

Technical communication in China: a personal perspective



by Geoff Hart

Nimen hao. (C'est a dire : Bonjour a tous!) *Wo hen gaoxing renmi nimen!* (C'est a dire : Je suis tres heureux d'être ici avec vous. I'm very pleased to be here with you tonight.) *Wo xing Hart, wo jiao Geoffrey.* (Je m'appelle Geoffrey Hart. You can call me Geoff) And a quick translation joke: *Wo shi jianada ren.* (Je suis très fier d'être québécois. I'm Canadian, eh?)

That's about all the simultaneous translation I'll be doing tonight, though it was certainly something we did a lot while in China. But I promise that most of the rest of this talk will be in English.

In this presentation, I'll be talking about my experiences during a recent trip to the People's Republic of China. The goal of the trip was to make professional contacts and begin an exchange of knowledge between the West and China. The two Chinese characters on this title screen, *jiao liu*, express that concept nicely: they mean "an exchange of ideas", and a colleague calligraphed them for me as a representation of the purpose of the trip.

The goal of our delegation

People to People Ambassadors:

- Founded by Eisenhower in 1950s
- Emphasizes diplomacy that survives beyond the careers of diplomats
- Goal: exchange of knowledge and learning other customs
- Led by George Hayhoe

In 2002, the Chinese government decided it would be appropriate to bring technical communicators to China so we could discuss our work and spread knowledge about the profession.

The sponsors of our trip were “People to People Ambassadors”, a charitable organization founded by President Eisenhower shortly after World War II.

Having served as president, Eisenhower was well aware of the limitations of “professional diplomacy”, and in particular, the fragility of such relationships as a result of their vulnerability to political fads of the day. Because diplomacy changes as the government changes, diplomats can’t always achieve lasting international understanding. In contrast, “civilians” can build ongoing relationships that endure despite changes in government.

People to People’s philosophy is simple: by sharing knowledge and interacting personally with our counterparts in other countries, we can learn to understand each other. As a result, much good can be achieved in the long term..

Our delegation was formed and led by Dr. George Hayhoe, editor of *Technical Communication* and past-president of the Professional Communications Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

My contribution

- Representative of Canada (informally)
- Expertise in writing, editing, and translation
- Roles and responsibilities of scientific communicators
- Goals and design constraints for electronic “books”
- Translation and localization

As the only Canadian in the group, I informally represented Canada during the trip and provided some balance for the Americans. But more than that, I was invited along based on my expertise as a writer, editor, and translator.

I also gave three different talks at various times during the trip:

- As my work primarily involves scientific communication, I was asked to describe the kind of work that Western scientific communicators do, and our responsibilities in doing this work.
- I also talked about the various types of online (electronic) media that are available, how the media constrain the design of information, and how the desired message constrains the choice of medium.
- Lastly, since I work as a French-to-English translator and editor, I discussed the challenges involved in translating and localizing information based on my work in Montreal.

Caveats

This talk isn't the final word on China!

- Only 2 weeks spent in China
- Visited only 3 cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guilin)
- Local guides for most of the trip
- But supplemented by book learning and some wandering on our own!

I don't want you to think that what I have to say in this presentation is the final word on life (and technical communication) in China. Among other things, this is obviously too complex a subject for a short talk—it would take a book, plus many years of experience to do justice to the topic.

Thus, don't forget that my impressions are based on:

- Only 2 weeks in China, which is hardly enough to fully understand a single city, let alone such a large and populous country.
- Based on visits to only three cities (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guilin). Describing China based on these three cities would be like trying to describe Canada based on a visit to Ottawa, Toronto, and Banff.
- We were taken around the country by local guides for most of our trip, so we lacked enough time to really explore China on our own—the best way to get to understand a country.

All this being said, don't forget that when I say “the Chinese” during my talk, treat that as the generalization that it is!

This shouldn't scare you off. I did learn a lot from doing some pre-trip reading, and I kept both my mind and my eyes open. And I did get to meet and talk to many Chinese, both with and without the supervision of our guides.

Technical communication in China

Not yet a profession. Instead:

- Engineers and programmers write manuals
- Journalists (TV and print) write about science and technology, but emphasize personalities
- Translators “localize” documents
- Chinese attempt to create English too!

The most interesting part of the trip from the perspective of technical communication is that there's no such profession in China. As was the case in the West in the first half of the past century, most documentation is produced by the people who develop the products. You can imagine how well that works.

Professional communication in China primarily takes the form of journalism, whether for TV or print. And for many reasons, including the fear of inadvertently releasing state secrets, most journalists focus on the personalities rather than on the technical details.

Translators make some attempt to “localize” Western documents, but not nearly as much as you'd think. Most Chinese have simply resigned themselves to working with English text and English rhetorical styles.

Interestingly, English is becoming sufficiently widespread in China that many ESL (“English as a second language”) Chinese consider themselves competent to translate into English. Mostly they're not, any more than the average Montrealer is capable of fluently translating into their second language, and the next screen shows this quite well.



How not to advertise your product: “Series [note serious] high foodstuff choiceness raw material produced meticulous. A present first choose [not choice] best enjoyment.”

Communication in China?

Technical communication is not yet a profession but there is professional communication in:

- Television?
- Journalism?
- Advertising?

Radically different mindsets from technical communicators!

Although there's no true profession of *technical* communication in China, there are certainly professional communicators. The difference is that they work primarily in different fields.

Television is one of the more surprising fields. I had a chance to watch some Chinese TV while preparing my talks for the next day's meetings, writing my journal, or sedating myself before bed. It's scary how close Chinese TV is to western TV: they have reality shows, comedies, soap operas, and action-adventure shows. And as in the West, you can get the gist without knowing the language.

Related to TV is the profession of journalism. Chinese news television is indistinguishable from the Western variety. It was like watching Connie Cheung on American TV or Mitsumi Takahashi on CTV!

Advertising is another profession. As was the case for TV, it's very heavily influenced by Western approaches. Both Coke and Pepsi are promoting their products to the youth culture; Pepsi has even manufactured a "boy band" akin to "Sugar Jones" to sell their product.

These professions obviously teach radically different mindsets and rhetoric from those adopted by technical communicators, so you can imagine the results of applying these strategies to technical communication. The documentation that would be produced by these professionals would bear little resemblance to Western-style documentation.

Understanding China

Keep in mind two things about Chinese culture:

- Intellectual property isn't a modern Chinese concept
- The culture works by different rules than ours

There are a couple of additional things you need to keep in mind when you try to understand the context for communication in China today:

- Intellectual property isn't a familiar concept in modern China.
- The culture works by a different set of unstated rules than govern our social interactions.

Intellectual property in China

After joining World Trade Organization:

- Government is serious about copyright etc.
- The message hasn't reached the people yet
- So.... a long way to go still (Harry Potter)

China's recent move to re-enter the national community included its joining the World Trade Organization (WTO). One criterion for entry into the WTO was the need to accept Western attitudes towards intellectual property. Joining the WTO is very serious business to the government, and they take it seriously.

Unfortunately, this attitude is alien to people in a Communist culture, and Chinese thought has always been strongly collectivist or group-oriented, so the concept of intellectual property is proving to be a tough sell.

For example, everyone's heard that China is the home of pirated or knockoff material. Because the government now recognizes intellectual property, they have prohibited the manufacturers who produce knockoffs of famous-label merchandise from selling the knockoffs. That means you generally won't find knockoffs in stores—but if you know who to ask, the material is still readily available.

To show the conflict more clearly, consider another example. When we attended a performance by the Shanghai acrobats, the announcers warned us in three languages not to take pictures because doing so would violate the rights of the artists to the intellectual property they were creating through their performance; however, no sooner did the lights go down than people started filming, despite the presence of ushers at the end of each row of seats.

A final amusing example: Harry Potter books have been pirated in China for a long time, but even the pirated editions have now been pirated. So there's still a long way to go.

Two things you need to know

Unwritten rules govern all interactions:

- *Guanxi*: networking plus obligations
- *Mianzi*: “face” (reputation, credibility, influence)
- Both still as important as they were 1000 years ago!

Every culture works according to a set of unwritten rules, and you can't hope to work effectively in that culture if you don't understand them. These rules shape interpersonal relationships and affect communication styles and rhetoric.

The first is *guanxi*. This resembles the Western concept of networking, but includes a web of obligations that is unknown in the West. In China, *guanxi* is a massively pervasive, informal accounting system that accounts for “favors owed and favors bestowed”. If you've built up a credit, you can call upon that credit to ask favors. If you're indebted to someone, you must repay them. Because *guanxi* is so pervasive, it's difficult to start a relationship by yourself; it's far easier if someone intercedes on your behalf by calling in their own favors. But once you achieve *guanxi* with someone, the sky's the limit. Western companies that don't understand how to work the *guanxi* network universally fail in their efforts to penetrate the Chinese market.

The second is *mianzi*, usually translated as “face”: this means your personal and public reputations, and it's the coin you trade on when you attempt to influence someone's decision. Because it's enormously important to preserve your own *mianzi* and that of anyone you deal with, direct criticism of any sort is dangerous. It invites retribution, and diminishes your own *mianzi* for causing harm to someone else. For example, when we finished our formal presentations and talked informally with our hosts around the table, it was very important not to contradict (for example) George, our delegation leader. Doing so would have caused him (and thus us) to lose face.

Beijing, China's "Ottawa"



Our delegation's first stop was in Beijing, which is China's Ottawa. In addition to the obvious fact that it's the national capital, it's also seemingly very comfortable with foreigners, in large part due to all the embassies in the city. As a result, Beijing is a very westernized city, with English-character labels for street names written in *pinyin*, the Romanized version of Chinese speech.

Unfortunately, Beijing is a relatively ugly city and suffers from Stalin-era design. Moreover, it's enormously polluted; my nose and throat burned from the smog throughout my stay. But oddly enough, the city is scrupulously clean; there's no litter in any of the main areas.

Beijing is currently very much a city under construction, with cranes everywhere. This is largely because they will be hosting the 2008 Olympics, a source of tremendous national pride.

Beijing

We met with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers



Our first meeting was with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. We met half a dozen of their senior members in a private dining room of the Kunlun Hotel, not far from “embassy row” and the Beijing Hard Rock Café. This photo is typical of the sort of meetings we held, with the senior members of each group sitting together, the remainder of our hosts on one side of the table, and our delegation surrounding them.

Beijing

We met with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers:

- Mostly engineers: ca. 2200 members in Beijing alone
- Few communicators: only 13 in the professional communication society
- Nobody wants to learn to write well!

Given China's increasing importance in the world electronics industry, it's not surprising that IEEE is well represented. In Beijing alone, they have 2200 members. Interestingly, only 13 of their members belong to the professional communication society, which speaks volumes about the perceived importance of technical communication at this early stage.

One thing we learned was that many professional scientists, including those who were present at this meeting, now have a difficult time attracting students to whom they can pass on their knowledge. With the growing perception that the computer industry is "the" place to get rich and make a future, that's where all the students seem to be headed.

As in the West, few of them want to write, and thus, few of them ever develop what we would consider good technical writing skills. This should eventually create lots of opportunities for us: someone has to do the writing!

Beijing

We met with Beijing E-C Translation:

- 56 employees mostly involved in what *they* call “localization”
- 600 thousand words per month
- Modern tools (translation memory etc.)
- No true “localization”

We also met with a company called Beijing E-C Translation. These people were the nearest thing to a “dotcom” company I encountered during my brief stay, and had all the hallmarks of a Western dotcom: a flat hierarchy, a very youthful culture, and seemingly a happy place to work, despite fairly intense work pressure.

The company currently has a total of 56 employees, and these people crank out enormous amounts of work: a claimed 600 thousand words per month—equal to more than 10 thousand per employee (including the managers). They have all the latest computers and software tools, and subcontract as necessary to a large network of translators when it comes to crunch time.

Interestingly, they don’t do any of what we’d call true localization: they do literal translations of Western interfaces and text, with no effort made to adopt Chinese rhetorical styles. And they do this for big customers, such as Hewlett-Packard. Their opinion is that Chinese readers have become so accustomed to Western styles of expression that there would be little value gained by translating the rhetorical style too. I don’t imagine this will last once the Chinese begin flexing their muscles and demanding equal treatment with the rest of the world.

Beijing

We met with Chinese Association for Science and Technology Journalism



We also met with representatives of the Chinese Association for Science and Technology Journalism. In this picture, you can see one of the standard events at any meeting: an exchange of gifts. In this case, George Hayhoe is presenting a poster for NASA's "The Virtual Astronaut" project, something of very great interest in China.

Beijing

We met with Chinese Association for Science and Technology Journalism:

- 100 members in the Beijing area
- Mostly journalists, but some editors, publishers, and professors too
- A very different emphasis from in the West: personalities, not science

CASTJ is a relatively small group. Beijing has a population of some 12 million people, but there are only around 100 people in the Beijing chapter.

Chapter members seem to have impressive credentials: most are working journalists, but many are newspaper editors, publishers, and university professors.

The emphasis in Chinese journalism is very different from that in the West. In science reporting, the emphasis is more on personalities than on the science; for example, at a mathematics conference a few years back, the media focused on Stephen Hawking's physical disabilities and largely ignored his theories.\

I suspect that this kind of thing results from the lingering effects of working under a regime with extremely tight controls on the press. In the past, it would have been professional (and perhaps literal) suicide to write anything too “sensitive” and particularly anything that challenged the authorities.

One senior journalist told us a particularly revealing anecdote. While preparing for a press conference on the country's 10-year plan for science and technology, he discovered in the planning document that China intended to create its own manned space program. Sensing a scoop, he obtained written permission from the Minister for Technology to report this story. When the editor saw the story, he liked it enough to publish it under his own byline—resulting in a police visit to discover why he was releasing state secrets. It took the letter from the Minister to clear things up.

Beijing

We met with Chinese Encyclopedia Press:

- Encyclopedia of China: 20 thousand contributors in 66 disciplines, 1.5 billion Chinese characters
- Major efforts to standardize scientific terminology in China: more than 1 million terms!
- Considerable assistance from outside China

One of the more interesting projects we heard about was undertaken by the Chinese Encyclopedia Press.

Their main project is the “Encyclopedia of China”, a project that required the efforts of 20 thousand contributors in 66 disciplines, and produced an encyclopedia containing 1.5 billion Chinese characters. That’s not quite equivalent to the “word count” in a Western document, but still gives an idea of the scale of the project.

Another of their projects has been a major effort to standardize scientific terminology in China. Their terminology database has now expanded to include more than 1 million terms!

The Press has received considerable assistance from outside China, including the advice of terminology experts from Industry Canada and the European community. The project is ongoing, so there are likely to be opportunities for Canadian terminology experts for the next few years.

Beijing

We met with the Beijing Association for Science and Technology



We also met with the Beijing Association for Science and Technology, an offshoot of the Chinese Association for Science and Technology Journalism. Their goal is to devote more journalistic emphasis on science and technology rather than just discussing the personalities of the scientists.

Beijing

We met with the Beijing Association for Science and Technology:

- More emphasis on science, but still not “scientific communicators”
- Signs that things are beginning to change
- Opportunities for science writers?

This group is an offshoot of the Chinese Association for Science and Technology Journalism. Their goal is to devote more emphasis to science and technology rather than just the personalities behind it, but they still haven't fully made the shift towards what we could consider true “scientific communication”.

Things are, however, beginning to change. Professor Tao Dan recently published a book intended to teach students and journalists how to write reviews of science and technology books without ignoring the science. Her suggestions are eminently sensible, and make an excellent contribution towards advancing science journalism in China.

Again, I think there are likely to be opportunities here for skilled technical writers as China makes the shift from “safe” personality journalism towards a more detailed exploration of the issues raised by science and technology.

Shanghai, China's "Toronto"



The second stop on our itinerary was Shanghai, which I've called "China's Toronto" because it is in many ways the country's second city, and trying hard to be predominant. Shanghai has become very "yuppie" and the pace of progress and emphasis on economics makes it an obvious parallel for Toronto.

However, Montreal's multiculturalism and position as a major river port also make it a fitting match for Shanghai. Indeed, under former Montreal Mayor Bourque, Shanghai became our sister city. Unlike Montreal, though, Shanghai understands progress. They've created an entire new city akin to Laval, but roughly the size of Montreal, called "Pu Dong"—in only 12 years. They already have more bridges and tunnels under the river that separates this city from Shanghai than Montreal has, and they plan to double the number.

Shanghai is a much more pleasant city than Beijing. It's every bit as clean, and not nearly as polluted. For a Westerner, it's also probably a good place to start getting used to China because the environment is much more familiar and thus more comfortable. It's also a very English city and has a very long history of dealing with Westerners, so there are many people willing and able to speak English.

Shanghai

We visited Shanghai Jiao Tong University



In Shanghai, we visited Jiao Tong University, a top engineering school considered the equal of MIT. There, we met with a professor whose expertise was image analysis, and gave a series of presentations to his students. This picture was taken in front of the university's museum, and you can see our host and his students in the front row.

Shanghai

We visited Shanghai Jiao Tong University:

- A lesson in *mianzi*: students and questions
- But... students less reluctant to ask questions than formerly
- Disciplines other than engineering in the curriculum, but still not much in the way of communication

Watching teachers and students interact provides an interesting lesson in *mianzi*. Chinese students have been trained to sit quietly and absorb what the teacher says, without questioning. In part, this is because if you ask a question, you risk making it look like the professor has failed to communicate successfully, and embarrassing the teacher who will be grading you is a *bad* thing. Previous STC delegations who went to China to teach have run into this problem; you can find details in two issues of *Technical Communication*. One solution is to communicate the concept that it's the *failure* to ask questions that causes a teacher to lose face.

The students we spoke proved this observation through their deference to their teacher, but also demonstrated that things are changing. Once we'd broken the ice and established a connection with the students, they were eager to ask questions and talk to us. This also gave us a chance to see that although most of them are skilled at reading English, they lack the opportunity to practice speaking it, and thus tend to be shy and awkward communicating their concepts. In many cases, they asked one of their classmates, who was working as an English teacher at the school, to help translate.

The University is branching out into other disciplines, but still doesn't do much in the way of practical communication. I found this ironic given that the *jiao* in the university's name is the same as in the "exchange of ideas" character with which I began this presentation.

Shanghai

We met with USActive and Imprint:

- Greg Ray of USActive: helping Western firms get a foothold in China (*guanxi*)
- Interestingly, the “consultant culture” hasn’t reached China
- Anton Kozisek of Imprint: headhunters for middle management

We also met with two Westerners who had moved to China and found challenging and lucrative employment.

Greg Ray of USActive explained how his company helps Western firms enter the Chinese market. He reiterated the importance of *guanxi*: if you don’t know someone, you can’t get your foot in the door, and Western companies who ignore that reality inevitably fail. He’s spent enough time in China to have developed considerable *guanxi* of his own, and is now selling those connections to Westerners.

Interestingly, the “consultant culture” hasn’t yet reached China, even though what Greg does sounds a lot like consulting. The problem is that you can’t consult if a company doesn’t invite you in. Secondly, admitting the need for help could entail a loss of face. So the trick for a consultant is to be a “facilitator” who helps a company do better rather than a consultant who fixes problems. Trainers and (in some cases) people able to write “procedures” for Western companies setting up an office in China are two good examples. The trick is to use *guanxi* to get you in touch with companies who need your skills.

Anton Kozisek of Imprint works as a headhunter for Western companies in need of middle managers to manage their operations. Since there are no technical communication departments *per se* in most of China, there are no immediate opportunities here, but I suspect these opportunities will develop in time and Anton will be a wonderful person to know.

Guilin, China's "Banff"



Our final stop in China was the tourist destination of Guilin, which I've called "China's Banff". That's an apt description despite the semi-tropical climate. Few Westerners seem to have heard of Guilin unless they're planning a trip to China, but most immediately know what I'm talking about when I mention the funky mountains.

Guilin

We visited the Guilin University of Electronic Technology



The city itself is nestled amidst limestone crags reaching up to around 800 feet in height, much the way Banff is cradled in its own part of the Canadian Rockies. Here, you can see the Guilin University of Electronic Technology campus, with typical mountains in the background.

Guilin is a very rural area, with relatively low population densities for China. The government recognized its tourist value so well that they shut down all manufacturing in the area to keep the environment pristine; the clouds you can see in the background are rain, not smog.

The city itself has rapidly adapted to the tourist trade, with a brand new, glossy downtown core that includes shopping areas that would put Montreal's Ste-Catherine street to shame. On the down side, there are more signs of poverty around the fringes than anywhere else I visited. The city thus serves as an interesting bridge from the very urban, very modern cities of Beijing and Shanghai to the more stereotypical rural China.

Guilin

Guilin University of Electronic Technology:

- Another major engineering school
- Communications = computers
- Advertising vs. technical communication
- Communication “theory” (public administration), not practical writing
- A need for teachers of English

Like Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Guilin University of Electronic Technology is another major engineering school, and very well respected in their field.

We quickly learned that their interpretation of “technical communications” is really telecommunication. As engineers, their emphasis is on computer data communications.

Early on, we discovered that they didn’t understand the difference between “technical communication” and advertising or technical marketing. That, in a nutshell, reveals the problems we face as a profession in China: very few people know what we do, and this situation won’t change without a fair bit of evangelism.

Unlike other places we visited, they actually do teach communication “theory”, but in their case, it’s heavily influenced by computer concepts such as channel capacity. They also have a department of public administration that does some work in public relations–style communication. But there’s little practical teaching of how to write (say) an effective manual.

One thing that was made very clear by the professors we talked to was the fact that they’re desperate for people willing to come teach English. I have a firm invitation from the head of their International Relations department to come teach whenever I want. That won’t happen soon, but I’d love to spend more time there.

Guilin

We visited 8-year-old students at the Le Qun Primary School



For our last “professional” stop, we visited the 8-year-old students at the Le Qun Primary School. On the face of it, this doesn’t seem like much of a communications-oriented activity, but our visit held some interesting discoveries.

Guilin

At the Le Qun Primary School:

- English (written and spoken) begins as early as first grade
- Written English required for university graduation but...
- English books are difficult to get

First, written and spoken English now begins as early as the first grade. These kids were so eager to show off their skills that they were just about jumping out of their seats to talk to us. By the time they make it through university, they'll be effectively bilingual, even if their spoken English still needs considerable work. This means enormous opportunities for those of us interested in teaching English now, but it also means that there will be potentially enormous competition in the future.

Second, proficiency at written English is now required before you can graduate from most universities. This means that China has a large and growing audience of people who can read English and who are eager to obtain English books so they can practice.

Unfortunately, importing English books isn't easy, which makes them difficult to obtain. This suggests that there's an enormous market here for someone wanting to write English manuals along the lines of the "for Dummies" series: basic instruction manuals for Chinese who must, in the short term, grapple with English software and with the language itself. If you write and publish inside China, you still face censorship, but at least you're past the hurdle of importing books. And with a market of 1.3 billion people, you don't have to achieve much market penetration to do well.

Opportunities

Lots of chances to work in China:

- Writing computer documentation
- Journalism
- Translation and editing
- Terminology development
- Training, writing procedures
- Publishing books
- Teaching English

China is a place of enormous opportunity if you're willing to broaden your definition of what constitutes "technical communication". For instance:

- With so many students going into the computer field and lacking writing skills or the willing to develop them, niches for technical writers should develop over time.
- Journalism is relatively immature in China. As their society becomes more open, there will be opportunities to help the Chinese develop a more technical focus in their media.
- The quality of Chinese English ranges from surprisingly good to appallingly bad. If you can sell your expertise without embarrassing anyone about the quality of their English, there's almost certainly a good market for editors.
- As indicated by the Chinese efforts to standardize their scientific lexicon, those with linguistics backgrounds or expertise in a particular field's terminology could find work in terminology development. For example, China plans to spend \$1.5 trillion U.S. over the next 10 years to improve their telephone network and Internet infrastructure.
- Training and writing procedures are other areas where, with a little *guanxi*, you can find work. Writing books while in China (to avoid import problems) could also be attractive.
- There are many opportunities to teach English, in schools or privately. In Shanghai, the money can be excellent; in schools, the experience can be.

Resources

- **STC Montreal:** www.stc-montreal.org/china.html
- **Seligman, S.D. 1999. Chinese business etiquette. A guide to protocol, manners, and culture in the People's Republic of China.**
- **Thompson, P.L. 1998. Dear Alice. Letters home from American teachers learning to live in China.**

A few resources for those who are interested in travelling to or working in China:

- With Ed Hawco's help, I've set up a Web page on STC Montreal's site to provide resources for anyone interested in visiting China. This is in the "just getting started" stage, but I'm open to suggestions for adding new resources, and hope to expand the page to help Chinese get in touch with us.
- Scott Seligman's book on Chinese etiquette is a must-read. The younger generation and older Chinese who have experience with Westerners know we're barbarians, and don't expect us to understand traditional etiquette, but everyone we met was honored by our efforts to follow Chinese forms rather than insisting on our own Western habits. Learning a little Chinese is also a wonderful way to make people smile and open up the lines of communication.
- "Dear Alice" is a wonderful book composed of letters from American teachers who spent a year teaching English in China. It tells what it's really like to live in China for a year, without tour guides holding your hands the whole time, and provides a welcome antidote to the inevitable cultural shock. There are also many keen insights into Chinese society, ranging from the poignant to the darkly humorous.

Xiè xiè!

Any questions? Drop me a line!

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Xiè xiè! That's pronounced "shyeh shyeh" or "shay shay", depending on where you learned the pronunciation. It means "thank you for your kindness in listening to me".

I hope I've communicated some of my enormous enthusiasm for China. If I can answer any questions later, don't hesitate to contact me.

And of course, I'd love to answer your questions now, and talk with you later after the formal question period is over.