. Even mosquitos.

Blue Skies emerged for the final game

And the field had gotten upgraded. New scoreboard. New bleachers. New clubhouse. And the league has attracted a market basket of small sponsors instead of just one big one.

The fans were stoked. No more simple repetitive cheers of "jia you, jia you" all the time. This year they broke out in complicated rhymes and clever theme songs. Who knows? What if baseball survives another year? Might they get



cheerleaders?

And yeah, in the season-ending championship game, Tianjin lost to Beijing by one run. But who cares? Next to survival itself, the loss of first place standing for second seems pretty trivial.

Oh, and bonus points if you can find the ball in the two pictures above.

===== Personal Notes and Appendices =====

Well, I got my plane ticket, finally. Korean Air is still the best! And I have a brand new passport to replace the one which almost expired. I'll be winging my way to SFO on January 16, with subsequent trips to Phoenix and Portland. I'll be in the USA through the end of February. I hope that I can see people again, more than I did last summer when my feet finally broke down completely and I really couldn't walk anywhere.



Portrait of the artist (and wife) as a middle-aged man. Yes, this is a traditional Chinese painting style.

As for those feet, the exercises prescribed by the physical therapist are literally reshaping them. This process is not without its discomforts, but I remain optimistic that I'll have normal-feeling feet, for the first time in ten years, by the time I return to the states. I realized that they haven't actually been normally-shaped for

about three decades.

And as for the new metal mailboxes installed for our apartments last summer, even though my mother and sister mailed cards in plenty time for Halloween and Thanksgiving, nothing has ever appeared in those boxes. The layer of dust inside remains undisturbed and pristine.

So anybody attempting to mail me anything should go back to the old address. My neighbor Lonnie did get one piece of mail from the states, but it was a large envelope with a 24-dollar postage tag. It was a step up from simple first class. I am reminded of something I read three years ago, which stated that China's post office aimed to achieve as much as a 50% delivery success rate. Yes, 50%.

===== Piano Appendix =====

I've had these recordings sitting around for months. Those who don't

care about such things will have to excuse me, I guess, since there are a few (cough. . cough.. parents, as well as my old music buddies) who might. Anyway, the player won't embed in documents like this, but I put the link in the titles. Click on one of them to either download the file or play it in a new browser window.

I was delighted to finally, after all these years, be able to play a be-bop tune in a bebop style. The tune is called ["Lady Bird," by Tadd Dameron.](#) This performance might not be as good as his original, but at least it hangs together.

Second up is a sort of [pseudo-rubato version of Misty.](#) "Pseudo-rubato" is a way of saying that I occasionally play fast and loose with the measure length. This, by the way, is the reason that I only play with bass players who are friends. Yes, for too many years, I was pelted by chunks of fresh resin lobbed in frustration from a bass section that wanted a predictable beat. Anyway, this piece is dedicated to one such forgiving friend — the legendary "Strings" Carlbob.

And finally, here is the Bobster himself, accompanying me at home in California on the old [Dave Brubeck tune, "In your own sweet way."](#) I must also point out that the piano we used is that century-old Crown upright, bought at an estate sale when I was seven years old, and recently refurbished (and tuned) courtesy of my friend and house-sitter Tim Goodman.

===== Signing Off =====

Well, that's all for this message. If you get a chance to drop me a line, I stand ready to pick it up. Oh, and I almost forgot. Courtesy of my associate Dan Sumin, I was again entered into a photo contest. And again I got a prize! This time, it was third place, and the prize was a nice wristwatch.

Trash Mountain

The subject of the picture is the tallest hill in Tianjin. I took it about a year ago to prove that, yes, Tianjin does have fall colors. The name of the hill? In both English and Chinese it's called "Trash Mountain." I think you can guess the reason.



It certainly is a fine example of "making lemonade when life gives you lemons." And it makes me feel at home; it's like my alma mater Davis, California, where the tallest hill is actually a freeway overpass.

===== Happy 2015! =====



So here's our faculty meeting that took place this week at the new campus site, far away from

everything else in the world.

Just kidding. Actually, we all jetted out to the Columbia River near Portland for our meeting. That's the state of Washington in the background.



Just kidding. But I sure wish I could bring them all out there. After so many tedious meetings, they deserve it.

The new campus site will be almost as disruptive as a commute to the Columbia would be. It's painful to listen to all the problems that will be caused in just our small group, let alone the hundreds of other faculty and thousands of students involved in this exile exodus.

It would seem that, despite its reputation otherwise, this country attaches little regard to education as a system. Of course, teachers here are no richer than their American peers, but moreover, as soon as the real estate values go up, universities are moved out to the wastelands, regardless of any impact on education, or education's enrichment of the cities. This is not only true in Tianjin, but in most Chinese cities. Universities become outliers in far-flung satellite villages, disconnected from city centers, isolated for greater governmentally oversight and control, while rich real estate investors make a killing by developing the evacuated land.

Still, it wouldn't be so bad if it hadn't been handled with such utter disregard for the people affected. For example, we had long been promised public transportation for when the school opened. No ground has yet been broken for that. There's no housing adjacent to the university. The closest housing developments lie 8 kilometers away (that's about 5 miles). It's a pleasant half-hour bike ride in the spring and fall, but summer and winter will tell another story. It probably means that more cars will be purchased by people who really can't afford them. Unhindered by city traffic, they'll spout even more

hydrocarbons into the air.

There are also no elementary or high schools for staff families. There are no nearby businesses that cater to them, at least not yet. And there are no places, other than dormitories, to stay the night on campus. No wonder that one of our students, who actually visited the site, came away saying, "There's No Soul there."

Otherwise, the comparison to the wild lands around the Columbia River is not far from the mark.

Oh, and nobody will actually know for sure until February or March this year who will stay and who will go. I keep thinking that if this university, the oldest in China, the foundational institution, is being tossed about like this, then what must other schools have to put up with?

On the other hand, a university education here is affordable even for farmers from the countryside. Nobody talks about turning the educational process itself into a profit center, like they do in the USA, saddling students with debts unimaginable compared to when I attended university, not to mention the dismantling and privatizing of public education in general. Here, they just talk about taking the land. So I guess it could be worse.

Actually, just under two-thirds of the campus will be moving, including all the undergraduates. Those who remain should find the campus pretty roomy, at least until more businesses move in.



Actually, the connection between business and higher education is much more explicit here than it is in America. Take, for example, the shiny new building called the "1895 Building" (named after the year this university was founded) which was erected in a single year across the street from the main campus.

I took this picture of it last March. It's the building painted the color of gold bullion.

Except for some street-level shops, it houses an architectural firm attached to the university. I am told that this firm ranks about the same as a normal university department in the governing hierarchy, and that it functions within the university just like any other department.

This picture shows a view from the "1895 building." Tianjin University lies in the foreground.

The same grad students that study in the regular architecture department on campus also contribute their labor to this firm. They do earn a small amount of pay. Oh, did I mention that the architecture grad program is not moving next year? In fact, they'll be expanding into an otherwise abandoned building on campus.



Actually, there's a lot to be said for business-educational partnerships. It would seem, though, that there's little use for education other than to gain skills to help companies make profits.

===== The Marvelous Weather =====

It's been cold, though apparently not as cold as Colorado or Iowa. Temperatures dip far below freezing every evening and morning, though.



The upside to the frozen ponds is the skating. A huge expanse beneath the lofty Tianjin Television Tower is devoted to skating every year. I took this shot a few days ago at dusk. The main skating area is actually in the distance. The shiny roped-off circular area closer to the camera is most likely too thin yet to be safe (?)



People here don't simply skate. They also maneuver a large variety of sleds and sled-like vehicles. These can be seen by enlarging the pictures above.

===== Merry Christmas =====

One of my biggest privileges here has been some friendships with a small group of journalists. I've written about them from time to time over the years, and also traded pictures with them on occasion.



In fact, my picture at right, which portrays students celebrating Christmas at the nearby Gloria Jean's Coffee, actually got published in a local paper, as part of a conglomeration of Christmas shots. Unfortunately, the paper's page layout overlapped the pivotal figure, the girl tied to her computer, lost in cyberspace. Can

you see her? This obliviousness to actual space is perhaps typical of our modern life everywhere.

I always contrast this connected-yet-isolated condition with my many trips to Europe back in the old days, when nobody could get in touch with me for months at a time. What a different world. Everyone I interacted with on those trips actually interacted with me.

Anyway, these parties, like all annual feasts here, always feature the same activities — lots of games where guests can embarrass themselves singing or performing silly stunts, as well as some planned performances, such as magicians.



This year I attended two local Christmas celebrations, and they both featured magicians. Maybe it's finally time for me to bring my "dove pan" and "linking rings" from home. Anyway, the prestidigitator in the picture at right was pretty handy with card tricks and needle swallowing.

===== Professional Pictures =====



One of my journalist friends shared some pictures with me recently. I wrote her some feedback, some response. I deliberately didn't ask what the subjects were, although I've since discovered that her first picture (at left) comes from a "veteran's home."

I thought that people on this list might also enjoy seeing these shots. It's an opportunity to see this country through its own eyes. And if we don't know the exact circumstances for each shot, maybe that's okay. Believe me, if you ever come to live here off the beaten tourist path, you'll discover that discerning the true conditions of things is rarely easy.

Anyway, these are my original reactions. If you have any, I'd love to hear them.

=====

The first picture with the middle-aged men strikes me as very lonely and impersonal. The men are all dressed alike (the green jacket makes this even more clear) and they emerge from identical doors. Yet they are no group. Their circumstances push them together.

The surfaces of the building are clean, but hard and merciless. The men's faces seem interchangeable. They are not so hard. The unsmiling wear of a graceless existence impacts their appearance. None smile. They should be presiding "in their family" over the younger generations, their functional apparel exchanged for clothes of honor.

Instead, they find themselves cut off and penned up. They don't appear to be sick, but perhaps some other malady has pricked society into warehousing them this way.



The baseball players, seen from that low angle, tower like superheroes. They are dirtied by the mud of good honest effort. The intensity in their faces contrasts with their older peers in the picture above. These young men are strong and confident. They crowd together in a huddle, as a team, intent and purposeful. Overconfidence stains the two at left. They lounge with hands on hips, their success guaranteed by merely showing up.

Their uniforms, elaborate and colorful, unite them as a team — the Tianjin Lions. I would be tempted to Photoshop a blue sky with racing clouds above their heads.



The young graduate clutches his hopes, now fulfilled. As inscribed on the stone, "dreams become reality." The wind stirs his gown. It is a spirit that will lift him and his stone into a successful life. His smiling face tilts to one side, pressed against the rock like a young boy clinging to his mother. He is carefree. His sense of decorum floats away into the air.

The young man on the right, meanwhile, readies his cap, as if planning to fly off next. Or perhaps he's just gripping it against the wind which streams into him from his highly-placed comrade.

Our mutual friend Vincent in his days of longer, more tousled, hair, happily flashes a victory sign. He has just bagged a photo, or perhaps is about to bag it. His right hand cradles his weapon. The day is bright, with firm shadows. His quarry rests peacefully, quietly snacking. Does he snack on food, or on the latest news? Deerlike, a brown sweater serving as his coat of fur, he sits out of focus. He is but sustenance for the black-clad panther standing behind him, so close, so happy, so unannounced.



A women walks a bicycle respectfully through a temple. What sort of temple is it? The miraculously straight lines of demarcation enclose a lofty space above the fans, above the chandeliers. The space's white pureness soars in contrast to the muddy browns of the world below.



The columns, like dim and standing arrows, transform into whiteness as they hurl into that higher plane. They point the way. Will the woman strive to leave the world of the bicycle for the ecstatic, yet spare, realm above? Will she have to stage herself on the hard green seats, harmoniously bound to the stern, enclosing, angular walls? In the

distance, a humbler figure ventures to enter. He's escaping that same outer confusion, an indistinct world without guideposts.. It's bright, but without form. Will he succeed where she may not?

The cat stares directly towards the viewer. His tongue hangs out. Is he thirsty? No, his coat seems tousled, as if he had just emerged from a soaking. Is he just happy to have escaped all his problems? It's not always easy to perceive the thoughts of a cat. This cat himself is hard to perceive. His body stretches out of focus, but his face is sharp, emphasizing his gaze.



(*nice use of shallow depth of field*). He stands amidst a formed, yet formless backdrop, a sheet that isolates him from the real world. So much mystery here. Like the Cheshire Cat, only his eyes and his smile remain.



A queen sits proudly on a throne, her hair piled high like a crown. She gazes down her nose, away from her high-flying subjects, who merit not a glance. They stand at attention within the flying arch. Starched and stiff, they wait on cords. And they wait. She won't let them clutter her perfect thoughts. She prefers the light. At first glance, all seems disheveled. True symmetry emerges only gradually. And light enters the passageway, which no longer seems as stuffy as it first appeared. And still, the shirts wait.

Two figures huddle behind a veil of redness, reduced to shadows. Their hands seem to

touch. Perhaps they are paying each other. Perhaps they are taking things. Perhaps they are playing at cards. Perhaps their game will capture winnings for one of them.

Perhaps one is a client, and one provides service. One smokes, addicted to nicotine. A bright, hidden light bears down on them. An empty chair stands ready for the next actor in this shadow puppet drama. Additional curtains cover the side walls. What lies behind them?



The people in front don't count. They have already rejected what she has to offer. She gazes off in expectation of others to come. Her child, of course, does count. He accepts what she can offer. Such a



variety of goods, yet no one willing to buy. Feeding two mouths, she doesn't appear careworn. A tenuous existence, but they seem strong. They seem healthy. Does she have everything she needs?

And how do they transport all that stuff to their spot on the sidewalk? All those boxes, too many to carry very far. Who helps her?

=====



I hope that you enjoyed these photos as much as I did. I leave you with one last winter shot that I took – the Administration building of our school, taken three weeks ago when it snowed. (It has not snowed since then).

Tianjin, Saturday, January 31, 2015



===== The Flight Back =====

The Hai River, Tianjin's connection to the sea

My journey to America was fragmented. The plane was an hour and a half late out of Tianjin, despite perfect weather (and sort-of clear air) and no visible traffic. Apparently the government had some non-apparent traffic in mind. Perhaps it's a consequence of building the airport directly adjacent to an air force base.

Los Angeles from the clear air

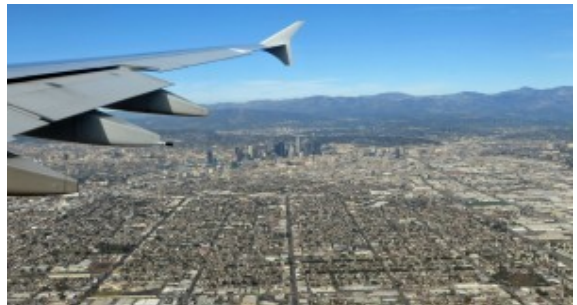
Such a delay had happened to me once before, last winter. But this time the delay was greater, and I missed the connecting flight from Korea to San Francisco. So I flew to Los Angeles. Now that I know what LAX is like, I've decided that LAX it is not my favorite airport.



I also found out that the American border crossings are moving towards computer-supervised systems where passengers can process themselves through customs. However, due to my general incompetence after so many hours of forced sitting, I got diverted to a human, who proved to be pleasant.

How many hours? By the time I got to San Francisco, and was collected by my long-time friend Sharon, and delivered at home, it was 26 hours door to door.

Afterwards, I slept the most I'd slept in one night for a long time. The good news was that so much sleep all at once dropped me into Pacific Standard Time almost immediately.



===== Point Reyes =====

For the first time in at least five years, I got to visit Point Reyes again, one of my favorite places on earth. My friend Arlene took me this time. We visited all the old haunts that carry so much meaning in my memory. But before we got there, we also visited a Gloria Jeans coffee

shop.



The Mall-ified Gloria Jeans

As I previously wrote, Gloria Jeans took over the old restaurant on the Tianjin University campus where the foreign experts used to stay. It's an international Chain that began in Chicago, but is now mainly centered in Australia, where they've opened more than 400 shops. There's also a Gloria Jeans

in San Rafael, in a mall. It lacks the burgers and Chinese food of the Tianjin version, but still serves the same white hot chocolates.

Beware the Seal

We visited the Visitor Center at Point Reyes, and discovered that the 3D map of the park by the door had been replaced by a stuffed elephant seal. Sharks and Orcas now swam through the air under the high ceiling. Otherwise, it remained the same, and it still maintains one of the best book stores of any visitor center that I know. And yes, I bought a book. And yes, I also snagged one of the old style baseball caps, which they appear to be phasing out.



===== Kule Loklo =====

We visited Kule Loklo, the re-created Indian village, where I remembered Lanny Pinola, the kind and gentle Miwok soul whose forebears had dwelt there for thousands of years. He always used to laugh and joke about the difference between his traditional diet of acorn mush and the McDonald's down the road (actually, though, I've never seen a McDonald's out in West Marin County).



Traditional homes at Kule Loklo

The old people, he said, had always lived to be ninety, a hundred, or much more. But not now. Not when they're cut off from their traditional diet. "I'll never see a hundred," he'd joke. "I love McDonald's too much. Hey, about

about that for an advertisement — 'Eat McDonald's! Kill you before your time!'"

He was right. He died about ten years ago, and nowhere near ninety. But Kule Loklo still survives him, even though, as he often said, no Indian would ever actually build a village there, not at the top of a hill where there's no water.

===== The Educational Center =====



Clem Miller Environmental Education Center – Panorama

Naturally, we visited the Educational Center, or at least viewed it from a distance so as not to disturb anybody who was staying there. To me, it represented twenty-one pilgrimages over the years, leading groups of either forty or eighty. My long-time camper colleague Kay is also now gone, having passed away too young about five years ago.

The field where we had conducted studies now was thoroughly shorn into a lawn. Yes, that field has a lot of interesting history with my groups over the years. Perhaps they'll let all that vegetation spring up again in the springtime. In the meantime, the dry poison hemlock sticks had been cut down so they couldn't injure some kid.

Other than that, we didn't explore any further, since the facility was in use at the time. I did wonder if the daffodils would rise again by the sign at the turnoff. They were left over from when the site was a private farm. The daffodils had been planted around the farm house. There's no trace of the farm house, but the daffodils still bloom there.

===== Limantour Beach =====

Limantour Reflections

We also strolled onto Limantour Beach, again, remembering classes past. If you don't know Northern California, you may be surprised at how few people were present to enjoy the beach that day. Only one person was actually swimming. Our real California is not like the more famous faux California found in the southland, like by Santa Monica. No,

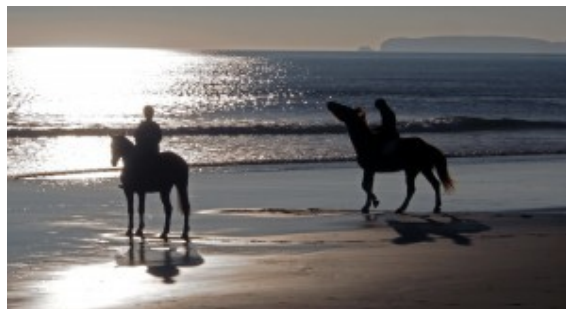
our beaches are made for strolling and reflection, not for showing off trim figures in skimpy costumes. And if you want to surf, you better dress warmly.



Equus at the beach

That's the beach where Sebastián Cermeño lost his fully-loaded and not-so-securely-anchored Manila Galleon to lashing rain and high winds in 1595. For centuries, pieces of the lost treasure, including Chinese porcelain, washed up on the beach.

It's also where, exactly four hundred years after Cermeño's loss, a small group of students huddled around a teacher in lashing rain and high winds, not just listening to the story, but experiencing it. Yes, it had been a teachable moment.



===== Point Reyes Station =====

The deceptively simple life at Point Reyes

We briefly toured Point Reyes Station, the closest thing to a town in the region, and picked up some sandwiches at the same deli where my friends Bill and Marilyn and I had gotten sandwiches many years ago.



The town looks like a simple country settlement, except that you'd better have a lot of dollars if you want to buy one of those simple homes, not that they come up for sale very often. I have to say, though, it's a wonderful place to live, to breathe the fresh air, and listen to the quiet and the twittering of actual birds. If I had the money, I'd probably retire

there.

In addition to these places, we took both the Lucas Valley and Fairfax routes between Point Reyes and San Rafael. It was a day for nostalgia, as I realize even more strongly as I sit typing this in Arizona. The only

thing missing was Gus Wright and his patched-together Volvo. Well, that's a long story for another time.

===== White Tank Mountains =====

Cholla reaching out from the ground

I'm actually in Phoenix visiting my dad. I've already typed more than I'd planned, but I really should include some desert pictures before I sign off. The beach isn't the only place where you can find sand, after all.



What you do find in the desert are a lot creatures prepared for self-defense and water conservation. Most of the plants are covered in barbs and spears. If you ever fall into cholla, you'll be pulling them from your skin for quite a while.



Curve-billed thrasher with stick.

The White Tanks are named for some rocky pools located high up on the slopes, the most important geographic features in such a dry region. That said, it's rained almost every day since I've been here, though seldom harder than what they'd call a "soft day" in Ireland. Temperatures are typical for winter – around 20 degrees Celsius. It's incredibly pleasant compared to

winter in Tianjin.

We drove up to the White Tanks nature park a few days ago, before the rains started. I got lots of great pictures, and then we visited the park visitor center.

White Tank cacti

The last time I'd been in the visitor center it was an old house-trailer, cramped to navigate and full of animal and plant specimens.

These days the visitor center occupies a spacious showroom in a



large public library, newly-built right outside the park entrance. It's quite professional. Not only do they still have several cages of snakes and a gila monster, they've got some living black-widow spiders in their typical tunnel-shaped nests and some bark scorpions with a handy ultra-violet flashlight for making them glow. Cool.

Well, I've written more than enough. I'll attach a few more desert pictures to the end. I hope the nostalgia wasn't too thick!!



Big Skies in the White Tanks



Gambel's Quail



Bird Nests



A Forest of Saguaro Cacti

Castro Valley, Friday, February 27, 2015

===== The Land of Clear Air =====



It's been a month since my last communication. I'd rather not go longer. Besides, my friends outside of the Western Hemisphere might enjoy more views of the Eastern Pacific – the Coast of Paradise – America's Pacific Northwest and West.

===== The Berkeley Hills =====



UC Berkeley Campus Fire Trails

Honestly, it's hard to imagine a more pleasant place to live than the west coast of North America. This path wends its way through the campus hills of the University of California at Berkeley. Berkeley's campus is huge because it extends up into this range of tall hills. Most of the property is maintained in a natural state, though patches of it have been developed into sophisticated physics labs.

For years, a group of friends from church assembled every Friday to tackle those steep trails, such as the one in the photo above. They are actually dirt roads built for emergency fire vehicles. This month witnessed my first foray through them in a few years. I could not have walked it last summer, so I felt celebratory to be able to handle them



now.

Even at the beginning of February, flowers were beginning to emerge along the trail. Some rose up from the trail edges like these.



Others showered down from the overarching trees, like these. They're California Bay Laurel, called Myrtlewood in Oregon. They're related to the Mediterranean Bay Laurel, whose leaves feature prominently in Italian cooking. They're more distantly related to cinnamon and avocado.

These common trees grow quite tall and enjoy the company of oaks. They branch almost as wildly as the oaks themselves. Most importantly, though, their leaves possess their Mediterranean relative's aromatic qualities, but with even greater pungency.

Ane captures their imaginations. They always remind me of Ane Rovetta, the multi-talented artist, storyteller, and ethno-botanist. She also led nature walks with kids. Here she stands in a half crouch, confronting my elementary school class with stories from the old days. The photo was taken at the campfire stage at Point Reyes. It was 1988. Yeah, those kids are nowadays deep into middle age.



Anyway, back when Ane was a budding naturalist, she had wanted her audience to appreciate the power of the Laurel's scent. She folded a leaf several times, breaking it along the resulting creases. "Just do this," she shouted, as she cupped her hands around her nose, sealing her face, and pushing the leaves onto it. She took in a very deep breath, entirely through her nose.

The next thing she knew, she was staring up from the ground. And the sky was full of worried faces. The powerful leaf aroma had literally knocked her out. At that point, she advised her audience to maybe not smell it quite the same way.

Despite her propensity to take life to the edge, she's still out there, still painting. I see her every few years, when she holds an open studio sale.

And in fact, one of her paintings, with pigments hand-manufactured from the natural materials which she gathers herself, graces my living room. Its organic colors are not likely to fade. Here she is, a year and a half ago, flanked by her two sisters and several examples of her paintings.



===== Lake Chabot =====

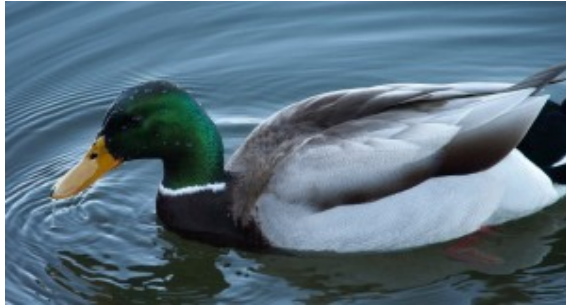
I've often written about another collection of bays and oaks, closer to hand of my home in Castro Valley, at Lake Chabot. Lake Chabot Park is simply amazing. I think of painter Carl Larsson in Sweden. Once he reached that country home in Dalarna, he never left. His entire career was based on paintings of that home.



Similarly, I think a photographer could base a lifetime's career on Lake Chabot. The continually transforming interplay of light on that oak-bay woodland, frosted with eucalyptus, constantly turns up new possibilities. Moreover, even when the park is overpopulated on the weekends, it never loses that quiet serenity. It's a miracle that such a place exists in the midst of a major metropolitan area.

What struck me most this time was the variety of birds. Okay, from

memory, here are a couple dozen birds that I've spotted at Lake Chabot, listed in compact, easy-to-skip-over form:



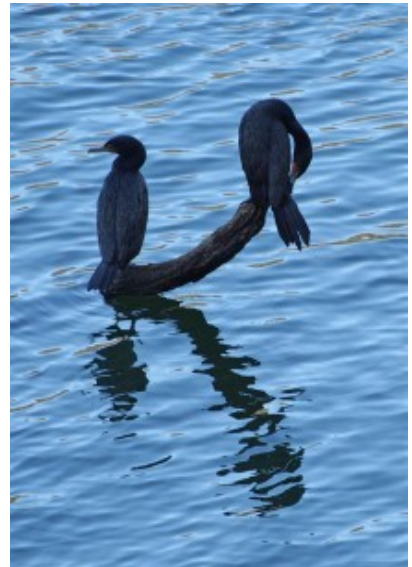
Mallard, Canada and hybrid geese, brown pelican, double-crested cormorant, robin, Stellar's jay, scrub jay, Caspian tern, several kinds of gulls, Anna's hummingbird, California towhee, varied thrush, Oregon junco, yellow-crowned sparrow, golden-crowned sparrow, Western

bluebird, turkey, turkey vulture, ruby-crowned kinglet, brown creeper, American coot, great blue heron, great egret.

And in addition to all of those, other kinds of ducks appear on Lake Chabot, and some of the woods bristle with tiny warblers that flit about too quickly to ever identify clearly. And I've still never spotted the nesting pair of bald eagles.

It's not just the quantity of birds, but how photogenic they are.

Lake Chabot, like all the lakes in California, is low on water this year, though not as low as some, since it's maintained as an emergency water supply.



And yet, rain did fall in

California this winter. And here are two bluebirds, hunched down to keep warm, staring defiantly into the windy drops. Look close and you can make out the drops themselves.

Here's a picture that shows what light can do at Lake Chabot. It's some anonymous boatster captured by my long lens, rowing off into a psychedelic sea of electric gold. Click on it for the larger version to catch more details in the abstract patterns – they're really beautiful.



===== Portland, Oregon =====

The rain followed me to Portland. My mother, sister and I immediately embarked on our seasonal pilgrimage to the Pendleton Outlet store in Washougal, Washington. This small pier is part of a park on the Columbia River next to the store. The locals walk their children, their dogs, their bicycles, and themselves around on it.



To honor this Californian's visit, all precipitation ceased. On the right, the clouds summon fallen rainwater from the ground back into the atmosphere. Massive mounds of moisture float overhead like flying fleece. The pier, too, seems to be floating above the fleece. The locals, sitting on the benches, must feel that they are soaring. In the end, the clouds departed, leaving nothing but crystal-clear Northwest Air™.



For the rest of my stay in Portland, the air remained clear and sunny, like in this picture. The Mountain is Mount Hood, an old volcano, one of many in the area. The falls are Willamette Falls in the Willamette River. This valley marks the end of the famous Oregon Trail, which brought so many settlers from the eastern United States, which displaced, of course, many of the

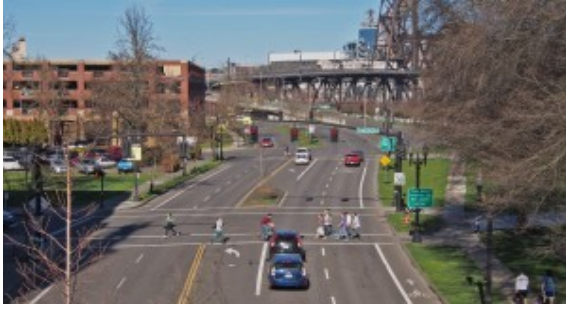
people who had been living there for the previous millennia.

Another local volcano, Mount Saint Helens, used to have a sharp peak at the top like the others, but then it rather spectacularly blew it all off in 1980, flattening an entire region of forest, and spouting ash all over Portland (and other places). Those were dangerous days! Above is a view of Mt. St. Helens from "Rocky Butte," a tall promontory in Northeast Portland not far from my family's homes.

Here's a patch of Northeast Portland, seen from Rocky Butte. Many years ago, a Dutch friend of mine came to visit Portland. He never could get over the sight of so many trees growing all over everywhere. This shot compacts them quite a bit, but it's true. This is a view of the city, not the countryside. If not for the trees, you'd see only houses.



Trees are so sacred to Portlanders that the city recently made it illegal to trim them without the guidance of a professional arborist.



Downtown Portland's waterfront, along the Willamette River, is a long, stringy, park. At lunch time, it fills to the brim with walkers, joggers, and cyclists.

This part of the waterfront is dedicated to Japanese-Americans. It's located not far from the old "Japantown," which no longer

exists. Various monuments call to memory the way Japanese Americans were mistreated during World War II. It's good to keep such self-critical monuments in the public eye, even if most people are jogging by too fast to read them.

I recall a string of self-critical monuments along the waterfront in Bonn, Germany, bringing to mind the World War II excesses in that country. I've never seen any self-critical memorials in China, but perhaps I just haven't looked hard enough yet.



There is a Chinatown in Portland.

But unlike its sisters in Oakland and San Francisco, there's not much to write home about. For one thing, there are hardly any trees. For another, there's no block jammed with Chinese grocery stores. Still, it does have an impressive gate. I suspect, though, that not many of the city's many Chinese-American citizens live there.

And then there's Powell's City of Books. They spent a year remodeling the main entrance on the corner of Burnside and NW Tenth Avenue. Powell's is one of the truly great booksellers, its main store one of the largest anywhere. It was the first book shop (that I know of) which, decades ago, installed a coffee shop for the convenience of browsers.



Now the entire front room is encased in wrap-around windows. The effect is to draw the outer environment into the store, along with lots of customers. Any book lover who visits Portland owes it to themselves to visit Powell's.

As for me, I spent a lot of time visiting my family, and sleeping.

For some reason, I really slept well up there. And I even got home-

cooked meals from my mother. It was a thousand-kilometer drive from California each way, but it was worth it.

And I even stopped in Rice Hill, Oregon, each way for some scoops of that classic Umpqua ice cream.

===== The Way Back =====

In three days, I'll be wending my way back to the CCP, the Chinese capitalist paradise. No one has thought to inform me of my teaching schedule, but that's pretty normal. I suspect that I'll start teaching again sometime around the eighth or ninth of March. We'll just have to wait and see. Usually I nag them until somebody tells me. This semester, I got tired of that. I wonder if they'll let me know before or after my first class takes place?



An Oregon rest area for long-distance drivers. Free of charge, of course.

It's good that I'm going back. As usual, I gained lots of weight while in America. It's much easier to eat more moderately in China. Hopefully that's what's going to happen this time. I'm also hoping to be doing a lot more walking (on

days when the pollution is not severe).

As always, I welcome any communication. Somebody asked me the other day what the hardest part of living in China is. I had to answer that it's the fact that so little communication takes place there.

One of my Chinese colleagues recently asked me to compare the students' English to the state of English in general in China. I had to answer that, except for my own students and a couple Chinese wives married to Americans, almost no Chinese person ever speaks English to me (or for that matter, communicates at all), including most of the English teachers, so how can I judge?

Anyway, I'll close with one more beautiful scene from our lovely Pacific Northwest, taken through the windshield on my drive south from Portland. In the background, that's Mt. McLoughlin, another old volcano.

In the foreground is the Rogue River Valley near Central Point. What's not so obvious is that crystal-clear air, through which you can see not just for miles, but for dozens of miles.



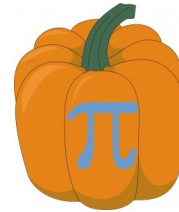
Tianjin, Saturday, March 14, 2015

My journal from China continues . . .



===== Happy Pi Day! =====

Well, 3/14 has rolled around again, so here's a shout-out to *pseudo*-Uncle John B. and *pseudo*-Nephew John C. and to all irrational math nerds everywhere. Happy Pi Day. May it be transcendental. My own favorite pi is a pumpkin.



===== Movie Night =====

Here in Tianjin, at the weekly movie night, we celebrated Pi Day by viewing the recent academy-award-winning bio of Stephen Hawking, *The Theory of Everything*. Unfortunately, this week's movie night took place, not on Pi Day itself, but on Friday the 13th.

Here we are at a movie night in January of this year. (Photo by You Sihang)



The video card in the office computer failed right off the bat. Without a video card, there's no video. But luckily, I had brought my laptop along that night. We began the film, but the laptop chose to update itself and shut down about a half-hour into it. Eventually, we limped through the rest of the movie. Luckily, there won't be another Friday the 13th until November.

Despite the hiccups in the process, the discussion after the movie was lively. And that's the reason I like to hold movie nights in the first place. I don't come to foreign countries just to look at pretty scenery. I come to find out how people think.

Normally, I just can't sit for two hours to see an entire movie (or anything else that takes two hours) these days. But it's worth the trouble for a good discussion. The only other place I'm likely to watch an entire movie all at once is on an airplane, strapped into a seat.

Indeed, I had just seen *The Theory of Everything* on the flight over here. Actually, I had watched several movies for the first time on that flight. It was 12 hours from San Francisco to Korea, and Korean Airlines has one of the better-stocked libraries, which passengers can view at any time on a screen attached to the seat-back in front of them. I was so impressed that I wrote down the entire list of movies, and will attach it as an appendix to the end of this message. Am I a fan of Korean Air? You bet.

At any rate, I also watched *Birdman*, *Interstellar*, *Paddington*, and *Charade* (1963), as well as some documentaries. It was a quintuple-feature with short subjects! *Birdman* was the most interesting of them, but I'm unlikely to show it for movie night. Not all its subject matter is appropriate, and I don't think the students here would quite know what to make of it, anyway. And if the students aren't dead sure of their own opinion, they're not likely to say anything in a discussion.

===== Students in Public =====



Indeed, Chinese students are unused to expressing anything like a personal opinion in public. A maximum of 15 people can fit into our office to watch the movie, which is a good thing, since the larger the group, the less expressive the students become. Even so, I am lucky that some friends from America and Australia

also attend, who model for the students what it's like to simply say what you think in a public setting. And they, too, always have interesting opinions.

But for the students, expressing oneself in public always seems to be like being put "on the spot." They know that their peers will judge (or "evaluate") everything they say at such times. And in fact, they usually care more about what the other students think than what the teacher thinks, at least in my case.

Well, it's common enough for young people to favor their peer's opinions over a teacher's. But here in China, you also have to factor in the extreme competitiveness that they bring to any endeavor. In the West, public expressions may simply be judged as "cool" or "lame," "awesome" or "weird," "sick" or "sick," etc. Here, expressions are also judged on quality. It's almost like everyone is asking "Who said it best?" and sometimes "Why does he think he's so smart?" Thus they hesitate

to speak.

===== Student non-relations =====

And in fact, this overall competitiveness tends to drive out the easy collegiality that I generally associate with the student life. It's one reason that I ask my students to discuss topics of interest to themselves in small groups during class time. They find out that they like swapping opinions with peers to whom they would normally never speak, and that such strangers can be trusted not to hurt them.

At first, it seemed odd to me that students might only widen their circle of acquaintances if they were required to in an English class. But now, it seems normal.

In general, a student's circle of acquaintances is small, and often limited to people who live in the very same dorm room, or work in the very same lab.



In fact, here's a related tidbit connected to our University's upcoming move to the remote countryside, to somewhere north of Timbuktu: The staff may be upset over the isolation and distance of the location, but some undergraduates, I have heard, are upset because instead of six students per dorm room, there will be only four, and thus they'll know fewer friends.

===== Topics of Interest =====

And what kinds of topics do my students choose to discuss? Well, the students just finished planning their topics for this semester, so let's take a look at one class section:

The ideal city for settling down.

Air quality in Tianjin

Protecting the environment

Movies that impressed you.

China's achievements in economic development

The stupid things we did as kids

Stress relief through shopping.

Inconvenience of banning foreign web sites

Keeping in good health

*Tianjin-Beijing soccer rivalry
The story "ordinary world" is encouraging
Cooking something new
How Tianjin's development affects us
Faye Wong's movies and songs
Rural life is more comfortable than urban life
The most impressive travel destinations
Our feelings and lessons learned from them.
Pretty girls on campus.
Working out in the gym
Keeping pets
Differences in East and West.
The singers we like in "I am a singer."
Delicious food available on campus.*

It's really a nice a variety. And they actually don't seem much different than a list drawn up by young people in most places in the world.

===== Last-minute reconfigurations =====

It's also obvious that this class section isn't very large. Indeed. There were three of us foreigners teaching English last semester, and four this semester. Between semesters, somebody forgot to fill the fourth teacher's classes. He only had one or two students per section. So on the day before classes began, the rest of us lost students to his classes.

Amazingly, word got out quickly, and, at least for my four sections, every student showed up on the first day of class, with no transferees hanging around. Such quick reconfiguration might not have happened so smoothly back home, but here, where everything is always subject to change at the last minute, such reconfigurations are simply taken in stride. Still, I was impressed.



And I'm also more than happy to have fewer students. It means I can collect writing papers, check them off in my gradebook and write comments on them while the students are otherwise occupied. And the students get them back ten minutes later! Such a deal.

===== The Lantern Festival =====

Fifteen days after each lunar new year, the lantern festival has been

held in China for more than two millennia. As the centuries passed, it was sometimes celebrated for a single day, sometimes for three days, and at least once, it was even a week.

It's meant as an all-village celebration. Colorful lanterns, usually red, carry riddles for the village children to solve. It's also a great excuse to socialize in the warming weather of early springtime (at least it's warming in South China), before planting begins in earnest. As with practically every Chinese holiday, there are small roundish food objects associated with it. In this case, they are called Yuan Xiao, and consist of sweet dough stuffed with sweet fillings.

In San Francisco, they celebrate the Lantern Festival with a New Year parade that wends its way up Market Street and through Chinatown. Yet I've never seen the celebration here in Tianjin.

===== Cityside Lanterns =====

Well, this year, I arrived back in town on the fourteenth day of New Year's. I rode out into the evening of the fifteenth day on my trusty "Flying Pigeon," the classic bike that put China on wheels.

And I found almost no lanterns. In the entire campus, only two lanterns hung, unlit, over one old building's entranceway. Further afield, I couldn't find much else. Sure, fireworks continually sprang up city-wide, and the constant pervasive drumming of firecrackers sounded like heavy rain on a tin roof overhead, even when there was no roof.

But the only lanterns to be found were hanging over restaurant doorways, and who's to say that they wouldn't have been hanging there, anyway? Finally, a few blocks from campus, I found two lit lanterns, staring out into the city from a fifth floor apartment like giant red eyes (in the photo at right), as if the building itself were searching for companionship on this festive eve.



Well, I was disappointed. But the tenor of most of my Chinese friends went along the lines of "What did I expect? Tianjin is simply not a village!"

The Road to Yangliuqing

Well, one of Tianjin's western suburbs, Yangliuqing, 8 miles from the city

as the crow flies, is a village and it does pull out all the stops for the lantern festival every year. And one of my journalist friends was going out with her family to view it on the third night! And there was an empty seat in the family SUV, a BYD model S6.



BYD, by the way, is a domestic manufacturer that, at least for one year, sold the top-selling sedan in China. It also sells cars to Africa, South America, and the Middle East, but none to America, except for electric buses. Indeed, Chinese cars and buses are moving quickly to hybrids and electrics. The first natural-gas car I ever rode in was a taxi in Xi An a few years ago. In

fact, my most-used bus, Line 678, seems to have been wholly replaced by new hybrid vehicles while I was away from town last month.

===== The Gathering Crowd =====

Well, Chinese people are not scared off by crushes of crowds, and in fact, seem to prefer them to even small groups, let alone solitary wandering. As one can imagine, then, the trip to Yangliuqing was slow, as traffic was heavy. It took about an hour to negotiate the twelve miles to there from our meeting place.



As we drew close, the streets were hung with LED faux-lanterns overhead. As is normal here, we found a spot on the sidewalk to park, and then walked towards the central square, which was closed off to traffic. The streetside was lined with vendors hawking

every sort of trinket and treat, as well as cotton candy and those Yuanxiao sweets. In fact, the flour and the sweet globes themselves seemed to be milled and assembled in some sort of gigantic twirling

pans that looked something like marching bass drums with one drum head missing (photo above).

Yangliuqing town center

The center of town blazed in light, an incredible electrical extravagance, but acceptable for the limited 3-day time slot.

Lanterns hung everywhere, but most especially hung along giant inflatable corridors, through which, like cattle, the people thronged.





This is the year of the ram, so electric rams danced from the buildings.



Traditional giant electric fish-wielding toddlers sat everywhere, as they did every year. The word “fish” (“Yu” in Chinese) is homonym for a host of other words that all add up to good fortune. So it’s like a hope for prosperity written in flesh and blood. Well, gilded fish flesh and blood.



Just down the road, part of the famous Grand Canal passes through the town. This canal, constructed hundreds of years ago, reaches down into central China. In the other direction, it flows east into Tianjin City, and then north to Beijing, though the latter stretch is partially filled in nowadays. At any rate, a giant, permanent, gilded, fish-and-toddler sculpture overlooks the canal at this point.

Near the statue, a candy craftsman was blowing hot liquid candy into the form of animals, the way other craftsmen might blow liquid glass. We bought one of them, though nobody dared to eat it.

And a forest of leafless trees had been wrapped in tiny multi-colored bulbs. To wander through it was magical. And people sought out the trees wrapped in white bulbs to take properly-colored snapshots of family members with their smartphones.





And all along every path were various glowing Chinese characters and character combinations which my hosts pointed out and patiently

explained to me.



==== The standard hot pot ====

Afterwards, we stopped on the way home for a hot pot dinner. The next time I'm in the Bay Area, I've really got to see if there's a hot pot restaurant.

I've written about hot pot before. It's the ideal family or community meal. At a spice bar, you assemble your preferred dipping sauce. Usually it's based on sesame sauce, but a couple dozen ingredients are available. I added lots of cilantro and onions, as well as a little Chili pepper.



Back at the table, a double-pot of boiling water, half spiced and half not, bubbles in the center, surrounded by bowls of whichever raw meat, vegetables, and mushrooms you'd ordered.

You take turns tossing these into the boiling water, and each time, it's like an invitation for everyone to enjoy what you'd offered, once it's cooked. And what's more, it's basically all protein and vegetables.

Few carbs. A healthy, almost paleolithic, diet.

Well, by the time we sat down it was past ten o'clock. And by the time we finished, and got me home it was almost midnight, long past my normal bedtime. What a great celebration, though. I finally experienced a lantern festival in Tianjin.

Appendix: The Korean Air movie list for March, 2015

As promised:

Full Length

Contemporary Hollywood Movies

Interstellar
Imitation Game
Birdman
Foxcatcher
Paddington
The Theory of Everything
The Hunger Games – Mockingjay Part 1
Wild
Beyond the Light
John Wick
Big Hero 6
Gone Girl
Fury
Night Crawler
Whiplash
The Judge
St. Vincent
The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby
Before I go to sleep
Kill the Messenger
A Walk among the Tombstones
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No good, very bad day.
The Book of Life
The Equalizer
The Good Lie
Hector and the Search for Happiness
Joe
Believe
The November Man
This is Where I Leave you.

Classic Hollywood Movies

The More the Merrier – 1943
High Noon – 1952
Charade – 1963
Coming Home – 1978
Hannah and Her Sisters – 1986
Coming Home – 1978
As Good as It Gets 1997
Good Will Hunting 1997
Sideways 2004

Classic Kid's Hollywood Movies

Sleeping Beauty
Pocahontas

Korean

The Divine Move
The Pirate
A Hard Day
The Target

Other Asian

Don't Go Breaking My Heart II
The Legend Ends
The Golden Era
The Whitehaired Witch of the Lunar Kingdom

Television Shows

News

KBS
CNN
BBC

Documentaries

Fabric of the Cosmos
Brain Games
Dolphins
Untamed Americas – part 2
History of Life – Birds
Futurescape – Galactic Pioneers
Mankind – Revolutions
Animal superpowers – hunters
The two-million year old boy.
Cities of tomorrow – vertical farms

Travel and Food

Vancouver BC
Los Angeles
Korean cuisine
Myanmar
Gorges of Karijini
Barble Bar
Western Australia
Bungle-bungle Mountains

Venice
Sri Lanka
Seoul

Kids

Dororo
The Osprey
Scarlett and Isaiah
The Airport Diary

Sports

2013-2014 Soccer Highlights
Golf 2014
Lebron James Interview
Seattle Seahawks
Rad Company

Comedy (several episodes apiece)

Big Bang Theory
Friends
My Family

Drama (several episodes apiece)

Sherlock (BBC) Season 3
House — Office Politics

Drama Festival
Introduce my Father (Korean)
Person of Interest – Season 3 (complete)

Life and Style

Hidcote Manor
Great Artists – Michelangelo
Ancient Art of China
Triumph of the Tomato
Amazing Water Homes
Treasure Hunters

Others

Bolshoi Ballet
ABBA
Red Men
Arthur Miller Bio
Nat King Cole Bio
Kandinsky Bio
Joe DiMaggio Bio
Where are we going, Dad?
Vivien Leigh Bio
Shakespeare Background
Sky Team Exercise Program

Tianjin, Monday, April 6, 2015



===== Easter iin Tianjin =====

It's April. It's 39 degrees (Fahrenheit) and windy for the morning commute. On a bike. Do I put the long underwear back on? Should I have worn my down jacket? Well, at least it's not Massachusetts.

Rows of rentabikes that nobody rents.

As if that weren't annoyance enough, this month my value.net email system changes, though not the email address itself. Still, I'm crossing my fingers that contacts don't get lost. I can at least send out this message on the familiar system before anything . . . happens.



On the other hand, they recently upgraded and sped up my Internet connection here, at no extra cost, so now I can stream video, just like I can in the states. It makes quite a difference when Skyping my dad. Meanwhile I'll have to be careful not to use too many full-sized photos in these messages. It's just too easy to upload them now.

Beneath the fortress, access to
Nankai University.

Well, Happy Easter. And Happy Qing Ming. Yes, the "tomb sweeping" holiday coincided exactly with Easter this year. Please don't ask how many years until it happens again. I've written about Qing Ming before. It's the day when everybody goes out to the cemetery to sweep away accumulated dust and leaves, and make tombs presentable again.



===== What's cooking =====

What's new? Today I traipsed over to our local market for some take-away. I decided to try an outdoor vendor whom I hadn't purchased from in a long time — mainly because of the long lines of students in

front of his stall. But today was a holiday, so customers were relatively few.

And , yes, it's fried rice. Some people really do cook that here. However, the sign announced "Jiangxi style." That's a province way to the south. The man also prepares fried noodles, more common here in the north.

He throws in vegetables of various kinds, eggs, spices, and stir fries it all in a sleek wok. Then he pops in a premeasured dose of cooked rice, mixes thoroughly, and stir-fries it some more.



I have to say, it was delicious and filling. Well, the students always know, don't they? And I also have to say that it really didn't taste much like the American equivalent.

===== Going to the Dogs =====

And there, right next to his stall, sat something I never imagined might turn up in our simple market, never in a million centuries. It was a Sharpei puppy, the first I'd ever seen in China, even though the breed itself is Chinese through and through. Those little guys are rare and expensive. It was like finding an emerald in a jar of pickles. There he sat, cool as a cucumber.

Not a bark. Not a tail wag. But regally alert.

If you haven't seen one of these dogs before, then, yes, that's the normal loose skin. And as an adult, he'll grow into most of it. So, contrary to me, he'll get less wrinkled with age. But both of us will sport wrinkles in the end.

The word "sharpei" seems to mean sand-skin, possibly because the coat has a very rough texture. This one had a nose that matched his coat's sandy color, an even rarer variation.



They had almost been exterminated here during the Cultural Revolution, but a Hong Kong businessman spirited out about two hundred of them, which is why they suddenly became known in America at about that

time. They were only recognized by the American Kennel Club in 1991. They are closely related to another ancient Chinese breed, the Chow, which is more commonly seen.



=== Flower Power ===

Yeah, speaking of the sixties Well, speaking of Tianjin University. Every year at this time, the crabapple festival takes place — not for the crabapples themselves, mind you, but for their flowers.

All weekend, tourists flowed into campus to snap pictures of a long

crabapple row. Some of them toted bulky cameras with seriously massive glass attached. Most of them, however, shot with mobile phones — usually pictures of smiling girls, their lovely faces framed by pink and white blossoms.



And on Saturday, students of all stripes set up booths or presented performances. The monument to the school's founding was surrounded by red-and-blue-roofed tents, like defensive fortifications, with entrances in just three locations. (photo above)

Yes, these little booths were not simply spread out on the square willy-nilly. They were lined up in rows and

strapped in with string, channeling all the onlookers into the same narrow paths.



Occasionally, an onlooker broke out of the maze, vaulting over the strings the same way they pop through iron fences or scramble over brick walls elsewhere on campus.

At first, I thought that maybe this channeling was simply intended to direct traffic flow to the less popular exhibits. But no, it's simply

the mind set here. Of course the booths will have channels! It's not a matter for discussion. It's just like the lantern-bedecked walking corridors that I wrote about last month. It turns the whole thing into some sort of Disneyland ride. Pirates of the Bohai Sea!

Forever blowing bubbles

The main entrance to this little tent community was surmounted by a balloon-bearing arch, making the ride aspect even more festive. The balloons seemed to be birthing soap bubbles, which struggled to descend through the pea-soup atmosphere to reach the ground.



You can spot them in the enlarged version of the picture at right.

The campus street with the crabapple row was blocked to cars, and all along it stood the exhibitions that required more space.



Opera performances took place on the plaza behind the administration building. I remembered those red-clad women from last year, when they wore blue.

The same onlookers who would never tune in an opera on television stood enraptured. It reminded me of outdoor Shakespeare plays that I had attended back in college at Davis.

They had granted me friendly access to the bard. Perhaps it will work out the same way for these young people here and now.

And shades of Dr. Who. It was a red British tardis. Inside, a little camera sat waiting. Those who wished could enter and record themselves. The recordings would be placed in a time capsule, to be unearthed at some future date.



There were too many exhibits to post pictures of them all — the alumni association hawking post cards and other souvenirs, the boards for posting good fortune messages, the DNA centrifuge exhibit, the Chess and Go players club, as well as craftspeople selling various souvenirs, the folk singers and much, much more.

Miscellany

As for me, things have been pretty up and down. I have to say, the education in language acquisition that I've gleaned from this experience in China has been impressive. My understanding has deepened significantly, and my skills have only gotten more effective with time. It only goes to show the advantage of stability. I've been here over six years, and still my lessons are developing. It's kind of like when I taught elementary school and it took six years before I actually felt that knew what I was doing.



I worry sometimes about teachers in America. When are they offered such stability? I quite literally taught the same class for twenty-one years in the same room, now but a razed memory.

Actually, according to the federal government, the annual turnover rate for teachers (15.7%) is one-third higher than the average for

other fields (11.9%). It's well known that almost half of all new teachers are gone after five years. They mostly leave because of a lack of support, and a lack of respect, both tangible and intangible. None of the members of that exodus remained long enough to ever achieve their full potential as teachers.

I think of this because finally I saw [a study that confirms what all working teachers already know](#) – that it takes many, many, years for a teacher to reach full potential. My own feeling is that somewhere around

year six is when it all comes together. And I've now seen it in my own practice here in China, as well as my earlier experience in America.



Indeed, I had planned to quit teaching in America at the end of year five in favor of computer programming. Then, an influx of support during that key year helped me to put the last few key pieces together. And so it was that I never entered what was then an much better paying career, that entailed a lot less stress, programming computers.

One of my students from those days is now a high school teacher himself!! He recently wrote about something similar on his blog.

Yes, even once you do get it all together, support and respect are lacking. Why? My own feeling is that the type of skills that you develop as a teacher are mainly invisible to the observing public, as well as to some school directors (not all, thankfully). And of course there's the political angle, with its constant demonizing of teachers as lazy union members. And even the politicians who do support teachers think that the endless layering of new demands and requirements are what those teachers need in order to make a go of it.



Here in China, the foreign teacher population seems to flow in and out like migrating salmon. Few seem to stay put for very long, particularly if they are English teachers. Teachers are seen as even more interchangeable than they are back home. The Chinese teachers are more stable, particularly at this university,

where salaries are higher and working hours more brief.

Indeed, one year, the entire staff of our department got their required courses done the first semester, and then simply took the whole second semester off. Only myself and my foreign colleague Rob remained to actually teach during those months.



But the Chinese teachers must adhere to the forms handed down from central authorities.

They have little latitude to make changes themselves. I've heard them complain that they are evaluated annually, but very little of it has anything to do with actual teaching skills. Where have I heard that before? You know, it's well known that Chinese culture is imbued with a deep respect for learning and culture. So it came as somewhat of a shock when heard a Chinese teacher complain that nobody respects actual living teachers.

===== Flame Off =====



Sorry for the rant. Usually I can avoid such excesses, but certain problems seem to weigh on my mind, like the climate study that came out last month, the first of probably many that will [link California's continuing drought to global warming](#). Yeah, if Portlanders got tired of immigrants from California before, they better

get ready for another thirsty wave!

Lots of things go through my mind these days. I'd be interested in hearing what's going through yours.

Tianjin, Monday, May 18, 2015



===== Happy Spring and May Days =====

Spring has sprung, and, in typical Tianjin fashion, bounced back back and forth. We went from a week at 40-degree highs (Fahrenheit) to a week of eighty-degree highs to a week of 50-degree highs (with rain). When I began writing this, it was 62, but two days later it was back to the eighties again, where it still is, having reached a humid 90 yesterday. Must be summer arriving.

Fortunately, our concrete massif of a building has not had time enough to absorb the heat, so it's still nice and cool inside.



The Tianjin Water Park

Somewhere in the midst of all that meteorological confusion arrived a perfect day. Actually, it was Monday, Star Wars Day ("May the Fourth be with you.") and the pollution suddenly dropped to reasonable levels. I had taken some out-of-town friends to our local water park and zoo, so we climbed into a tower and snagged the view seen above. As I so often say, Tianjin really is a beautiful place, if only the air were cleaner more often.

===== The Water Park =====



The Floating Walkway

The “water park” by the way, receives that moniker because “water park” translates its Chinese name, 水上公园. So don’t expect to find a water slide. The park simply celebrates water, which flows every which way throughout the city.

After all, the name Tianjin itself means “Heavenly Ford,” indicating that, from ancient times, you couldn’t navigate this region without getting your toes wet.

One cool park feature, which I hadn’t noticed until that day, was a floating walkway that leads strollers through a particularly marshy and reed-infested natural part of the central lake. Amongst the reeds I found one of the biggest, fattest, wartiest toads I’ve ever seen.

Indeed, the park is a great place to spot wildlife of all kinds, particularly birds.

Wide Squares at the water park

When I first started living here, six years ago, the park was not nearly so nice. Everything inside seemed cheap and dusty. A couple years later, they had scrubbed and upgraded all the facilities, lowered the fence, and let the rest of the city just flow in – admission cost free. Indeed, there’s a crowd of old guys that, contrary to all the remaining rules, invades the place every morning for a bracing morning dip in the lake.



Most invasions, though, take place on the weekends, when the long corridors and wide squares attract groups of musicians, dancers, chess players, and Tai Chi practitioners.

===== The Zoo =====

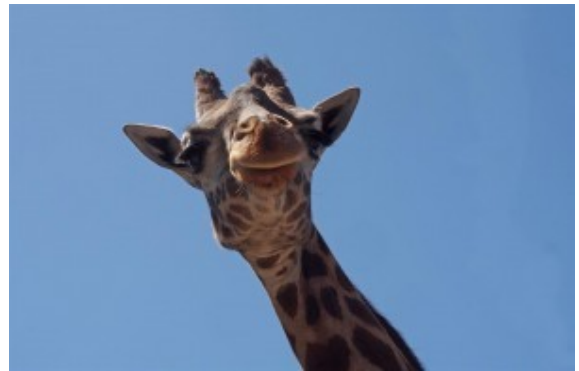
A rhino horn, available for petting (though nobody did).

The zoo adjoins the water park. And I wish that they could get whomever manages the water park to manage it, too. When so much of the city has made so much progress, the zoo seems stuck back in the old days, a couple decades ago. It's still an okay place to see animals, but badly in need of an upgrade.

The cages resemble those seen in the west generations ago. What's amazing to me is that if you want to reach over to touch, or feed, the giraffes and rhinos, you can. And the same is true for many of the other animals. Of course, in some ways, it's cool to be able to come so close. Where else could I get such a lovely giraffe portrait, taken from directly under the creature's head?

Giraffe Portrait

In addition to being bad for the animals, it looks to me like lawsuit\$ waiting to happen. Of course, legal niceties don't work quite the same way here, so nobody's really concerned about that. On the other hand, there is the vibrant social media, where complaints can mushroom overnight.



And the zoo definitely has potential, if someone were only willing to invest some serious cash into it. I saw many workers that day working steadily to keep things neat and presentable, but when the facilities are crumbling and outmoded, there's only so much that they can do.



Dinosaurs by the lake

And the zoo has its own lake, with boats for hire, just like in the water park. And thank goodness they chose to keep their dinosaurs isolated on a little island in the middle. If only Jurassic Park could have done the same!

But on the other hand, even the pandas that I remember from my previous zoo visit, eight years ago, were missing. Taking their place was a twin pair of Malayan Sun Bears.

===== Food Highlight of the Month =====

Later, the same zoo-visiting friends all gathered at our nearby “Crazy Chen’s” restaurant. The name makes it sound like a chain which might advertise on late night TV, but actually it’s not a chain. It’s one of the best restaurants in our neighborhood.

Crazy Chen’s Chinese Delights.

I don’t really remember what this dish was called, but it was glorious.



The middle of the plate is piled with lamb, chopped and fried, with onions, various red and green peppers and cilantro.

Using chopsticks, you stuff it into the little pockets, along with the pre-stuffed lettuce.

I don’t know how traditional this dish may be – certainly everything else on the menu was traditional — but again, it demonstrates one of the many Chinese delights that Americans will never enjoy at their local Panda Express.

===== Tianjin University =====



“Yeah, I really did wear that.”

I like to include the pictures that I present twice a week as the first slide in each lesson’s PowerPoint presentation.

First up, from about a month ago, a young romantic couple cements their relationship with a picture on campus, snapped by a tree-

climbing photographer. It was early spring, and love was in the air. I can just imagine, 20 years from now, the couple’s adolescent kid saying “Dad, did you really wear things like that back then?” or maybe “What were you thinking???”

Communist-era architecture.

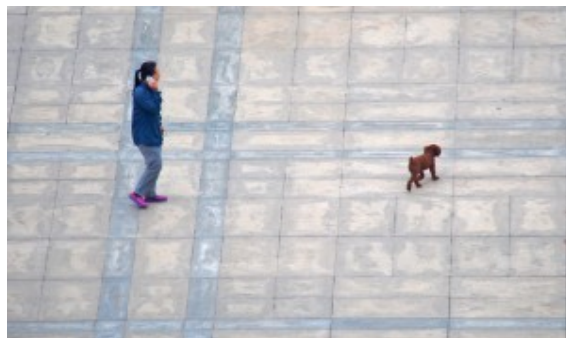
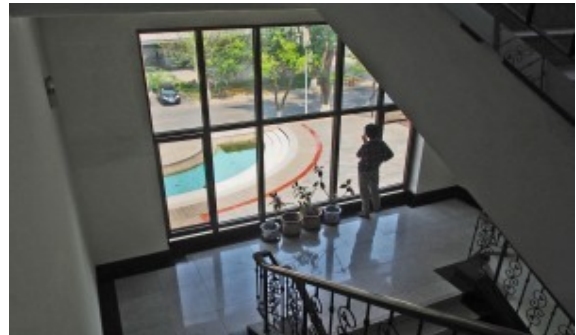
Next up, the back window of the administration building. I had visited there that day to sign up for one more year teaching English.

It was a hard decision, actually. I've had various little health issues for the last couple years, and health care here is not as convenient as it is in America (fortunately for me when I'm in America). Yeah, I sure do thank my lucky stars to have had a good union job during my working years. My health care costs now are so much cheaper than most of my non-teaching friends.

Anyway, various health concerns have continued this semester as well, which I'll have checked out next month when I return.

However! Today, I walked the entire traditional 2.85-mile path around the main campus that my friend Jeanne and I have trodden so many times. And for the first time in a very long time, I never had to stop because of sudden foot pains. Physical therapists, and simple exercises, really have worked miracles for my feet.

This administration building was built back in the early 1950's, back when true-believers made sure that everything was quality work. It even hosted Mao ZeDong once. They should put up a sign — "Mao spoke here."



Walking up the wall

Next up – a view of Beiyang Square, the heart of the campus. The angle makes it look like a slope, but actually it's flat. Most of the square is a light-colored textured stone that offers sure-footing. However, the fashionable grey stripes are a polished stone which, when wet, slides slicker

than a day-old banana peel.

How kind of the architect to encourage pedestrians to attend to where they place their feet!

The first fountain of the season.

Here's a more conventional shot of the square, taken from the same steps on the administration building where Mao once



addressed a crowd. The fountain had been turned on for the first time since last fall. Rows of newly-planted annuals added color. When their blossoms fade later in the summer, they'll be dug out and replaced by rows of other annuals.

The campus shuttle stopped just long enough for the shot. I've never ridden it, but perhaps I should, just for the experience. I think it costs the equivalent of about twenty-five cents.



I (heart) Tianjin University

Finally, when I stepped into the gazebo on the lake, I noticed that someone seemed to have dripped something rather durable into a heart shape on the stone floor. Epoxy?

It seemed very sentimental, with the blocky School of Architecture

and the setting sun in the background.

===== The Big Move =====

A metal press in the lab

One of my former students gave me a tour of the mechanical engineering facility, a multistory building full of cool toys (professional equipment). It even has a little track for robot races! It even has 3D printers!

When most of the campus moves out to the boondocks, these machines will remain, and provide the school with a tidy income. They'll be rented out to other schools in the area who will flock to this campus for short-term seminars.

Yeah, the move. It amounts to the biggest change for the university in over sixty years. This summer, most of the campus should move out to an old warehouse district a hour from here by car. Or will it? Not all the buildings are finished yet, and of those which are finished, not all have been inspected and certified by the city.



And Chinese construction companies are notorious for getting their products just up to an acceptable level, but no further. Indeed, one of

the likely post-move challenges will be that of knocking the kinks out of the facilities. As an example, our present shared office never had workable heat for the first five years of its existence. It made for some pretty cold office hours in Decembers.

The administration building and a tight corner.



This “just enough” quality extends to other areas as well. For example, one of my colleagues is an Australian who teaches business English. She was assigned an apartment in the building next to ours, a building mostly inhabited by Chinese scholars and some grad students. Had it been thoroughly cleaned after the previous resident had vacated? Why should it be? Perhaps the next person to move in wouldn’t care so much about that. Then all that effort would have been wasted.

The original opening date for the new campus was September 2013, and the present opening date is September 2015. But will it actually open this fall? Who knows?

How can people plan in such a situation? And of course, the answer to that question is simple – most people simply don’t make plans, not for this or most other areas of their lives. As my friend Lonnie says, modern Chinese society is reactive, not proactive.

This reactivate quality may seem odd to Westerners, but actually it’s quite rational. It simply follows from the authoritarian nature of society here. The people on top will take charge to an extent only found within the military in the West. Indeed, I remember one of my first jobs – a night watchman at Amfac Corporation’s data center in Brisbane, California. While sitting at a receptionist’s desk one evening I found a booklet outlining the company policies, not only for how to dress and act at work, but also how to dress and act at all other times.

All authority in China has that quality. For example, the above mentioned Australian colleague, like many teachers (but not me) was assigned a student assistant. In addition to helping print worksheets and mark tests, the assistant could also clean up the above-mentioned messy apartment, as well as run errands and tackle other domestic chores. My colleague, shocked at this, has never asked the assistant to

scrub anything.

I remember my ethnic studies courses, eons ago in college. We discussed Asian decision making. The point was that Asians planned through consensus. Everybody gets together and talks out an issue until agreement is reached. It all sounded so wonderfully inclusive.

Well, I don't know about the rest of Asia, but what I've found here is something slightly different. Yes, everybody does get together to air all views. But then, at some point, whoever actually has authority will make a decision, and everyone else throws out their differences and falls into line. Instant consensus.

And do people really throw out their differences? Well, with this impending exodus of uncertain date, stress levels are up and morale is down, but it's usually not aired in public. It's hidden behind pleasant faces. People say "Nothing to worry about" when they mean "There's nothing that anybody can do to affect it, anyway."

The other day, my Australian colleague's supervisor came to ask her to postpone classes for a few weeks, because the students were doing final projects. This request, by the way, was by no means arbitrary. Students in that department generally are scheduled to be working/studying about seventy hours per week on ordinary weeks. They really did need a break from classes at this point and it was very kind of the authorities to recognize this. My colleague readily agreed, but found out later that the postponement had already been announced and confirmed to the students before she was even asked about it. Yes, that's what consensus is here.

===== Summing Up =====

Well, such is life. I hope everything is well with you. Drop me a line if you get a chance. It seems I'm not writing as frequently as before, though. I hope that I can see many of you this summer in America. Last time, there wasn't enough time to see as many as I would have liked.

Tianjin, California, Thursday, July 2, 2015



===== June Tunes =====

I haven't much felt like writing anything lately. It's a combination of too much going on in my life, and too much of the same old craziness wearing down on me. Still, some events have been interesting. I'm not actually in China at the moment.

For that matter, I also let June slip away from me. But I can write as if I were and I hadn't. Hence the title of this note.

The Big Move



A metal press in the lab

This picture appeared in my previous note. But it turns out to have even more relevance than ever to Tianjin University's big move exile to the distant lands of old warehouses and weeds.

Almost no one I know has actually been out to see the new site,

mainly because it's not easy to travel out there. And yet, we're already headlong into the process of moving. Yeah, moving like lemmings, in joyous ignorance of what we'll find. But that's okay. The move's planners don't know much more, either.



One of my colleague's students toured the new site. He told her later that "the place has no soul." Another colleague's student visited there and exclaimed happily that, unlike most pieces of property in China, the campus had no enclosing wall. I guess she hadn't noticed the moat?

A lazy weekend afternoon at the

Tianjin University Village 6 square.

Yeah, thousands of people will occupy the new site come fall. 99% of them don't want to move. But there's nothing to be done about stopping it. The old site's real estate is too valuable to waste on students. The

land along the main street has already been sold, and the buyers can't wait to tear down the old dorms and build their new business park. And, to be fair to their evident impatience, I did once see a flyer about the new campus that set a date of 2013 for the opening. So it's two years behind schedule already.

Local coffee and pizza shops, some owned by students.

As for me for next year, I will most likely teach one day a week in the new campus, and one day a week in the old campus, for the students who remain. Of course, nobody can say for sure, as we're all lemmings in this process. Hey, there are still two months to go. Plenty of time to sort things out.



How is it, though, that some students will remain in the old campus, despite its value as real estate? Couldn't a business make more money from the site than a simple school? Well, this point brings me to my new understandings of business's position in Chinese universities.

Academic departments engage in a friendly competition.



I've mentioned before that an architecture business is attached to our University. Its CEO sits at the same meeting table as all the heads of academic departments. The architecture business, as well as the associated academic architecture department, are not moving to the new campus.

After all, clients seeking a design consultation like to meet with the staff in town, not in some far-flung gulag. And the staff includes the students in the academic department. One of my former students, in fact, recently designed a railroad station for the business. So the academic department can't move out to the new campus, either.

As for my own department, Culture and Law, it's moving. This was a bit of a surprise to me, since our department includes the hallowed school of Marxism. But maybe it just goes to show the real position of Marxism in modern society.

Tai Chi enthusiasts practice on campus

Recently one of my English students had missed quite a few classes. He had never contacted me (as students generally would) about the reasons for his absences. So I asked his buddy in the class to talk to him. If he wasn't going to return to class, he should inform me so that I could sign him up for English the following semester. Well, after that he came to class.



He also came to office hours to get caught up on what he had missed. And while he was there, I asked him where he'd been.

Every kid's favorite fountain on a hot day.



He was spending most of the week, every week, in Tanggu, the port town located about an hour's journey southeast of here by light rail. That explained his difficulties in attending class. And while there, he was operating what he called a "distillation column," which turns crude oil into petroleum, which can later be further refined into various

petrochemical products.

The view from my classroom on a fabulous day.

I tried to imagine what sort of study he could be doing that concerns such an established technology. He assured me that he was doing no study there at all. So why was he out there? Because it was part of a business, loosely associated with Tianjin University through his academic adviser.



And was he paid to do this work? Of course not. He's a student. He simply does what's asked of him. Actually he seemed to relish the idea of telling his adviser that some maniac English teacher (me) was so insistent that he attend class that who knows what might happen otherwise. And after that, the student regularly attended class. And he arrived on time.

So, yeah, business is a much more integral part of the university in China than it is in America. And if part of the old campus will be developed into a business park, well, that's simply a small extension to what's already going on there anyway.

===== The Move Begins =====



A hoopoe, feasting on worms.

The big move formally began on May 18th. With great pomp and ceremony, various officials ushered a phalanx, not of staff, but of machines, out to the new campus. Maybe they figured that machines can't complain or cry, so nothing would spoil the bright dawn of the new campus's development.

These were not ordinary machines of course, but huge museum pieces that had occupied part of the mechanical engineering lab for at least sixty years. And I realized that I must have seen some of these machines during my recent tour of that building, a few weeks earlier. And I wondered if one of them might even have been the machine in the picture at the beginning of this note. It's certainly big enough, grand enough.

Traditional musicians entertain the crowd in the student activities center.

Well, the machines didn't cry or complain. However, when they reached their ultimate dispensation, it was discovered that neither the floor nor the foundation of the new building was strong enough to support them! I don't know exactly how this failure was discovered, nor how anybody could have let it happen, since no one has exactly been open about the situation. I only know that a mad scramble to install a new foundation and floor ensued.



And I suspect that the Move's beginning will prove emblematic of the entire process. It's not likely to go smoothly, nor are the new facilities likely to be fully ready. But until it happens, we're standing between the bear of business and its cub of profit. It could be a stressful, though

highly exciting, position. I wonder sometimes, though, if maybe I'm getting a little old for such excitement. We'll see about that in September.

The Bridge Park

Well, this whole idea of businesses as part of a university goes against my cultural grain, but that's just an example of how cultures differ, and not something for me to sit in judgment of. And when you think about it, besides chopsticks and lion dancers, there's not much more basic to Chinese culture than entrepreneurship, and the dream of forming one's own business. So it only seems fair to provide a concrete example of where this system has functioned well.



Bridge Park nestles in a cloverleaf

And that spectacular example is a public park that opens some breathing room in the midst of densely-populated Tianjin. It appears in the center of this photo taken from space by Google Earth.

The land had long stood idle.

Other than some brief employment as an army shooting range, nobody had ever done anything with it. And that's because of the high water table. All of Tianjin is sopping wet from rivers flowing in from every direction. That's why so many canals are needed just to keep the rest of it solid. Indeed there's yet another canal in the above satellite photo running from top to bottom right along the freeway.

Water lilies and a bridge are what Bridge Park is all about.



Warding off this under-the-water-table water flow would be difficult and expensive. But as a park, it held promise. The assignment was given to a landscape architect business associated with Peking University in Beijing.

The professor and students planned a park that was both beautiful and practical — it could deal with the water through a

series of catch basins and a large L-shaped lake, all held in place by dense plantings, some of them native plant species, and some imported

ones. It could guard the neighborhood from floods while providing a peaceful public space.

The local reed species grow between the cement blocks.

China has a long history of working in harmony with nature, particularly with water, going all the way back to Yu the Great, over 3000 years ago. It's thrilling to see this sensibility reasserting itself in the modern world.

And it's wonderful to see Chinese architects doing it, when so often, even today, foreign architects are hired for the most important constructions.



Elevated pathways carry joggers, like great bridges.



The two photos here show the same set of reeds — seen from overhead and seen from across the lake. From across the lake they look like an ordinary reed thicket, such as grows around the edges of most ponds. But the overhead view reveals cement blocks that allow the visitor to freely stroll through them, perhaps on the lookout for frogs and small

waterfowl.

Each "hill" is planted with a different kind of flower, and the red elevated pathways form more bridges between them. They remind me of Mayan temples.

a jogger enjoys the view from the "bridge."

Actually, red lines are a key motif in everything that this architectural group designs. Red lines crop up throughout the park, as well as in their other parks elsewhere.

Well, I think a few more pictures will speak more eloquently than anything I write. So at this point, I'll simply paste a few in.



Strolling over the bridges



Red benches for socializing



Yes, the Chinese do cosplay, too. A peaceful place to display a new costume!



I don't know how they managed to get fall foliage in the spring.



Exercise machines in the background here are available to the public



The happy soldiers also sport red lines.



Real flesh-and-blood kite fliers also appeared on the day of our visit.



More bridges, more lilies



Entrepreneurs cluster around the main entrance to the park (which is at a street corner).



Sometimes the red lines are the path itself.



Jeanette and Han pause outside the bridge museum, which was closed that day.



The area just inside the main entrance is a traditional hanging-out venue.



A sign denounces pond jumping



Yeah, they didn't even bother to finish translating the final sentence.

And, yeah, the presence of questionable English is the final mark of Chinese authenticity on this park. I'll include one typical sign for your reading pleasure.

When I first saw scrambled English like this in China, I was annoyed.

But now. . . . Okay, I'm still annoyed. I'm an English teacher, after all! But I'm also filled with warmth that this beautiful site is an authentically Chinese development, reflecting both the modern and traditional worlds.

Well, I hope you enjoyed the trip. If you get a chance, drop me a line.

I've actually been in California for exactly a week now, and today was the first day that I made it through the entire day without a single nap. And my word count here has passed 2000 so I'm now officially ready to venture out and do things. I'll conclude with one final Bridge Park shot – a panorama taken from near the main entrance.



The lake spreads out in a 90 degree angle from the entrance on either side of the museum.

Tianjin, California, Tuesday, July 7, 2015



===== Tianjin in the eyes of a foreigner =====

I took this panorama last month along the Hai He, the main river in Tianjin.

The steps on the right lead up to the main train station in town. The opposite bank contains Jinwan plaza, a financial center. The cigar-shaped building towards the right used to be the tallest building in town. It's also a financial center. And it's only about five years old.



Since my first visit in 1998, the river banks have been cleaned and developed beyond any reasonable expectation at the time. In fact, I have no pictures of the riverbanks from back then, since there had been nothing beautiful to remember.

===== The Competition =====



For three years now, my contact in the International Cooperation Office has submitted some of my photos to a city-wide contest among foreigners. And for the third year in a row, one of my photos actually won a prize – third prize in this case.

foreigners enjoying the sites,
crowded by photographers

My prize winner was taken not far from this spot on the Hai He River, actually. The occasion was the opening ceremony for the contest itself,

which was rendered more attractive by the the promise of a tour on a bus and a guided visit to the city's planning museum. The photo at left show a bunch of typical foreigners enjoying the view that day from the open-topped tour bus.

It had been four years since my previous such excursion. I had forgotten that these trips were mainly intended to harvest pictures of foreigners enjoying the splendor of Tianjin. Or actually, the foreigners could only try to enjoy it because all they could see were photographers pointing big lenses in all directions. Here are three examples, in addition to the bus photo above:



So, somewhat as a joke, I snapped the picture below at right. Yes, it really is a lens bigger than your head.



And no, he never lowered his lens.

And somewhat equally as a joke, I submitted it to the contest along with some others photos

I never dreamed that they might actually single it out for a prize. I keep wondering – did they understand it in the spirit in which

I made it, or did they imagine that the man behind the lens in the picture isn't a Chinese photographer at all, but an enthralled foreign tourist in Tianjin, drinking in its sumptuous vistas?

Well, whatever. A prize is a prize.



===== A Boatload of Dragons =====

The omnipresent fisherman.

Getting back to the Hai He — three of us had ventured out last month in search of dragon boat races. They make up part of a traditional observance held every June called Duanwu. Duanwu is actually

celebrated in many variations across eastern Asia, including in Vietnam and Korea.



In China's case, the boats commemorate the suicide of the diplomat and poet Qu Yuan in 288 B.C. He had despaired of the fact that nobody – but nobody – would ever listen to his sage advice on governance and international relations. At least, nobody who mattered would

listen. Upon his suicide, boaters searched, but failed to find his body, alive or dead. They even scattered balls of rice throughout the river area to distract fish from eating him. Still, no trace of him was ever found. The dragon boats, then, commemorate the boats used in the search that day.

We weren't sure exactly where Tianjin's dragon boats would be, having gotten conflicting information from various sources. We started at the train station and walked south along the river, finding no crowds at all along the way. In fact, if not for fishermen, who, in China, can be found on any body of water larger than a bath tub, there would have been hardly anybody along the piers.

International bridge and cotton shipments



The photo above again shows Jinwan Square, but also notice the little bridge across the river. It's the oldest bridge in Tianjin, built at a time when both banks of the river were occupied by foreign powers (Italy, France, Japan and England at this spot), so it was known as the International Bridge.

I got the picture at left from a collection on the Internet. It was taken about 1940.

The French Concession

The picture at right, also taken about 1940, shows mainly the French concession, and you can spot the International Bridge in the upper left-hand corner. It's amazing, really, what huge swatches of land were ceded to



foreign powers during the many wars against the Qing empire.

In the meantime, the territory has long since been reclaimed by China, and the bridge has been rechristened "Liberation Bridge."

===== The Quest for Dragons continued =====



Nope. No dragons here.

But where were the dragon boats?
We continued our walk down the half-deserted riverfront.

I found it surprising that the dragon boat festival, which is such an established tradition in China, was proving so hard to find. Yeah, I guess this is what happens after decades of repudiation of ancient

customs. Now that people want to get them back, it's proving hard to re-insert them into people's priorities. Yes, most events in China tend to be catch-as-catch can, but still . . . where were the dragons?

A local Zongzi Dealer

On the other hand, one part of Duanwu has returned with a vengeance, and that's because it's something you eat – Zongzi. These little rice balls commemorate similar rice balls used to distract the fish during the search for Qu Yuan's body, over 2000 years ago.



Zongzi constitute yet one more variation of the glob-of-rice-with-who-knows-what-in-the-middle that is so common throughout East Asia. In this case, it's all wrapped in leaves and steamed. And since you don't actually eat the leaves, they can be almost anything you like.



Here, for example, one can see two women, earlier in the season

last year, gathering leaves from the newly-sprouting reeds at the edge

of Aiwan Lake on campus.

Perhaps the young sprouts bear leaves at their tenderest stage, and thus they are easier to wrap around dollops of mystery-filled rice.

===== Fish Planting =====

Anyway, continuing our journey south along the river that day, we encountered a small group of people standing around crates full of catfish.

They were led in chants by what seemed to be a Buddhist priest. Unfortunately, we couldn't understand the message that they intoned. The main audience seemed to be the fish, and they didn't seem to be poetry lovers, since they struggled mightily to exit the crowded crates.



I guess these people must have been anti-zongzi environmentalists, who took the side of the fish who lost out on a human meal during the search for Qu Yuan back then. Certainly, there was not a grain of rice to be seen.

Or, since the fish looked like little dragons, perhaps it was an endorsement of dragons themselves over dragon boats.



We didn't stick around to witness the fish's liberation into the river, though I did notice, later that day, that many of them had fatal run-ins with those ubiquitous fishermen. However, they were too numerous for even such dedicated hooksters to harvest them all.

===== There be dragons =====

Well, we finally did find dragon boats, parked on the river outside the

Astor Hotel.

In fact, we made it in time for the opening ceremony. All the high mucky-mucks, dressed almost identically in white shirts, but no ties, since it was “casual Saturday,” gathered in formation to lend gravitas to the proceedings. They stood in a line like soldiers, in front of an almost-obligatory decorative-blue background. With the sun in their eyes, not many were able to smile, but that’s okay, since it wasn’t really necessary to be welcoming — as always in such ceremonies, it was enough to just stand there.

And there turned out to be a small crowd of spectators! Here are some of them lined up on a bridge next to the Astor Hotel. You’ll note the many umbrellas and parasols. Chinese people don’t seem to like the bright sun, particularly the women, who don’t want their face darkened by a tan.



Dragon boats fly past the Astor Hotel



And then they were off!! But it wasn’t clear exactly when the start occurred, nor did all the boats even speed off. It was like the piglet races at the county fair, though. The start was confusing, but eventually they did all head up

the river in more-or-less the same direction.

We decided that this must not be the actual race, but perhaps a pre-competition warm-up parade. Maybe the races themselves would take place later in the afternoon, or even the next day.

And certainly, many of the rowing teams seemed to be having far too light-hearted a time for a real race.



And we even saw lion dancers and real dragons!! In California, these creatures seem to sprout from every Asian neighborhood, as I’ve heard they do in southern China, as well. But they’re pretty rare in

Tianjin.

The lion dancers extended their necks fully to salute the rowers as they passed by.

Not one, but two dragons graced the festivities.

The dragons sailed along the side of the river like they usually do.

I swear, it was finally starting to feel like I was actually in China.

Well, this note is already longer than I had intended, so I'll stop at this point.



However, twenty-five years ago, when elementary schools were mandated to teach ancient Asian history, but not given any materials to teach it with, I composed a lengthy book for my students about Chinese history. One of those chapters was about Qu Yuan and his famous poems. I found it, dusted it off, and fixed it a bit, and now attach it here for those wishing more information about the guy. Click on the link to access it: [Qu Yuan](#)