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In China: A Time to Work

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Dear Peter,

"We would like you to give us a complete presentation of how you would go about establishing a Systems Engineering education program in China," said Professor Shen Jingming of Jilin Polytechnic Institute. I was being interviewed for a job in China.

It was a Saturday afternoon early in September 1978, and six of us were meeting over tea in an office at the Foreign Experts Bureau in Beijing (Peking). Present were Comrades Ke Daquan and Gao Liduan, both cadres\* from the Foreign Experts Bureau, Professors Yao Deming and Zhao Zijing, from Harbin Institute of Technology, Professor Shen, and I. I was given half-an-hour's notice of the meeting, and was then expected to make the presentation on the spot. I declined, saying that I would not like to miss my friend's wedding later that afternoon. The meeting was adjourned to the following Monday.

In August 1978, the first year of my fellowship as a Canadian exchange student in China would end. What

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\*In China and other socialist countries, "cadre(s)" refers to an individual or group of individuals holding a leadership or managerial position in an organization or office.

was I going to do after that? By the Spring of 1978, after some thinking and preliminary exploration on the matter, I was considering the following options:

1. To stay in China for a second year as an exchange student.
2. To work in Beijing, representing a foreign corporation doing business with China.
3. To work for a Chinese organization in the field of Management or Computer Sciences, or teach Physical Sciences and Mathematics.
4. To leave China for other endeavours in North-America.

My student exchange fellowship was automatically renewable for another year. So the first option was readily available to me. There were, however, some drawbacks to it. I was interested in taking courses in the Social Sciences, but none were offered to foreign students. Assuming we had stayed on in Beijing to allow Brenda to continue in her teaching post, I would have had to take a year of Chinese History at Beijing University. Also, as I described briefly in my last newsletter, major changes were taking place in the Chinese education system. This didn't allow foreign students to pursue any serious scholarly work. In addition, the low status afforded foreign students in China meant a lot of limitations and frustrations, e.g. my repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to visit the computer center at Beijing University.

In short, I was ready for a whole new experience in China that would be beneficial to others and to me. Here was a country entering a "new era" with its top leadership steering it on a new course. A country embarking on a "Long March" to modernize its agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology by the end of this millenium. A country committing itself to raising the standard of living of over a fifth of Humanity. A country where the people felt strongly the need for more democracy, freedom of expression, and "emancipation of the mind," and hailed a new "Springtime for Science."

I decided to work in China.

1977 and 1978 were two years when the floodgates of China trade opened wide. During these two years, no less than four major national foreign trade conferences took place. Their objectives were to dispel all miscon-

tructions remaining from the old trade policy, and to clarify the new one in light of the "Four Modernizations" program. The conferences helped exorcise the spirit, attributed to the "Gang of Four," of equating imports with "the philosophy of servility to things foreign," exports with "selling out natural resources to foreign countries," and the Ministry of Foreign Trade with "the Ministry of Treachery." The upshot was a jump of 17.9% and 30.3% (a combined 53.7%) in foreign trade in the two years following the ousting of the "Gang of Four" in 1976. In 1978, one Chinese leader after another, one delegation after another, went abroad window-shopping. At the same time, chairmen of the boards and presidents of major western and Japanese corporations came to Beijing, the new Mecca of international trade, lured by the prospect of selling "oil for all the lamps of China." The myth of China trade, the ElDorado of the 1980's, was at its height, beating frantically its gongs and drums.

Corporations expanding their trade with China or hoping for a fat contract were looking for "our man in Beijing." I had job offers from U.S. and Canadian firms, which tempted me for a while, both financially and experientially. But after taking a sober look at the China trade, I decided to refuse these offers. The unique experience of working with Chinese colleagues within a Chinese organization was far more tempting.

As to the last option, that of leaving China, I did not want to consider it seriously, and was ready to do my utmost not to have to face it,

What type of work should I look for in China? In what fields? Which Chinese organizations should I approach? How? When? What were my chances of finding work?

In the Spring of 1978, all these questions were buzzing in my mind. At that time, there were two groups of people working in China for Chinese organizations. The first group was the Overseas Chinese who went to China for a period of a few months, or more, to visit their relatives. While there, a number of them participated in research projects, or taught sciences and mathematics. Non-ethnic Chinese and some Overseas Chinese, who were "invited" to work in China for one to two years, formed the second group. The scope of the "Foreign Experts"

work --the title given to them by the Chinese authorities-- was limited. They either taught foreign languages and literature in language institutes, universities and colleges, or edited and polished translations in organizations that published or broadcast in foreign languages, such as the Foreign Language Press, the Xinhua News Agency, and Radio Beijing.

I did not want to teach foreign languages or be a polisher. I did not believe I was qualified to do this kind of work. I wanted to put to use my professional training and experience. This narrowed down my options to three. The first was to work or train people in Data Processing Systems Engineering. This is the art and science of building up a set of operations and procedures that may use computers to handle information in an organization more efficiently. The second was to train people in aspects of management skills and techniques, preferably combining it with the first option. Finally, and as a last resort, I was willing to teach Physics, Chemistry, or Mathematics, in English or French, in high schools or colleges. I had not heard of any foreign expert who had worked in Systems Engineering or Management, or taught basic sciences in foreign languages since 1966, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, or even since 1960, when the Soviet and Eastern European technicians withdrew suddenly from China.

I judged, however, that the situation was about to change in light of the new political climate and economic policies. Elaborating on the economic development plan presented at the Fourth National People Congress (NPC) by Zhou En-lai in 1975, --one year before his death-- Hua Guo-feng gave an outline of the "Four Modernizations" in February 1978 at the Fifth NPC. The emphasis was clearly on developing the national economy, and raising the people's standard of living. Unlike in the previous twelve years beginning with the Cultural Revolution, foreign trade and the transfer of technology from abroad were to play an important role in the country's modernization. Newspaper articles started to appear castigating the "Gang of Four's" erroneous interpretation of the policy of self-reliance, and criticising it as being too close to autarky. These articles urged the Chinese to learn from the experiences of other countries in Science and Technology, now that China was emerging from a rather ethnocentric period. They called for the study of foreign management systems, techniques, and knowhow, and for their adoption, when suitable, irrespective of which country they originated from. In support of this shift, the Chinese media used quotes from Lenin urging the practice of "scientific management" --read Taylorism--

in running Soviet enterprises. Finally, during the People's Republic of China's first National Science Conference, held in Marh 1978, Computer Science was named as one of the eight key areas for research.

All the above developments, though very recent, made me foster the hope that I might be able to work in China in the areas of Management education and/or Data Processing Systems Engineering. By the end of the Spring of 1978, I sought informally the advice of a number of Chinese friends and acquaintances in universities, ministries and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The unanimous reaction was very positive. They said that there was a felt need to "invite" people in my professional areas to work in China, and that the Chinese authorities were planning to do so in the future. They believed I was a good candidate since I combined training and experience in both my professional fields and the China area. Interestingly, however, most of the people I talked to feared that the Chinese administration was not yet geared to "inviting" "technical foreign experts" -- as opposed to "foreign language experts" -- and advised patience, as the process to find work may take time.

Patience was not one of my virtues. Moreover, Brenda and I were planning to leave China by the end of 1979. So time was an important factor.

Consequently, I decided on a two-stage strategy that not only might raise my chances of getting a job, but, also, speed up the process. As a first step, I wrote directly to the institutions in Beijing that seemed the best prospects. For work in Applied Computer Science, I chose Beijing University, Qinghua University (the "M.I.T. of China"), and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. For work in Management education, I chose Qinghua University (I heard through the grapevine that it planned to establish a Management program); People's University (after being disbanded for over a decade following severe criticism during the Cultural Revolution, it reopened officially in 1978 to train economists and administrators); and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (a remote prospect for a job, since it was founded only a few months earlier). I gave low priority to teaching Sciences or Mathematics in schools or colleges, and, therefore, did not actively pursue the option at that point.

In every society personal contacts play a big role in getting things done. China is no exception to this

rule. On the contrary, she is a prime example. "Getting in through the back door" is the usual modus operandi. When Chinese people want to get something done, they first look for someone on the "inside;" a friend, or a friend of a friend of a friend. They would feel apprehensive about walking "cold" into an office on business without making a prior arrangement of this kind. The leaders of the Shanghai Institute of Mechanical Engineering, where I worked for a year, were surprised and amused that I transacted business and corresponded with members of organizations in Canada and the United States, most of whom I had not met before. They were impressed when things got done in this way far across the Pacific Ocean. If the business to be done is legitimate, and does not violate rules and regulations, using the "back door" acts as a facilitator. Otherwise, it may constitute a misuse and an abuse of power. The Chinese authorities, however, condemn the "back door" in whatever form. But, as long as the standard of living in China stays low, and the administration is fraught with bureaucracy, the "back door" will remain open for a long time. Actually, at the moment, it acts as a safety valve, and a way of getting around the problem. Centuries of Chinese governments have fought both bureaucracy and the "back door," hardly making an indentation on them. Since 1949, socialist China has been waging one ideological campaign after the other against them. While these campaigns may be necessary, they are not, in my opinion, sufficient, since they address the symptoms rather than the disease. A two-prong, long-term policy, I think, is the only way to overcome these problems successfully. China must increase its productivity to get out of the present economy of scarcity, where one billion people are vying for limited resources and services, and it must keep income disparity to the minimum. It must, also, foster a democracy befitting its culture and society, coupled with a system of responsibility, whereby individuals are fairly rewarded or punished according to their actual performance.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do." I followed this dictum. I, too, looked for friends on the "inside" to help me. Whether the "back door" I used was a facilitator, or constituted an abuse of power, I do not know. But the institutions concerned considered my work applications seriously, and followed them up.

The first stage of my strategy was completed: I had contacted directly prospective institutions. This had a double purpose: to find out concretely my chances of

working in China, and, more important, to alert them to my willingness to work with them. The next stage was to apply through the normal and official channel, the Foreign Expert Bureau (FEB).<sup>\*</sup> The institutions needed the active participation of the FEB in the decision process, and its approval before hiring me. On August 5 1978, I met with Comrades Ke Daquan and Gao Liduan of the FEB for the first time. I handed them personally my letter of application for work, and clarified the kind of jobs I felt qualified and willing to do. I also took the opportunity to brief them on the latest status of my dealings with the various institutions I was in touch with on this matter.

Comrades Ke and Gao let me talk at length, I, presenting my case, and they, frantically taking notes as was so common in China. When I finished, Comrade Ke went through the normal politeness rituals of thanking me for wanting to work in China. He then proceeded to give me a briefing on the present policies in China, and on the "Four Modernizations" program. He sidetracked for a while to launch an attack against the "Gang of Four" and their harmful policies. He stressed that, now, the Chinese people were eager to learn from other countries, and one way of doing it was to invite more "foreign friends" to teach and work. Finally, he went to the heart of the matter saying:

"The State Council has decided to invite more foreign language experts. Whereas before they were mainly concentrated in Beijing, with only a few scattered in other large cities, now the plan is to spread them wide across the country. We are, at present, making the necessary preparations for that. As for those technical foreign experts who are friendly to China, and would like to work here, we would welcome them. However, no preparations have been made for them yet. Would you like to teach a foreign language? We have a number of openings outside Beijing."

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<sup>\*</sup>The FEB is a central government organ, which was under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1978, and has now reverted back to the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the State Council, as it was before the Cultural Revolution. Some of its functions are: allocating the yearly national quota of foreign experts among the various institutions that are allowed to have them; hiring them; and making and implementing the rules and regulations that govern their working and living conditions in China. In recent months, there were signs of a decentralization of the FEB's functions, down to the host institutions.

"Thank you for your offer, Comrade Ke," I replied. "But, I do not believe I am qualified to teach a foreign language. I prefer to work in the areas I just mentioned to you. Moreover, my wife and I would like to stay in Beijing, since, as you know, she is working at the Beijing Foreign Language Institute."

"Finding work as a technical foreign expert is going to be difficult," Comrade Ke said. Then using a more personal tone, he added, "China needs friends like you to help us in our 'Four Modernizations.'" But, we are not yet ready to receive technical foreign experts. However, since you requested to work as one, I will personally try and see what I can do. I can not promise you anything."

As a typical way of closing a meeting in China, all three of us talked about other things: our mutual friends, our life in China, and our families. By Chinese standards, the meeting had been friendly and relaxed. But, I was not very optimistic of the outcome. The problem was timing.

I did not hear from the FEB for the rest of the month. Meanwhile, I kept in contact with the various institutions I had applied to. A few of them showed a definite interest in me working with them, but they could not commit themselves yet.

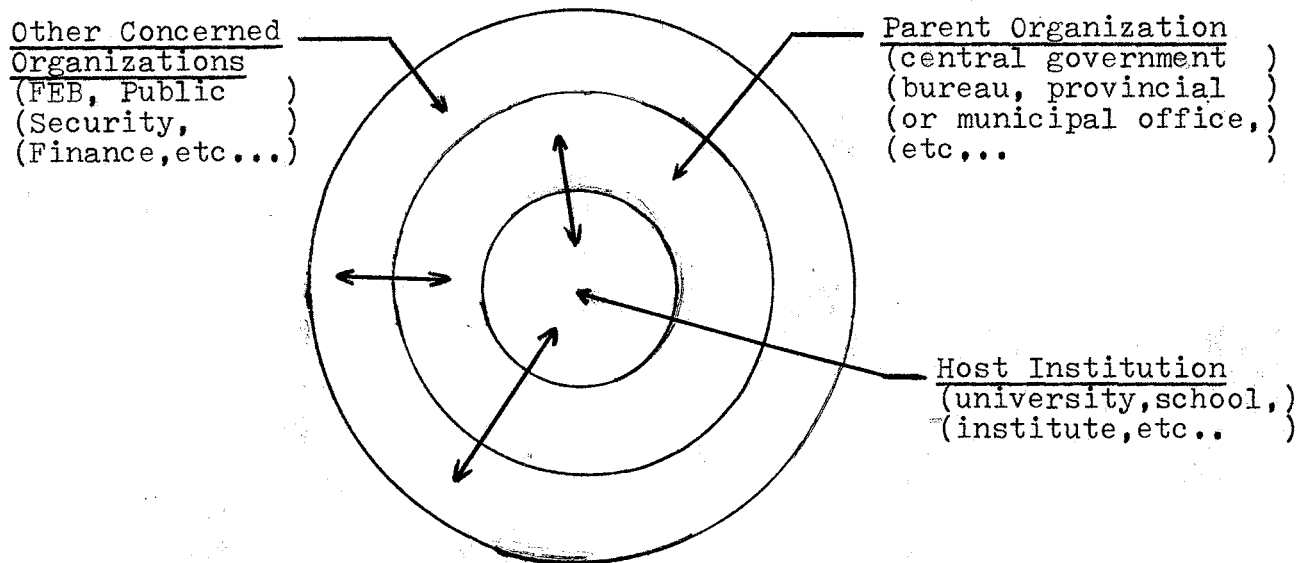
In late August, I asked for a second meeting with the FEB, during which Comrade Ke informed me that there were no new developments, but that he would keep on trying. I let him know that I would like to have a response before October 1st, so as to be able to make alternative arrangements if necessary. In dealing with Chinese organizations, I had found it very helpful to set deadlines, and give reasons for setting them. This provided a time frame within which these organizations could operate, avoided running into inconveniences on both sides, improved channels of communication, and, consequently, often speeded up the decision process.

By early September, I began to receive some positive signs from the institutions. The responses were unofficial, and all had the same ring. I shall select the one from Beijing University as an illustration. The Computer Science Group there said they were interested in me working with them. (The nature and content of the work were not clearly specified to me.) But, in the next breath, they asked whether I would be willing to wait five months, until about February 1979, before actually beginning work. I



was told, this was because the Computer Science Group was undergoing reorganization, a typical move reflecting the transitional state of the Chinese education system. But another unstated reason, I presumed, was that the university did not yet have an allocation for a foreign expert in Computer Science, and needed the time to remedy this.

The decision-making process of allocating quotas of foreign experts to institutions can be represented by three concentric circles. The inner circle, where the process often begins, is the host institution that needs a foreign expert, for instance, Beijing University. At this level, professional departments, in our case the Computer Science Group, as well as administrative offices, such as Logistics, and Foreign Affairs,\* are involved. The



Quota Allocation of Foreign Experts —  
The Decision-Making Process

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\*In a university environment, the Logistics Office, a military-inspired term, has the overall responsibility for its non-academic, non-research support functions, e.g. physical plant, personnel, finance, students and staff housing, and transportation. The Foreign Affairs Office, a separate entity, oversees work and/or living arrangements for foreign experts, foreign students, and foreign delegations visiting the university.

final decision requires the active participation of a high-level administrator, e.g. the president or the vice-president. The second circle represents the institution's parent organization, in this instance, one of the bureaus in the Education Ministry, since Beijing University is a central university. If the institution is a provincial or a municipal one, it is the provincial or the municipal government. The communication between these two levels may be initiated from bottom up or top down. In the first case, the host institution uses all sorts of informal channels to assess its chances for a positive outcome before it makes a formal request. In the second case, the parent organization allocates its quota of foreign experts to the institutions under it. Final decision at that level requires the signature of the head of the parent organization, or even one rank above him, such as a vice-minister. The outer circle encompasses all the government organizations that participate in the decision-making process, and which are external to the host institution and its parent organization. Such organizations may be at the central, provincial, and local levels. They include the FEB (see note on page 7 above), the Ministry of Finance, the Foreign Affairs Office of the municipal government in the city of the host institution, and the Public Security Bureau in that municipality (for questions related to safety and security).

It is not my intention to go into detail about the above, nor to describe the interaction and power play of the numerous organizations involved, or the behind-the-scene manoeuvres. I want merely to convey the complexity of such a process, and the amount of time and resources that it entails. You can imagine the bureaucratic merry-go-round the institution faces when it actually employs the foreign expert. Unless the host institution and the parent organization have exceptionally good access to the "back door,"\* the process can take over a year.

Thus, whenever I was told that there was an interest in my candidature, and was asked whether I would wait for six months before beginning to work, I could not promise to do so. I pressed the FEB to help me find work before

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\*Many large and medium-size organizations have on their staff one person or more whose sole function is to facilitate their employers' dealings with other organizations. These Chinese-style public relations officers have usually solid connections in Beijing and other provincial centers. I had the opportunity to deal with some of them, when I lived in China, and called them the "back door" openers."

October 1st, 1978, but suspected that my candidature for the kind of job I was seeking was premature.

One Saturday afternoon, on September 9, 1978, Comrade Ke Daquan phoned me to say:

"Can you come to my office in half-an-hour? I have people here who are interested in talking to you."

"Later this afternoon, I have to be at a friend's wedding. Can we postpone the meeting till Monday?"

"Come in half-an-hour anyway, and stay as long as you can."

This was when I first met Professors Shen of Jilin Polytechnic Institute, and Yao and Zhao of Harbin Institute of Technology. They told me they had come to see me on behalf of the First Ministry of Machine-Building Industry, the largest ministry dealing with civilian industries. The First Ministry wanted to establish a Systems Engineering (S.E.)\* department in one of its colleges. They asked me to tell them about S.E. training in the U.S. I obliged, to the best of my ability. But, as you can see from the definition of S.E. in the note below, its range of applications is extremely wide. Consequently S.E. training will be colored by the field in which it is to be applied. So I tried to find out from my interviewers the objectives of the S.E. training program the First Ministry had in mind. It was not easy for me to grasp the three professors' answers. Communication was hindered by our biases and diverse experiences. Also, we had our cultural and technological differences. They kept referring to the training of people who would eventually be able to use computers to solve management problems in enterprises. I sensed that they meant Data Processing S.E. So when I left the meeting with the request that I

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\*Systems Engineering: "Techniques applying advanced scientific methodology to organize and manage the "system's" planning, study, design, creation, testing, and use.... (When) used in Engineering, it becomes Engineering S.E.; (when) used in business, it becomes Economic S.E. In addition, there is administrative S.E., scientific research S.E., military S.E., logistics S.E., quality assurance S.E., etc.... S.E. is regarded as a science. Its principal bases are Mathematics, particularly Operations Research, and Management Theory. An important means of its computation is the electronic digital computer." Translated from the Cihai (a Chinese dictionary) (Shanghai, Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, 1979) Vol.2, pp. 2622-2623.

give them a presentation, two days later, on how I would set up a S.E. department in China, I had in mind the training of Data Processing Systems Engineers and Systems Analysts.

The next Monday afternoon we met again. This time three more professors, all from Qinghua University, were present. At this meeting, our discussion, by no means, centered on the use of computers. We talked more of Management Theory, Management Science, Behavioral Sciences, --officially taboo for over a decade in China-- and, of course, S.E. for Management purposes. It was clear to me this time that the main objective of the First Ministry's S.E. department was to train people in modern management techniques and skills to run Chinese factories. Based on this exchange, I broadened my presentation far beyond that of Data Processing S.E., and dealt more with Management Science and Industrial Engineering (more about the substance of my work in a future newsletter). The presentation seemed to have gone very well. Every word I uttered was noted down conscientiously. Although at times we had to clarify some of the terms we used, the discussion flowed smoothly and pleasantly. At the end, two or three professors expressed their satisfaction with the outcome of our meeting, and told me that they would report back to the leaders of the First Ministry.

Fifteen days later, a delegation of the First Ministry came to our apartment to "invite" me to work with them to set up S.E. programs at some of the, then, fifteen universities and colleges under the ministry. The meeting was very business-like, which pleased me. Professor Shen, who acted as the spokesman, outlined broadly the work plan, and where I fitted in. A discussion ensued, mainly to hear my reaction to the substance of Professor Shen's presentation. When asked whether I accepted the "invitation," I said I did in principle, provided that work conditions were discussed and agreed upon by both parties. Such questions were not even broached during the meeting.

It took a series of four meetings with representatives of the FEB, the First Ministry, and the Shanghai Institute of Mechanical Engineering(SIME), where I was to begin my work, to iron out questions of work conditions. Not that we were far apart on what they should be, but rather we differed on how to handle them. To my Chinese employer, it was perfectly alright for me to begin work, and later address questions, such as living arrangements, work for my wife Brenda, schooling for my daughter Anna, and renu-

meration. I did not entirely subscribe to this approach --the FEB representative agreed openly with me-- and insisted that a list of points I had submitted to them be solved, or at least, discussed. Still, it was difficult for them to understand my position. In meetings where I was sure such questions would be on the agenda, they would rather discuss the work involved, schedules, and dates of moving to Shanghai. Finally during the third meeting, I said to them:

"I believe questions regarding work conditions should be discussed, for our mutual benefit. Unless they are, I do not think I should begin to work."

"Do you mean you will not go to Shanghai?"

"That is correct," I replied, somewhat sheepishly. A painful, but necessary answer.

Dead silence for a while. Looks exchanged. Embarrassment. The penny finally dropped. For the second time, the representatives of the First Ministry and SIME jotted down the items I wanted put on our next agenda, as I read them from my list.

I knew my employer acted in good faith, though unconventionally by Western standards. This could be explained in a number of ways. When a cadre is transferred from one part of China to another, a very common practice, the State normally sees to it that practical questions resulting from the transfer are solved satisfactorily. I guess, the First Ministry considered our move to Shanghai as another transfer, and that it was entirely its responsibility to smooth things out for us. We did not need to worry about it. Indeed, this was stressed to us a number of times. Also, apart from a small number of cadres at the FEB, few people had the knowledge or experience of Western-style hiring practices. I was fully aware of the underlying causes of the Chinese position, and would have accepted to go along with it, had I not felt a strong family responsibility.

In our next meeting, all items on the agenda were dealt with, one by one. Some were solved, others were pendant. A few days later, I formally accepted the job offer. Then began a period of fifteen most exciting, educational, rewarding months, characterized by highs and lows, but never one dull moment.

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The first time I experienced the difference in treatment of a foreign student and a foreign expert was the day I moved out of Beijing University. I kept a room there in the foreign student dormitory, although I lived with the rest of my family in the Friendship Hotel -- the residence of almost all foreign experts in Beijing. Brenda was the foreign expert then. In April 1978, I had requested that I visit the university's computer center, and offered to give informal lectures in Computer Science and Data Processing. My request and offer were conveyed to Teacher Ke of the university's Foreign Student Office, the appropriate channel to use. I handed my curriculum vitae, and a detailed write-up on my professional training and experience with a covering letter to him, and spent close to an hour discussing the question with him. He sounded very favorable and promised to "do the best I can." In the following five months, whenever I inquired about the matter, he would give me his progress report. However, for one reason or another, I could not yet visit the computer center, nor meet with members of the Computer Science Group.

Then came the day I moved out of Beijing University. I went to the Foreign Student Office to go through the required administrative procedure. When I was through, Teacher Ke, who by then had become the head of the Office, invited me to the reception room for a courtesy chat. A very nice gesture on his part. Our meeting was about to end, when he said to me:

"I hope you will not forget us and visit the university in the future."

"I will surely. Actually, I will be back the day after tomorrow."

"What brings you back so soon?" he inquired.

"To visit the computer center."

An icy silence. Then Teacher Ke, a very jovial man, sprang back, saying with a wide smile on his face:

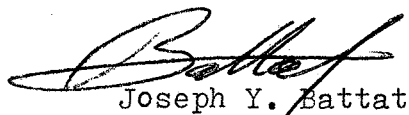
"Would you like to visit it this afternoon? If not, how about tomorrow?"

"No thank you, Teacher Ke. My friends at the First Ministry have already made the necessary arrangements."

I learned later on that it took one phone call from the First Ministry to arrange the visit for its foreign expert.

Foreign Expert!

Sincerely yours



Joseph Y. Battat