

# **Eight Academic Years of Life in China**



***New Campus Main Entrance***

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



Castro Valley, Sunday, August 30, 2015



## ===== Summer in the States =====

Another summer message from California, particularly intended for those on my list who live outside North America.

California's State Flower, the Golden Poppy

I've rested a lot during my summer in the States. In fact, I've spent a large portion of the time in bed. My lungs have enjoyed the fresh air outside of China. I've been getting doctors to check out my health. My friend Carlbob even gave me rides to the health clinic. Finally, during this last week, I'm beginning to feel like a human again. Just in time to return to China next week. I think I'm ready, but then one never knows until one actually arrives.



## ===== As Time Goes By =====

A number of factors have indicated that, as all good things must come to an end, so must my time in China. In fact, this will likely be my last year teaching full time in China. Actually, I might not make it past the semester break in January, depending upon whether health and stress permit. It's hard to believe it's been seven years already, though it's a little easier to believe it when I visit Schafer Park School, my stomping ground for twenty-five years, and I no longer know most of the people I see there.

## ===== Cunninghams invade CV Community Center =====

Another rather mind-bending reminder of time's passage came at a family reunion, not my own family's, but the Cunningham



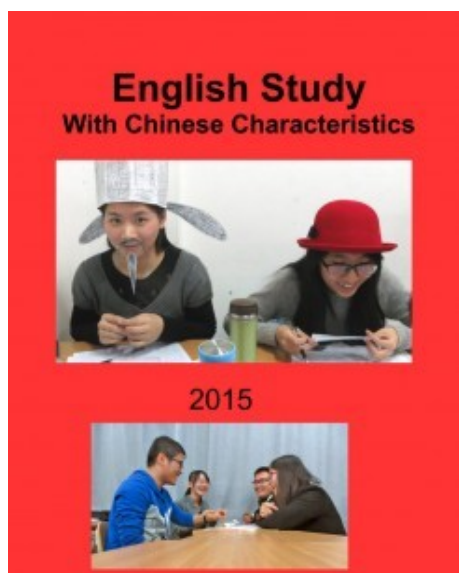
family's, that I was nevertheless privileged to attend. One family member, who had been a baby the last time I'd seen him, was now not only grown up, but he bore the same middle-aged paunch as myself, and a head of gray hair. Has it really been so long? Apparently.

### ===== Writing =====

So I need to start thinking about what comes next. My main interest remains cognitive science, so hopefully I'll be able to somehow work within that field, particularly with its application to instruction. We'll see. I spent a large part of the summer in Portland, Oregon, rewriting the book that I had written last summer. It's about English Language study in China. It has lessons for American pedagogy as well.

### ===== Powell's Espresso Book Machine =====

I hadn't planned on writing a book last summer, but I was visiting Portland when my book reached 130 pages, so I figured I should at least print it out. And Powell's Books in Portland has an instant-publishing machine called the "Espresso Book Machine." Just feed it a pdf for content, and another pdf for the cover. And presto! Your book materializes, right on the spot. Just like in Star Trek!! And it actually looks like a real book, like you might find for sale on Powell's nearby bookshelves! How cool is that?



### ===== Book Cover =====

Of course, book content is another question altogether.

So this summer's rewrite is 150 pages, probably about 140 pages more than anybody will ever actually read, but a fun challenge nonetheless. Well, at least it's more logically ordered and understandable than the the stream-of-consciousness model that I produced last year. Yeah, J. D. Salinger I'm not.

And yes, those are my very own photogenic students on the cover – they

are not professional models (though most of my students could be).

## ===== China News from Tianjin =====

Perhaps you've heard of the recent explosions that took place on August 12 at Tianjin's port. In case you haven't, here are a some YouTube links. Basically, there were **two** extremely large explosions, and a few small after-fires which followed.

Note that the apartment blocks that you can see in the vids are mostly on the order of thirty stories tall.

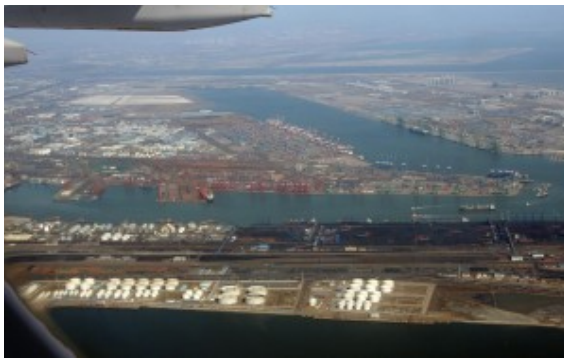
[This one shows an American expat returning to his apartment in such a block, located over a mile from the blasts.](#)

[This one shows an aerial view of the aftermath at the site itself, taken by one of those little quadcopter drones.](#)

And to sum up:

[Here's a complete summary with background information put together by Watchmojo.com.](#)

So this marks the second time in a year that Tianjin has made the international news, and both times, the news was bad. (the previous time was a Tianjin University professor arrested for industrial espionage in California)



Here's a photo of Tianjin Binhai Port, which I took last March fourth on my return from California. The explosions's location would be at the far left of the frame just under the far engine. It's an industrial working district, far from the city center, next to the ocean port, Binhai Port.

The explosions went off at 11:30 p.m., when most of the workers were far away from the port, and tucked into bed. Obviously, had these explosians occurred in the main part of the city, or during work hours, a lot more than the resulting couple hundred dead and several hundred injured would have occurred.

Luckily for me, the explosion took place 31.6 miles away (as the crow flies) from my apartment, and a month before I'm scheduled to return. Of course, the school is moving to a new site. But the new site still 23.4



miles away from the harbor. And the wind, in both cases, usually blows any toxic fumes in the other direction, away out to sea.

One of my students used to work down in Binhai, and another old friend has a mother living in the area. Hopefully they are both okay.

## **===== The New Campus =====**

By the way, in case anybody's curious about the new and the old campuses – first here's [a link on Google maps to the old campus](#). Where you see a cluster of lakes – that's us. And [here's a link to the new campus](#). It has the shape of an arrowhead or a leaf, outlined by a moat around the whole site. And then, city canals wrap around most of the moat. It's a double-wide water barrier. There's no need for building normal walls around the new campus. Intruders won't be going anywhere. It's beyond the range of the city's buses, and certainly I've never seen anybody swim in Tianjin's canals.

You'll also notice a circle of lakes and canals in the center of the new campus, crossed by various bridges. So one who walks any distance across campus will have to take a bridge or two. Thus, the bridges are foot-and-bicycle-traffic bottlenecks. One basic tendency in China is to create such bottlenecks and barriers everywhere. They make the place feel even more crowded than it actually is, and probably helps the government to control the populace, and use the crowdedness to justify everything that it does differently than the rest of the world.

To the lower right of our new campus you can also see the new site for Nankai University, our neighbor at the old campus. Their site is also surrounded by moats, lakes, and canals. I guess the two universities are not meant to continue their current chummy next-door-neighbor relationship.

As the crow flies, these new campuses are located eleven miles from the old ones. But the distance by road is longer and the traffic along the way will be heavy, so think 45 minutes by car.

The campus isn't really ready for the move in. The new buildings have not been certified for use by the government inspectors. Some have not even been finished. But we'll move anyway. It's like "Here I come, ready or not," but not as much fun as that children's game. Why the rush? Partly it's because that's how things are done. Hurry up and wait, and then hurry up some more. But the rush is also driven by greed, greed for carving real estate profits out of the old campus. Well, my hope is that the government inspectors do their jobs honestly and well. I'd prefer to avoid any more closer-to-home catastrophes.

## ===== Portland =====



### Picnic at the Wild West Fest

I did spend time visiting my sister and my mother in Portland, Oregon. Actually, those days were quite serene – full of lounging around, writing that book, and helping out with chores now and then. I really enjoyed it, which I

think improved my health.



And I did get out a little bit, even visiting some old friends from China who now reside in the Portland area.

### Traditional Blacksmith

I thought that I could escape the California drought in Portland, a city so wet and dreary that the "Portland Coloring Book" uses only

two colors of crayon – grey and brown. But drought conditions prevailed in Portland, too. It never really rained once during my stay. The grass dried out, as seen in these pictures. It was the hottest summer in recorded history, and it's not over yet. For that matter, I don't remember a hotter summer in Castro Valley, either.



### Balloon Animals

My sister and her staff put on a "Wild West Fest" at the community center which she manages. They had petting horses and sack races, a traditional blacksmith demonstrating his anvil technique, and a clown tying up balloon animals.

There was face painting, too. And, as is traditional in America, copious amounts of food. All in all it was well attended, and the weather was not too hot that day.

Bernie pontificates from the TV screen.

I also attended a political rally, along with my sister and brother-in-law. It's my first rally in decades. It was for US presidential candidate Bernie

Sanders.

So many people turned out that they had to move to a larger venue that holds 19,000.

Even then, about 8,000 others (like us) still couldn't fit inside. So they simulcasted the speech to various area restaurants. We stood outside one of them, watching the video of Bernie through its window and listening through the loudspeakers. It was crazy, but celebratory.



## ===== The Long Drive =====



### Klamath River Rest Stop

I drove up and down highway 5 between Portland and the Bay Area, using my friend Tim's blue Honda, which mostly survived the ordeal. I needed two days to get up to Portland, but only 11 hours to drive back to California, due to improving health.

It was a fun drive, with time to stop at some of my favorite "rest stops." The picture shows one near the California-Oregon border. The air that day was hazy, as can be seen in the picture. It's not industrial pollution, but smoke from the many wildfires burning through the surrounding mountains. Thank you, global warming!



A "rest stop" mainly consists of a lawn, picnic tables, bathrooms, water fountains and huge parking lots. It's all available without charge. Some of them in Oregon also serve free coffee. Others have snack vending machines.

### Lunch at the rest stop

So I could sit at a picnic table and eat the lunch that my mother had prepared for me (seen in the photo). It was great.

Lake Shasta





Each way, I passed Lake Shasta, one of the largest reservoirs in California (photo at left). The water level low, though it's rarely allowed to fill up to the line of trees along the rim.

But I've never seen it so low before. To get an idea of the scale, the small white spot near the middle of the frame is actually a Three-story house boat.

In the background at right in the frame lurks Mt. Lassen, which I normally think of as snow-capped, but not this summer.

## ===== Back in the Bay Area =====

### Alameda County Art

I did get out a bit in the Bay Area, too, such as the Alameda County Fair, which I attended with my friend Jerry and his family. A county fair has no known equivalent in China. They're basically a showcase for local arts, crafts, and livestock, mixed with carnival rides. The picture at right, for example, shows the art exhibits.



Many county fairs host a "destruction derby," a truly bizarre, but characteristic, slice of Americana.

### The Destruction Derby

Three or four old cars take to a muddy field where they ram each other, like it's a high-powered bumper-car game. The last car still moving wins the prize. It's actually not as violent as you might think, since it takes place in a slippery pool of mud, and the strategy generally involves bending the other cars' bumpers into the tires so that the wheels can't turn. Still, it's always a crowd pleaser.



### Claremont Diner

I also got to eat at one of my favorite traditional American diners – the Claremont Diner in Oakland, along with my friend Kate. The shot, taken from our “booth,” highlights the train track that encircles the room. Unfortunately, the train was not running that day. And the meal? Hamburger, Fries

and salad – traditional diner fare.

### ===== Lake Chabot =====

San Francisco and the Bay, seen from Castro Valley, twenty miles away.



I’ll close with a few pictures of Lake Chabot, a perennial local highlight. At left one sees San Francisco, twenty miles distant, taken from above the lake.

The white pelicans are another highlight. They’re native to Southern California, and rarely occur so far north. This flock spent

the entire summer at Lake Chabot – they are no fly-by-nights. In fact, this summer, white pelicans have occurred throughout the Bay Area. Some naturalists suspect that their north-trending range may be connected with global warming. So what about China’s birds? Yes, in Tianjin this year I had also seen birds that should not have come so far north, according to my field guide.

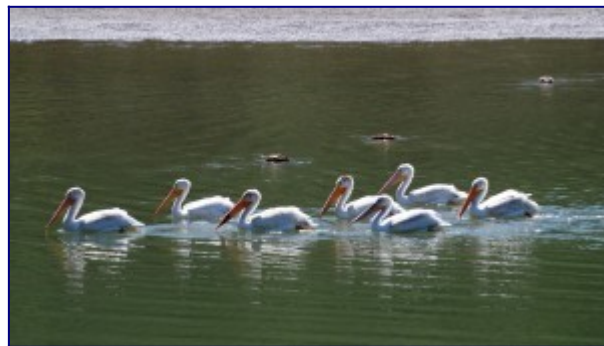


Anyway, here are the rest of the shots. Next time I write, it should be from China.

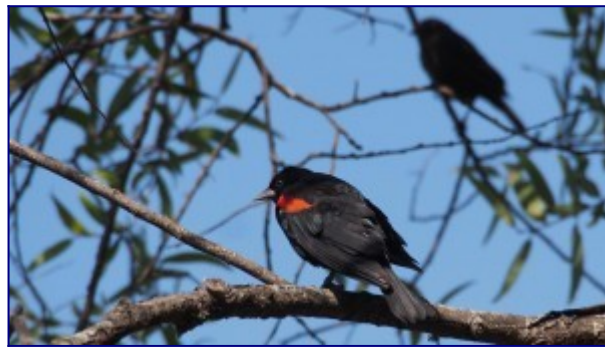
The bench on Fairmont Ridge – Lake Chabot in the background.



Flying White Pelican



Swimming White Pelicans





Red-winged Blackbirds



Snowy Egret



Hemlock





Castro Valley panorama from Fairmont Ridge

Tianjin, Friday, September 18, 2015



### ===== The New Campus =====

Yesterday, I spent the entire day indoors in pajamas, de-cluttering my apartment. Today I finally feel like getting dressed and going out. A few more days of de-cluttering, and I'll have an attractive home again.



I was amazed at how much stronger I was feeling than when I left in June.

*Ducks and Geese at Aiwan Pond.*

Tooday was a student move-in day, so I saw lots of them pulling suitcases topped by pillows. Some of them should have gone to the new campus instead of the old one, but they didn't know for sure which one they were assigned to, and where the new one was located, anyway, so they just showed up here.



And after an absence of several years, the ducks and geese have returned to Aiwan Pond!! I can't help but wonder if the old man is back in his hut, the guy who studied Japanese, the one who tended them before. The picture shows a shelter that somebody built to house them. They even put up little fences on each side of it to keep human intruders at bay.



### Haze enshrouds the Lake of Commitments

The morning was bright, and the air had returned to its normal polluted haziness after some pretty clear days in the previous weeks.

Actually, there had been a lot of clear days this month, due to a celebration of the victory

over Japan in world war II. In America, the day is called VJ day, to distinguish it from VE day, but nobody here cares about VE, so “V day” it is.

Grandma shows the kid what a campus is like.

All the nearby factories had shut down for the ceremony, and a magnificent photo-op was staged in Beijing – a military parade of impressive proportions. The general public was excluded from attending it, of course. That’s true of all such events, as far as I know. On the other hand, it could be viewed on television.



Those allowed to attend were picked out by the camera, since such attendance emphasizes who's important and who isn't. This not only happens in government events, but in business and academic events as well.

### ===== The coming semester =====

Meanwhile, I had received my schedule for the coming semester: One full day teaching from 8:30 to 5:00 on Wednesdays at the new campus, followed by one full day teaching on Thursdays at the new campus. Four sections at each location, for a total of eight sections in all. I have a feeling that by Thursday night I’ll be ready for an early bedtime.

A recycler cycling the back alleys



Why were the teaching days scheduled right next to each other like that, with no chance to recover one’s strength in between? Almost certainly because it just never entered the minds of the scheduling officials that human factors might affect their scheduling decisions.

Such considerations are not common here.

And as for my former teaching colleagues in California, whose working

hours are triple what mine are (*or more*), and who are wondering what I have to complain about, hey, I'm retired. Gimme a break! Well, my same weekly lesson plan should serve for all eight sections.

#### Senior Citizen on roller-blades

One salutary effect of the new schedule, though, is that for once I might be able to observe my Chinese colleagues teaching their English classes on Mondays and Tuesdays.

For the last several years everybody's classes were scheduled on the same two days, and since I've always taught more hours than they do, (*Howzzat, former California colleagues??*) I could rarely visit any of their classes. At last, my curiosity may be assuaged.

Last time, I only could write about the new campus. This time, I could actually go there. Most classes on campus have not yet begun, and, indeed, my own first classes wouldn't begin until September 30. So several of us had time to venture down there to check the place out.



### ===== Finally we see the new campus =====

The parked buses and the posted schedule (at right)



There had been rumors of a new city bus line running between the two campuses. Friends had sent me conflicting messages about it. But last week, buses actually parked near my apartment, so we could confirm the news face to face with the drivers themselves. How convenient that the terminal stop is located at the entrance to our housing development!



The new bus lines come in two flavors – local and express. The local bus stops 26 times on a winding route through town. It takes about an hour and a half to reach the new campus at the end of the line.



The express but only stops four times and makes a more direct trip in 45 minutes, at least when traffic is light. At US \$0.80 for the faster trip, it's twice as expensive, but the extra forty cents (US) is worth it, in my view. So this morning, we all piled into the express bus (once we confirmed with the driver that we were on the right bus).

#### Walking into the new campus

Forty-five minutes later, we de-bussed at the new campus's southeast entrance, which is not the main entrance. We began the long trudge into the heart of the campus where our classrooms would be.

The old campus is about half university and half residences. The new campus is about the same size as the old one, but with fewer residences outside of the student dorms. So there's lots of room for labs, dorms, and classrooms. And they really spread them out!

### ===== “Bauhaus with Bricks” =====



Before they built the new campus, the site had been an old warehouse district. In light of recent events, who knows what chemicals the soil might contain? The architects seem to have taken the site's history into account, because almost all the buildings that we saw that day had that typical Kleenex-box warehouse shape, albeit with a faux brick facade. Almost every building on campus has this faux brick facade.

Building 44 – with an entrance in the middle.

The building above, the brick one, is building 44, where English classes will be held. From this angle, it looks like two buildings, but it's actually only one. You'd think that such a huge building would have enough classrooms to hold half the students in the city. However, there's a lot of wasted open space inside.



#### The Hollow Heart of Building 44

Here's a view of the hollow innards of building 44. It reminds me, more than anything else, of a prison exercise yard, with hallways along the walls suitable for guards and surveillance cameras. In any case, more volume is devoted to open space than to classrooms. This inefficient use of space translates into longer journeys for getting from place to place within the building (*except for on the ground floor, of course*). It probably also means that it's more expensive to heat the building in winter.

The school library, which squats next door (a tip of it is seen at the left edge of the photo below), is even worse. At least our atrium has a roof! The gray library was the only major building I saw that day without a brick facade. If hollow buildings are typical, then it's really a tremendous waste of space, spreading out the buildings across the land more than necessary, entailing longer walking times and greater air conditioning power use. On the other hand, all the hiking should keep us all in better physical shape.



#### Sophomores' military training

And speaking of exercise, we happened upon some sophomores undergoing their required two-week military training. The picture shows the ends of rows that extended

for a third of a kilometer down the lane. At last, there's enough space for all of them to participate in the same drills at the same time and location. Indeed, the many wide, straight avenues on campus reminded me ever so much of the street used for military parades in Beijing.

## ===== The administration building =====

We wanted to access a classroom and try out its projector. As I've mentioned many times before, higher education in China lives and dies on PowerPoint.

To run the projector (we had been told) required a special card, like a hotel's key-card, to slide into a slot on the console. No such cards had yet been issued to any of us. How could we try out a projector without our card, then? There had to be an answer, since presumably teachers might also misplace such cards from time to time.



We spent two and a half hours talking to everyone from guards to officials, in person and on the phone, in order to solve this conundrum. Everyone had a different suggestion.

At one point, our quest for solutions led us to the "1895 Building," one of the administration buildings. Inside the lobby, we were confronted with rows of clerks around the room's periphery, who represented various administrative departments. One row of clerks represented the "International Cooperation Office," the people who oversee the foreigners at the university.

### Probing the Clerks for Answers

Over the years, of course, we have worked closely with the people in the International Cooperation Office, in recent years with a highly-competent and caring administrator named "Echo."

Now, it would appear, we would have to work through this row of gate-keeping clerks, all of whom to me were strangers. As for the real administrators, they were locked away somewhere else, maybe even back at the old campus.

And even if the room appeared to be a lobby, there were no stairs, elevators or hallways to provide access to any other part of the building.

Well, no clerk in any row seemed to know the answers. We might have given up at that point, had we not run into an acquaintance, a professor from the English department, who had come into the "lobby" at that time by chance. **HE** knew the answer. He knew how to get the projector working when we had no card.

So we had wasted two and a half hours of our time, as well as the time

of various well- intentioned but misinformed guards, clerks, and officials. It would merely be a mildly interesting anecdote if not for the fact that this is the way things here work all the time. Official sources of information are spotty at best, but if you happen to know the right person, then you can find out what's actually going on. This, then, is one aspect of the local culture that tends to wear on me over time.

Well, at least that "lobby" had a nice shiny-clean floor. And, to be clear, all of the clerks, guards, and officials that we had spoken to that day were positive and helpful to a fault. It's the system that makes life difficult, not the many individuals who struggle within it. You can't share information that you don't have, or share good information when you don't know that yours is faulty.

### ===== The Cafeterias =====

So we returned to Building 44 and tried out a classroom projector, noted its various strengths and weaknesses, and visited all of our actual classrooms. Before heading home, we decided to celebrate by eating lunch at a student cafeteria. Naturally, the meal cards from the old campus would not work here. But as a stop-gap measure, they sold little paper tickets – one per yuan – with which to purchase food.



Lights shine off the cafeteria floor

The first thing I did upon entering the cafeteria was to slip and almost fall. It was the slickest shiny-clean floor I had ever seen in an eatery of any kind. Of course, that little spot of invisible mystery liquid was not supposed to be there. But what about when it rains? I can imagine the domino effect as hundreds of students, all released from classes at the same time, and with a much shorter lunch hour than before, rush into the building.

Oh yes, the lunch hour. Up until now, the second morning class had ended around 11:30 and the first afternoon class started at 2:00, leaving 2½ hours for naps, errands, and correcting lessons. Now the morning classes start a half hour later than before, and the afternoon classes start a half hour earlier, shrinking the lunch bread to 1½ hours, making it harder to deal with the longer distances involved.

I presume (but have no way of actually knowing, of course) that this change was made to accommodate the many teachers who still live in town, but have to commute a long distance to the new campus.



Paradoxically, though, the schedule change was also made at the old campus, where nobody commutes any more than they had before. Well, that's bureaucracy for you.

As for the cafeteria food itself, it was serviceable. Well, it's a student cafeteria, isn't it? With that in mind, it was quite good. And it was cheap. I paid about US \$1 for two-and-a-half helpings. I just need to remember to wear shoes with rubber soles for the next time I go there.

### **===== The Soulless Campus =====**

Like most information in China, most of what I had heard about the new campus was spotty and contradictory. Anybody who wants real information better go find out for themselves in person, or know the right source. One thing had always stuck with me, though. A colleague's student had visited last spring, and described the new campus as "The place has no soul." I had always wondered what he'd meant by that. But, as I stared out a window from one Big Box to another, I think I began to understand his meaning. And, again, the buildings in that picture below are real buildings. They are not an architectural model.

Compare this picture to any of the six pictures of the old campus at the top of this message:



The Campus without a Soul – even the dorms look like that.



Tianjin, Tuesday, October 6, 2015

National Day was October 1, and we're still on holiday until Thursday. I've used the opportunity to get outside and take some pictures, and now I'll compose them into a letter. And a reminder – clicking on the pictures will send you an enlarged version.

### ===== Classes Started =====

Many have asked about the new campus, the gulag, or as one of my friends in Oregon put it, the "thought adjustment facility." Yes, classes started on both campuses on September 30. However, the next day, October 1, started the week-long holiday for National Day, so classes are on hiatus until October 8. And on October 9, I'll have spent exactly a month in town and only actually worked two days. What a rough life. On the other hand, there will be no more holidays, and no more breaks, until the third week of January. Since we're starting so late, we're finishing late, as well.

And why start so late? Because, as expected, they're having trouble getting the new campus prepared. The Internet there is still spotty, and the mobile phone service cuts in and out, and even the water supply isn't always dependable. However, all the students were moved out there, anyway. Unlike at the old campus, there is no on-campus housing for **regular** staff. The promised housing for **foreign** staff is not going to be finished until at least December. None of the foreign staff that I know is unhappy about the delay.

And, yes, they did have the big opening ceremonies on the 120th anniversary of Tianjin University, the day after national day on October 2. They took place at the new campus's main entrance, which apparently had only been finished the night before. Or maybe it's only provisionally finished. Nobody I know attended them, partly because it sounded like too big a hassle, and partly because these sorts of ceremonies are really intended mainly for the leadership and a few journalists, anyway. I did have the opportunity to go. But I would not have known anybody else there.



Blocks of Bricks – library on left  
Meanwhile, my Australian friend Jeanette, who works in the publicity department on the new campus, found herself, with no warning whatsoever, handed a microphone and asked to Interview Ernesto Zedillo, one of

the visiting dignitaries, whom many will remember as the former president of Mexico. Such lack of preparation time is normal around here, where all job demands come at the last minute, often after waiting all day with nothing to do.

Thus, she wasn't familiar with the ex-president's current activities (*I looked it up, though – he now teaches at Yale and sits on the boards of various international corporations*), so she had no idea how to even address him! But through skillful use of diplomatic language, she managed to pull off the feat of not actually addressing him at all. It turns out that he's quite a nice guy. No surprise, really.



The Main Library

Her interview took place in the main library, a building so gigantic that it's hard to wrap one's mind around it, let alone one's camera lens. As one can see in the picture, it's not actually as huge as it first appears, because most of its "footprint" is a spacious, roofless interior courtyard. The

building itself, then, is shaped like a hollow open square, and though the actual floor space is still generous, it's not exactly the humongous structure that it seems to be when viewed from the street (like in the photo below).

Remarkably, even though it's the same rectangular shape as all the other buildings, it doesn't have a faux-brick facade like them. Apparently, that's because it's meant to act as a landmark, the one unique building in the center of campus. Well, it's certainly big enough for that.



The library dwarfs building 44 where I teach.

I found out that the faux-brick facade has been named the official facade for Tianjin University. That's fine with me, because I like bricks. It reminds me of my brick-

laying grandfather, among other things. Unfortunately most students really don't like it, or so many of them have told me. Well, what the students think is officially not important.

I found out that the architects of the new campus were mainly professors at our university. This surprised me, because I would think

that professors here would come up with more inspired designs. However, they were under pressure from leadership to make the buildings look as big and grand as possible. That's why the library is mostly hollow space inside. The architects had to use their building-materials budget to buy just the basics in bulk, leaving few resources for innovations.

Well, the leaders got what they wanted -- Grandiose vistas full of the largest, but simplest buildings possible, wasting a great amount of space, and lengthening the time one needs to walk anywhere. It's like a warehouse district for giants. My building, for example, is exactly three-quarters of a mile from the bus stop. There are some shuttles, and some rent-a-bikes, but it's all still being organized, so we've never had a convenient opportunity so far to take one.

And though my friend Eileen will remind me that she walked a lot further than that to high school, (and mostly through the driven Castro Valley snow, I believe), I will still insist that my walk here works out to be much further in "Oldsters miles."

Of course, the leaders don't generally walk at the new campus. They don't walk anywhere, nor do they have to catch a shuttle. Luckily, by my apartment in town, the end of the bus line is only a couple hundred yards away. So at least the walk is convenient on the home end. And in the meantime, if the air is good, the exercise will improve my strength and health. And my strength and health are, in fact, improving.

Ah, the bus. It's a city bus line. There is also a university bus, but it's too expensive and the schedule rather inconvenient, so nobody has considered taking it.

Anyway, the express city bus costs under \$1 US, while the local-stop route is about half that. When I took the 6:30 am express, we arrived at the new campus in 35 minutes. The trip is exactly 25 kilometers (15.6 miles). Unfortunately, the trip back was longer due to traffic: an hour and forty minutes. I think that works out to an average speed of 9.4 miles per hour (15 km per hour). Traffic is heavy because of all the cars, but also because most nights there are car accidents.

We were packed like sardines onto the bus that night. My three colleagues and I had to stand the whole way in searing hot-house humidity (many windows on the bus didn't open) Only one young man gave up his seat, and that was for his girlfriend. I kept thinking "I'm retired. I really don't have to be doing this." One advantage of the crowd was that it was impossible to fall over.

I'm hoping the crowd on the bus simply resulted from the date -- the night of a major holiday. And so, bored students, like bored sailors



everywhere, were jumping at the chance to put into port and spend a wild weekend on shore leave, trying to forget their otherwise bleak existence out on the big briny. So on normal days, maybe I'll find a seat on the night bus. The suspense is not killing me, though.

### "Give One, Get One" activity



My classes at the new campus, as per normal, went well. To this day, no matter what the rest of my life is doing, I'm always happy and light hearted when teaching. It's amazing, really. It's better than a tonic.

Anyway, this picture shows some students on that first day of class doing a language-development activity that many will know: "Give One, Get One." Yeah, good times.

Interestingly, I couldn't find any surveillance camera in my classroom. Other classrooms have one. I've seen them elsewhere in the building. Probably, they just haven't gotten around to installing it yet. In fact, one day last month, we had to travel out to the new campus to get our identity-cards readjusted (their electronic innards didn't work), and that service was located in a security room.

The cards are important because teachers need them to turn on the projectors in their rooms. Gone are the days (still here at the old campus) where you have to get the projector key from a guard at the door. And yes, for a moment, we got to watch The Watchers.



They had a wall of TV screens, each screen prying into a different classroom – sometimes the view came from the front of the room and sometimes from the back. The resolution on the pictures was amazing. Had it been any better, I might have been able to check the accuracy of the notes that students were taking. The Watchers also had their own

screens at their desks with additional classrooms displayed.

When you combine all the classroom cameras with the omnipresent street-side cameras, you pretty much end up with a scene that Big Brother would immediately recognize. It makes me wonder, in fact, about the dorms. And all this on a campus so far from anywhere, that few thieves would be able to find it, let alone haul anything significant

away.

Actually, The Watchers were, as we used to say in high school, bored out of their gourds. One of them struggled mightily, though mainly failed, to maintain consciousness. I think they were happy when we showed up with five identity cards to adjust. It took them an hour to do it, and they were 80% successful – only one card still wouldn't work. That's a solid B- in my book!

By the time classes actually started, the one faulty card had somehow been fixed. Unfortunately, one of the others (not mine) then stopped working for that day. Yeah, good times.

The cards also function as meal tickets. And yes, that means that the meal tickets at the old campus won't work at the new one and vice versa. One has to "charge" them with money to buy lunch. Unfortunately, this can't be done at the dining halls themselves. You have to walk half-way across campus to the only place where such transactions can be carried out, that weird room with the clerks around the periphery that I wrote about last time.

And now I have about 25 meals worth on my card, more than enough for myself, so when you come visit me, I can take you to lunch. What a pain, though. I used up most of my lunch hour just walking over there.

To add insult to injury, the Chinese teachers enjoy a subsidized lunch – often they pay nothing. That program is not available to us foreigners, though, because we were paid through a different bank. Well, at the end of the day, it's not a matter of much money, so it's only the symbolism that's annoying.

## ===== Out on the Town =====



Entrance to Chang Hong Park

Last weekend I took advantage of the Giant bike that Lonnie left me. It's the same model as the two that I'd twice had stolen from me. It's so much easier to ride than my Flying Pigeon or any other bike that I had, that I've taken it all over town. Yesterday I rode out to

my friends the Boogaards out in Hua Yuan – 4.6 miles each way, and it seemed like nothing. The Boogaards, by the way, will be moving across town soon.

Another point of interest that I cycled to was Chang Hong Ecological

Park, located just a couple miles from my apartment. Chang Hong means "Long Rainbow." It's like a miniature version of the water park south of here.



### Boat Rentals

It's really a nice little getaway from the surrounding city. I entered the park at the rear entrance, which is located at the end of a quaint little shopping street full of specialty gift shops and restaurants. And there's lots to do! Gazebos and corridors for

sitting and talking. Basketball courts. A plaza for kite flying. Extensive paths for walking among the greenery. Crafts for the younger set, as well as slow-speed carnival rides like bumper cars, also for the younger set.



### Painting plaster heads (sold in the background)

The park also boasts extensive waterways. One can rent a paddle boat, or even fish.

Fish indeed! One of the fundamental laws of Chinese existence is that any body of water larger than a bathtub will attract fishermen. And maybe even the bathtub will.

In the fishing picture below, one can see some actual fachwerk (Half-timbered) houses. Well, the visible timbers are actually just a facade, but still, they look nice. And they must have been hugely expensive, occupied by rich tenants, and yet, when I got closer, I didn't see any of the omnipresent bars that grace most windows in town, including mine at my apartment.





### ===== The Tianjin-West Train Station =====

For the first time in many years, I also toured the West Train Station. The panorama below shows how it looked the last time I had seen it in 2009.



I found almost the exact same spot and made an updated panorama this weekend. Here's what it looks like today:



The builders were nice enough to preserve the old station building, even though they apparently haven't figured out what to do with it yet. It's all fenced up and locked down. Perhaps it will make a nice museum someday. According to my maps, they haven't moved it at all.

#### West Station Main Entrance

Meanwhile, that gray building to its left is the new West Station. It doesn't look so big in the panorama, but here's a shot of just the main



entrance to give a better idea of its bulk. Like some other buildings I can think of, its massive scale is meant to impress. This building has some style, though.

In fact, I had taken that early 2009 panorama precisely because some of my students back then had given me a tour of the city planning museum. There was a special exhibit of the plans and models that various architects had submitted to compete for the new West Station's design job. I remember seeing the model of this design, as well as several others.

My students correctly predicted that this design would win. So later that month I cycled over to take a "before" picture.



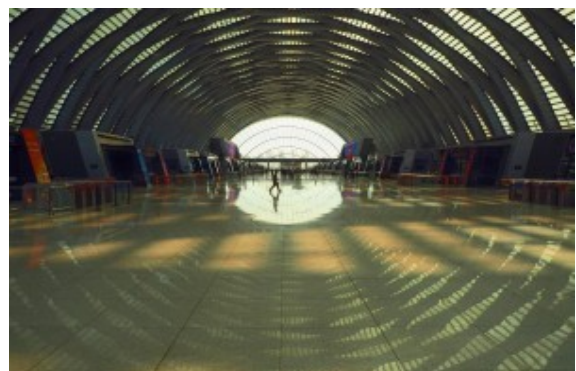
Cubist Floor patterns at the West Station. The slopes enclose escalators to the platforms.

Well, actually, I am late to taking the "after" picture. They finished the construction a couple years ago. They work fast here. And now, the same kind of "fast trains"

that fly all over the country, and that stop at the main train station, also stop here. However, the West Station trains generally go to different destinations than those from the Main Train Station. The two stations, by the way, are connected through the city metro – it's about a fifteen minute trip between them.

I was also surprised that one can gain access to the main departure waiting room without a ticket, just like at the Beijing station. That access is not allowed at Tianjin's main station, another indication of how much more things are controlled here than in other parts of China, I guess.

#### The Time Tunnel Effect



I was also amazed at how empty the waiting room was. Again, both the Beijing and Tianjin main station have been crowded every time I've gone there. But at the West Station, I could take an almost perfect

“time tunnel” shot of the main room. The structures to the sides are the entrances to the platforms. It’s a pretty standard arrangement for new train stations in China.

I didn’t notice any fast train to Beijing on the departure list, but if there is one, I’m thinking it might be a whole lot more pleasant to wait for it here than at the main station.



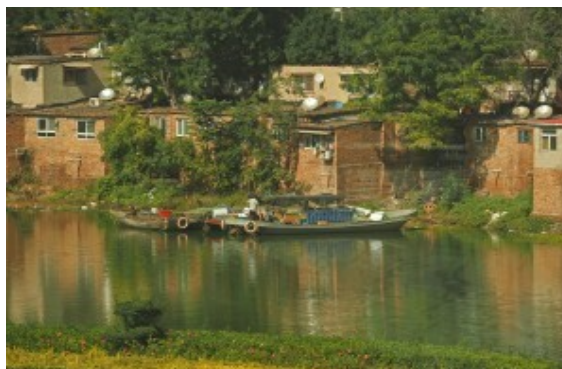
Catching a few winks in the West Station.

I mean, look at the people in this shot. They don’t seem to be concerned about anything in the world. Actually, they don’t seem to be even conscious. And still, there’s a KFC readily available!

And in addition to the two floors of grandiosity above ground, there’s

a huge chamber underground with access to parking and to the city metro. All in all, it’s quite convenient, and not as confusing to navigate as Tianjin’s main station.

And there’s more! Through the back windows, I caught a glance of an older way of life – a boating way of life – along the Grand Canal, the waterway that was built centuries ago to connect Beijing with cities along the Yangtze River. I’ll acknowledge, though, that all the satellite dishes do tend to spoil the antique effect.



Yes, the West Station seems to have it all.

And here is a picture of that same canal, taken about a hundred years ago:



### ===== Mid-Autumn Festival =====

The mid-autumn festival was celebrated on September 27th and 28th this year, and for those who are counting, yes, that means there were only two possible work days last week, and I drew one of them.

The point of the festival is to go outside and enjoy the sight of the full moon. It's nice, really, because whenever I go observe the moon on that night, it always brings to mind autumn moons from previous years. Here, for example, is a picture from two years ago, showing building 25 on campus, where I used to have an office. And no, I did not Photoshop the moon into that shot. That's what it actually looked like. And yes, building 25 is not shaped like a warehouse.



This year's moon view was a bit different. I had just returned to Tianjin from Beijing with a group of friends which included Jeanette and her family. We'd gone up there to see off one of our students at the Beijing Airport. She was going to Australia to study for several years. When we returned to the Tianjin Train Station, I succeeded in getting everyone lost, so we

gave up finding the exit and took the subway to a station near our home.



When we exited the subway, there was excitement! Two of those cursed electric bikes had run into each other, and in the deflection, had scraped a passing car. Tempers flared, and entertainment for the whole street ensued! Anyway, that's why a crowd is in the middle of the street in the picture. The distant moon is orange, kind of like the eclipsed moon in America earlier that afternoon, but in our case, the orange color resulted from sand and pollution in the air.

The other point of the mid-autumn festival is to eat "moon cakes," little sweet cakes that generally only appear this time of year. (So don't buy any in January – they're not likely to be fresh) This year, my friend and former student Han Tao gave me a homemade one to try, which naturally turned out to be even more delicious than the kind you buy in the stores. Yes, it was an eventful festival this year.



I'll finish this email with a picture of the coolest little tree that I've seen in a long time. It was installed a couple weeks ago at back of the old Administration building here on the old campus, the one with character. What an interesting trunk structure!







## ===== Feeling the Heat in Tianjin =====

One of my friends asked yesterday if I still sent out any email messages, and I realized it's been a month and a half since the last one. Well, I'm still here. Please don't forget me! I think of things to write all the time, but then I can't remember if I already wrote them before or not.



While I'm thinking, and for my bird-watching friends, here's a snapshot of one of my favorite birds – a hoopoe. It's sitting by my front door, in a space that was designed as a little plaza, but now is a little parking lot, due to the rapid proliferation of automobiles..

Hoopoes mainly eat bugs that live underground. I thought that this one must be quite frustrated trying to get at worms through the bricks, but then I discovered that food was not its purpose. A misaligned and sunken brick had accumulated quite a bit of dust, so this bird was happily taking a dust bath.

When they fly, hoopoes seem like giant butterflies, marvelous to behold. They are not related to woodpeckers, but to hornbills, and less closely, to kingfishers.

## ===== Packing Heat =====

The radiator heat arrived right on schedule, on November 15. That's the hot-water heat that's pumped in from a plant a few blocks away. All the cities north of the Yangtze River have this winter heat, supplied as a public utility. Prices vary depending on the heating subcontractor and a home's floor area, but my small apartment (about 800 square feet) is assessed at about \$300 US for the period from November 15 to March 15.

The heated water comes through gigantic insulated pipes that mainly run overground, along walls and buildings. Instead of simply starting it full blast on the 15th, they ramped it up gradually, beginning a couple days earlier. In fact, compared to the "old days" a few years ago, when they just let it rip full blast for four months, a more nuanced approach has taken hold these days, and the amount of heat varies with the

weather and the time of day.

The upshot is that it never seems quite as warm as it did five years ago. But, it probably does save a lot of heating costs, as well as pollution from the power plant. I'm just glad it's finally on. It's been pretty cold. Highs will be in the 40's this week.

And since the heat comes through the walls, the bathroom mirror no longer fogs from taking a shower, and those pajamas that had been hung out to dry on the balcony, and were still damp after five days, could be brought inside to drape over the radiator and finally dry off completely.



Nanjing Road on November 16

Pollution seems better overall than a couple years ago, but we still have our smog-choked days. I took the above panorama from the office of Korean Airlines in the International Building on Nanjing Lu. I was there to buy a ticket to SFO for January 10. I expect to not tarry long in California, though, but to head up to Portland for a while.

The panorama shows one of the better days, though smog is still evident. Longtime Tianjin residents will recognize the continuing proliferation of tall buildings in the center of the picture, which is the central shopping district at Binjiang Dao (though large malls also continue to sprout up in other areas, too). Also, at the left edge, one can spot the Tianjin TV tower in the distance.

### **===== A Tale of Two Campuses =====**

I continue to teach all day on Wednesday at the new campus, and all day Thursday at the old campus. Now seven weeks into the semester (the half-way point), classes are finally getting more organized.

The end of the line by my  
apartment

Transportation to the new campus on Wednesday mornings continues to be a concern. This picture, taken on a Wednesday before 6:30 am, shows the end of the line, a short walk from my apartment, where the line's buses are all parked overnight. This line opened just a couple months ago precisely to ferry people to the new campus and back.



And every morning, we all try to guess which bus will be the 6:30 express bus (forty minutes) and which will be the later slow bus (an hour and forty minutes). All the buses are marked the same, so we are all speculating. Then, a driver approaches one of the buses at 6:30, and immediately a line forms and we board. The cost for the express is the equivalent of about 80 cents U.S.

Unfortunately, most of the buses are parked with their rear-positioned engines right next to the apartments on the left. And it can take a few minutes to warm them up on cold mornings.

So on several occasions, angry NIMBY residents, who are mostly grannies and grampies, have expressed their displeasure by blocking the buses with their bodies, leading to a scramble to find rides for the normal ridership. Since the oldsters usually wait until 7 am to start these activities, it hasn't affected my 6:30 AM commute – yet. Meanwhile, it's nice to know that the Chinese tradition of fed-up citizens blocking heavy vehicles with their bodies is alive and well.

### ===== Manual Labor =====

The express bus heads out Weijin Lu for two or three miles before turning onto an expressway. At that intersection, every morning, hundreds of people stand huddled against the cold.



I don't know who they are, nor what sort of work they seek. I only know that occasionally a van pulls up and they all gather around it. Most are men, though

many are women. We usually pass by too quickly to get a clear picture.

And I'm glad I don't have to live like that.

Shortly after seven , our busload of passengers gets out at the ceremonial main campus entrance and enters the new campus through an extended gauntlet of major university events, printed on the back of a series of milestones.

From there, we can take a waiting electric tram to our classrooms.



Last week we learned (by talking to the tram driver) that these trams park inside the entrance, but they can be dispatched elsewhere merely by calling a phone number and telling them where you are. How convenient. Now we won't have to walk so far back to the entrance after class (1 kilometer). And by the way, we can

compare the new campus main entrance to the old one, in a picture taken at about the same time.

#### The main gate for fifty years

Note the floral display that commemorates the university's 120th anniversary just inside the old campus's gate. And also note how much shorter the hike into campus is, and the constant stream of people coming in and out because there's actually some place outside the campus worth going to.

When I arrive at my classroom on the new campus, then my own labor begins. Since I'm not the only one using that room, the tables and chairs are spread out haphazardly and often backwards every Wednesday morning.

I spend about twenty to twenty five minutes lugging the oversized and oddly-shaped tables into some semblance of order, parking about a third of the chairs onto the back wall and out of the way. Here's "before"





And here's after:



Luckily, students in the classes that take place in my absence follow the time-honored rule of students in China and pew sitters everywhere – move as far away from the pulpit as possible. That leaves me room in the front to start placing tables.

Oh, and here's what it looks like when it's full of students:



## ===== Grand Vistas =====

For lunch, the new campus features several student dining halls. Here's one of them. This shot was taken after the daily lunch rush.



I find the food to be pretty inexpensive, though I have heard of students complaining that it's more expensive than at the old campus.

The people that work in these dining halls are pleasant to a fault. I have heard that many of them are country people whose homes

were displaced when the university moved in, and that they were offered jobs such as these in partial compensation for the loss of their property.

As in many things here, it's hard to say how accurate that story is. However, it seems reasonable if only because the workers are almost unbearably pleasant and helpful. Countryside people throughout China are well known for their hospitable and kindly natures. So that fits.

I can't say I've anything to complain about at the old campus dining halls, though. And the old campus has advantages that the new one lacks — alternatives to the cafeterias.

#### Path-side Fried Rice

Here, for example, are a group of food sellers at the old campus. The guy on the right with the adroit wok hands cooks some of the best and cheapest fried rice and fried noodles in Tianjin, and he always has a long line of students waiting for a meal that proves it.



His little stand is located next to the simple covered market I've written about before. However, it was closed in August and just reopened again a couple weeks ago.

Vendors from inside are outside.



It had been closed for renovation. I found out from a young architect friend of mine that buildings in China have rated lifetimes. Some of them are rated as short as five or ten years. And at the end of that time, they either get overhauled or torn down. It was time for this simple market building to be overhauled, the

second time since I've been living here. And while the work was going on, the many merchants inside were asked to simply step outside.

The path, crowded by merchants

They spread out all along the footpath between the market and where I live. This picture shows the resulting improvised conglomeration.

Luckily the reconstruction was finished just before the cold weather set in.

And I have to say, the results were impressive. The basic structure of the building was not altered, but new stalls were added on the outside, and the footpaths on the inside were widened, so one no longer has to squeeze by people in order to move about.



And the booths on the outside have a new plastic rain cover high overhead so customers won't have to negotiate a field of puddles when it rains.

There was lots of new paint. Everything looked well scrubbed and much neater than it had after the previous reconstruction, about five years ago.



Market Entrance

This shot shows the main entrance. The merchants' display area was reduced in order to make the paths wider, but they also added some stands that made the horizontal displays more vertical.

So it was quite well thought out. And to top it all off, one of our favorite and friendliest fruit sellers,

who had been selling for a couple years outside on the street, now has an indoor location.

The picture here shows her (and her mother?) in their new indoor setup.

So people at the old campus have lots of choices, convenient and plentiful. On the new campus, though, there are few alternatives to speak of.

So for the first twenty minutes of lunch time after class in the new campus, the dining halls are jammed pack with lines ten deep as





everybody tries to get fed all at once during the shortened lunch break. In fact, for this and other reasons, I've taken to brown bagging it and eating lunch in my new campus classroom, where I can watch videos and spread out my legs.

And when the dining halls close between meals, the only food sources at the new campus are a few small convenience stores with selections of ramen and other (basically) snack foods. One hopes that this situation will improve with time, but it's not likely that a market like ours by the old campus will be built anytime soon. As my colleague Jeanne says, "If I lived on campus at the new campus, I'd have to bus into town just to buy a carrot."

### ===== Monumental Considerations =====

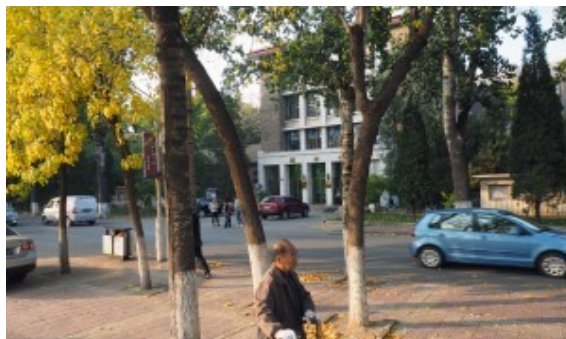


I'll close with a couple pairs of comparison shots.

First up is the main library on the new campus, a building of truly monumental proportions. It was generously donated to the university by a grateful alumnus, and it's named after him.

As I've mentioned in a previous letter, it isn't actually as impossibly huge as it appears, because most of the inner space is a huge roofless atrium. So it's really more like an impossibly long building bent into a rectangle. I've only been inside briefly, long enough to find out that most of the books are on the top (third and fourth) floors. I've been told, however, that there are lots of comfortable study rooms for the students, as well as a coffee shop.

But its outward appearance, as with all the surrounding buildings, and the sacred path of pilgrimage at the entrance pictured above, is meant to create an almost religious grandiosity. And it is impressive. And the library is one of the few buildings on the new campus without a red-brick facade.



In contrast, the main library at the old campus has study rooms, but probably not as comfortable, and its interior is much more crowded. But it makes me think of a tea house in a park, intimate with its



surroundings. And the entrance that you see in the picture is merely the inviting gateway to extensive floors spreading out in three directions behind it. It looks much smaller than the new campus library, but I wonder if its compactness really holds much less.

And then we come to the monument of monuments – the symbol of Tianjin University. It was set up on the centennial of the school's founding, back in 1995. Here at the old campus, it dominates a huge paved square, and is almost always surrounded by activity, day and night.



Here is a photo from last weekend. Every year, fruits are given out to the students on this date as a kind of bonus just for studying diligently and being all-around nice people (which they invariably are). And at the square, a blue tent full of fruit was set up next to the comforting and ever-watchful monument. I mean,

where else would it be set up? Any and every activity that takes place in that square is set up right next to the monument. It's like an old friend, or a symbol of parental care. You just want to be near it.

No wonder, then, that they turned this part of the fruit distribution into a little sideshow game – throw the hoop, hit the target and claim a fruit! And these contestants were far from the only people wandering or skating or biking around this monument on that day, or entering it to show their kids the school song, emblazoned on one of the inner legs.

And I actually once tutored the daughter of the man who built it (as part of a summer program with ERRC), so having met the designer and enjoyed dinner in his home, I feel even more favorable towards it than most might.

Well, the new campus has a monument kind of like it. And it must be better because it has five sides instead of only four. And it even has a dome. It stands vigil, almost alone, in the midst of a circular building, reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum, but with staid, implacable windows rather than a boisterous crowd. This building appears in its entirety in the picture of the entranceway of history above.



Its pristine grandeur will not be disturbed by silly fruit games, since it's

surrounded by a patchwork of grass and loose white stone. And further out, the pavement is rough, with stones angled in all directions, which sparkle when reflecting some distant lights that hit it after dark. And it really is dark there after dark. You can bike on the pavement stones or walk on them, but I think skateboards may not work.

And instead of a spacious interior that invites people in, the new campus's monument is filled with the titanic figure of the school's first director. And it seems unlikely that his regal splendor will be disturbed by night-time line dancers, like you'd find near the old campus's monument.

Well, that's all for now.



===== **Addendum: Feeling the Cold**  
=====

After sending that message earlier this week, a remarkable thing happened, so I wanted to include it in this, my rather public version of a journal.

No, it wasn't the first snowfall of the season, though I'll include a couple of pictures of that, too. And it wasn't an end to my continuing health problems, which remain a constant source of annoyance. In fact, my feet continue to improve.



This is the view from my front door this morning.

Yes, that's the very same plaza / parking lot where I took that picture of a hoopoe not long ago for my previous message. And next up is almost the exact spot where that bird took a dust bath, now occupied by some



anonymous young couple reveling in the sparkling whiteness.

I tried to take a taxi this morning, but taxis were not to be found. In fact, traffic of any sort was not to be found. Drivers here don't do well in snow. They tend to spin out. No taxis plied the byways of my local streets. I walked all the way out to the main road (Anshan Xi Dao, in the photo below), and vehicle availability wasn't much better. There weren't any unoccupied taxis on the main road, either. In fact, there was hardly any traffic at all. It's a souvenir photo for anyone who has never seen this street in the daytime with so



few vehicles.

Finally I gave up waiting on taxis and trudged home, which is why I have time to write this. But snow is not actually what I wanted to write about.

This is what I wanted to write about:



Yes, those are my lovely students at the new campus happily practicing their English last Wednesday. And the next photo shows a corresponding group at the old campus the next day, on Thursday:

Those of us who teach in China are well aware of the students' reluctance to speak out during class. I once



estimated that the magic number for a study group of classmates was somewhere around 7. Fewer than that, and the students needed no help to speak readily among themselves. More than that, and everybody just clams up, no matter what you do.

Many teachers resort to awarding points towards the students' grades just to get anybody to share anything. I've never been comfortable with that. I never even gave out gold stars when I taught elementary school in California. So if the demands of the lesson require a student to talk, and nobody will, then I just point to one of them (usually randomly) and command that they say something. True volunteers usually step forward, though, given enough time to think and plan what they'll say.

Anyway, my goal for the students is that they learn enough linguistic theory, and practice it, so that they can go on to perfect their English after the limited class hours that they have spent with me. Or, with the tools that I've given them, they might someday want to master a new and different language altogether.



Simply explaining linguistic theory doesn't work, at least not for the majority of the students. The concepts are too foreign compared to what they're used to, particularly as most of them study engineering, and not biological sciences. The only way to reach them is to build up the concepts gradually and somewhat indirectly, encouraging their own thinking processes to assemble those ideas into a cohesive theory.

Well, I seem to have reached a milestone this week.

I actually teach English somewhat differently every year, as my knowledge of language learning and of the students both deepen. Every year it seems that my understandings and skills for teaching Chinese students "have arrived," and every next year I discover that there's actually a whole lot more to understand.

Meanwhile, I search out more effective ways to build up those linguistic concepts gradually and somewhat indirectly. My latest additions to this buildup, by the way, are "movie talk" and the "face identification area" of the brain.

Well, this week, in my last class on Thursday, as my exhaustion from the two long adjacent teaching days threatened to topple me, I stopped talking at the end of another short presentation segment and again asked for student response. I usually get about three responses, either through volunteers or by invitations.

A young woman volunteered and stood up (another common habit in Chinese schools). She began by reviewing the key concepts of the lesson, speaking slowly (because of the foreign language) and measuring every word. But she didn't stop there. She plodded along, and every time I was about to say thank you and give another student a chance to contribute, she dredged up another concept, connecting it to the previous week's ideas. Where was she headed with this?

And then she put it all together, exactly the way that I had been planning to, and then she extended the ideas just as I planned to extend them in the coming weeks, but with her own spin on them, **thinking** as she continued speaking, even as her ideas provoked me to rethink a couple of things.



And her ideas were all coming out in public, in the middle of class. It was remarkable. It was marvelous. Students had spoken thoughtfully in class before, but not like that —

not taking the risk and putting together entirely new concepts in public. Students had put ideas together before, but not so extensively, and again, not in public.

And I realized that this is what I had been working towards for several years. I wondered if this young woman was simply a fluke. Well, eventually she sat down. I told the class that this was why I love teaching. And I was about to continue with the lesson, when I realized that only one student had given a response at that point in the lesson. Was there another volunteer? There was. And she began an exposition much like her classmate's, but taking her own direction with it!! So maybe it wasn't a fluke. Maybe it's a milestone. But what might I have done to have encouraged it at this time?

Anyway, that's my addendum. And I'll attach another snow picture – that anonymous young couple playing with some (feral?) puppies in that very same spot once occupied by a hoopoe.



## ===== Happy White Christmas =====

There was white on white for Christmas in Tianjin this year. Yeah, new-fallen snow on the ground and new-floating toxic soup in the sky. And it's almost the end of the month and I've written nothing so far this month for friends and family.

## ===== The Community Band =====



This was my second white Christmas in eight years in Tianjin. I don't count some years where drips and drabs of snowfall didn't actually fall on Christmas itself, but instead persisted in cool corners, gathering soot.

I traveled out Christmas morning to see and hear a Dutch

acquaintance of mine, someone who has more gumption than I do, someone who has integrated herself so thoroughly into the local society that she actually joined a community band in her neighborhood. Yes, once again the Dutch people's worldwide influence belies their modest numbers.

The pictures show the dusting of snow in her neighborhood on that morning.

There's something universal about a community band. It really doesn't matter what style they play or what patched-together instrumentation they feature. The charm of a community band is not simply the music – which is usually played competently. It's the community – both the orchestral community and the larger community from which it's drawn. And for this performance, the audience swelled in numbers until it almost attained the size of the orchestra itself! Yes, things don't get much sweeter than that.



Oh, and the omnipresent varied personalities that compose any

community band were evident here!



There's the classic conductor, youthful in demeanor, though maybe not in years, reeling in melodies from out of that thick orchestral sea. And then there's the standard-issue saxophone soloist, coursing with overconfidence through Kenny G

hits. Then there's the shoal of bottom feeders, who would be clarinetists in America, but erhu-istas in China. Such individuals avoid standing out. They swim with the current, happy for the experience, and happy to remain concealed amongst their fellows.

And there are the one or two giants who always stand out, breaching free from the gravitational confines of mediocrity, into the rarefied atmosphere of excellence! Such potential! But in the end, they always succumb to the gentle, but inevitable, pull that again enfolds them into the community.

Chinese Sheet Music – “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”

Oh, and don't forget the M.C., floating serenely on a middle-aged spread — elegance without eloquence.



Yes, all of these requisite roles presented themselves that day before a community audience, mainly composed of children pushed within range of the director, to be lectured at, and initiated in, the arcane traditions into which we were all about to embark.

All of this constitutes the universals of the community band. Indeed, the photo above at left depicts the director herself delivering that cultural lecture before commencing the performance. And you, too, can witness a bit of this cultural magnificence for yourself.

I uploaded one ensemble piece, entitled “The Flower Blossoms in the Full Moon,” to YouTube, where it can be viewed here:

<https://youtu.be/wWQpt0IhZ0Y>

I also uploaded a flute and sheng duet, entitled “Wu Bang Zi,” here:

<https://youtu.be/IPRSikNHY-c>

And finally, there's a sheng solo piece, for those who may not be familiar with that instrument: <https://youtu.be/MJrfBPL9yxk>

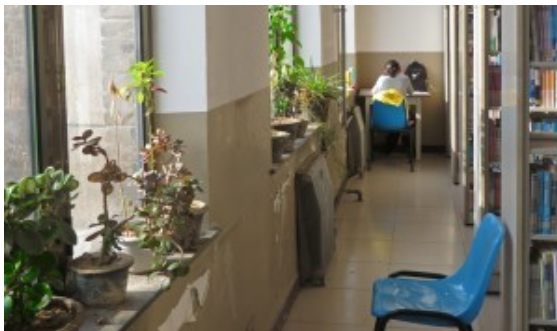
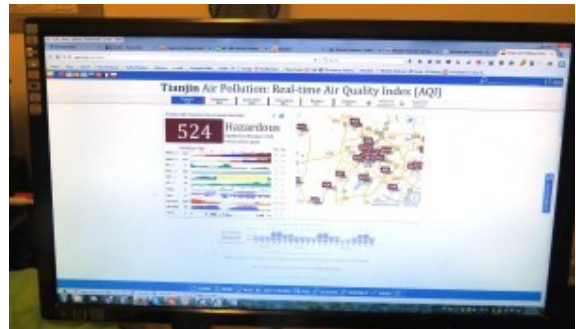


Interestingly, as soon as these pieces were uploaded, they were automatically analyzed and tagged by YouTube's computers. Youtube then informed me of the pieces' titles, and they let me know that two of them were copyrighted works, but that the copyright owner didn't mind (for now) if I hosted them on YouTube. Perhaps, though, if you want to view them, you should look sooner than later.

In addition to this fabulous music, I also celebrated Christmas on the preceding weekend with a group of friends in their office downtown. So all in all, it was a celebratory holiday for me this year.

### Hazardous Air in Tianjin

I guess the only other personal news this time is the surprising level of pollution that I've seen here lately. Indeed, over the past year or two, the atmosphere had seemed to be improving. The power plant that supplies our winter radiator heat stopped spouting exhaust from its chimney, and instead spouted from a series of shorter ones. Probably, as I have heard, it's one of many that have been converted to natural gas in order to reduce atmospheric particulates. Earlier this year, when I saw lower pollution levels (down to only 13 on one occasion), I had been quite encouraged.



However, the last couple weeks have been as polluted as any that I've seen here ever. The level reached 524 at one point, with local readings even higher. It's been most discouraging. Public schools (except for colleges) closed for three days. Even more automobiles were pulled off the road, which meant I lost the

opportunity to ride in a car back from the new campus after class last week.

Automobiles don't represent the bulk of the problem, though. One of my British friends sarcastically commented, "Yeah let's get those coal-fired cars off the road!"

However, one of my students got me a new mask, which I've been wearing regularly. At this point, though, it's no longer white, so I may

need to find another one. And two weeks from now, I can again breathe the air of California, clean thanks to the EPA.

Meanwhile I came across a couple photos that encapsulate and symbolize the difference between the old and new campus's libraries.

A cozy study nook in the old campus's main library.

Look how warm and cuddly the old library is. Small study desks jam into corners of rooms packed with books – the kind of book doesn't really matter, just that they insulate the studier from the disturbances of passersby. And look how alive it is, with plants growing on every window sill. I wonder who waters and fertilizes them.



The grand staircase in the New Campus's main library

Compare that to my photo of the new campus's library. There are books present, of course, at least around the corner at the top, but they don't press in so close as in the old library. There are plants, but fewer of them, and their presence is tamed, as they're stuck in flower pots. Exposed to the elements and to each other, studiers are always at risk of disturbance from passersby. In fact, the grand staircases themselves are so open that the noise of stair climbing can travel and disturb for quite a distance.

### ===== The Kidnapped Statue! =====

It was shocking. The Beiyang Monument on the new campus seemed destined to harbor that regal figure of the school's first director forever. But two weeks ago, I visited the site, and the statue had vanished, as can be seen in the picture at right.



As with so many things in China, I'll probably never find out exactly what happened to it. Perhaps they wanted to shelter it from the cold. It couldn't have shattered, could it?

If you enlarge the picture, you can also see the secret of the

monument's strange dome, and why it never seems quite in focus when you look at it. This photo was taken from the Colosseum building, gazing straight out towards the main gate, with its sacred corridor of history, and its water cascade (emptied for the winter).

### Heading for Lunch

If you look in the opposite direction from that spot, you get the view at right. The path from the entrance continues unobstructed over the bridge. Then it continues west, through the openings in the main library. Next it continues, still in the same straight line, by the student recreation center. It ends in "Youth Lake," which has the same name as the pond by the student center on the old campus.



I snapped that photo at the beginning of lunchtime. The impressive structures dwarf the students streaming towards distant cafeterias. The scene reminds me ever so much of that [famous 800-year-old painting of passersby on a river during the Qingming festival.](#)

The old campus boasts nothing so glorious as that scene. But in exchange, I present the simple autumn fisherman (though the picture was only taken about ten days ago). His presence on that old-campus pond seems as timeless as the Qingming festival itself.

And I held my very first office hours in the new campus two weeks ago! In fact, as far as I know, it's the first time that the office there has been used by anyone.

Eight students came by that day to make up classes that they had missed. I'm not able to do that for the students at the old campus, because the promised office in the old campus never materialized. Well, often promises don't materialize around here.



Mainly, it's a result of shifting leadership. That's what happened to the promised subway stop at the new campus, for example. A city leader was promoted to another job, outside the city, and his successor felt no obligation to honor his commitments. So we're all on buses now.



The cafe at the new campus where I have lunch with my colleagues.

I realized that, at a minimum of forty minutes in each direction, my weekly Wednesday commute to the new campus is the longest commute that I've ever endured. At least I don't have to drive it myself.

On Wednesday mornings, I now take a bus chartered by the university instead of the city bus. It was a bit of a hassle to get listed as a passenger (reservations had to be made the previous month), but it's a comfortable bus. Unfortunately, no such bus is available for the return journey, at least not at a reasonable time. So for the return trip, I still catch the ordinary city bus, with its customary suspenseful jockeying for seating space.

It really makes me appreciate my class sections here on the old campus – with the shortest commute that I've ever had, classrooms that more comfortable, and the convenient access to just about everything that I need (except office space) throughout the day.



### ===== My Unique Souvenir =====

I'll probably be the "only person on my block" in California to have the autograph of the President of Tianjin University, Mr. Li Jiajun himself. I obtained it thanks to my friend and former (*really* former – the guy's over thirty now) student Andy Yu.

Andy's father has had a long and influential presence on this campus, and he even named one of the lakes. He's an amateur photographer who showed interest in my work. He took some of my pictures of the University and donated them to the campus archive, hence the letter of



acceptance (with a serial number) signed by President Li himself. It's all too cool.

### **===== Please Release Me =====**

The dome from a more customary viewpoint

Yes, [Engelbert Humperdinck would fit right in, here in China.](#)



My Australian friend Jeanette works a desk job at the publicity department. Everything for her was new, exciting and a big adventure until the adventure got a little out of hand, because the publicity department moved to the new campus. The forty minute commute (80 minutes round trip) every day took a lot of the joy out

of the job.

So when she heard of an opening in the newly-formed school of pharmacy, located back at the old campus and paying a significantly higher salary, she went for it. And to make a long story short, she succeeded, but not before negotiating.

#### **Another Winter Hoopoe**

Because, [contrary to what Johnny Paycheck might say](#), you can't simply leave a job in China. You've got to get a letter of release from the employer that you're leaving. Without that letter, other companies, let alone other departments in the same university, aren't going to hire you. And therein lies the rub that almost upset her job-changing plans. The old department simply didn't want to let her go, even after the term of her contract had expired.



How does such a situation get resolved? Either it doesn't, and you're just stuck working in your old job, or you find someone of greater influence to intervene. That's what happened in this case, and Jeanette was free to take the job with school of pharmacy.

And last night I had dinner with a Chinese friend who described the exact same situation happening between her positions at an old company and a new one. Without the intervention of an influential person, she, too, would never have been released from her old job, unless she simply didn't want to work for anybody at all. It really makes one appreciate the role of connections in this society.

In fact, I've been told that if I stop working for Tianjin University, I'd better get a letter of release from them, as it might even affect my ability to get visas to visit China in the future. On the other hand, I'm also told that this university is usually reasonable about granting such letters. So I'm not too worried about it.

Such a basic fact of life here! I'd heard hints of such things, but never had it spelled out so clearly until now, after living and working here for almost eight years. Yeah, China, where all information is dispensed on a strictly need-to-know basis.



fabulous, as usual.

Well, I'm going to stop writing this letter, at least, and finally send it off. Happy New Year, everybody. < sigh > It's already too late to even wish you a happy Boxing Day.

I also heard the Tianjin University Choir at the student recreational center this month. They were

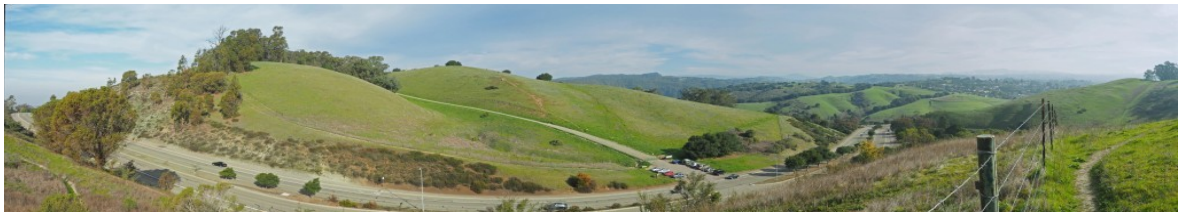


## ===== Happy Green Winter =====

Fairmont Ridge, California

Those of you stuck in Tianjin for the winter might appreciate my home town, Castro Valley, California. In many places, people dream of a white Christmas. In California, with the rainy season starting in the fall, we hope for a green one.

The panorama below, taken yesterday on the outskirts of town, shows the trail up Fairmont Ridge from Fairmont Drive. Castro Valley is to the right, San Leandro beyond the hills to the left. Mount Diablo is visible in the background through the morning fog. If you click on the picture, you get the big version – and it's pretty big this time. Clean air, and shirt-sleeve temperatures.



As I locate the car in the parking lot in the picture, I reflect that I am home, but my home is my mother's, not mine, and I drive a Honda, but it's my friend's, not mine. It's good to remember such things and maintain perspective about the blessings we receive, that we did not work for.



I enjoy taking pictures of this countryside-like area so much, that I might give the wrong impression of the area where I live. It's not actually the countryside, but the heart of a megalopolis. Just before taking the panorama above, I peeked over the hills in the opposite

direction, into neighboring San Leandro and got the shot at left. That's the "Bay Fair" shopping center. Yes, it's an American mall. If you enlarge the shot, you can just make out a BART metro train moving behind the shopping center. There's also a freeway in the foreground.

And now – the obligatory bird pictures from Fairmont Ridge – a junco, a mockingbird, and two yellow-crowned sparrows eating/pollinating



willows.





## ===== Two campuses in Tianjin =====

When I left Tianjin on January tenth, the canals and ponds had frozen over, though still not completely. And the air had put on that typical winter coat of soot. In fact, a couple weeks earlier, the air quality index had soared — the worst I'd ever seen – 668. To commemorate it, I offer a screen shot from my computer:



Needless to say, this was disappointing. Actually, pollution levels in the last couple years had seemed to improve, and the coal-fired heating plant near us seemed to have been converted to natural gas.

But an AQI of 668 sure makes Castro Valley, where pollution levels usually hover between 30 and 40, look pretty clean (As I write this, it's 17, while Tianjin is

180). And if California levels ever go over a hundred, a “spare the air day” is called, and it's really a pretty big deal. In Tianjin, people are happy when it's only a hundred. And that's assuming that you trust the government's numbers in the first place.

In China, ever since November, I had labored under a cough that never got really bad, but never really went away. Until I arrived in California. After about a week, it disappeared, and never returned. I did catch a cold in Oregon, but after two days, that cough was gone, too. Yes, air quality is really something to factor in when considering a life in Eastern China.

One last pair of pictures compares the new campus and the old campus for 2015. The first picture, at right, shows the main bus stop outside the main gate of the new campus. The sun is trying, but mostly failing, to push through the smog.



The campus is located on the right – and one can barely make out one of the distant campus buildings across the frozen moat. On the left, across the street, and behind me, as well as in front of me, there's a

patchwork of newly-transplanted trees – all alike. And on the far side of them lies nothing. I suppose one might count the dirt as something.

But it's really nothing. Nothing for miles, until you encounter the new campus for Nankai University. And Nankai's campus is kind of empty, too, since Nankai University didn't move all their departments at once, like we did. Instead, departments started moving when they were prepared to do so. That seems sensible, doesn't it?

The corresponding shot from the old campus appears below at left. The campus buildings on the left of the frame come almost up to the frozen canal (it's a canal and not a moat because it doesn't surround the whole campus and it leaves room for walking paths between the canal and the wall). The smog is the same, but the other side of the street (on the right side of the frame) is full, not empty! Buildings spring up everywhere, containing all the resources of a huge city. The blue sign in the picture announces the FM frequency for traffic information. And the bus stop is located in front of the buildings in the middle of the picture.



The walker on the left wears a mask, the kind with a valve for quick exhalations, so the air trapped within the mask doesn't heat up like a warmed-over rain forest. That's my preferred model of mask as well.

The cage in the canal contains a small flat boat, used occasionally for maintenance. It's the only boat

that ever sails this canal, which ends at the end of this block. Actually, when they had planned this neighborhood, they had envisioned small tourist boats moving up and down the canal from bases in the nearby "water park." In fact, the road at the university entrance arches high over the canal, precisely to accommodate such boats. However, the plans never panned out. It would have been cool, though. I can **so** imagine a Chinese gondolier belting out Peking Opera. I'd pay for that. Even if they didn't dress up in costume.

Apropos shopping centers, if you follow the street in that last picture into the distance, you'll find yourself at one of Tianjin's largest malls. In Chinese, it's called 大悦城, which translates to something like **Big Enjoyment City**, but everybody calls it just **Joy City** in English. This gives the Chinese English learner, who doesn't seem to like words longer than two syllables, a fighting chance at pronouncing it. And if "joy" and "enjoyment" don't mean the same thing, well, how important can that be?

## ===== Food for Thought =====

In fact, my friend Jeanette and I traveled down to Joy City in early January to share a lunch at a Sizzler, complete with the traditional salad bar. Yes, Sizzler. They didn't do so well in America, but they're still growing in China, not to mention Australia.

I didn't get many pictures that day. However, someone has posted a nice tour of Joy City on Youtube here:

<https://youtu.be/7wIW--G25Nc>

I did squeeze off one camera shot, seen at right. Such a cool model motoring setup. It evokes many happy memories from my youth. The sign in the corner (translated into American dollars) says 7

dollars for ten minutes – 8 dollars for twenty. That's a lot of money for the average Chinese person to spend on such frivolities, but not so much, really, for those in the new middle class.



Other than the Sizzler, the main culinary highlight for this winter was the Shao Bing (烧饼). My colleague Lee discovered this vendor/chef one evening after work. His little stand is set up along the path through our housing development. I assume that the little girl is his daughter. She regarded me with some suspicion throughout the transaction. These sorts of reactions don't happen as often as they used to in Tianjin, though.

Anyway, shao means roasted and a bing is anything flat made from wheat dough. (and every imaginable variation of that form can be found in northern China)

Prior to finding this guy, I had not known about Shao bing, but every time I've bought some, passersby have taken note as I ate them. It's yet another example of something everybody knows, but I'm just finding out after eight years.





But they're great — especially hot off the grill in the early evening. They aren't plain dough – but some spice is mixed in. They are cheap – less than twenty cents (US) apiece. And they are not all oily like most bing, as most bing end up deep-fried in oil. The warmth of a shao bing can really pep you up when strolling home after a long tiring day.



Portable food stands like this are common throughout the city, and often improvised from a wide variety of cast-offs. For example, all it takes is some charcoal and an old oil drum, set upon a pair of wheels, and you have a serviceable and mobile potato cooker.

Some food processors are more sophisticated, though. The strange contraption at left roasts sunflower seeds. It looks kind of like a clothes drier without the front door. Sunflower seeds roll around and around until they drift out the front into a basket, roasted.

Street-side food contraptions come in many forms. Maybe they pop corn. Maybe they puff wheat (with a loud bang). Maybe they melt sugar for sugar sculptures. Some occupy the same spot on a sidewalk for years. Others drift about the city. Maybe they're just never satisfied with one location. Maybe they're just keeping one jump ahead of the licensing authorities.

Of course none of this wonderful variety of food can be found out in the gulag of the new campus. They do, however, have dining halls. And this picture shows a typical meat and vegetable dish, plus a few spring rolls (which are not typical) all poured over rice (which is almost universal in school cafeterias – even in the relatively-riceless north). As you can see, this ignorant foreigner put his chopsticks down on the plate backwards. 太不好意思了!!!



You'll also note the university emblem on the plate itself. Thanks to my friend Jeanette, I arranged to buy four sets of these plates and brought them home as practical souvenirs. So, long after I have returned to America for good, I can still enjoy that dining hall ambiance. And I'm



pretty sure I'm the first "kid on my block" to own these gems.

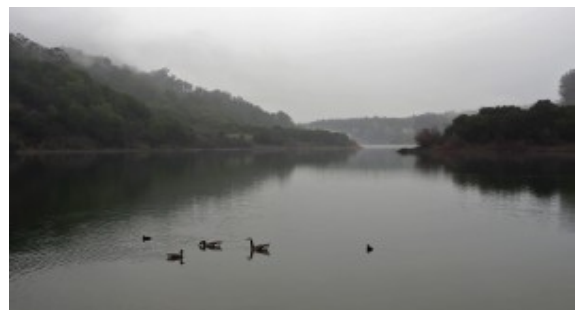
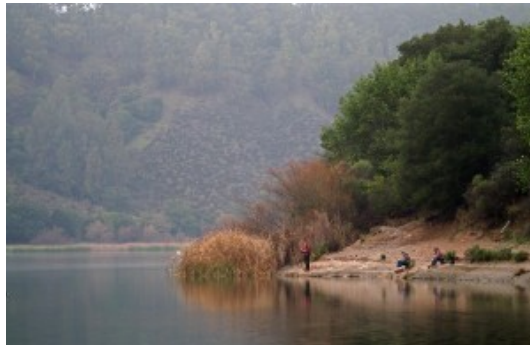


Here is the table at my mother's place in Portland last month, set with genuine Tianjin University plates. We did not, however, use chopsticks that night.

## ===== Sights in California =====

So I did travel from California to Portland and back – a jaunt of

about a thousand kilometers each way. And of course, I got some photos out of it.



After three years of drought, California finally had a normal rainy season this winter. So I got lots of photos of cloudy, drizzly weather, like the moody photo of avian swimmers in Lake Chabot, the lake

next to Fairmont Ridge. There are two coots and three different geese – A Canada goose, a white-fronted goose, and something that looks halfway between them.

Again, it's hard to believe I'm in the heart of a megalopolis when I view a scene of people peacefully fishing amidst hills and forest, unfazed by wet weather. But at Lake Chabot, such scenes are typical.

I also took the path up Fairmont Ridge, as is my habit. As always, the path streamed with people walking their dogs.



In this shot, Castro Valley is in the background. The asphalt road leads to a "children's memorial," a remembrance of Bay Area children lost to violence through the years. The earliest names are now about

twenty years old, and unfortunately, new names are still being added.



On a brighter note, I found that climbing the ridge involved considerably less huffing and puffing than it had last summer. I guess my health had hit bottom last summer, and things are looking up again.

And wandering down the path were, apparently, a pair of Leprechauns (photo at left),

judging by their dress and their size next to the gates, the signs, the bench in the background, and that bulky eucalyptus tree. Well, with all that green, it's no wonder that leprechauns turned up.

### ===== Up to Portland =====

I didn't take pictures driving up to Portland – it was too cloudy and dark the whole way. However, the weather cleared on the trip back. So I snagged another shot of my favorite mountain – Mount Shasta — up in northern California.



In the foreground is a wonderful institution of the Interstate Highway System that I've written about several times – the rest stop. This one is near Weed, California.



The rest stop at left is in Oregon. Rest stops are exactly what the name implies – a place to take a nap, eat a snack, use the (always clean) toilets, etc. They are located every thirty to sixty minutes along the portion of the Interstate outside major towns and cities. And they usually

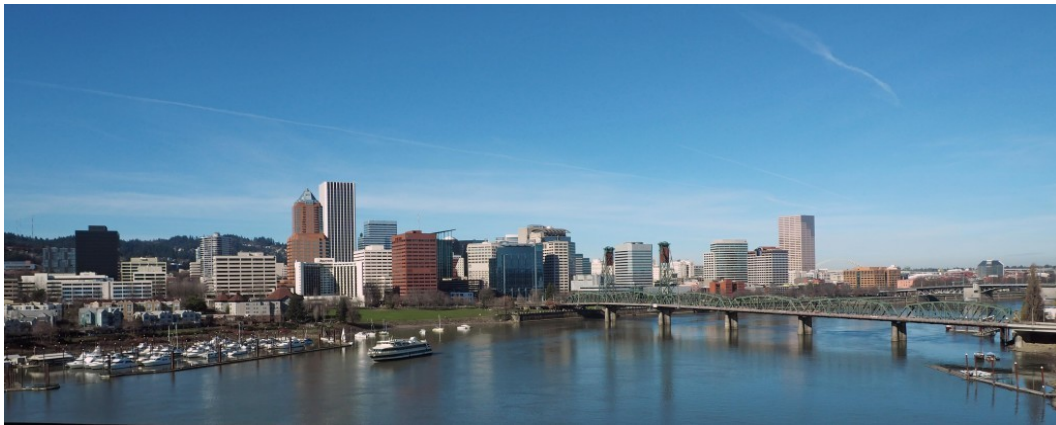
feature beautiful views, if not of mountains, then at least of forests.

One notable surprise was the price of gas. Here's Central Point, Oregon, where I filled up for a dollar eighty six a gallon. The mountain in the background is Mt. McLoughlin.



I think that \$1.86 might be the cheapest price that I've ever paid for a gallon of gasoline, allowing for inflation. I have mixed feelings about such low prices, but it was nice to fill up the tank with a twenty-dollar bill. The trip to Portland takes two tanks. So a round trip for less than four twenty-dollar bills in fuel is quite a bargain. For metric thinkers, that's forty-nine cents a liter. For the Chinese, that's just over three yuan a liter. I never thought I'd ever see prices that low. Of course, the prices are a bit higher than that in California, due to the refinery monopoly there, but still . . .

## ===== Portland Oregon =====



Portland was just as beautiful as always. And it even stopped raining there a couple of times. The picture shows Downtown Portland and the riverfront. Does it always look so beautiful? Yes, it does.

And what about downtown itself? Here's a panorama of Pioneer Place, an upscale shopping area, on a typical grey and drizzly day. That's the stylish Apple store on the left side of the street. There are a few artifacts from constructing the panorama from several smaller shots.





In Portland, I mainly puttered around the house, and spent a lot of time revising my writings about language acquisition. But I did get out a couple times to the movies, and I did visit a some old friends from Tianjin, and I did go out to a car show.



Perhaps due to the fall in fuel prices over the last couple years, the cars that they showed this year seemed bigger than I remembered – except for the Fiat and the Minis, of course.

As always, I paid close attention to the Hondas. And I wasn't the only one. Here are a bunch of Honda fans carefully examining the new HRV.

All in all, I wasn't ready to buy anything, but it was lots of fun to look, anyway.



I also attended a cat show, for the first time in decades. And half of Portland seemed to be there as well. Actually, I had no idea that cat shows were so popular. Here's an overhead view. A half-dozen "rings," where the judging takes



place are located on the right.

Cat shows are different than dog shows. For one thing, all of the judges rate all of the contestants. The cat owners, then, are always carrying their pet from one ring to another and to their cat cages, and back again.

Cats also aren't shown by their own handlers. Instead, the judge just picks up each one in turn. The picture at right shows a judge about to pick up a cat.



Also, cat shows feature many categories of what would be termed "mutts" in a dog show. In fact, there were lots of categories — so many that most contestants were awarded first, second, or third in something or other. And of course, some cats were pretty exotic. Three pictured examples include a Bengal Cat, a hairless cat, and the Lykoi, a new breed that first appeared a couple years back. Its sparse, yet wild, hair makes it look like a werewolf cat.





And, speaking of werewolves, I also took in a lecture at Portland's Reed College given by Dr. Demento himself, that radio disk jockey whose connections to werewolves, fish heads, and Weird Al Yankovich are well documented.

For new fans, here's a YouTube video from Dr. Demento's 20th Anniversary Celebration, back in 1991. I've been a fan since the early seventies, so it was quite a treat to see and hear him in person. Just click on the link:

[https://youtu.be/OOD\\_LUVx1BE](https://youtu.be/OOD_LUVx1BE)

It turns out that he's a graduate of Reed College in Portland!



Here's what he looks like these days. Unfortunately he was fighting off a flu the night that I saw him.

Interestingly, he presented three lectures that week, and none of them concerned novelty music. It turns out he is also interested in the history of popular music. So he delivered a very academic lecture on the various ethnic roots of American music, illustrated by a

lot of recordings that I had never heard before. The lectures on other nights examined Frank Zappa's career, and the history of punk rock.

I took a panorama of the Reed College lecture hall where he spoke. I would point out that this modern room features a chalk board – and no obvious trace of a projector screen. I mention this because, back in Tianjin University's new campus, teachers are all connected to a high tech system where we each have a virtual desktop served up from a central server projected onto a screen in whatever lecture hall we may

find ourselves. Luckily I can still use my own laptop, since the system's bandwidth often isn't sufficient to function under load. In other words, it often freezes.

But when we asked why such a system had been implemented, we were told that colleges everywhere else in the world already had such systems, so China has to catch up! But Reed College seems to give greater value to the simple chalkboard. In fact, my friend (and former student) John, who teaches math at UC Davis, tells me that in Davis they also use mainly chalkboards.

Go figure. Here's the panorama of that beautiful room:



### ===== Nordic Food =====

Since I always feature some Chinese food in these messages, it seems only right that I also feature something American in a message like this.



In this case, it's Swedish American. My sister, brother-in-law, mother and I all went out to dinner at Portland's local Swedish Association. The posterized picture at left was taken with my mobile phone, (I'd forgotten my camera) which has a lot of "artistic" options.

The culinary highlight of the night was Lutefisk, a method of preparing fish that imparts to it

the consistency of hard jelly, with a fairly bland taste.

They say you have to be Scandinavian to like it, but actually, once you smother it in white sauce, melted butter and allspice, it tastes like, well, white sauce, melted butter and allspice, so not bad at all.

Two weeks later, my mother, sister and I drove out to a new Scandinavian heritage center. A local Scandinavian restaurant, Broder's, set up a franchise inside it, so we enjoyed shrimp salad (Swedes are big on shrimp and crayfish), as well as a cream herring salad, and three open-faced sandwiches on brown bread. (The Swedes are big on these, too). The sandwiches were all different. One featured gravlax – cured, uncooked salmon. There was also farmer's cheese and curry chicken apple salad, along with pickled beets. For a culture with a noted aversion to spicy food, these Swedish sandwiches had an intense flavor.



### Back to China

Well, this message was a bit longer than usual, but then, I had two global hemispheres to cover. I have just a few days left in California. I'm planning on heading to China on February 21, for what is likely my final semester teaching there. I haven't decided whether or not to continue these monthly updates. Let me know if you have an opinion.



Tianjini, Saturday, March 12, 2016



===== **March March March** =====

I've been back in Tianjin for three weeks now, my jet lag finally dissapating.

The graduate school modified our class schedule. The old campus classes moved from Thursdays to Mondays, while the new campus classes remained on Wednesdays. Thus, a day of rest opened up between them. And believe me, that single day of rest significantly lightened everybody's mood.

More importantly, the weekly expedition out to the new campus gulag is easier to recover from when it's no longer first, but second in the week.



Room assignments at the new campus also changed. The new locations were furnished with normal rectangular desks (seen in this picture), which fit together in normal rows and columns, so other teachers won't scramble them so utterly in our absence. And my new classroom is located on the first floor – a welcome change from the top floor in a building without elevators. Yeah,

they call it a "green campus" that saves energy.

Oh, and one additional welcome change – a new express bus.

The bus routes down to the new campus were inaugurated last September. The express bus (85¢ US) could make it in 40 minutes, and the local bus (50¢ US) took just under an hour. But that's without traffic, which can stretch either of those trips out to an hour and a half or longer. The same physical buses plied each route, but as of this month – no longer.

Guess which bus in this picture is the express bus. Hint: it's the big one with the line of passengers waiting. It has plush tour-bus seating and a better heater, while retaining the classic side door in the middle for easy exits.

And according to my friend Jeanne, it also features an



annoying voice that constantly admonishes the driver whenever s/he goes too slow or too fast. Seated in the back, I've not heard it, though perhaps my bus's driver figured a way to disable it. Yeah, it's pretty bad when the vehicle itself is a back-seat driver.

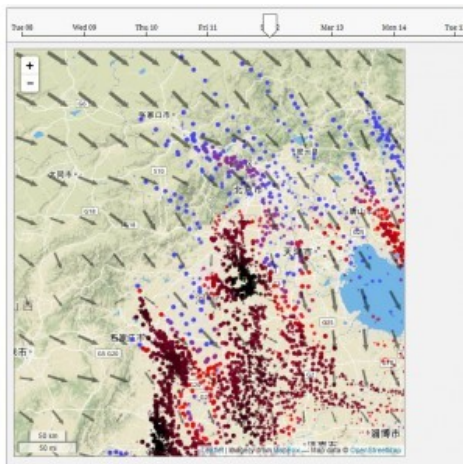
If they wanted to have such a special bus as an express, why wasn't it ready on the first day of the route? Because that's the way things work here. You never over-prepare. When the routes were announced mere weeks before they were to start running, then they started thinking about what kind of bus to use. By that time, the only expedient left was to press any old equipment into service and go for it. And believe me, that first load of hardware featured transmissions ready to fall from their sockets. Only when the new routes became a going concern did they use new buses.

Well, they hadn't posted the schedule or specifics about the route right away, either. Information is currency in this society. You don't toss it around willy-nilly.

### ===== Pollution Indicators =====



Pollution continues unabated, billowing through town in waves. However, I now know that the air filters within my apartment are doing their job. My mother's Christmas gift was a "laser egg," a product only available in China, which can only be purchased through WeChat payments. It's a portable pollution measuring device.



The picture shows it sitting in front of my computer screen at home last Sunday. The pollution index outdoors was 453, hazardous to man and beast. Yet within my apartment, the laser egg measured just 40, a value that would even be acceptable in the Bay Area. It's quite a remarkable number, considering how poorly these drafty apartments are sealed.

Interestingly, by Monday night, due to some brisk, cold, northerly winds, the outside index had dropped to about 70!

Inside, the laser egg had dropped to 4 — cleaner than clean. Yes, we breathe at the mercy of the winds, and these particular winds probably blew some of that pollution all the way to California!

Those who are interested in the variety of winds in Tianjin, and their interaction with pollution and the mountains north and west of here can consult this link:

<http://aqicn.org/faq/2015-11-05/a-visual-study-of-wind-impact-on-pm25-concentration/>

You'll see an animated map like this one. It's actually quite mesmerizing to watch the dirt sweep around our region in complex swirls.

I mentioned WeChat payments. WeChat is an evolving technology, launched in 2011, just five years ago, which has grown into a behemoth that coordinates most of contemporary Chinese society. Yet many people outside of China don't know about it. The Chinese name is 微信 ([\*Wēixìn\*](#)), which means micro-letter. It's like a combination of Twitter and Facebook plus Apple-pay. Of course, at least two of those three are banned in China.

### **===== WeChat =====**

I learned of WeChat from my American friend Lonnie. He used it to maintain communication with his Chinese wife when they found themselves on opposite sides of the globe. It offered something unheard of China – a telephone answering machine, all done up in software. And this one worked for free, even from halfway around the world — anywhere a data connection was available.

Yes, until WeChat, basically none of China's hundreds of millions of telephones ever had an answering machine. How's that for a cultural difference with the rest of the civilized world?

WeChat provides both voice and text messaging, as well as the ability to send pictures. People can form groups for group messages, and they can "follow" friends who post public messages. And nowadays, you can also plug in some cash, and go shopping online. Honestly, if you're not on WeChat, do you have any identity at all in China? And what other sorts of convenient services may they incorporate in the future?

My own WeChat connection resides on my iPad, another bastion of faulty capitalization. A recent development in WeChat's software means that it must remain my only connection, since I can't transfer it to other devices, since those devices must be tied to my smartphone through its camera and its telephone number. I had used my American landline

number to sign up in the first place, and it has no camera. Yeah old technology. It also means I don't get the updated WeChat client with automatic translation.

Of course, the entire WeChat infrastructure is overseen by the Chinese government or its minions. And if they don't like your message, it will quickly blink out. Meanwhile, since it's all tied to your mobile phone, they can sit back and learn everything about your location, everything about the pictures that you take, everything about who your friends are, and everything about your interests and purchases. Honestly, I sometimes feel sorry for career spies. What's left for them to do? I guess they'll have to take low-skilled jobs such as hunting down and deleting objectionable thoughts from people's message streams.

### ===== This month's picture collection =====

My obsession with photos that document campus life continues unabated. This interior shot depicts the second floor of the old campus's Student Activity Center. A student studies behind an architectural model that someone seems to have abandoned there. It's labeled: *"Science Park – the region surrounding Youth Lake."*

Interestingly, one of the modeled buildings is the Center itself! It's the white sail-shaped one at the left in the picture, sitting on the bank of "Youth Lake."



Since the semester's classes had not yet commenced, the room's occupants were few. It was a bit cluttered – old plush seats arranged like cafe booths, easels, pictures, notices. A large painting, carelessly leaning against one wall, shows workmen constructing . . . something. Maybe a boat? Maybe the student center?



The enveloping clutter seems more protective than smothering. As I wandered about, the sounds of distant rehearsals – pianists, choirs, etc. — wandered around with me.

And I also remembered this building from my first trip here in 1998. At the time, an "English



corner" (*for practicing speaking English*) took place just outside it, a couple evenings a week. Foreigners and motorized vehicles weren't so common back then, so I remember standing in the street, in the gathering darkness, surrounded by a small mob of students politely grilling me about everything American for a couple hours. The stressful experience was okay, as I worked to avoid discussing anything controversial or what today would disappear from WeChat, but it was not an experience that I want to repeat.

The corresponding Student Activity Center room at the new campus sits by a corresponding artificial lake also called "Youth Lake." It's visible on the right, through tall windows that seem to invite the outdoors in for a visit.



There's no clutter. There's no inexplicable painting or cast-aside keyboards and architectural models — just re-arrangeable chairs and cushions, scattered across the wide floor. Again, the faint sounds of rehearsals – pianists, choirs, drifted into the space.

The Center's lecture hall was also a decided upgrade to the old campus's center. No one performed that day, but someone gave drum lessons in the back stage area. In fact, the whole building was a decided upgrade. Despite its lack of warmth, it's really a nice facility.



The picture below shows the entrance to the main administration building on the new campus, the building which houses the offices of the president, the publicity department, the international cooperation office,

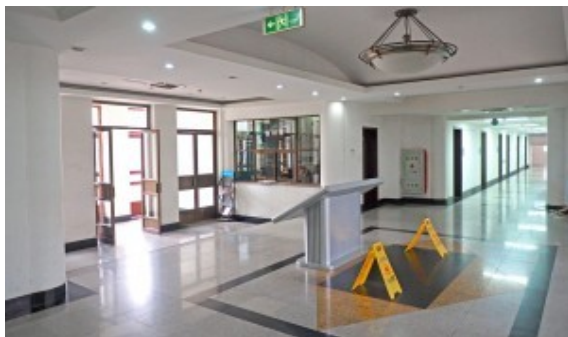
and several other system-wide organizations.

The foyer is literally three stories tall. The exterior entryway is populated by a forest of gigantic rectangular columns which loom even taller. Like most new-campus structures, they are cloaked in faux-brick.

A friendly desk with clerks replaces the more common guard station. Meanwhile, the guard stands at attention by the door, at least during business hours. When you



greet him with “Ni hao,” he does his best to be polite and respond softly without moving his lips or anything else. Of course, nobody but foreigners ever acknowledges the guard’s presence.



By comparison, the foyer in the old administration building seems pretty plain and matter of fact. Yet, this is the building known and visited by Chairman Mao. It boasts no standing guard, but it does offer a podium with an informative guide to the building. What it lacks in grandeur is made up by its historical gravitas.

In the end, I couldn’t find that combination of sky-high ceiling plus guard anywhere at the old campus. Only the trees displayed such majesty. In fact, the camera frame could not even contain their splendid height. How could I depict their stateliness?

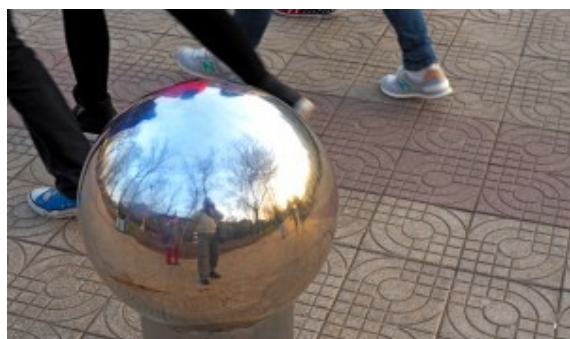


And then I remembered the “ball mirrors.” Four of them had been planted in the sidewalk by the lakeside long ago.

The ball’s shiny surface reflected entire trees, all the way up to the tip-top branches. And in fact, it even reflected me. So I captured it all and even included the bonus of some passing tennis shoes.

This, not the administration building, constitutes the old campus’s true majesty.

### ===== Of Possible Interest to Teachers =====



In December I wrote about a successful lesson and its emotional fallout for me. This month, it happened again, and I realized just what it was that I missed most about teaching elementary school. I realized it as I wrote about it in my journal entry for this week.

It's kind of a long entry, but I placed it at the end, so those who aren't interested can more easily skip it. The background was that the students were supposed to perform skits that day, but in this particular class, some actors in the scheduled groups had been called away unexpectedly. Again, we had to deal with the normal chaos.

=====

My final class at the old campus presented me with a challenge. Actually, that particular section presents me with a problem of some sort every single week. It's my "difficult" group, I guess. Isn't it funny, though, how so often the most challenging students end up being the most meaningful? Yeah, I'm looking at you, Matt.

Anyway, enough students were missing that we could only present two skits, so even after blowing through the emergency activities that I had prepared, an empty third of an hour remained.

I had been thinking recently of "thought shots." A thought shot is a revision technique used mainly in stories.

Yes, it's revision – the heart of good writing. Basically, you insert a paragraph into story events that tells what a character is thinking about them. The purpose could be to better depict a character's personality, or to fill in background information, etc.

In general, a thought shot is tied to the details of the scenes in which story characters find themselves thinking. In other words, if the character is sitting in a restaurant, his/her thought might reflect the décor, the other guests, or the food itself, as each of these items could trigger memories or meditations.

I had included thought shots in my Tianjin English courses for a few years, but I finally gave up on them because few students ever seemed to understand that the thought shot is triggered by details of the "here and now," and is meant to connect them clearly to the character or to other events. Instead, the students' thought shots often wandered away from the scene at hand and into the same sloganeering and platitudes which they'd been so thoroughly trained to regurgitate on command for their whole lives.

But I still taught explode-a-moments, another revision technique which stretches out the moment for dramatic emphasis. So instead of writing "I drank some water," I might stretch out the moment by writing – *"My hand moved towards the chilled glass. Gratefully, my fingers wrapped around it. The liquid inside danced and sparkled. I began to lift it towards my waiting lips,"* etc.

But suddenly I thought – maybe an explode-a-moment could anchor a thought shot?

In other words, one could first write an explode-a-moment. Then, for each sentence or two of that explode-a-moment, write a sentence to describe what the character is thinking about it. I had been thinking that the students ought to review explode-a-moments soon, anyway, so, maybe now would be a good time to do both – review explode-a-moments and try out my sudden thought shot idea.

So I had the students take out paper to write. A list of explode-a-moment prompts already resided on my computer. I displayed it:

*She dove into the swimming pool. He fell from his bicycle. She tossed a paper into the trash bin. The firecracker (鞭炮) exploded. A cat caught a mouse. A house fell down in the earthquake. He laughed so hard at the joke. She picked up the flower and smelled it. He sped around the corner on his bike.*

I chose the last one. I picked up a piece of chalk, and quickly wrote an explode-a-moment for "He sped around the corner on his bike" on the chalkboard.

*As he approached the corner, he leaned to the left. His feet circled faster. His fingers gripped the brakes. He took a deep breath. He slowly turned the wheel. People jumped out of the way. He pedaled faster. The bike flew like a cyclone, until the corner had been passed.*

The students should be able to understand most of that vocabulary. Perhaps not "gripped," or "cyclone," but then I hadn't had time to think more carefully.



The students then chose one topic for themselves and wrote explode-a-moments for it. After a few minutes I called time. My directions, then, were to read each sentence that they had just written, and write what the character was thinking for that sentence. Gee, this exercise

might also trap the students into actually reading what they had just written!!!

First, I picked up a piece of yellow chalk and tried it myself. Could this method produce a coherent thought shot tied to the moment? It felt like I was swinging on a trapeze without a net. I'd never actually tried this before.

*Steady your mind. I don't have much time. Can my feet move fast enough? What if somebody steps in front of me? It would be a tragedy. I'll watch carefully. Yeah, I need to go fast. I'm late.*



Hey, that paragraph hung together nicely. And it's clearly rooted in the events of the scene. I asked the students to do the same thing. They set to writing.

The bell to end the class cut off the students' writing. So at that point, I asked one of them to read what she had just written. She did. And her paragraph also hung together very nicely. And it was centered "in the moment," and responded to the events of the scene that she had written. Cool. The writing sample in the picture above, which I happened to snap while they wrote, also does this. Perhaps this year I'll finally have students who will understand "thought shot."



And I reflected that this sort of improvisation is the daily part-and-parcel of teaching elementary school in America, where the teacher might have five, six, seven, or even eight different lessons in one day, covering as many different subjects. No teacher ever has time to prepare

fully, the way I now could. Improvisation is a necessary skill.

The picture shows an assembly at my old elementary school back in May, 2007. When I once showed it to a group of students here, they couldn't believe it was America. "Nobody's blond," they said.

Nowadays, instead of 30-40 lessons to plan each week, I have only one or two. With plenty of time to prepare, and in order to keep my eight sections all "on the same page," my lessons had become scripted. I wanted all eight of them to hear the same complete message, and scripting was the only practical way to ensure that. I also wanted all the students, who often can't understand spoken English, to understand whatever I said, and the only way to ensure that was to write it all down like subtitles so they could also read it. And I also wanted it all written down to help students who came to office hours.

But even though I always left some room in my scripts for variation, and even though I had written the scripts myself, thus making them presentations that I could stand behind, they couldn't provide the improvisatory thrill of knowing what I wanted to teach, then not having time enough to prepare everything, but teaching it anyway. It's that thrill of charging forward, while not completely knowing which way "forward" actually is. It's the sort of forced risk-taking that wore me out as an elementary school teacher. But I miss it.

It all reminded me of my first lesson here at Tianjin University, almost eight years ago. I had bought a plane ticket from San Francisco to

China, which would put me in Tianjin a couple weeks before classes would begin, according to the previous year's calendar. That would give me time to get over jet lag and plan out the first few English lessons.

But then, I got a note from the English department that the schedule had changed and they wanted all of us to start classes a couple weeks earlier than anticipated. (Such chaotic last-minute changes will be familiar to China veterans). So my first class was now scheduled to begin at about the same time as the plane would be touching down in Beijing.

Luckily, my American friend Rob was already working in the same department, and he was "on the ground" and ready to go. He volunteered to take my first couple class sections for me. In fact, he'd take the first half week, so I could observe him and see what sorts of things the students were used to. Cool.



Everything went according to this new plan. He took over my first class early in the week as my plane touched down and a car swept me off to Tianjin. And then the next day, he led me around to my second class so I could observe him. As we passed down the fourth-floor hallway of Building 18 (shown in the picture) and

neared the door to the classroom, he took out a schedule to double-check the room number. Suddenly, he froze in place and did a double-take. "Hey, my own class also meets right now. Well, good luck!" and with that, he was off down the hall. And I had ninety-five minutes to fill, with nothing but vague thoughts in my mind as to what I would do. I don't remember now what I did back then, but I do remember that thrill of "pulling it off."

Only weeks later did I find out that actually I'd only had to fill ninety minutes, not ninety-five, since a five-minute break was scheduled in the middle of every session. I had kept wondering what all those extra bells halfway through class time were for, but none of the students had ever dared to tell me. Again, China veterans will be familiar with this non-



communicative phenomenon.

Yeah, good times. In that first September here, not only had the schedule been unclear, but the official class lists had not been forthcoming for the first few weeks. My classes filled to overflowing with students who didn't themselves really know if they were supposed to be enrolled or not. The picture shows part of one of these classes.

Up until this year, those had been the largest classes that I had ever had. One of them grew to over fifty students, and they didn't even all fit in the room until finally about a dozen of them were sternly told not to attend, since they weren't actually enrolled, anyway.

Since those dark-age years so long ago, the English department has gotten its act together, though the general chaos of of this year's move to the new campus has definitely put a strain on it all. This was the first year since 2008 that I didn't have a class roll sheet to start class with.

In any case, this week's improvisatory lesson worked. In fact, I would try it with all my sections eventually. Life is good.

## ===== April Flowers =====



I still don't compare to 34-year-old me, who swam a mile in 32 minutes several times a week (never did reach my goal of 30 minutes, though <sigh>). But I feel so much better after switching blood pressure medications. And my feet continue to heal, too. I briskly walked the standard 2.5 mile "Tour de Tian Da" with my friend Jean last week, with no foot pain at all. Makes me want to go somewhere again, for the first time in a long time. Just not sure exactly where, yet. Oh, and I also have 241 essays to grade <sigh> so it won't be this week.



Speaking of my students, here are some of them pretending to be historical figures, discussing current events a la "Meeting of Minds."

When you click to get the closeup version, you'll notice that, as in each of the past thirty years, my students are the most adorable on

earth. And they're smart, too.

And then, there's this: a flavor of Lay's chips that you'll probably not find stateside — Seaweed. Perhaps I should start a chip of the month series to highlight some of our exotic flavors.



## ===== Too Small to Fail =====

I usually attend an international Christian Fellowship on Sundays.

We meet in a hotel about a half-hour taxi ride from here (about four miles, in other words). We used to meet on the campus of a private school, but they got bought out by Nankai University, so we had to move a couple years ago. The photo is a panorama which shows the ballroom where we hold court, but we've rented many additional rooms in the same building complex for various purposes.



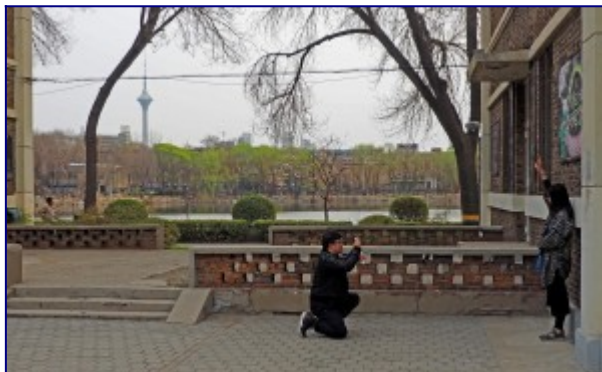


To satisfy the local government, only foreigners are allowed at this gathering, and they check passports at the door to be sure. It's one of the most ethnically diverse congregations I know, certainly more diverse than any back in the states. Occasionally I play saxophone, usually with a group of Africans who really can raise the roof.

So the news that we might have to move again was certainly unwelcome. But unfortunately, the hotel was going bankrupt. It wasn't really a surprise to us, since business hadn't seemed brisk of late. So finally the slowing economy in China was going to have an impact on me personally. The church elders began casting about for another site.

But then, an interesting development happened. The government stepped in and simply stated that, no, the hotel was not allowed to fail — like it or lump it. Instead of closing their doors forever, they suggested that the hotel secure some investors and close just temporarily for renovation. When they reopen with more attractive facilities, they ought to be more successful.

I don't think this strategy would play out quite this way where I come from. But it certainly does highlight the interconnectedness in this culturally distinct society, without which nobody would dare propose such a scheme.



So the only question now is whether we'll be allowed to continue meeting while the hotel undergoes renovation and all the regular staff have been let go. It seems likely, but who knows?

**===== Spring — old and new =====**

My series comparing and contrasting the new and old campuses

continues.

The first “old campus” shot shows some of the oldest dorms in the central campus. These will be torn down sooner or later in order to make space for the business park that’s scheduled to be constructed here.

The picture shows a small porch between two adjacent dormitory buildings. The low fence which frames the porch was simply improvised out of a pile of bricks. But it’s charming.

The door here at the building’s end is not normally opened, though such doors can open in unusual circumstances. I remember once seeing students passing out departmental T-shirts from one of these end doors at the beginning of the year in September.



And then, the young man in the picture took out his camera to capture his girl friend, who must have once lived there.

Extending her arm to give the ubiquitous “victory salute” emblematic of all Chinese young people, she posed herself in front of a student-created chalk drawing, affixed to the dorm wall. Maybe she’d created it. Who knows?

The message in the middle says something like “Youth, without regret, in march step, walks the path to the barracks.” (at least I think it’s something like that). The message below that, on the ribbon says “Software Institute. Barracks 3, Connection 14” (or something like that — just knowing what the characters mean doesn’t guarantee that you know what the message means).

Many old dorms feature these mini- masterpieces, sketched in chalk. They usually last for several months before the rain washes them away or a newer drawing replaces them. They exude a hominess, a charm and warmth, despite the military theme and the cold bricks that back it up. In the distance, the willows have begun leafing around Youth Lake. And further back, the vigilant Tianjin Television Tower demonstrates that we find ourselves in the heart of a metropolis.

The “new campus” picture shows some of the new dorms (I think that they're dorms). They are the rectangular buildings with the faux brick facades.

These brick facades come in two shades. Some people claimed that the lighter ones were dorms. Others claimed that the darker ones were dorms. Like everything else in Chinese, it's probably not so clear cut.



Certainly the darker building in the foreground is no dorm. In fact, it seems built for giants, not people. And this gigantism is no trick of the lens. Try to make out the Lilliputian bikes leaning against it. Of course, none of these buildings feature student-sketched chalk drawings, military or otherwise. Every line must be clean and

sterile.

The following week, I glanced out one of my new-campus classroom windows and witnessed the noontime sun lighting up the flowering fruit trees like fluffy pink sparklers next to the neighboring engineering building.

I grabbed the shot. Later in the day, I took the bridge over there to get a closer look.



Viewed from there, the flowers seemed gigantic, encrusting my classroom building as if it were an arbor. Well, this actually is just a trick of the lens. Those trees, or any of the other trees, will never grow big enough to shroud the overpowering bulk of those buildings.

Still, the spring flowers were appreciated, and a surprising number of them bloomed in the subsequent weeks.

So I sought out flowers on the old campus, as well. And since my previous dorm picture only showed the end of the building, I grabbed this shot of almost an entire dorm building to make up for it.

Yeah, despite the brick commonality, these old-campus buildings evince a much deeper and more rugged character. And everything about them



is solid and weighty.

I've been inside one of those dorms once or twice. It's solid and weighty in there, too, but also drafty and dark. And there are no showers. However there are laundry rooms. There are no washing machines, just sinks. But one can improvise and give oneself a cold shower by standing in the sinks. You can even wash your clothes and yourself at the same time! Yeah, it's not luxury accommodations. I've heard that the new campus dorms are quite luxurious in comparison.



As I stood framing the shot, a man came walking along the wall next to "Youth Lake," carrying a bag and a trident. Was he Neptune overseeing his realm? He kept walking and soon he was out of sight. I showed the picture to my students, and they couldn't understand what he was doing, either. I don't expect any such mysteries to occur at the new campus.

### **===== Melbourne, center of the universe =====**

My Australian friends Jeanette and Norma discovered an Australian exhibit in the 1895 building, the building with an architecture business associated with Tianjin University. It's called "The Black Box," because those black boxes that record airplane diagnostic information were invented in Melbourne. And so was everything else you've ever heard of, apparently.

The exhibit consisted of little black boxes held up on posts, arranged in a large grid in a dark (naturally) room. You take a smart phone, lay it across one of these boxes, and the screen lights up with yet another Melburnian invention. Oddly, there was no fish 'n chips — not even a picture of it!



There were, however, images of child safety seats, camping coolers, power strips, footballs (Australian Rules, though), trash bins, electric guitars, and almost every useful item known to modern man. Leave it to Melbourne to shine light in the darkness!



## ===== Now and Then =====

My continuing series of Now and Then pictures features the track stadium on campus. My first visit to this spot took place eighteen years ago. At the time, it was an empty lot. We took some summer school students out there to play a game of pickup baseball. Not many years after that, the wave of development swept over our university and the stadium sprang up. Over the years, I've visited that spot with many significant friends.



The panorama above was taken in the fall of 2008. My friend Rob and I had come out for two reasons. First, to talk to our departmental head, Mr. Yang, and ask him a favor. And second, like Mr. Yang, to cheer on the colleagues in our department as they competed against each other in various track and party games. Like bullfighting, it's more than a sport — it's a ritual with deep and symbolic cultural roots. Rob and I could have taken part in it, but somehow our American culture was not quite attuned.

Anyway, if you look closely, you can make out the teams from various academic departments passing quietly by in formation as a lead-up to the actual competitions.



So a couple Saturdays ago, I returned to that stadium and rediscovered the exact seats that we had occupied almost eight years ago. And I snapped the panorama that appears above. Since the area was already pretty well developed in 2008, one doesn't see such dramatic changes in eight years as you see by the Hai He river. But if you look closely and

compare, you can find lots of new tall buildings in almost every direction. Yes, development continues apace.



## ===== Happy June Day =====

I had meant to write on May Day, but things got away from me. So now I write on June Day.

I'd been struggling mightily with perhaps staying here one more year. I had actually reached the decision to stay. But when that offer was accepted, no mental peace resulted. Instead, anxiety welled up in my brain, clogging my thinking, and keeping me from sleeping for two weeks. What was going on inside me?

The issues and factors involved in this decision are too numerous to detail in any email, even in one of my typically loquacious meanderings. So consider yourself spared. However, some of my friends here were not so lucky, particularly J and J, Jeanne and Jeanette, whose ears of steel may remain permanently bent ever after.



Long story short — I'm headed home to California at last. After eight years, I'll join the churning turnover of foreigners and Chinese alike from this turbulent city. My old friend Sunny recently asked me what I meant by that. And off the top of my head, the following names dropped out, people whom I'd gotten to know pretty well from my earlier years here:



Rob Moore and his wife, Lonnie and his whole family, Steve Wedgwood and his whole family, my Ukrainian colleague Inga, my other Ukrainian colleague Anastasiia, my Canadian friend Jane, my Canadian colleague Lee, my American colleague Lee, my journalist friend Du Hai, my New York intellectual buddy Pete, my musician colleague Edgar, as well

as some former students, now friends, such as Andy Yu, Liang Juan, Wang Ruijia, and other Chinese friends — Professor Ji, my long-time ping-pong partner Liao Chuan, my friend and tutor Julie, and of course

Li Xiang and his wife.

All of these good friends have left Tianjin. A concomitant exodus of acquaintances has occurred as well. Thank goodness for me that a few, like the aforementioned J and J, still remain to see me through the end of my term here!

Well, as my father pointed out this week, maybe it's time that I simply rested for a month, or for five, and let my frazzled brain heal. And I do feel deeply fatigued. I'm excited about the possibility of regaining some of my old memory capacity, as well as regaining some old friends in the Bay Area. And at this point, my family needs me in America.

And how did my inner self react when I emailed our college that I needed to go home? It's a bit embarrassing to admit, but as soon as I hit the email's "send" button, I dissolved in tears. Partly it was a process of finally letting go, and partly it was a profound sadness at leaving this place, a home that has meant so much to me over almost twenty years, and abandoning the life that I had gradually built for myself. But my inner self seems to concur in the decision, difficult though it was. And I finally slept well last night.

### **===== The signs of a full life =====**

Last weekend I played piano in one of our church musical groups. The team leader was a friend of mine, a young Kenyan, Edgar Sirucha, whom some recipients of this email also know.

He had come to Tianjin University eight years ago, the same summer that I had come to teach. And this summer he will repatriate to Africa, with both a bachelor's degree and an advanced Engineering degree in hand.

So, having arrived and having left at exactly the same times as me, I consider him my term brother in educational seasons.

And so for both of us, it was our final musical turn on the church stage. How nice to play together.

Edgar's dream is to develop a university like this one in Kenya. If the kid of eight years ago had told me that, I would have nodded





indulgently and said "How nice." But when the man of today told me that recently, I could look him in the eye and affirm that, yes, this was a task that, though daunting, he could do. Such has been the pleasure of watching him, and others, grow and develop from children to men and women during my sojourn here.

As I head home, I hope to find similar pleasure in the growth of those from the Bay Area, whom I once knew as kids, and who are now fully grown, some even with middle-aged spread and sparsely-populated crowns. Like the baby who used to be my friend Eileen's brother.



### ===== The Students

=====

Of course, I'll miss the students here. But then, they were always going to leave, anyway.

This pair of pictures, the opening slides of my PowerPoint presentations that week, shows students from each of my two campuses. And despite the huge disparities between those campuses, the students are equally wonderful everywhere.

Although Chinese students are not always easy to teach, they have a profound sense of duty. So whatever outlandish thing the teacher suggests, they're always willing to at least try it, and with enthusiasm.



In this case, they've all dressed up to role-play historical personages. They meet each other across the centuries to exchange views, much like the classic PBS show (authored by Steve Allen) called "Meeting of Minds."

The purpose of the exercise is not only to practice English skills, but also to practice understanding that another person's point of view may differ from yours. This skill is one

with which many of my students struggle.

Of course, I will also miss those Chinese friends who don't plan to leave

town, such as my friend Sunny, whom I've known for almost twenty years. \

And here more "opening photos" from recent PowerPoint presentations.

## ===== Campus Developments =====

### Bikes to Go

This old campus shot shows a group of maintenance workers, supervised by a security guard, tossing old bicycles onto the flat bed of a truck. The workers balanced themselves precariously on the spongy pile of tubes and pedals. Amazingly, as the stream of bikes flew through the air and piled on, none of these workers ever bounced off into the street.



Until recently, most of the parked bikes on campus were "abandonware" a supply built up over several years. It was about time that somebody cleared them out.

For the most part, they'd been purchased as "used" for less than the equivalent of \$10, or received as gifts from older students. When their owner graduated, unless they could sell it or give it to a friend, it's just not worth the hassle of finding a way to dispose of it, so they just abandoned it. And in fact, my former student Han Tao had thought to donate his bike to me last year, even though I didn't really need another bike. But then, it got stolen anyway.

And one other factor may also promote this campus bike encrustation: the law. It is, in fact, illegal to sell a used bike in the city of Tianjin. I can only imagine that this law is meant to frustrate the bike-thief hordes by depriving them of a market. But like most such impracticalities, it's widely ignored. And besides, stolen bikes can always be transported to nearby towns that have no such law.

On the other hand, students might think twice about actually selling their old bike. Why take even a miniscule risk of legal problems when there's no real money to be made from the sale, anyway? Probably, official channels exist for disposing of old bikes, but if they're like everything else here, they're fraught with paperwork and procedural hassles. So why not just leave sleeping bikes lie?



Meanwhile, with the exception of bike thieves, people here are loathe to touch somebody else's abandoned bike (or any other stray junk property, for that matter). So these ancient derelicts remain parked for years, locked in place like faithful cairn terriers, vainly waiting for the master who will never return. Over the

previous week or so, workers had been piling them up all over campus. In fact, they'd also piled up the bike racks, most of which would no longer be needed.

A notice at the entrance to each dormitory proclaimed their imminent impounding. Those bikes which remained, then, would take that one spectacular final flight into the flatbed of oblivion.

#### New Campus Construction



Meanwhile, on the new campus, things are building up, not clearing out. These new-campus gardeners are tending young fruit trees located in the largely-undeveloped western arm of the campus. The smile on this worker's face is typical. All the workers down there are as friendly and helpful as imaginable. In fact, one of the

few pleasures of having to deal with the new campus is the extreme helpfulness of every worker on it.

In the distance, one can make out some tall apartment buildings. These might be the apartments that teachers had been pushed into purchasing over the last few years, since they seem to be the closest apartments to the new campus. None of them, of course, is a brief walk away.

They were sold with the promise that markets and other amenities would also develop nearby. This, of course, never happened. So many teachers now would like to unload them and remain living in the city. It's simply one more example of how one cannot trust high-level leadership to live up to its promises. And I have some experience of my own to add to that narrative. But perhaps that's a subject for later.

As for the carpets of trees growing everywhere along the new campus's periphery, it's good that this otherwise waste land has been marshaled

for purposes both productive and “green.” Indeed, I’ve rarely witnessed so many trees all crowded together over vast tracts of land as I’ve seen here, either on the campus itself (like these) or just outside, edging the roads.

On the other hand, there’s also a lot to be said for hedgerows. Are these trees meant for the university, or is the university just leasing the land to companies who sell plants? Or is it a project of the city government? Who knows?

I only know that this particular field is located across the lakes from the classroom buildings, and that it is infested with hordes of screaming mosquitoes. Indeed, two different mosquito species pursued me that day, and one species of gnat also attempted to block my escape route. It was horrific. And that was in full daylight – just after 9 am! Shouldn’t any self-respecting mosquito be asleep by then?

### Bloomers

This Old Campus shot was taken at the annual crab-apple blossom festival, a very old tradition at Tianjin University. This year, it only took place on the old campus, the one where everybody knows its location.



Why celebrate crab-apple blossoms and not others? It’s just another of life’s little mysteries, I guess. Parents and alumni join the current students in admiring both the flowers and springtime weather.

And on that particular day, several students celebrated by gathering around a giant plastic blossom who is clutching an acceptance letter from Tianjin University. Now wonder she’s so happy!!



Several blocks of one campus street were closed off to motorized traffic. Little booths lined the curbs, some for campus clubs, and others for local craftsmen. Beiyang Square, over at the heart of the campus, also filled with such booths. Various performances took place, and many opportunities to purchase or leave memories

presented themselves. When would any such celebration take place on the new campus, since that’s where most of the students are these



days? Who could I ask about it?

As it happens, many students straddle both campuses, despite the hour-long bus ride between them. This is a ride that students are not encouraged to take for any but official reasons. We can surmise this from the bus schedule – all the lines to and from the campus shut down daily after 8:30 p.m., the earliest closing time of any bus line in the city. I guess they're really afraid that those students are going to get themselves into trouble if they're allowed to stay up so late. It kind of reminds me of my first year in Tianjin, 1998, when we stayed in the guest house, and they locked the doors at 10:00 PM every night. I guess they hadn't trusted us foreigners, either. So do they now think of students as being like foreigners?

Anyway, some students have actually moved back to the old campus, not because people want to let them back into civilization, but because after almost a year, their lab equipment still hasn't been moved. Yeah, something about the promises of high-level leadership.

Anyway, I talked to one of these campus-straddling students. And no, not much crab-apple activity happened down in the new campus this year. Well, maybe someday it will. The carpets of crab-apple trees there are yet rather short.



As always, when I view the new campus, I see nothing but rectangular brick buildings everywhere, such as this shot from the school of engineering, with our English classrooms in the distance. One lone pedestrian makes his way along the vast processional way to the school of engineering's entrance.



This next shot shows the spacious foyer of the computer science building which dwarfs any human who enters it.

And as with the engineering building, few actual humans passed by during my moments there. Luckily for my photo, a friendly work-lady swept by to polish up the floor.

## ===== The People's Stadium =====

Okay — one final entry in my never-ending series of before and after shots. Its the Minyuan Stadium, located in the “Five Avenues” area of Tianjin, the former British concession area, and one of the nicest (and most expensive) areas to live in this city today. Think of it as Sausalito without the house boats. Tall buildings are forbidden there, in the interest of preserving the historical architecture. Here’s what it looked like a few weeks ago in the early spring:



If you look in the distance for Tianjin’s tallest building – just right of center in the panorama — the Minyuan Stadium is located just below it in the picture. It’s one of the oldest (or perhaps the oldest) sports stadium in China. Here’s a panorama that I took of its back side in 2010:



It’s modeled after the Stamford Bridge stadium in London, England, the favorite stadium of Eric Liddell, the famous Chariot of Fire who was born in Tianjin, got the gold at the 1924 Olympics, and then returned home to become a science teacher at a local Tianjin High School.

Not only did they construct the original stadium to honor Eric Liddell, they located it just a few steps from Liddell’s former residence in

Tianjin. This is what his house looks like today — pretty modern for something constructed in the thirties. Actually a lot of the buildings in the Five Avenues areas feature cutting-edge architecture. It's not just their history that makes them interesting.



When I first got here, a big plaque on Liddell's house declared it his former residence and described his work in Tianjin. That plaque no longer exists. I've often wondered why they took it down. The building nowadays is occupied by a business. It's not used as a residence, at least as far as I could tell.

So I was dismayed when they tore down the Minyuan stadium. Perhaps it was getting old and was structurally unsound. Certainly its location in a neighborhood crowded by houses was inconvenient to accommodate fans in automobiles. There simply wasn't much parking around the neighborhood.

What would they replace it with? As it turns out – a shopping complex with an underground parking lot. However, though the stadium is gone, its spirit lives on in the shape of the shopping center. There's even a track made of a soft reddish rubber material where both shoppers and locals can come to jog without jarring their ankles on hard city cement.



And it contains one of the better pizza places in town.

All in all, they did a great job, and here's a panorama of the back side taken this year from the same location as the view above:





### ===== One more Goal fulfilled =====

I have often felt greatly honored to be a teacher in the same city where Eric Liddell once taught, to serve in the area where he once served. In some ways, I'm not ready to leave, and will never be ready, regardless of the necessity. And certainly Eric Liddell wasn't ready to leave when he had to.

But the depth of his still-remaining influence gives me hope that, though my contributions to this city can never be as significant as his, something about them may yet last.

And in the meantime, I'm still fulfilling some long-standing goals at the last minute. To wit, this bird, standing on the bed of an ancient tricycle just half a block from my apartment:



In English it's called a Red-billed Blue Magpie. It may have the longest tail of any member of the crow-jay family. I've known about them since I first came here, but just last week was the first time that I actually saw one. And it was so close to my own home!

Unfortunately the picture is not too clear, but I was in a rush, and

that's the best I could do at the time.

And yeah, that's kind of how I feel about my whole Tianjin experience these days. I was in a rush, and that's the best I could do at the time. I can only pray that I have done enough.





## ===== California Dreaming =====

California dreaming, but not like the old song; more like California snoozing.

My nerves are shot. My energy has bottomed out. I've been home a week. So today I started to unpack. I'm behind in my emails. But I'm enjoying the glorious weather, so wonderful that it could make my eyes fill with tears, except that I'm too pooped to actually squeeze them out.

Before returning, I'd joked that I'd have to sleep for a couple months. It turns out to be no exaggeration. Most days I take two naps. Some days, up to five.

How could I have gotten so worn out? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that China has changed me a lot. It's a challenging place to live, and the attendant growth pains can suck you dry after awhile. It's a paradox, actually, because Tianjin is just full of lovely people, whether students or pensioners, office workers or cab drivers. And yet, it's still a challenging place to live. And so it took me a week after my arrival in California to get up the strength to even open my suitcases.

## The old friends from China

The last few weeks in China had been quite busy. First of all, there were the essays from 241 students to grade, as well as setting out all of my grades in proper form on a spreadsheet for submission to my department. But there was also a lot of packing, a lot of giving things away, and a lot of old friends who wanted to see me one last time.

You know, the last time I wrote, I bemoaned the fact that so many good friends had left town forever. This time, the number of friends that still lived there was brought home to me. And it was I who was leaving forever.



Here, for example, is a picture from our final movie night, with the film credits still scrolling on the screen in the background. For several years I showed such movies in my office. This year, we lost the office due to the move to the new campus, so I had to use a classroom instead.

What matters to me is not the movie so much, but the discussion afterwards. And thus, a group like this is just about the right size. Most of them are students, but several are not, such as my Australian friend Jeanette standing next to me, Mr. Guo on the other side of me, "Jack" at the far right, Han Tao behind me, and Liu Zheng and Li Wen in the back row. And of course You Sihang snapped the picture.

Chinese students in large groups like this are extremely reluctant to venture any opinions about anything, no matter how trivial. So in addition to their friendship, I valued the participation of these older friends in setting an example of how to discuss things like movies, and that it's okay to have a simple opinion. A fully-fledged polemic suitable for publication is not required.



And here's another wonderful group of people — office workers in a company where I occasionally help out with their English.

Sunny, the (fairly) young woman at the left, is actually one of my most long-time friends in Tianjin. I met her eighteen years ago, span of time that hardly seems real to either of us, despite the fact that Tianjin today, like China today, is barely recognizable from what it

had been back then.

The company makes bricks to insulate blast furnaces. When they

started twelve years ago, Sunny was the only employee. Now the company has dozens (maybe hundreds?) of employees located at various sites around China, and it literally exports to the world. The photo shows just a few of these workers attempting to arrange themselves into a group pose.

Two years ago, the gap between this company and my university was bridged when one of the office workers' daughters wound up in my English class!! And last month she got married, so I was invited. That's her in the red dress below. And that's her mother in the green shirt and brown jacket.



They decided to hold a more-or-less Western wedding. They invited too many guests to fit into any restaurant or dining hall.

Tables were set up outdoors, filling a plaza in the city's old Italian quarter. Passersby stopped and stared, perhaps because of the Western style, but perhaps because they thought that such a big to-do must feature somebody famous. Well, they're famous to me!



And here are a few more office workers who didn't fit into the picture above, happily attending their co-worker's daughter's wedding. Note the tourists standing at the fence in the background.

The man in the dark blue shirt at the end of the table is the company driver who gave my dad

and I a ride from the Beijing airport five years ago. Yeah, lots of good memories. I was generously offered his services for my final trip, but I had already made other plans.



And my taxi ride home that night illustrated the fact that I now know just enough Chinese to get me into trouble. The way was dark, punctuated by street lights, and we were coming from an unfamiliar direction, so I started asking about the route. Well, I knew enough Chinese to ask my questions, but not enough to understand all



the answers. And the driver did not take well to the fact that I was questioning his judgment. At one point his dispatcher polled him as to his activities and he answered "Yeah, I've got an old foreigner headed towards Tianjin University."

In the end the ride cost considerably less than the taxi ride that I had taken out there. And in fact it cost even less than that. He refused to accept the whole fare, saying that that I was his first foreigner, so here was a discount. The guy was really irritated, irritated enough to be super-polite, and I kicked myself for not trusting him, since almost every time I've ever wondered about a cab driver's route, it has turned out that s/he was actually saving me money.

My department also remembered me on my birthday this year.

Here I am in a private room in a restaurant with three of my colleagues – Zhang Yue, who coordinates the foreign teachers. Xiao Zhenfeng, who coordinates student testing, and Liu Changhua, our connection to the mysterious and rarified realm of the Graduate department leadership.



I celebrated my final days in Tianjin with lots more friends, including those from the Jian Hua organization such as Jean, Linda, and the Boogaards. I attended the last Jian Hua Community Night of the season, at the Jian Hua office, where they sang Happy June

Birthday to me and two others.

But "*Après moi le déluge.*" The weather had been clear on the way there, but the rains and the thunders settled in while we were distracted singing birthday songs.

I'd recently listened to Garrison Keillor, describing the "long summer rain" at Lake Wobegon. Keillor's rain was soft, cool, and introspective. Tianjin summer rains are violent cascades that fill up the sewers in minutes and flood the streets. My friend Lonnie always kept a special pair of flip-flops to deal with them. I, on the other hand, had worn my expensive SAS sandals that night.

I had departed before the others in order to get more packing done.



Like the others, I had no umbrella. Pretty soon I was swimming through puddles, completely soaked. But the odd thing was — I wasn't at all cold. The rain had the same warm temperature as the air. It was like wading through a giant bath tub with the shower running.

Still, I jumped (literally) at the chance to hop in a cab that happened by. "*Anshan Xi Dao*," I yelled as I entered. That was one of the main streets in the city. Once we'd got there, I'd planned to tell him how to find my particular street. He was very friendly, and he asked me the standard impersonal questions, such as my age and how high my salary was.

But he seemed mystified by "*Anshan Xi Dao*." I told him to just follow *Weijin Lu*, one of the main arteries in the city. But he still looked mystified. "Which way is that?" he said. I was taken aback. Had he just moved to town that day? Still, I didn't want to repeat my earlier mistake, so I pointed vaguely in the right general direction and set to watching what he would do next.

"Which way now?" he asked. "This is *Weijin Lu*."

But it wasn't *Weijin Lu*. I knew that, even though it was raining too hard, and the night was too dark, to make out the street signs. "Look," I said, just drive forward." And he did. "Now turn left." It was *Tong An Dao*, which led to Nankai University. I carefully instructed him on which way to go at each block until we arrived by my apartment. At every turn he got more and more quiet and subdued. As I paid him the fare displayed on the meter he sank into absolute silence.

Well, what do you know. I had actually found a taxi driver who'd wanted to "take me for a ride." I suddenly didn't feel so bad about not trusting that other guy. It was an interesting way to be relieved of guilt. And truly, petty swindlers like this guy really are few and far between among the Tianjin taxis.

Later, my former student Han Tao took me to pizza in the type of place that could only be found in China.

Its presence was anything but obvious — just off *Anshan Xi Dao* and down an alley. And the hallway from the front desk to the dining rooms was paved with an aquarium.

It feels very strange to walk over swimming fish on the way to your seat. If you look closely in the picture you can see one of the coi



swimming around. I can only imagine that a cat would go crazy in such a place.

### ===== Baseball Update =====

And my journalist friends took Jeanette and me out to the ball game!! Amazingly, the league still existed, having survived the sponsor who had lost its money and the CEO who had absconded with the rest three years ago. It survived the fledgling popularity of the game itself. But, like Tianjin University, it could not survive the relentless drive to move facilities out of town and to the middle of nowhere.



The ball park used to be located right in the center of town, across the street from Nankai University. They even made lots of expensive improvements to that field for last year's season. But now that field is closed, to be dedicated to more profitable enterprises, I suppose.

The new field is located even further from the city than Tianjin University's new campus. It's an entire sports complex that includes three full-sized baseball fields, in addition to the normal assortment of gymnasiums, tracks and soccer fields.

And no trams or city buses go anywhere near there. The only way to get there is by private car or a very long bike ride. And the set of rest rooms isn't quite complete either. The nearest one was located in a large building about one kilometer away. And yes, to locate it "there's an app for that." We were only able to find that restroom because Li Wen had a smartphone app specifically dedicated to locating bathrooms. Here's a panorama of the whole field. The bathrooms were located in that distant building with the white arched dome.



The players actually live at the site, since there's no convenient way for them to get there otherwise.

And like everything else in that part of the province, it's still under construction, even as it's being used. The scoreboard, for example, was present, but it lacked the electricity to light up. So we kept score the old fashioned way — by asking the other members of the audience, most of whom were family and friends of the players. Oh, and did I mention that the Tianjin Lions beat their opponents that day?



After the game, we walked to a different baseball field to play with You Sihang's new quadcopter, which snapped the picture of us above at right, laying around next to the pitcher's mound. Yes, it was good training for my post-China activities — or rather, non-activity.



And then there was my dinner with Andy Yu and his family, whom I've known for 17 years. Andy's father is an avid bird photographer. Last year, he helped me donate some of my photos to the Tianjin University Museum. Andy himself is now married with a child, living in Shenzhen, but happily back in Tianjin for a visit that weekend. The picture demonstrates that his daughter, for all of her youth, has

already developed a healthy interest in photography. She's perusing my latest set of snapshots.

In addition to all this, I had dinner with Scott Carlson, the closest our fellowship has to a genuine pastor (as he actually is ordained), and I spent time with Jean, with Jeanne, with Jeanette, with Lee, and with other English teachers and of course, Professor Ji, the Tianjin native whom I've known longer than anybody. It really was a full social schedule, a normal semester's worth compacted into three weeks.

And the final activity was held the night before my departure, when Jeanette took a bunch of us to an authentic Xinjiang (Western China) Restaurant. I met my first Egyptian on that occasion, and he explained to us some of the intricacies about Ramadan, which was currently underway, which was the reason that he was waiting until late in the

evening before chowing down.

It was the consensus of the group, except for me, that this was my last opportunity to savor Xinjiang cuisine. I wasn't so sure that I couldn't find such food in San Francisco, but I didn't belabor the point.

### **===== The old friends. Really old friends =====**



California is in a different universe from China. Nevertheless, my return simply continued this non-stop socializing with old friends, beginning with Karen Cauble, whom I've known since my freshman year at Bixby Hall at the University of California in Davis. She and her husband picked me up at the airport.

And then I slept for two days.

And the next day, another friend from Davis freshman days, saxophonist Bill Barner, dropped by to play jazz, along with the legendary Carlbob, the bass violin virtuoso whom I've known since high school, where he simply went by the moniker "Strings."

And the next day, the two sons of my friend and house-sitter Tim Goodman took us out to breakfast at Doug's Omelettes. And then there was the fourth of July weekend. Our little street is famous for its summer socializing. They scheduled a block party for the Third of July (the actual date of the Declaration of Independence's publication), when I would be here, and also Tim, who is immigrating to England in two week's time.

The block party was well attended – perhaps fifty or sixty people in all, about half of them under the age of 15. Yeah, this street has an astonishing number of little kids. And they all play well together.

And of course there were fireworks. First off, there were more sparklers than I'd seen in one place since I myself was a kid on that very same street.



But surprisingly, there were also the kind that I associate more with



Spring Festival in China, the kind that ascend to about the tenth floor before they explode. Yeah, they're not strictly legal in California. And suddenly our old tales of childhood cherry bombs no longer seemed so impressive.

We shot off fireworks for about half an hour before Officer Friendly showed up to tell us to cut it out. It was too late to be making such a racket, anyway, and some neighbors had complained. He did not confiscate any of the remaining contraband, however. So the remains were ignited early on the subsequent evening. And the neighbors being the neat people that they are, they swept up the spent shells from the entire street .



couple decades.

I also rejoined my Sunday School class at First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, and then I got to take two of my Berkeley friends, Arlene and Kate, to the Alameda County Fair. It was a great adventure to a place filled with the most unhealthy food imaginable, much of it sold "on a stick." Kate had never seen a fair before, and Arlene had not attended one in a

In the picture, the two of them seem aghast at my devotion to "curly fries," my annual county-fair culinary tradition.

We took in the animal exhibits, the crafts constructed by kids, the model trains, and had our ears blasted out by several musical groups performing at various venues scattered across the fair grounds. I declined the suggestion to



try riding the mechanical bucking bull.

But the highlight of the afternoon was a troupe of Chinese acrobats, who hailed from Hebei, the province that surrounds Tianjin and Beijing.

One acrobat tossed bowls onto his head while riding a unicycle on stilts. Other acrobats juggled clubs from one to the other from similar unicycles

And here, another acrobat balances at the top of a tower of chairs, all of her weight on her teeth. Hopefully she has a good dentist.



To me, finding such people performing in our local county fair illustrates the continuum between peoples worldwide.

And then yesterday, I had lunch with my dentist friend Jerry. Well, I still haven't found a Xinjiang restaurant in the



Bay Area, but here, right in the little town next to mine, we found an Afghan restaurant.

Sure, kebabs in the two countries aren't exactly the same, but they're both still delicious. And they're certainly a lot healthier than the curly fries of the previous weekend.



And it turned out that Ramadan had finally come to an end, so relatives of the restaurant's proprietors, dressed in traditional garb, stopped by to wish them well. And then they were off to visit more relatives.

But not before I could snap a picture of them through the window where we were sitting.

And later this morning, I'm off to

Sacramento to celebrate my dad's birthday. It's truly been a most social month, spread out over two hemispheres. And so many pictures this time are snapshots of people, in contrast to my usual landscapes.

It's a time of endings and beginnings, not only for me, but for the fore-mentioned Garrison Keillor, who this week has finally ended his Prairie Home Companion career. The final News from Lake Wobegon can be viewed on Youtube at this link:

<https://youtu.be/ZNSI9XemXdo>

As for future email messages, I'm not sure. Now that many Chinese people are on my list, I suppose I could write about America to them instead about China to here. And Bill pointed out things like the Dadaist festival in San Francisco, something that most people outside of Paris, New York, and California would have little familiarity with.

So, we'll see. In the meantime, I have a mound of normal email to get caught up with. As always, I welcome any communication back from the people on this mailing list. As I told my friend Jeanne last month — no long compositions like this one are necessary. Even just fifty words (or 51) would be welcome!

Bye for now,

Paul

