

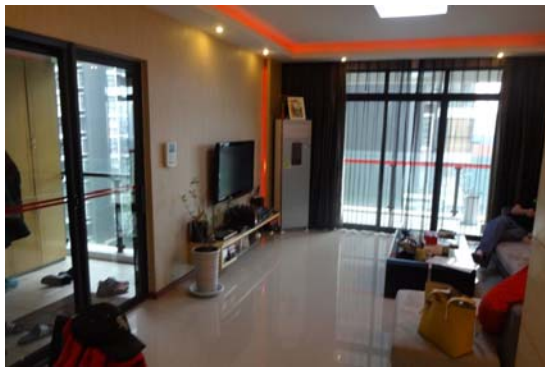
Journal - Around the World in 79 days - Spring 2013

Part 5: A fourth weekend in China - in Chengdu, (not Shanghai) - March 29- April 1, and some education connections

29 March, Good Friday: It was a fascinating flight out to Chengdu, leaving at 5:30 pm and taking about 3 hours. We left from Shanghai's Hongqiao (inner city) airport, the same flight as Daniel took two weeks earlier. The plane was full and with many older country people who clearly been working in the fields much of their lives, with very wrinkled and brown skins from the sun exposure. They were a very lively group wanting to see everything possible out of the windows. They are much smaller than the typical Shanghai people, although that may be just the age difference, older people having grown up in a not so prosperous time with food shortages.

On arrival, there was a phalanx of taxis waiting, very well organized and essentially no waiting line: the driver knew the name "Jalafour", the Chinese pronunciation for "Carrefour", plus the local area name "Tongzelin". [Daniel: Excellent directions! D&A have this great little phrasebook/directory which has lots of items written in the Chinese script, since many people cannot read the Arabic script equivalent, or even read maps - that and a good map are key needs for getting directions to anywhere in China]. Daniel and Anita live about a half block from the Carrefour store - a memory throwback from having such stores near us in both Lyon (1971) and in Paris (1981) those many years ago - I suppose they can be classified as the French Walmart, but I remember the boys entertaining themselves in the comic book section, while Mary and I did the grocery and other shopping. And that reminds me of another story about the "Walmart game" played typically by high schoolers hanging out there - ask me about it sometime...

I texted Daniel from the taxi, and they came down to meet me at the entrance gate to their gated community of 6 large apartment buildings - I somehow missed them on the way in since I went around



Living room, with entrance foyer & porch, note the red lighting, big TV (and Daniel's leg)!

the back instead of the front where they were - but soon reunited and escorted up to their great eighth floor apartment: big living room, 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, kitchen and several outside areas - lots more space than their previous abodes, all modern conveniences, etc - why, it



View from porch

could even be in America!

30 March, Saturday: Saturday morning was panda time - we left early to get there for their breakfast - they live in a zoo on the northwest outskirts of town, whereas Danita live on the south east side. The taxi-driver was unnaturally non-aggressive in his driving compared with others we have experienced, but mostly he chose directions that seemed to lead him through all the construction traffic jams, and then having cleared the final ring-road, he got lost in a maze of



They gave us directions, amidst the grave decoration sellers, still smoking

villages and construction equipment sites. Amazingly, he turned off the meter while apologizing extensively.

Hence, it was more than 2 hours later when we reached the pandas, their bamboo



Good as gold



Bamboo lunch

breakfast having long disappeared. Fortunately for us, they also have fresh bamboo lunches, which we were able to watch them eat. It is a nice big park-type zoo, with lots of bamboo forest, although the pandas are either indoors, or in small yards built on the outsides of circular buildings, while the visitors can stay on a path outside and/or go

into the center of the buildings. The pandas are mostly each in their own enclosure, apart from a mother and her 18 month old twins, who were fun

to watch rolling around and over each other; hence it is hard to believe they are dangerous to humans like other bears, especially since they look so warm and cuddly...However, I didn't see anyone jump into any of the enclosures to find out:

even the staff delivering the bamboo meals just threw the branches over the walls of each enclosure.



Black swans

It is really a panda research lab where they let visitors come and see the action, so our entry fee mostly goes to help research to expand the limited number of existing pandas - I guess I was never able to persuade visitors to pay to come

and see my lab, even though the breed of "atomic spectroscopists" is definitely shrinking in numbers - the only places they may be expanding are in places like China, Japan and India - I must come here more often and help train a few more....

It was also a nice hilly park for walking around, with black swans in the lake below the cafeteria which we eventually ended up at for some late lunch. The taxi ride home was much faster and less eventful - the driver went completely to the other side of town, and must have known that was the construction-free route. Such local knowledge is essential given all the construction going on in Chengdu, building roads on top of roads and new flyovers etc; new



One twin with his/her mother



Red pandas - different species



Dancers in the panda park

housing blocks are going up all over to accommodate the city as it expands beyond the present 13 million or so population (Daniel can correct me on that number).

We walked a short distance home through a nice pedestrian shopping area - their Tongzelin area is clearly a fairly high class residential area, with most of the apartment buildings either new and/or elegantly older within secluded gated park-like areas.



Cliff, Anita, Daniel and chair

In the evening we went for poker and pizza (and beer) to Cliff's apartment high up in one of the very nice older established buildings. He also rents - his apartment is smaller, but with huge pieces of 1950s style furniture (see pic), plenty of room for himself, since his wife is working in the USA. A very nice relaxed game of poker in which three of the four of us won - Marco had been expected, but was busy working, and we plan to see him Sunday evening for dinner, if he and his wife can squeeze time off from work.

31 March, Easter Sunday: Another great day!! Their friend Kaarina lives in the same group of apartment buildings - another teacher - she normally lives in Canberra, Australia, but is German by birth - she is here for a year while she takes an 18-month "sabbatical" from her Canberra job. She and Anita had been preparing various courses for our picnic Easter brunch in the park. The



Brunch finished

park was a short taxi-ride away, and we first settled down at a little café near the entrance - an interesting experience since all we bought from the café was cups of tea (lots of choices) and a replenishing thermos full of hotwater. A delicious picnic meal at one of their tables: I have to use Mary's description:

"Anita--who had wisely turned hard boiled but undecorated eggs into deviled ones (a nice irony) for Easter celebrations", plus potato salad and other goodies made by both Kaarina and Anita. Daniel and I were very grateful for their work.



The pen is mightier than...

Afterwards, we went for a walk in the park - lots of fascinating full size sculptures (many of them looked like Confucius and his friends), manicured gardens, woods, glades, lakes and wooden bridges - it looked like China! Many chinese families were there too, plus lots of wedding couples being photographed beside the lakeshore; clearly a favorite place for a Sunday afternoon - their equivalent of "A Sunday afternoon on the island



Entering the park



Climbing the entrance urn



There were lots of signs

of La Grande Jatte”: Seurat should have been there to record it - but we went one better(?) We had our digital cameras!



Three guys and a girl



Hold your gun this way



Three guys and a guy

Home to rest before joining Marco for Easter dinner at "The Hotpot" restaurant: the four of us sat around a double hotpot -- the inside had a non-spicy sauce, while the outer was spicy. As the meal progressed, meat, fish or vegetables (Marco did the ordering) were added (sequentially), where they cooked, and then were fished out and eaten from one pot or the other as one wished...with plenty of Chinese beer to cool the palate. An excellent meal, and very nice to catch up a little on Marco's life in China.



Wedding couples reflecting



Marco on his scooter

Marco is the nephew of Mary's brother Denis' wife Susanna (did you get that?). He has been in China, mostly in Chengdu for 5 or 6 years and fairly recently married a Chinese lady - who, unfortunately, I did not get to meet. It is clear from the conversations that she and Marco both work most of the morning noon and night, one reason he missed our Saturday evening poker session.

After seeing Marco take off on his scooter home, Daniel, Anita and I took a long walk home to make up for all the eating - it seemed a bit too long for my liking - is that really old-age creeping in? - I decided afterwards, it was more the speed of those young guys striding along that was different - I think I should stick more to Mary's speed.

1 April, Easter Monday (Dyngus day in South Bend): Perhaps also April fools' day, since all of the museums I had planned to visit were closed that day - but that turns out to be every Monday - so I will just have to visit Chengdu again, but not on a Monday.



Scary guy at the entrance

I started off by taking the metro line #1 (one station is close to Danita's) north to the Wenshu monastery, one of the two large Buddhist monasteries in Chengdu. It originally began about 600 AD, but much of the building took place in the Qing dynasty in the late 1600s to 1800s. It consists of many courtyards and different prayer buildings; each building being essentially one large room, with a large sculpture piece in the center - many paintings and sculptures can be seen as one walks around, and of course, in my ignorance, I can only guess which are old and which are new. In one courtyard is a

“peace tower” (see pic), with an octagonal pathway round it; many of the visitors took a slow praying walk around it, well protected by the guarding elephant and lion statues. The buildings are the traditional Chinese wooden structures with tiled roofs, many of them decorated with animals, not just



A typical roof corner

on the corner flourishes, but also sometimes a lion or monkey would be crouching in the middle of the tiles.



Peace tower

Next stop, again via the subway, plus a short walk through a wooden furniture shopping area to the Science museum - this was in the same park that we visited on Sunday - but of course, it was closed! An armed guard and a closed automatic gate. So a walk back past the furniture stores, which

had some really fine Chinese (or possibly Indian) made wooden chairs, tables and tableaux, and over a smelly little creek to the subway station. I reckoned that at least the Sichuan University archeology museum might be open, but that was not to be either. It was another short walk from the closest subway station down to the river bordering the university campus and the museum. The Funan



“Altar” in a prayer building



Roof lion



Funan river lock and dam



The bridge restaurant



Fishing or courting?



A stork and reflection

the Fu and the Nan rivers in Chengdu) is very low, as it must be near the end of the dry season. I crossed a road bridge next to a dam and lock, the latter looking as if it had not been opened for many years: congregated there were hundreds of white storks, and also about a dozen fishermen - I did not see either species catch anything to eat. At the museum, only university faculty were allowed to enter, but after I visited the men’s room, one of the guards offered to show me around for 50 Rmb. I declined his enterprising offer (the museum is usually free) - in part because most of the museum was in the dark.

Back to the subway: this time past the towering Shangri-La hotel, and an interesting old-style bridge across the river (it was a restaurant area). I shunned both, and walked back past another construction-site for yet more apartment buildings alongside a little tributary, and just beyond found a little restaurant used by the workers



Workers at lunch



A construction dinosaur

for their lunches, underneath a building still under construction - I guess one could call it the workers' Shangri-La. I think most of the clients were amused to see a foreigner there, but great friendly service, and good but fairly spicy food. Further up the street next to the subway station (one stop up the line from where I had gotten off) was a famous pre-school - Eton House! The "campus" was not worth a candle to Daniel's Eton House in Singapore: instead of spacious hilly parkland, there was a small school yard half-filled with school buses, the school itself looking like quonset huts sealed in by high-rise apartment buildings; and who knows what sort of learning goes on there....

Since parks were definitely open, I subwaysed back to the People's Park - by my sampling of just two cities, I guess that every Chinese city has one: lots of people there watching open-air entertainment - dancing, balancing acts, singers, etc; a buyer/seller market of people offering their services or vice-versa - just as in Shanghai, tables of people playing cards and checkers: some families, but mostly older people who have had to retire at age 65 when still wanting to lead an active life.



Games in foreground; exchanging services in background



Leaf writing

There was a beautiful enclosed formal garden with banzai trees in coffin-like structures, a goldfish pond, etc.

From the park it was a three block walk into the center of town, dominated by a huge open plaza plus an enormous statue of Mao at one side: behind him was the science and technology



Bonzai coffin

museum, but of course that was closed too. I found the Starbucks for a relaxing cup of coffee inside with air-conditioning, since outside it had reached the mid-seventies; there also was a large table of sprawling, talking American students - they must have completed their physics courses and had nothing more to do.



Can you see Mao?



Here he is!



A new family!

From there it was a straight shot on the metro to the Danita apartment: just in time for a cup of tea with Anita before Daniel arrived home from school; he then ensured that my taxi driver knew the way to the right airport terminal (using his handy-dandy phrasebook) - it actually rained on the way there, but no stopping the plane which took

off about 9 pm for Shanghai, and then a fairly crazy (rapid) taxi ride back to my hotel, getting there right on midnight. Thank you Daniel and Anita for being such welcoming hosts - we will have to bring Mary next time!

Three days later I was on my flight to India.

Some education connections:

(a) Liu Q'ian teaches early education at East China Normal University in Shanghai, and a few years ago worked at the Erikson Institute in Chicago for 3 months, staying at our 5411 S. Harper house during that time, and of course became a very good friend of Mary. Searching her out took a bit of time, because of wrong email addresses and telephone numbers, but we finally made contact, and one evening, she and her son Daniel (he's about 14 and interested in science) picked me up and drove me out to their apartment which was not far



The Liu family at home

from Fudan University, in fact very close to the new Fudan campus. Their apartment is spacious with beautiful wood floors and room for all three of them to have office space - not all chinese live in little places, as generally advertized! Qian's husband is an artist - I would describe his art as abstract



What do you think it is?

with a very chinese style of broad inky-brushstrokes - all his pictures I saw were monotone in color, but very dynamic in subject, and as he said, the explanations come from the mind of the beholder: he was generous enough to give me one painting to bring back to Mary. We had a wonderful Chinese dinner, all cooked by Chen, lots of dishes including some wonderful sliced beef (there will not be any of that in India) - as is the case there, one thinks you have tasted all the dishes, when out comes another one - I don't understand how the chinese keep so slim. A very nice visit renewing friendships - next time with Mary!

(b) Roger's daughter is a senior at the Fudan International School - she is fluent in chinese and not interested in science, but she and Roger arranged for me to meet the high school science staff - like most of this type of school, it focuses on the International Baccalaureate program, with its associated exams, and presumably the tiger-parents who want their children in the best international universities (e.g. Notre Dame). The science staff have a biweekly 1-hour get-together, and one Wednesday, I was able to join them, and give a hands-on experience explaining our Indiana program of modeling and guided inquiry in high-school science classrooms. A few days later I came back and observed three classes in chemistry and in physics. From the limited exposure, I concluded that the skills of the teachers are quite varied, and like the Singapore international schools, they have very little equipment or spare cash to buy more.

Probably Fudan is a little better off than most, since the University is quite prestigious. However, it was great to see one teacher (the chair) was following exactly the same procedures that I presented - probably not because of me - the topic was optics, and she discussed a viewing problem with the students - how could you see the stage of a performing



Fudan International School

rock group when you are at the back of a room, assuming that you have two mirrors?... each group of 3 or 4 students had to come up with a solution and then present it to the whole class. The girl-groups had an advantage - they whipped out their makeup mirrors and essentially developed little periscopes - most of the boys were quite unsuccessful, but during the presentations you could see them learning from their female peers!

The month in Shanghai has disappeared incredibly rapidly. During the time here I gave a minicourse to the atomic physics graduate students (one session per week -5 x 2.5 hour sessions total); and worked with two or three of the students on the beginnings of probable EBIT experiments - clearly, these latter will not take place till later, and so during the last few days, Roger and I have been planning for a return visit next year, and we plan to definitely schedule it when my hard-working wife can take some time off and come too. (It helps that Fudan is very generous in providing support, much more so than my India jaunt to Delhi).



The hotel breakfast buffet

And finally...

Silk is a major industry in China (as you undoubtedly know), especially as part of the export business of Shanghai: so with some pointers from Roger's experiences - his silk shirts are hand-made to fit; one of the students and I ventured forth to a silk market - not the one that all tourists are led to, but one for the locals - a wonderful 2-story building crammed with little cloth shops, making anything you want to wear: I planned to buy a silk suit: we went to the little shop frequented by Roger, and after choosing the style and materials, they made the measurements and promised to have it ready 5 days later. I thought you might like to learn how a suspicious scientist likes to check things out: here is a part of an email I sent to Mary:

The silk shop gave me a small piece of the material with their card and bill (I paid half before leaving). Is it really really silk? and not a synthetic material like rayon..

#1 - I used the computerized magnifier that I am taking to Woodstock to take a picture of edge of the unravelling material - it passed the test.

#2 - I tried burning a little bit of it - synthetic material will melt and make little balls as it burns - whereas silk just burns more slowly, turning brown, then black.

It passed that test too - so it really is silk!

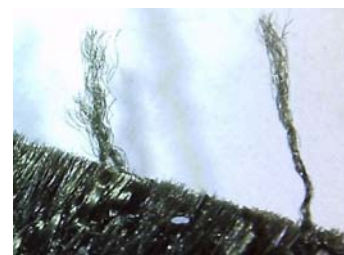
Of course, as Roger pointed out afterwards: silk is cheaper here than any synthetics.

Five days later, we went back, tried out the suit, (it fit excellently), paid the balance - about \$120US total, and taxied home. I wore it on the last evening for the celebratory dinner with Roger and his wife.

On to India....



With Zhangzheng Zhao



Magnified about 200 times