

# ICWA LETTERS

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**Institute of Current World Affairs**  
The Crane-Rogers Foundation  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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*Alex Brenner's two-year fellowship in China has now officially begun following his completion of a lily-gilding, Mandarin-immersion course in Beijing that started earlier this year. The course was interrupted by the SARS outbreak, and Alex commented on it so cogently in a report to ICWA's Trustees that I asked him to flesh it out a bit as a foretaste of reports and newsletters to come. Here it is.*

## *Western Worrywarts vs. Wang's Way:* **Who's Worrying about SARS, and Why** *Plus: From the Not-Quite-Trenches:* **My Very Own Beijing Quasi-Quarantine**

By Alexander J. Brenner

SEPTEMBER 30, 2003

BEIJING, China—Early this month I was biking home at dusk through the narrow lanes, or *hutongs*, that crisscross the old neighborhoods lying near Beijing's center. At an intersection I saw a bright red banner suspended over the street, declaring: "Don't let SARS into our neighborhood." I wondered if it had been put up earlier in the year, during the height of the city's SARS outbreak, or was part of a fresh wave of public-health propaganda preparing for a possible return of the disease this fall.

"How long has that banner been up there? Is it from the spring or is it new?" I asked a woman walking by.

She looked up at the banner. "I don't know." She turned to the old man sitting nearby, occupying his corner of the intersection; in the *hutongs*, individual old people establish territorial rights over individual corners. "How long has this been here?" she asked him.

He glanced up at the banner and studied it for a moment. "I don't know," he shrugged.

As I later found out, the banner in question had been up since May. In my own neighborhood, however, other propaganda postings have appeared in recent days. A long banner, stretched on a wall 50 feet from my house, reads: "Create a national sanitary zone, each person participates, everyone gains benefits." The more generalized message is intended, perhaps, to avoid stoking direct fears of SARS, but the reasons for its appearance at this juncture—with Chinese health authorities preparing for the fall weather and a SARS case in Singapore sending jitters through East Asian markets and governments—seem clear enough. But while knowledge of the continuing threat from SARS has been hanging, literally and figuratively, over the heads of Beijing residents throughout the summer, the issue seems to lie just above their collective field of vision—you have to bring the issue to people's attention and make them focus on it, and even then many people seem to dismiss it entirely. This is a bit surprising, since we're only a few months out from a period that produced widespread fear and transformed life throughout this huge city—and we're now potentially a few months away from a situation in which the imperfect state of SARS testing combines with flu season to create mass confusion about who is sick with what.

Beyond the hanging of banners, the government has been carefully preparing



*“Don’t let SARS into our neighborhood,” reads the banner. Old Wang, seated second from left, shares his hutong corner with a friend.*

the population for a return of the disease, running articles with headlines like “Experts: SARS may re-emerge” and announcing specific preparations it is taking for the fall. These measures, like setting up fever wards in hospitals and establishing detailed SARS-reporting guidelines, are declared in confident, optimistic tones. From my own unscientific sampling, the result of such coverage is that 1) a commanding majority believe SARS will return and 2) almost all in this group think the government is well-prepared to deal with an outbreak. Given that the new, more open course taken by the leadership starting in late April proved successful, it seems people are willing to forgive the authorities for the botched early response that allowed the disease to break out of southern China and spread around the country (not to mention the world).

I’m not sure the state of knowledge about this new disease gives us grounds to be either optimistic or pessimistic at this point. I do believe, however, that if SARS returns the government is likely to be forthright in its reporting on the disease. Avoiding the economic disruptions from a major SARS outbreak is a key concern for a Party whose domestic legitimacy is based largely on rapid growth of the economy, and the leadership learned last spring that in the fight against infectious disease, as an April *New York Times* editorial aptly phrased it, “information is the best disinfectant.” And if obfuscation and cover-ups in China led once again to a global outbreak, the international loss of face would be immense—and also particularly ill-timed, adding another layer of tension to the finger-pointing over trade deficits and job losses. You can just see some Congressman standing at the well of the House, ranting: “Not only are the Chinese stealing our jobs, they’re sending us killer germs!” Maybe

I’m being naively optimistic here, but it seems to me Beijing has got to play this round openly, with its own people and the world.

I should note that on this point about openness, I’m more optimistic than certain Chinese. I’m seeing a split in how different groups are feeling about the fall: Unlike people in the working-class neighborhood where I live, a small, elite subset of younger, college-educated Chinese seem to be more skeptical of the Party’s ability to cope with a return of the disease, with some saying they won’t trust the government numbers on SARS cases under any circumstances. Here in the hutongs, however, I’ve been intrigued by a line I have

heard repeatedly when discussing SARS: “*Women xiangxin Dang*,” “We believe in the Party.” As far as I can tell, these words are delivered with absolute sincerity, and when people say this they are expressing more than just “we believe the Party did a good job controlling SARS in the spring and will do so again this fall.” No one worships leaders any more, as they did Mao—and, in a lesser, different way, Deng. But it seems that for many, particularly working-class urbanites just tasting the possibilities of a middle-class existence, there lingers a deeply-planted, quasi-spiritual belief in the correctness of the Party’s decisions.

We hear a lot in the western press about China facing a “crisis of belief”—which is to say, “belief in Communism has collapsed, with nothing to replace it.” It has never been clear to me what this means in terms of individual people. Intellectuals and Party cadres aside, the overwhelming majority of Chinese never embraced Communism as a developed belief system; Communism was simply the name for the set of policy reforms introduced into their lives from on-high by China’s new emperors. Peasants, for example, certainly didn’t believe in communal cafeterias or farming collectives—the effects of which they disliked greatly. What Chinese people have been willing to do is place their belief in government that is reasonably competent, maintains stability and guides society on an upward path toward prosperity. This is, on the whole, what most people living in the People’s Republic experienced through the mid-1950s, and again since the late-1970s. (Competent government is decidedly not what many are experiencing today in China’s rural areas—a whole other story.)

In light of these two-plus decades of “peace and de-

velopment,” and in the absence of any political or spiritual competition, for many the Party still fills a natural desire to believe in some greater, protective force. And even for those less satisfied with the government, it remains the *de facto* fallback when a threat like SARS hangs over people’s heads. The importance of government of course becomes apparent in times of uncertainty. Just as Chinese have no choice but to trust in the Party’s handling of SARS, Americans realize that the only thing standing between them and another 9-11 is wise leadership in Washington. The difference is that the American political system asks us to think actively about just how wise our leadership is—it’s actually our responsibility to make sure our politicians invest the proper resources in areas like, say, port security. One-Party rule, on the other hand, acts as a kind of infantilizing force. Particularly in the Confucianism-based authoritarian tradition, the relationship between ruler and subject takes on a kind of parent-child dynamic: like children who know they can relax and let their parents do the worrying for them, people find peace of mind by transferring their fears onto the Party.

At one point I was talking to a middle-aged man about the late-April decision to fire the mayor of Beijing and the health minister, and I asked him if he had any ideas about the timing or nature of this shift in policy direction. “Oh,” he shrugged, “we’re just *laobaixing*, ordinary citizens, we don’t know about that sort of thing.” In other words: “oh, we’re just kids, how should we know what the adults are doing?” So when at the end of our conversation this gentleman proclaimed, “we believe in the Party,” his words ended up sounding like an invocation of a Great Paternal Protector who works in mysterious ways—the functional equivalent of finishing off a sentence with the clause, “God willing.”

This depositing of worry onto the Party is a manifestation of a trait buried deep in the Chinese psyche: a belief that one’s fate is to a great extent out of one’s own hands. Such a belief facilitates the shifting of one’s worries, and, perhaps, of one’s “rights” as well, to paternalistic rulers. Knowing you don’t really chart your own path through life, it becomes easier to accept an all-powerful government as just another fate-shaping force.

Last spring I remember being a bit taken aback by the dismissive mind-set of my landlady in commenting about the SARS situation. “What’s all the fuss? When it’s your

turn to die, then you die.” While her logic is unimpeachable, I found her attitude quite unsatisfying. Or, as a gentleman who just sold me some furniture said, “SARS is a natural force, like a flood or typhoon; you can’t do anything about it, so there is no use worrying about it.” Again, I find such pronouncements rather unconvincing. These comments are perfect examples of the kind of detached outlook about SARS I’m hearing from various quarters.

Over the years, many westerners have laid out their theories about the origins and particularities of the Chinese worldview. One such recent exposition can be found in *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*, by University of Michigan cultural psychologist Richard Nisbett. The distinctions Nisbett describes between Asian/Chinese and Western/Greek mindsets mesh closely with my observations, and it’s worthwhile to lay out the foundation of his argument: For reasons related to ecology and geography, Chinese society evolved to emphasize harmonious inter-personal relationships as first necessitated by the demands of cooperative agricultural production. The major philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism grew out of and reinforced a worldview that valued, not abstract truths about the natural world, but rather ways—the Taoist *Way*, the Confucian bonds guiding relationships—to live together in harmony with humanity and the natural world.

Western thought, meanwhile, finds its origins in an-



cient Greek civilization's emphasis on individual agency. The ecology of the Greek landscape allowed persons to engage in individual agricultural production. This ability to make one's own decisions led a search for the rules governing one's environment that would have predictive power and further increase individual control. At the same time, Greece's division into separate city-states with differing political cultures and its location at the crossroads of various ancient civilizations led to an exposure to conflicting viewpoints that begged for resolution—thus the tradition of argumentation relying on logic as a method to prove to others that one's hypothesis about X is correct. These twin emphases on discernible rules and logic provide the foundations of the western agency-centered, scientific mindset: the practice of pursuing truths about the natural world led Greeks to believe they could not just understand nature but, crucially, they could control it, and, by extension, their own fate.

The Chinese view that one's fate is ultimately out of one's hands doesn't mean that people give up on shaping their own paths; you still do the best you can do with the tools at your disposal. For example, nearly everyone here embraces the idea that education is the source of upward social and economic mobility, and so parents are notorious for pushing their children to succeed in school. And naturally, as the reaction to the spread of SARS this spring showed, in crisis settings the survival instinct always trumps the fatalist mindset. To this day, however, belief in the ability of man to dominate his environment is not fully developed in Chinese society. Many studies bear out that Asians' sense of control is much weaker than that of Westerners who have, from a young age, learned to place themselves at the commanding center of their experience. In answering questions about their daily routines, for example, American four- and six-year-olds resort to self-reference at three times the rate of their Chinese peers. As Nisbett draws the distinction, "Westerners are the protagonists of their autobiographical novels; Asians are merely cast members in movies touching upon their existences."

These disparate self-conceptions owe much to the predictive rules governing experience developed and embraced by the Greeks—rules that lacked real counter-

parts in the Chinese mindset. And so in trying to navigate a world with no clear, discoverable rules, the Chinese have necessarily viewed experience as exceedingly complex: at some level, everything that occurs is linked to everything else, making causality difficult to disentangle even under the best of conditions. Thus, I should not have been so surprised when my death-scoffing land-

lady asserted that the outbreak of SARS in China had to be connected to the break-out of war in Iraq. The fact that the direct link between the two was mysterious didn't make it any less obvious. When I protested that this simultaneity was purely coincidental, she gave me a little look that said, "oh sure," adding a disapproving smile that seemed to accuse me, an American, of knowing more about this connection than I was willing to admit.

An acceptance that the world is complex and hard to understand doesn't mean people don't seek to comprehend it. In the absence of hard rules, however, superstition flourishes. The myriad totally untested methods used this spring to keep SARS at bay are testament to the continuing force of superstition in modern China. Those who were in cities hit by SARS may remember around-the-block lines to purchase a type of white

vinegar said to have special antiviral qualities, bowls of Chinese medicinal soup served at restaurants and ladled out to students lined up on university campuses, and the ubiquitous burning smell of incense-like substances.

I don't have a problem with the argument that home remedies may help the immune system, at very least in as much as they create a sense of mental well-being, improve sleep, etc.; we need to be honest, however, about just how much such remedies really protect us from SARS. Most distressing is when obvious negatives more than cancel out any positives: for example, the theory that heavy smokers never caught SARS prompted who knows how many people to light up in the interest of protecting their lungs. This superstition became so widespread in Beijing by late April that the government resorted to publishing warnings in city newspapers in an attempt to debunk it.

The Communists came to power 50 years ago prom-



*During the spring, a Qinghua University undergraduate displayed a budding western-inspired, agency-centered weltanschauung through which she confronts her fear of SARS by an act of artistic creation and asserts control over her fate. Or maybe she just likes Minnie Mouse.*

ising to wipe out superstition, but this has clearly been one of their toughest battles. It's quite astounding the lengths to which the government feels it has to preempt conclusions based on superstitions. Last March 15, just as the power transition to the new 4<sup>th</sup>-Generation leadership was being completed at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, Beijing received an unexpectedly heavy snowfall that lasted the entire morning. As I cycled through big, wet flakes on my way to language class, my only reaction was how much better Qinghua University's concrete-colored campus looked under its white covering. The next day, however, state-run television channels were earnestly reporting that such a snowfall was not uncommon so late in the winter, the announcer proceeding to comment on previous years in which snow storms of similar magnitude had occurred mid-March. The unspoken subtext: a big snowfall coinciding with the leadership transition was not, repeat, *not*, a sign of displeasure from the heavens. Here is a country that is about to launch a man into space later this year, and its government feels the need to assure everyone that it's OK for it to snow in March.

Instead of worrying about a few inches of snow, the Party should have been worrying about SARS, just then in the process of breaking out of southern China. Of course one reason SARS was hushed up was precisely because it coincided with the leadership transfer; how very inauspicious for a dread disease to start spreading just as new leaders were taking power. And so a larger crisis ended up tainting the government because no one wanted to appear tainted. I guess this all makes sense in

a country where the telephone number 8888-8888 can fetch \$280,000 at auction. ("8" is a lucky number because it sounds like a word that means to get rich. "4" is an unlucky number because it sounds like "death." My cell-phone number, given to me free by someone who wasn't using it, has three consecutive 4's in it. Now I understand why they weren't using it.)

Several days after my initial visit, I returned to the intersection where I had seen the banner reading "Don't let SARS into our neighborhood." Sure enough, I found the old man seated on his corner. We chatted for a while, and I found out the gentleman, surnamed Wang, had lived his entire life in the area. No matter how detached an attitude Old Wang had about SARS, I still wondered how he couldn't have known when the banner had gone up. He has been sitting on this spot for decades, so you might think he would have fairly accurate knowledge of what was happening in the couple-dozen square-foot space in front of him. I studied him more closely; with his shaved head and upright posture, he exuded a monkish peacefulness. And I began to realize, it would also make sense that the many banners suspended at this intersection above his head had, over the years, run together like one long, red brushstroke. His whole person seemed to say: "Banners come and go; warlords and invaders and mass movements and diseases come and go; I'm still here." I asked Old Wang what was the biggest change that occurred in his neighborhood during the height of SARS. "Well," he said, "there were fewer people on the street."



*Multinationals are still trying to capitalize on SARS fears: this bus shelter ad for Procter and Gamble's Safeguard soap shows proper hand-washing technique.*

Reading back over the initial SARS report I wrote last May, it's obvious I'm a worrier in fine Western Civ tradition. Growing up in America provides the ultimate preparation for embracing the idea that we are captains of our own lives, and, as such, must ever keep our hands on the wheel. In the modern world, it is we Americans who are the standard bearers for the concept of agency as developed in ancient Greece. As a nation of immigrants, we're the progeny of people who didn't just believe you can chart your own course across life's waters, but who actually got in boats and did so.

In a globalizing

world, however, it was just a matter of time before America experienced what is often cited as a main casualty of 9-11: a “loss of innocence,” which I take to mean a weakening of our sense of control over our lives. Consider another current example, those 2.7 million manufacturing jobs lost since 2000. While the xenophobia-tinted finger-pointing in Washington—blaming China for currency manipulation and unfair trade practices—is mostly political bluster, labor flight to the developing world is a real part of the problem facing American manufacturing. Most economists stress, however, that the bigger issues leading to the current wave of job losses center around stagnant growth in Europe and Japan, as well as the international competitive pressures on US firms to boost productivity—maintain or grow output while cutting costs, i.e. workers. All these reasons point to how globalization complicates American control over our economy and society. And while these forces shrinking the globe are not new, events are now played out at an accelerated, Pentium processor pace.

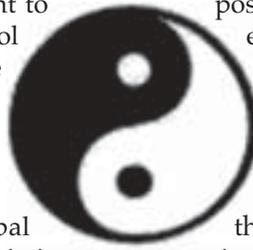
The expanding scope and depth of global interconnectivity means that causality really is increasingly difficult to disentangle. Thus the Chinese emphasis on complex interconnectedness, on causality being located in some dense network or field, presents renewed relevance. In this sense, the Chinese worldview is better prepared to envisage the complexity of globalization than a western agency-centered one—at least during the current info-technology-driven stage of globalization, when we are scrambling to come up with new sets of predictive rules. I’m not saying that we should throw up our hands and surrender in the face of a complex world. But faced with new, unknown sets of conditions, it will take some time to come up with rules that really help us describe our environment, and whence we can deduce appropriate policies. (To give a specific example: only following the series of emerging market financial crises in the 1990s, made possible in part by capital account liberalization and the “electronic herd” behavior of investors, did economists approach consensus that managed floating exchange rate regimes are preferable to fixed exchange rate systems, for small-to-mid-sized economies at least.)

In the meanwhile, a Chinese approach that stresses complexity and acknowledges everything that we don’t know can play a useful balancing role to a western approach that often assumes we know everything. The western agency-centered framework is based on the idea that individual minds are capable of grasping “the truth” and that there exist methods to “prove” to others the superiority of a given truth. (As noted earlier, one such key method developed by the Greeks was logic, which made possible geometric proof; the Chinese, however, lacked formal logic and never progressed far in geometry.) While

this western framework eventually enabled the development of modern science, it also proved particularly well-suited to generate ideologies convinced of their own infallibility. The infallibility of any given truth could be “proved” to non-believers by persuading them with logic, converting them with faith, or, failing these, by stretching them out on racks and bashing them over the head with heavy implements.

In contrast, the Chinese harmony-centered worldview suggests that everything contains within in it a dose of its opposite. This is symbolized in the sign of the Tao: yin and yang swirl together to form a circle, yet within the yin there lies a dot of the yang, and vice versa. This is a graphic representation of a relationship of opposites that exists totally outside the plane of western logic—a relationship in which the proposition “X” and the proposition “not X” may be simultaneously valid. Such a worldview can serve to check the excesses of self-assured, know-it-all ideologies. For example, during the trademark crisis of the current globalization era, the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, omniscient IMF medicine men treated the suffering nations with heavy doses of their “Washington Consensus” ideology—with consequences nasty, unnecessary and not nearly short enough. In a complicated environment, it may be worthwhile to paint a little dab of self-doubt onto our certainties and realize that “not X,” too, may contain some validity.

Over the long haul, as integration proceeds, we will hopefully figure out underlying rules that will make globalization more comprehensible and predictable. In the meanwhile, however, we all need to get used to living in a world that is more complex and more chaotic—a world where a handful of cell phone-plotting terrorists and a butterfly ballot flapping its wings in Palm Beach combine to change the fates of whole peoples and regions in the space of months. The *New York Times* ran an article a few weeks ago describing how highly anxious New Yorkers remain in the wake of 9-11. Granted, these are New Yorkers we’re talking about, and we wouldn’t want them any other way, but this is still a serious indication of how hard it will be for all Americans to curb their worrying. Had New York or any other American city been affected by SARS this spring on the scale that Beijing was, I’m guessing the climate of anxiety as fall approaches would be significantly more palpable than it is here. Again, my comments on the pertinence of the Chinese worldview should not be interpreted as a call for Americans to take a “hands off the wheel” approach in managing our lives. We could, however, afford to loosen our grip a bit. It would benefit Americans’ collective blood pressure—and to a certain extent that of everyone else in the world—if we could learn at least a little something from Old Wang on his *hutong* corner.





*Starting in late April, the guards at the Qinghua University gates finally got a chance to actively guard their gates.*

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*The report that follows was written in early May, 2003, following my return to the US from Beijing, and has been modified in a few places for style.*

In the weeks since the SARS outbreak began, it seems the press has reported on the etymology of the word “quarantine” every few days. In case you have not been following SARS coverage quite as religiously as I have, the word comes from the Italian *quaranta giorni*—40 days. This was the amount of time ships carrying the plague were forced to sit anchored out in the harbor, long enough for everyone aboard either to recover or die. As of this writing in mid-May, there are new reports that China’s neighbors are taking quarantine-like measures to protect themselves—Russia threatening to suspend flights from China, Kazakhstan warning it may close its border entirely. The more dramatic examples of quarantine have taken place inside the country, where thousands of people find themselves shut inside apartment buildings, universities and hospitals.

Qinghua University, where I was attending language courses, did shut its gates entirely, effectively trapping students and teachers inside. By that point our language program had suspended classes, so I never experienced

direct quarantine of any kind. However, during the 40-some days I spent in Beijing from mid-March, when SARS burst into the press headlines, until the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, when I passed through two heat scanners at the Beijing airport and boarded a plane out of the country, I got a very real taste of living in an environment completely transformed by a nasty infectious disease. And I suspect the sensation of relief I felt upon landing in New York provided a little taste of what a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italian sailor felt when landing on a Venetian dock after 40 days in the harbor—had we deplaned onto the tarmac rather than through a walkway, I would have seriously considered giving the ground a little Pope John Paul II-style kiss. With the situation in China continuing to change daily, all I can do here is offer some impressions of life in Beijing during those first 40 days of the SARS phenomenon.

What was it like to be in a country turned upside down in such brief period of time? To employ another boat metaphor, it was like being on a mammoth oil tanker during a grave emergency. The tanker is moving full speed ahead; first-quarter statistics show the economy growing at an annual rate of 9.9 percent, the fastest clip anywhere in the world. One day some reports emerge of a small fire in the hold, but the ship’s officers really don’t want to hear about it, in part because they are occupied



*Shop till you drop: Shopping was one of the more dangerous urban activities. I wanted to suggest to the mother in the photo that if she is going to make her daughter wear a mask, then she might want to make sure it actually covers her daughter's nose.*

with a big meeting during which they are transferring power among themselves and giving long speeches complementing each other. But in a short span of time the small fire has spread ferociously, and the bridge is suddenly aflame. The newly-appointed captain and officers at first don't say anything, hoping that maybe no one will notice the fire, and that it will go out by itself. But of course everyone has noticed, and the fire doesn't go out, so a little while later an officer steps forward to announce that while the bridge is indeed on fire, the situation is firmly under control (this lieutenant is later made to walk the plank).

However, when lots of people on the bridge start to go up in flames, the captain finally realizes it's time to face reality: everyone must focus on fighting the fire before the oil tanks catch and the whole vessel is engulfed and sunk. And that's where we are today, with everyone on board, from the captain to the lowliest deckhand, all

enlisted to fight fires. When everyone is fighting fires and trying to avoid getting burned, no one can focus very much on keeping the ship moving forward. Indeed, statistics for April are out, and the restaurants, shops, and streets that became emptier with each passing day have naturally translated into slowed economic growth. Beijing residents, of course, weren't thinking about how their actions would affect the GDP statistics; they were thinking about how to go about daily life without getting sick.

Despite the fact that all the schools shut and many people found ways to avoid going to work, all Beijing residents still had to engage, at least occasionally, in that crucial activity necessary for survival: shopping. Unless you grow your own vegetables and raise your own chickens on your apartment balcony, shopping is something that everyone in cities must do. This makes shopping very dangerous—even people in early stages of SARS need to stock up on frozen dumplings and peanut oil.

Witness the following death-defying escape. I was in the food section of a Chinese Wal-Mart-style store, vainly trying to read the ingredients on some package, when a matronly, middle-aged Chinese woman walking toward me unleashed a viscous barrage of sneezes into her ill-fitting mask. A wave of fear swept over me. I was sure I could see hundreds of little SARS viruses doing the cha cha cha above her head; I immediately began holding my breath. She was ten feet away from me and closing fast. I froze, caught like a deer in

headlights. Then, gathering my wits about me, I took a short, sharp breath, faked left, then dashed right up the escalator to the relative safety of the empty school-supply department.

I was wearing a quality mask, and I knew the chance that the sneezing woman had SARS and that I would get it from her was tiny. You know this, but you can't help feeling anxious. More than anything else, going shopping gave me an inkling of what residents of Baghdad must have felt as they experienced the recent aerial bombardment. Once you grasp the general outline of the situation, you know the chances of a bomb falling on your head are extremely slim. Still, you can't help but wonder if you're going to pick the wrong time to go to the market and get bombed—or, in Beijing, get coughed all over by someone with SARS.

What was most bothersome about being in Beijing

during those days was dealing with perpetual, low-grade, gnawing anxiety. It lurks in the back of your mind and accompanies you every time you walk into a public space, every time you come face to face with another person. For me at least, SARS was also a faithful bedfellow, making at minimum a guest appearance in my dreams almost nightly. When the majority of your waking hours is spent thinking, talking, reading and writing about a single concern, then you can't expect your brain just to change channels at night. Indeed, it seemed like someone had installed a cable, Matrix-style, into the back of my head, and the only thing it carried was a 24-hour news channel whose motto was, "all SARS, all the time."

The only other time I have experienced such similar night-and-day preoccupation came when I was living in Washington during the first few weeks following September 11. Life in the nation's capital during that period can be summed up by screeching sirens, bomb threats, hovering helicopters, an anthrax scare and plenty of general anxiety. "We're at war," our government told us after September 11. "We're at war," the Chinese government has been telling its citizens in the last few weeks. I'm not a big fan of militarist metaphors, but given that Al Qaeda and SARS have already killed Americans and Chinese in their own respective "homelands" and could, in the worst-case scenario, kill

many millions more, these governments really are at war.

These two wars share certain similarities. Both target invisible, faceless enemies that spread quietly and inflict maximum damage in vulnerable areas and populations; both require constant vigilance, with an emphasis on defense and preventative measures; both are long-term conflicts that may be characterized by severe flare-ups followed by stretches of seeming calm. To be won definitively, the governments will need to stamp out the current threat completely even as they address the root causes of the problem. Addressing the root causes of virus propagation will certainly be difficult for China—how do you "address" Mother Nature? Southern China, the probable incubator of the SARS virus, has also produced many other infectious diseases for a reason: the area is densely populated by man and livestock alike, making it for easier for viruses to jump from animals to humans. Over the long-term, urbanization, economic growth and more modern agricultural techniques may reduce the likelihood of viruses making this jump to humans.

Though obviously not comparable to living in an actual combat zone, the War on Terror and the War on SARS have been my first direct experience of "wartime"—and I don't much like it. In both countries the governments are going overboard by locking people up and depriving them of their civil liberties in the name of security



*"This toilet is so comfortable I almost forgot I'm wearing this uncomfortable mask!" exclaims the author. The landlady of the apartment where I now live offered to install a new toilet for my return, and invited me to go along with her and do some toilet-seat testing. Under ordinary Chinese shopping circumstances, I would have only had a few seconds to test each one before having to make way for other eager customers. On this day in late April, however, we were literally the only clients in a vast housing-supply warehouse.*

(granted, the Chinese excel at this even in peacetime). Also, in both countries you now have to be suspicious of the people around you, like those sitting next to you on the airplane—one false cough, Mister, and I'll have the air marshal put a bag over your head! Probably the most distressing thing about these wars is the fact that the "enemy" does lurk among us, leading to discrimination against fellow citizens. The Chinese can't resort to racial profiling to combat SARS, so they substitute "location profiling." The press has recently reported that people driving cars with Beijing license plates or holding Beijing residence permits who attempt to travel to other provinces are being harassed, insulted, shunned, pummeled with tomatoes, and sometimes even forced to into showers



*Would you like a mask with that?*

(hopefully *after* being splattered with the tomatoes).

All this said, thus far SARS is proving more of an anxiety-producing annoyance than a major existential threat. I'm quite sure that however bad articles about SARS in China have sounded over the last weeks, they sounded much worse when reading them on a sofa in the United States. I would see a piece in the *Times* on-line and think, oh my gosh, my grandmothers just read this and are going to have panic attacks. At least in Beijing, after reading some depressing news you could always go out, ride around on your bike, see the kids jumping rope, watch the old ladies chatting and fanning themselves in front of their apartment buildings, and be assured that the world really wasn't coming to an end. Americans reading the paper back home didn't have that chance to see that most people are finding ways to retain normalcy in their lives.

Don't mistake me, SARS quickly became an all-oc-

cupying concern to millions of Beijing residents. But by the end of April, for most of us it became increasingly scary at an ever- slower rate. My time in Beijing coincided mostly with the upward sloping side of an inverse parabola charting uncertainty and fear caused by SARS; I was there just as this arc of fear began to peak. Like all the people around me, I became better at putting the problem in perspective and in handling uncertainty. Of great help in reducing the uncertainty was the government's decision to come clean—or at least come a lot cleaner—in its reporting of SARS cases. Friends still in Beijing in mid-May indicate that although there were growing numbers of SARS cases piling up daily, the fact that the rate of increase was slowing was having a real calming effect. Traffic was picking back up, and more people were on the streets. McDonalds was giving out free masks with each order served, but the slowly-reviving clientele wasn't bothering to wear them. As a tactic to draw more customers back, it may be time to switch to free fries. □



## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

### Fellows and their Activities

#### **Alexander Brenner** (June 2003 - 2005) • **EAST ASIA**

A Yale graduate (History) with a Master's in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex also worked as a French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College, studied at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and served as a Yale-China teaching fellow at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. Against the backdrops of China's recent accession to the World Trade Organization and the anointing of the new leadership in Beijing, Alex will examine how Chinese are adapting to economic and cultural globalization, both inside and far from the capital.

#### **Andrew Rice** (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

#### **Matthew Rudolph** (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

When work toward a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations is finished, Matthew will begin two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

#### **Matthew Z. Wheeler** (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

#### **James G. Workman** (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548

Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: [icwa@valley.net](mailto:icwa@valley.net)

Web address: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

Executive Director:

Peter Bird Martin

Program Administrator:

Brent Jacobson

Publications Design & Management:

Ellen Kozak

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