

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## LEAVING HOME TO GO HOME

Shanghai, China  
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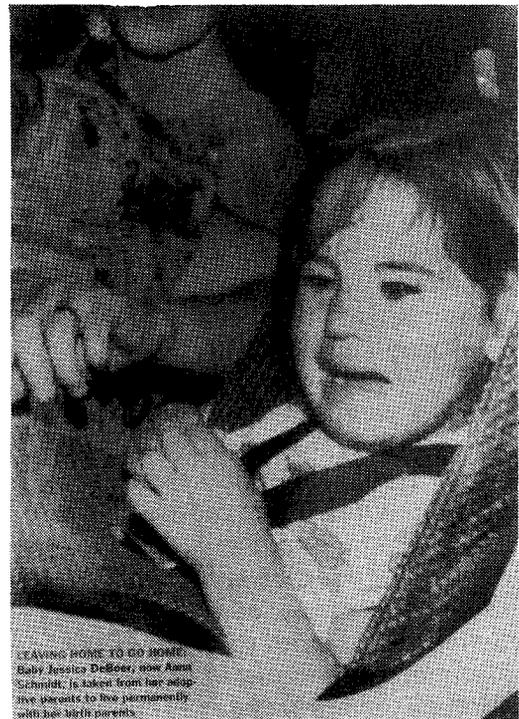
Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755 U.S.A.

Dear Peter,

It may seem odd that I am starting my newsletter from China with a photo of an American girl, Baby Jessica. The photo, taken by Lennox McLendon, a journalist for the Associated Press, appeared in almost all major American news magazines during the past summer. Time magazine not only selected this photo as the "Best Shot" of the season, but also provided an appropriate subtitle to the picture: "Leaving Home to Go Home."

"Doesn't this subtitle also say something about my journey back to China?" I said to myself as I reread Baby Jassica's story in a Northwest airplane from San Francisco to Shanghai.

Going to China means a good deal more to me than working abroad for a couple of years. It means going to the country of my birth, in which, apart from a brief visit three years ago, I have not lived since 1985. When I visited you in Hanover, New Hampshire last month, you asked me where I consider my home to be. I did not respond to your question. Indeed, I could not answer it without a rich stew of emotion boiling within me.



LEAVING HOME TO GO HOME:  
Baby Jessica DeBoer, now Ann  
Schmidt, is taken from her adop-  
tive parents to live permanently  
with her birth parents.

*Baby Jessica: Leaving Home to Go Home.*

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Cheng Li is a an ICWA fellow studying the political economy of the coast of China.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Every immigrant, suspended between an old home and a new one, has a double identity. For the Chinese, old home (*laojia*) usually means one's birthplace. No matter when they settled down in their adoptive countries, the overseas Chinese have often felt the cultural, linguistic, and psychological ties of their mother land. At least in part, their attachments play a role in their economic investments in mainland China. A report published by The Economist last year argued that direct investment from overseas Chinese to mainland China has been a driving force of China's economic boom. Hong Kong and Taiwan together accounted for two-thirds of the direct-investment flows (July 18th, 1992, p. 24). The Chinese of South-East Asia added another 10-15%, while the percentages contributed by the Chinese of America, Europe, Oceania, and other places are as yet unknown. This is the development resource that Russia and other Eastern European countries, according to the author, "can only dream about."

By no means do all of the overseas Chinese have a strong attachment to their old home. Some risked their lives to escape from China. As we saw on television last summer, refugees from southeastern China made a month-long arduous journey to the New York harbor. Many of them would never, under any circumstances, attempt a journey back to their native land.

An old home is often confirmed by memory, especially childhood memory. For the generation of Chinese who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, like myself, childhood memories are hardly enjoyable. J. P. Dieny, an expert on Chinese children's literature, offered a piercing comment on this catastrophic era of recent Chinese history. He wrote: "China treats children as adults and adults as children."

I spent most of my boyhood years fleeing from the "Red Terror" of the Cultural Revolution. As the former owner of two textile factories in Shanghai, and, thus, a "class enemy," my father suffered immediate attack as the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. That summer – the summer of 1966 – Shanghai was unusually hot and extremely humid. Virtually every night, a group of Red Guards banged on the door of our house and forced us out of our beds. Every Red Guard held a belt in his hand and beat my parents and brothers whenever they liked.

At the end of the summer, my father was forced to leave us and was sent to a remote and isolated place. I was not able to go to school for three years, because if I



*On a Northwest flight from San Francisco to Shanghai.*

stepped out of the house, I would be beaten up by my neighbors, not only by my peers, but adults as well. They would spit in my face and my body. Afterwards, and even more painful, my mother would cry as she washed my spittle-stained clothes.

Yet in my family I was the lucky one. At least I was spared the fate of my eldest brother, Li Yifu. He was a student at Fudan University when he was caught listening to the “Voice of America” – “foreign enemy’s anti-China broadcasting.” Maoists charged him as a “counter-revolutionary,” and tortured him numerous times in “denouncing meetings.” In 1968, when Yifu was rusticated to a small town in Hunan province, the persecution presumably continued. My family never heard from him after that. Several months later, two men came to see my mother and gave her Yifu’s belongings, including a smashed watch. They told us that Yifu committed suicide by lying on the railway track. Not until many years later did we know that Maoists had actually beaten Yifu to death and then moved his body to the railway track.



*My eldest brother, a student of Fudan University, was killed during the Cultural Revolution.*

My brother listened to the “Voice of America,” not to hear the news program, but to practice his English comprehension. Because of this, my mother did not allow me to learn English for many years even after the Cultural Revolution. Poor mother! She had become so confused under the Red Terror, for so many innocent activities had been deemed “counterrevolutionary,” that who could know what next to expect?

My childhood memories were thus filled with scenes of men’s inhumanity towards other human beings. The political climate, however, significantly changed when China’s reform began in 1978. My father returned to our old house. The false charge against my brother was cleared. I went to university, and it seemed like the dream that I had never dared to have during the Cultural Revolution finally came true. The nightmare of the past, however, was still recurrent in my thoughts.

You can imagine how thrilled I was eight years ago when the University of California at Berkeley offered me a scholarship for its master’s program in Asian Studies. But when I said “Good-bye” to my parents in front of our house, all our eyes

were filled with tears. We all thought it might be a final farewell.

“Don’t come back. You should settle down in America.” These were the only words that my father said to me and were uncharacteristic of him, because he usually liked to give me long lectures. These words, however, reflected his life-long experience. As a “patriotic capitalist” (the term that the Chinese Communists used to refer to entrepreneurs like him), he decided to remain in Shanghai after the 1949 Revolution. What later happened to my father and to his family made him feel his love of his home country was betrayed. He was trying to tell me, as I understood, it was not that we had abandoned our country, our country had abandoned us.

Just as Baby Jessica has become a real member of her adoptive family, I have made the United States my home. During the past eight years, whether working in a downtown Oakland restaurant as a dish-washer, or studying at Princeton University as a Ph.D. candidate, I enjoyed the things which used to be foreign to me – freedom, independence, and tranquility.

I always remember an episode that happened a few weeks after I arrived in America. A staff member in the Institute of East Asian Studies at Berkeley kindly offered me a tour of the Bay area. She was in her early 40s. Born and bred in Taiwan, she came to the U.S. in the early 1970s for her post-graduate education. She met her husband, another Taiwanese, in the graduate school and later settled down in the U.S. For over ten years now, whenever Chinese students, visiting scholars, or government delegates have come to Berkeley, she has always voluntarily helped to familiarize them with the area. People all like her, partly because of her ability to speak many Chinese dialects – Cantonese, Sichuanese, Shanghaiese, Hakka, etc., but mainly because of her boundless enthusiasm to bridge the cultural gap for newcomers. She has made great efforts to help Chinese understand Americans – their principles, values, attitudes, and of course, their dilemmas and problems.

I asked her to take me to her favorite spot in the Bay area. “That’s easy,” she said. I thought she would show me the famous places such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Fisherman’s Wharf, the San Francisco Chinatown, the Stanford campus, or the Lawrence Science Hall on the Berkeley hill. But instead, she guided me to an ice cream store on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. There was nothing special in this ice cream shop, you can easily find one in any town or city across America. But as a person who just arrived from China, I was absolutely amazed by so many varieties of ice cream.

– “It’s so hard to choose among them,” I said to her, “Could you give me some advice?”

– “I’m afraid I couldn’t,” She said, “I haven’t had ice cream for many years.”

– “But this is your favorite place?”

– “Yes, what I really enjoyed is the freedom of choice and the availability of options.” She said in a half-serious and half-humorous tone. “Eating too much ice cream, however, is not healthy.”

She apparently was not just talking about the choice of ice cream. Her metaphorical expression told me much more about the American way of life than any special book on the subject could tell. More than eight years have passed, but our conversation in the ice cream shop has always been vivid in my mind. Freedom does

have its cost. For freedom, or rather, an excess of freedom, can be dangerous. Yet, as Henry Grunwald, former Editor-in-Chief of Time magazine, forcefully argued, “freedom also holds within it the means to correct its defects, for it allows, indeed encourages, people to criticize their society, to tinker with it, to improve it.”

Emphasis on individuality, respect for diversity, and constant search for new opportunities have constituted some of the basic American values. The longer I have stayed in the U.S., the more I have appreciated these values. Meanwhile, I have also become aware of some of the serious political and socio-economic problems in the country. I have no longer conceived of America as a unified entity or an illusion as I did prior to my arrival in the United States. Instead, I relish the subtlety, the ambiguity, and the complexity when I try to understand my new home country.

One question I frequently ponder over is this: How could the country which strongly emphasizes the principle of equality have one of the most unequal records of income distribution in the world? Americans like to criticize Japan, with great validity, for its hierarchical social structure, but ironically, the income gap between business executives and employees in Japan is far smaller than that found in American firms.

In the same way, the country whose defining symbol is the Statue of Liberty has yet to solve its racial and ethnical problems. The verdict on the Rodney King case and the consequent violence in southern California shocked the entire world. America has seen the potential for nation-wide violence and chaos. While watching the L.A. riots on television, I suddenly realized that the evil, suffering, and cruelty embodied in China’s Cultural Revolution were not entirely unique.

F. Braudel, a France-born historian, once made the following remark as he described his learning experiences in a new place: “Live in London for a year and you will *not* get to know much about England. But through comparison, in the light of your surprise, you will suddenly come to understand some of the more profound and individual characteristics of France, which you did not previously understand.” What I have learned in America – for example, about how a democratic political system deals with political conflicts and social crisis – has shed light on my understanding of China.

China has changed very quickly and has become an altogether different place since I left. As I have learned from Western media, China’s economic performance in the late 1980s and early 1990s has brought about one of the greatest developments in human welfare anywhere at any time. More than 100 million Chinese peasants were lifted out of “absolute poverty” (i.e., not enough food). This number of people, as a British reporter describes, is the population of two Britains, one Japan, or half an America. China’s real GNP has grown by an average of 9% since economic reforms started in 1978. According to one study, China’s economy by 1994 and by 2002 will be respectively four times and eight times bigger than it was in 1978.

China's rush to market economy is also a rush towards individual liberty. With financial capacity, people not only have the chance to choose nice restaurants or to select fancy clothes, but also are able to decide where to work and how to live. Before

I left China, every Chinese citizen should have a *danwei* – a unit, whether it be a factory, a school, a shop, or a neighborhood committee. *Danwei* distributed industrial coupons; for example, one can buy a watch with five coupons, a bicycle with twenty coupons, a television set for forty coupons. One had to receive approval from *Danwei* if one wanted to get married or to have a child. *Danwei* decided whom should be recruited into the Communist Party, whom should be promoted, and whom should be punished in political campaigns. *Danwei* served as an institutional means for Communist elites to determine both the political and economic life of an individual. But now, *danwei* is losing its importance, because people are able to freely choose *danwei*, or start their own private “*danwei*.” Economic reform is passing power “from repressive institutions to individual enterprises,” as a Western journalist observes. “The further this empowerment goes, the harder it is to reverse, and the more the role of the Communist Party fades.”

No one will be persecuted, or criticized, for just listening to the “Voice of America,” even though some foreign radio stations did help agitate the Chinese political protest against the government during the 1989 Tiananmen turmoil. Today, communication and exchange with the outside world have become part of daily life in China. For my family and myself, nothing is more dramatic than the fact that I return to Shanghai as a Visiting Professor at both the Shanghai Institute of International Affairs



*Fudan University – where my brother was persecuted 26 years ago and where now I have returned as a Visiting Professor.*

and the Department of International Politics of Fudan University. Twenty-five years ago, my eldest brother, a student of Fudan, was falsely charged at that school and later killed when he was 23. Today I am returning to the same place as “a Chinese American Scholar,” lecturing on politics and doing research on Sino-American relations. The place, which abandoned its native sons and daughters before, now warmly welcomes them back. I can feel and, indeed, actually see a future that I could never imagine before.

I have changed; so has my native land. I don’t refer to some superficial changes in my life – changes in socio-economic status, for instance – but to changes in my values and visions. Neither do I mean that I have an unreserved optimism about recent developments in China. Privatization in economic structure and

liberalization in political system are the broad directions that China is moving towards, but the priority, timing, leadership, public consensus, role of the military, consolidation of the legal system, and international environment are all important factors in determining the future of the country. Market mechanism has not only brought about the rapid economic development, but also led to serious problems such as corruption, inflation, and polarization. The Chinese Communist Party has undoubtedly been losing its authority and power. But if this process happens too fast, the country will be in chaos. I am not sure that the American media has ever yet given adequate emphasis to the complexity of China's reform and the moral dilemmas involved.



*Reuniting with my parents in front of our house in Shanghai.*

Sino-U.S. relations have been constantly on my mind since I started my journey across the Pacific. On my way to Shanghai, I spent a few days in Hong Kong in late September. The most popular topic there was Beijing's bid for host city of the Olympic Games in 2000, since the International Olympic Committee was about to vote on the location. Several public opinion polls indicated that about three-fourths of Hong Kong residents preferred the games to be held in Beijing. "HONG KONG SUPPORTS BEIJING 2000," read a neon sign about ten-stories high and stretching along the bank of Kowloon. Much has changed. When I visited Hong Kong three years ago, I saw a sign of similar proportion. That one reflected Hong Kong residents' resentment of the Beijing massacre.

I asked a newspaper editor in Hong Kong to explain the change of public opinion towards Beijing.

– "Hosting the Olympic Games in Beijing is in the interest of the economy of Greater China (referring to mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong)." He said.

– "What about the argument concerning human rights violations in China?" I asked. "Are you concerned about these issues?"

– "Of course, we in Hong Kong are deeply concerned about human rights in China, especially considering the fact that Hong Kong is going to be part of China in 1997. It will give China, however, a great chance to improve its human rights record if Beijing is selected to host the 2000 Olympic Games."

– “Don’t you call it an improvement that China released Wei Jingsheng, a dissident who had been in prison for 14 years, just before the International Olympic Committee is going to vote?” I asked.

– “Why not?” He looked at me and seemed to imply that I had just missed his point.

He continued, “I sometimes wonder whether the American politicians who attempted to block Beijing’s effort to hold the games are really concerned about human rights in China. When President Nixon visited China in 1972, the Cultural Revolution was still going on. Millions of Chinese were under totalitarian repression and the entire country was like a prison. But human rights issues were never even raised by the U.S. government. Those Americans guests who came back from China often talked about how great China was.”

– “When one has been offered by the host a 12--course Chinese meal every day, one would certainly feel great and one’s outlook would undoubtedly become brighter.” The editor’s assistant who was hearing our conversation added.

We laughed. The editor explained to me that his assistant recently read Ronald Reagan’s memoir An American Way, which only has a few pages on China, but most of these pages were about a 12--course Chinese banquet he had on his China trip.

– “Those American policy-makers seem to be more interested in their own political agenda.” His tone became more serious.

– “Could you be more specific?”

– “Some American politicians have felt uncomfortable since the Cold War is over. They desperately need a new enemy. China is an ideal target, because it still claims to be a communist regime. Furthermore, China’s recent economic surge has made many American politicians nervous.”

Although I did not entirely agree with him, I found that his comments on the ironies involved in the Sino-US relations were well taken. It was a great oversight, if not entirely misleading, for some people in the U.S. then to portray Mao’s China as a great place. It is equally inappropriate to conceive of the post-Mao China as a repressive country without acknowledging that China has transformed from a totalitarian regime to an authoritarian one.

I recently talked with several Chinese scholars in the field of international politics. They all expressed their disappointment with the double standards of U.S. policy towards domestic turmoils in other countries. “No other country should have applauded President Yeltsin for his readiness and carelessness in the use of force as he dealt with his opposition in the Russian congress,” a professor in a Shanghai university said. A senior researcher from Beijing told me that the tanks which Yeltsin used in Moscow reminded him of the tanks he saw in Beijing in 1989.

Most people with whom I recently talked have a favorable view of the United States. They hope that Sino-US relations will be improved in the near future. “China has to have a good relationship with the U.S. as China joins the international community,” Yang Xiyue, editor-in-chief of the Shanghai journal International Observation, said in a recent meeting on Sino-US relations. His remark actually reflects the feeling of the public. People feel that China cannot achieve anything in international affairs without cooperation from the U.S. For many people, the failure

of Beijing's bid for the 2000 Olympic games was a case in point. People do not resent the U.S. for its role in blocking Beijing's bid so much as feel dissatisfied with the Chinese government for its "hopeless effort." Most hope that Jiang Zemin, President of the PRC, is successful in improving Sino-U.S. relations in his forthcoming visit to Seattle in November.

While the Chinese public has favored a good relationship with the U.S., some radical views should not be ignored, especially as China is becoming a major economic power in the world. In my flight from San Francisco to Hong Kong, I had a disturbing conversation with a Chinese who sat next to me. He was in his early 40s, tall, carefully dressed, with well-kept hair. I was not surprised when he told me that he was a real estate agent.

– "Do you live in the United States?" He asked me.

– "Yes."

– "Do you work in a Chinese restaurant?" For him, a Chinese person living in the U.S. was either an owner or a waiter in a restaurant.

– "No. I'm a teacher."

He did not talk to me for a while. Apparently, there was no business that one could talk about with a poor teacher.

– "How long will you be in China?" He finally decided to resume our chat.

– "A couple of years." I answered.

– "You may work for me as my English secretary. I will pay you a lot of money."

I did not immediately turn down his "offer." Instead, I asked him to tell me more about himself and his business.

He was born in a high-ranking cadre's family in Beijing. He joined the army when he was 16, and later, in the final years of the Cultural Revolution, was selected to study at Qinghua University. Upon graduation, he began to work in a large steel factory in Beijing as the Party Secretary of the personnel office, and then was transferred to be the head of the bureau of tourism in a coastal city. In 1984, he arrived in the U.S. to study English in a community college near Los Angeles. But soon he found that he was "too old to learn English." Instead, he worked as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant during the day and as a keeper in a motel during the night. The only thing that made him happy, he said, was to spend his weekends in Las Vegas. After "the most awful two years in his life," he returned to China. With the help of his father's old friends, he easily found a job as a manager in a joint-venture hotel in Beijing. He quit this job and became a real estate agent two years ago. "It is a very lucrative business," he said to me. In the past two years, he has made several trips abroad to attract foreign investment.

I asked him about his trip to the U.S. "Terrible," he said. "Americans don't know how to do business with China."

– "How come?" I asked.

– "They are too much concerned with the legal procedures." He did not give further explanation and shifted his topic. "The United States is declining, because it has placed too much emphasis on social welfare and minority issues."

I asked him to explain his point.

– "Minority people in the U.S. take advantage of its social welfare system," he said, "The Latinos in the U.S. are very lazy and they do not want to do anything but

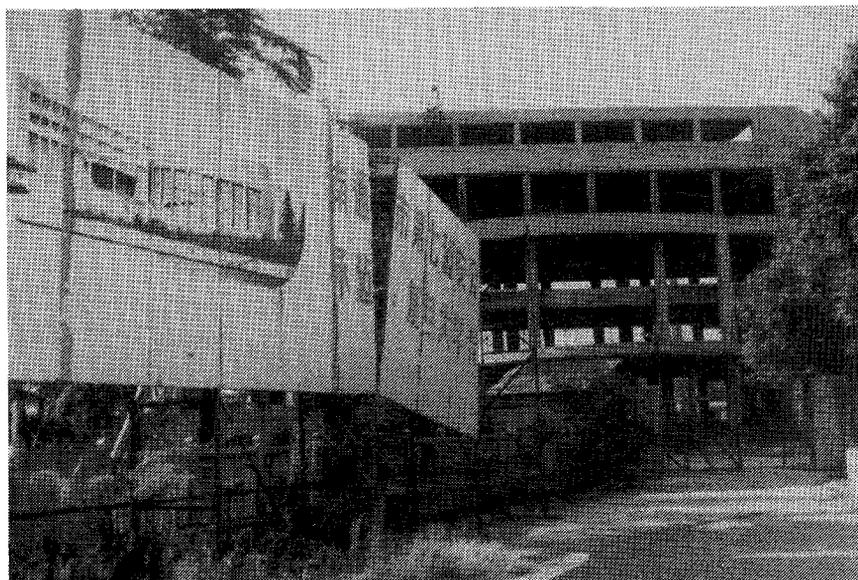
watch soccer games. Black Americans have far too many children than they can afford to foster. As a result, white taxpayers have to support them."

I decided to end our conversation while he continued to tell me how China will emerge as the superpower to replace the United States as the world leader in the near future. I told him that his understanding of the United States was problematic. How could we expect him to make a sound judgment on another society, when so much of the reality of his own society had been distorted by him?

What especially bothered me were his racist remarks. A half century ago, Lu Xun, the famous Chinese writer, made a general observation, "Throughout the ages, the Chinese have had only two ways of looking at foreigners: up to them as superior beings or down on them as wild animals. They have never been able to treat them as friends, to consider them as people like themselves." Until when, I wonder, can China get rid of this superior-inferior attitude towards nations, races, and cultures? And to be more sensitive, at least, to these offensive remarks? This real estate agent was probably not representative for the Chinese. But people like him could be very influential in the decision-making circle.

The troubling factors in Sino-U.S. relations do not only exist on the China side. A number of Chinese intellectuals told me that they felt offended by Samuel Huntington's recent article, "The Clash of Civilizations," which was published in the summer issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Huntington argued that the fundamental source of international conflict in the future will not be ideological or economic, but cultural. "The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations... A West at the peak of its power confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways." The major enemies of the West, according to Huntington, will be Confucian countries and Islamic fundamentalist states.

Huntington's article reflects a deep sense of unease about the future among the leaders of Western countries. The confidence that the West would remain a dominant force in the 21st century has been shattered, because of the rapid political-



*The construction site of the Center of American Studies at Fudan. The construction was sponsored by the U.S. and was suspended because of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. The unfinished project signifies the stagnation of Sino-US relations.*

economic development in many non-Western countries in the past decades. The question is whether the realms of different civilizations have become blurred or clearer as the world moves towards a new millennia. I have seen an integration of civilizations rather than a clash of civilizations. Anyone who studies the post-Mao China is surely aware how much the Chinese have learned from the West – not only its technology, but also its administrative skills, economic methods, social norms, and political values. The threat of Confucian civilization is totally unfounded. To predict “clash of civilizations” will only add tensions and lead to large-scale conflicts.

The Sino-US relationship is in its critical moment, which is colored by uncertainty. China itself is expected to go through another crucial moment in its history when Deng Xiaoping makes his big decision to go to see Marx. Is there anything more important than the fate of one-fifth of the world population? Or more interesting than observing this new episode of China’s century-long transformation? It will be an exciting experience for me to go through this pivotal time with my family, friends, and fellow countrymen/women. I want to know how they live, how government policies affect their lives, and how the change in their lives transforms the way they think. I am privileged to be with them; it is a homecoming, indeed.

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I drafted the large part of this newsletter on a Northwest flight across the Pacific. As I am now typing the draft into my Macintosh PowerBook, I keep asking myself: “Is it too personal?” “Are readers of the newsletter really interested in my own stories and my somewhat sentimental feelings about my old and new home?” I finally decided to keep it as it was. This is a personal journey and a personal report. By that I do not mean that I will be writing about myself while expecting to write about a country, China. What I mean is that, because of my own background, I have some idiosyncratic viewpoints on my subject. It seems a good idea to admit this in my first newsletter.

The very best journey is all in the mind. To share the mind is therefore to share the journey. The greatest challenge for me is to find out in what way the uniqueness of my experience and concerns could be made to link me with other people instead of separating me from them. My journey, I hope, will be a testimony to the simple human qualities and the common human aspirations that dispel the cultural differences between Chinese and Americans.

Sincerely,



Cheng Li

No. 5, Lane 570  
Chang Le Road  
Shanghai, 200040, China  
Fax. 86-21-2474947