

This is a collection of stories about ordinary Chinese. How they live. How they work. How they survive. How they prosper. How they dream. This book provides a peek at the life of ordinary Chinese through stories written by Chinese graduate students in journalism. The students are earnest journalism wannabes who were willing to search out stories that you would not normally read in the western press.

These stories introduce readers to workers, preservationists, cooks, entrepreneurs, peasants, a store clerk, the owner of a bookstore, student teachers, potential graduate students, international students, elderly Chinese who remember World War II, ambitious children, municipal police and bicycle police, and Chinese practicing their English. These stories are rich in information that sometimes does not reveal itself on first reading. Every time I've read this book during the editing process, I've been grabbed by another gem of information I had not seen before. I could have included more stories but believe that what appears here is representative of the students' work and the range of their topics.

Before I left the United States to teach at Tsinghua University in Beijing, People's Republic of China, in the fall of 2005, I asked Bob Heisse, the editor of the *Centre Daily Times* in State College, Pennsylvania, if he would provide a link on his newspaper's Web site to my students' feature stories. He readily agreed and thus began this book, although that was not my original intent.

I shared the link with many people, especially family members, and it was my younger daughter, Amy, who was so enthused by the stories that she suggested I publish as many as I could in book form. Since she and I were at the moment discussing using a print-on-demand service to publish other books, the idea made sense. Print on demand has democratized book publishing, especially for those of us with small audiences, but lots to say.

In addition to Bob and Amy, let me thank my editor, Sally Heffentreyer, who has done a good job over the years of saving me from myself. As I like to say, no writer is above the cursor (it used to be the pencil) and so I'm grateful every time she's saved me.

I was no stranger to China when I went there to teach in 2005. I first taught in China in 1994 at the China School of Journalism, which was part of the Xinhua News Agency,* and between then and 2005, I had returned on five short visits. On my first return in 1996 I met Li Xiguang, then a national correspondent for Xinhua. Eventually, Mr. Li became the director of Center for International Communication Studies and professor in School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University.† Between his visits to Penn State and my visits to Tsinghua

* Xinhua means "new China," hence it is the New China News Agency. The news agency is controlled by the government.

† Early in 2006 Mr. Li was appointed the executive dean of the School of Journalism and Communication.

University, we became friends. So when I saw that Tsinghua was interested in hosting Fulbright lecturers in journalism, I applied, knowing I would be working with a kindred spirit.

My primary assignment was to teach feature writing to a class of graduate students whose second language was English. (I don't speak Chinese, so I was relieved that my students could accommodate me.) The first assignment, a short one, was to write about some aspect of the National Day holiday week, Oct. 1-8. After that, the students had to write three 1000-word feature stories, defined by me as stories that focused on people. However, one of my students went off to write a story about a man who had trained his bird to talk in Mandarin and English and came back with a story about the bird, whom he said was more interesting. I have always told my journalism students to be flexible; now it was my turn. (See "A language genius" by Jin Cheng.)

I took the title of the book from a letter a middle school pupil wrote to a Tsinghua student who had been his teacher for a year. (See "The best times we spent together" by Zhao Minghui.) "When I'm writing this letter," the pupil wrote, "I'm thinking about all the best times we spent together." You may also read the book's title as referring to my time teaching at Tsinghua, in fact, every time I've been in China.

I took the cover photograph on the Tsinghua campus one August morning. You can find more of my photographs from China, as well as other locations, at <http://home.comcast.net/~tberner2003/swshome.htm>.

A few tips. Given that this book was published in the United States, I assumed a U.S. audience and converted most metric figures.[‡] I also converted Chinese currency into dollars by dividing by 8, roughly the exchange rate at the time. All conversions have been rounded off, so save yourself the trouble of checking my math. And Chinese names, don't forget, follow the telephone book approach, that is, surname given name. Chinese frequently use complete names when talking to each other, unless that person is close to them. So I would usually address my department head as Li Xiguang. On other occasions, he was Mr. Li or Li Laoshi (Professor Li). And when I wanted to get personal (and I know him well enough to do that), I called him Xiguang.

While on the surface these stories appear to be routine, they were challenging for the students. The students needed to deal with people who were reluctant to talk to the press, even the student press, and once past that hurdle the students had to ask questions that in the western culture we wouldn't give a second thought. In one case I made a student

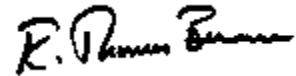
[‡] The more I travel around the world, the more I regret that the United States abandoned its plan to adopt the metric system 30 years ago. It's interesting that I have friends in Australia who can convert metric to English units in a second while I have to think about it. I would guess I'm a typical American in that regard.

ask the subject of a story why at age 59 he wasn't married. She cringed. That would be so disrespectful, she said. Sorry, I wanted to know. It was germane to the story, which was about a man late in life bemoaning his lonely state. I suggested a softer way of asking the question and she got a polite and detailed answer. Her subject was not offended.

You will also see that each student seems obsessed with describing how tall someone is and how much the person weighs and what he or she looks like that. That was part of the drill and I've left that information in most of the stories. I found some descriptions to be downright charming. Of course, you will also see what was on the minds of the students and one thing they seem to pick up on was someone's accent. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Each student published here has given me the one-time rights to his/her stories. Should this book ever make a profit, I have agreed, at the suggestion of one of my students, to make every effort to see that the profits are placed in a scholarship fund for Chinese college students in China.

Finally, I have adapted all of these stories for the English-speaking eye and ear. That in no way diminishes the original work. When working in one language and writing in another, it is the intent that means the most. All of these stories are well intended.



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