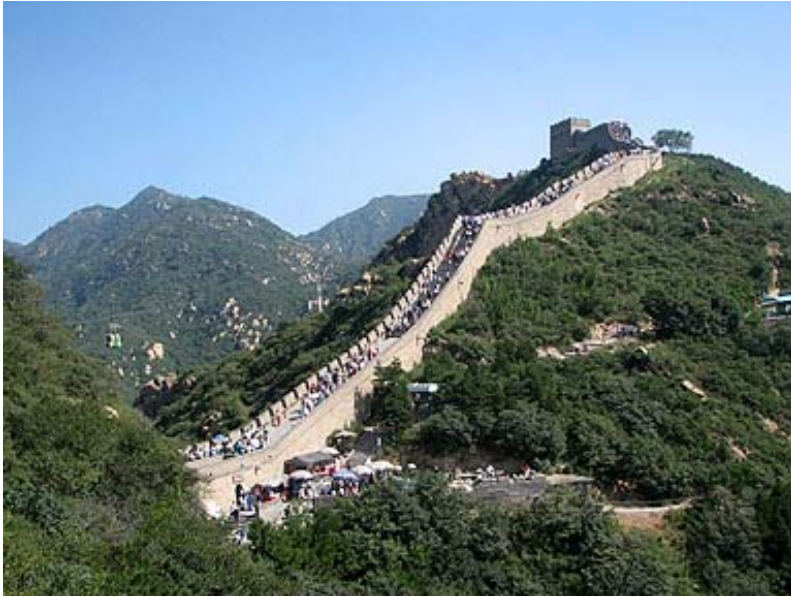


Visiting China: A Different World by Mary Bucy



As we flew in to Beijing, I could see the Great Wall through the haze and knew this would be a unique experience. Somehow, I'd been expecting similarities to other Asian countries, but the China I saw was different. And it was nothing like Monmouth.



For starters, I'd never seen so many people. I've always known there are a lot of people in China, but it's a big country so I was surprised to see how concentrated they were. I sometimes felt as if I was at the State Fair, jostling through the crowds. It was a very social, festive feeling.



Housing all of these people requires some creative building. There simply isn't enough land for single-story homes, so they build up. There are tall buildings everywhere, many with cranes on top as construction continues. Often there were 50 or 60 cranes within view from a given location. Many of the housing developments were similar to our apartment complexes, with several matching buildings clustered around open garden-like areas. But it was as if someone had stood above all of the buildings and simply pulled them up 30 to 40 stories. I kept thinking, "This is what Salem would look like if we stretched it straight up."

Not everyone lives this way, of course. My guide, Deng Lu, told me *she* doesn't live in a tall building. "My building is only 7 stories." Since returning, I've been asking my Chinese students about their homes. I've found one student who lives on a farm, but the rest live in buildings about 35 stories high.



All of these people need to get around, and the roads are filled with cars and bicycles, all sharing the same space. There are lanes marked, but they are treated more as guidelines than rules. Drivers maneuver using their brakes and their horns. When we shared that horns are used less in the U.S., our driver was surprised. “How does anyone know you are coming up behind them?” Right-of-way appears to go to the largest vehicle, and definitely *not* to pedestrians. Our drivers honked many walkers out of our way as we drove through town. Our guide (and WOU student), Yulin, guarded us carefully as we negotiated the roadways and confided in us, “Neng Yang made me promise to keep you safe.”

I keep wondering what it must feel like to come from this environment to quiet little Monmouth, Oregon, where every car stops for students in the crosswalks.



We saw very few children while we were exploring, and were told that this was because they were in school or studying. Instead, we saw parks full of adults playing and exercising. There were groups dancing, groups singing, groups playing paddle-games, groups playing card games, groups doing pom pom routines. There was playground equipment everywhere, but instead of toddlers, there were retired people on it, exercising and socializing. Tens of thousands of people; laughter, music, activities. What a happy place to grow old!



Food was also not what we are used to eating in Monmouth. Even our Chinese restaurants don't serve the meals we sampled in China. There was an emphasis on vegetables and meats, including many that I didn't recognize. This was in part because they eat plants and seaweeds that we don't have here, and in part because they eat portions of animals that we choose to throw away. Our Peking Duck dinner, for example, included fried duck hearts, roasted duck tongues in sauce, sliced duck liver, fried duck skins, and a variety of other duck dishes. They simply waste nothing. I was told many times that eating the entire animal was good for the body.



We also tend to disguise our meats so that there is no clear connection to the living animal from which it came. But this was not the case in China. Often the living creatures were on display in the fronts of the restaurants for our selection, and when cooked, they were still recognizable. Two new dishes for me were sea urchin and conch.



Our guides in China were delightful. In Beijing, Yulin Kang (a graduate student at WOU) showed us many of her favorite places. In Dalian, Wang Shuai (a WOU freshman) shared the beauties of an ocean city. And in Shenyang, my guide, Deng Lu, talked with me at length about her education in China. From this, I learned a great deal that gave me insights into the backgrounds of the students in my program.

Chinese families take education very seriously. Children attend school many hours each day, often from 8 am until 8 pm. They take extra classes on weekends and during the summer. When they are not in school, they are studying. Over and over, I was told how busy the children are. They have no time for playing or “hanging out.”

Deng Lu explained to me that most of her schoolwork involved reading and taking tests. Although she had lived in Shenyang all of her life, she had only ever visited one of the many historical or natural sites she shared with me. She had never been to a museum. She had never seen any of the fossils or minerals we saw at the visitor center except in books. Like her classmates, the first paper she ever wrote was during her senior year in college.

Deng Lu took her studying seriously because she would have to take a test to qualify to attend college. There would be only one opportunity to pass and if she failed she would not be able to attend college. Once in college, she would not be allowed to change her course – no changing schools, no changing majors, and no choice in coursework. I thought of my own two sons, who have each changed schools and majors, taken time off to travel, and taken many courses outside their majors.



At Shenyang Normal University and Dalian Normal University, I spoke to classes about the everyday life of students in our schools in the U.S. and about the kinds of things we teach and value in our education system. I shared with them some of the types of education people pursue following high school. When I talked about community colleges, I pointed out the diversity in students; from those earning GED's to those simply taking classes for fun. At this last comment, the entire room exploded into laughter. The idea of taking classes for fun was not even on their radar. Education is a serious business – it is *the* way to secure a good job and a solid future.



This hit home even more strongly when Denvy and I had an opportunity to meet with potential students and their parents in Dalian. The choice to study at WOU is a major decision and is not taken lightly. These students are not coming to the United States simply to expand their cultural experiences, or to take exciting stories home. They are coming to study and succeed. They are coming because it is seen as a pathway to careers and success. They are investing everything they have to make this happen. And I was reminded how big our responsibility is to ensure that their money is not wasted; how important it is to provide the support necessary to help them succeed.

This has been an enlightening experience for me, to visit a culture so different from my own and to pack so much into a short two weeks. But what an experience for our Chinese students, who come to a strange new place not for two weeks, but for two years. Many of them have never been outside of China until they arrive on our campus. What a shock this must be; what adjustments they must make. I admire them for this, and I'm glad I've had the chance to glimpse the culture they are leaving behind while they live and study with us.