

ICWA LETTERS

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EAST ASIA

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Great Walls, Panda Bears and Fractured Illusions

AMERICAN IMAGES OF CHINA

“As the president reaches out to the Chinese people, we will meet a people who in many respects are like ourselves — proud of their heritage, hard-working, patriotic, and family-oriented people, seeking a better life for themselves and their children, and looking optimistically to the future. I know of no better kind of exchange than one at this high level to dispel the misperceptions that had grown up between us about who we are and what we want.”

— *U.S. Ambassador to China James R. Sasser*
(speech at *The Asia Society*, March 1998)

BEIJING, China

April, 1998

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter:

“Presidential visits are very much about creating images,” said U.S. Consul General Raymond Burghardt during a luncheon address at the Portman Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Shanghai. “We will use President Clinton’s visit to China in June to update Americans’ image of China. The image will no longer be the guy standing in front of the row of tanks in Tiananmen Square, bringing their advance to a halt — though we do not want to erase that picture. It is time to change the logo American people call to mind when they think of China. What should it be then? Perhaps it should be a person sitting in front of a computer terminal.”

Just off the plane from China’s interior, I sat perplexed.¹ A person sitting in front of a computer terminal? Over the previous six months I’d traveled widely in southern Guizhou Province and during that time had seen only one or two computers besides my own. Wouldn’t a more appropriate image be a farmer, hoe in hand, laboring over a plot of soil? After all, more than 75 percent of China’s population are farmers. Or a laid-off factory worker in a long line at the factory’s gate, hoping to receive her meager compensation check? These were the images that came to mind. But someone sitting in front of a computer terminal? Hardly.

The consul general’s words intrigued and challenged me. My mind excused itself from the extravagantly furnished Portman Hotel to ponder the incredibly

¹ The occasion for the meeting was the Career Development Seminar of The Johns Hopkins-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies, China’s premier graduate-level, international-studies program for both Chinese and international students. I was invited to sit on a panel at the seminar to introduce the students to the Institute of Current World Affairs and my fellowship in Guizhou Province.



U.S. Consul General Raymond Burghardt told his audience in Shanghai: “We will use President Clinton’s visit to update America’s image of China. The picture will no longer be the guy standing in front of the row of tanks in Tiananmen Square, though we do not want to erase that image.” The anonymous figure that courageously stepped in front of a line of advancing tanks, bringing them to a halt, was a powerful image broadcast to the world in June 1989.

diverse experience of people and places I was immersed in this month. During April’s 30 days I spent time with a poor village family in Guizhou’s mountains, the head of a new factory in our prefecture’s poorest county, a Guizhou Province leader over dinner in the provincial capital of Guiyang, fellow worshippers on Easter weekend in cosmopolitan Shanghai, my wife’s family in a small town in prosperous coastal Jiangsu Province, former professors of mine and laid-off factory workers in Nanjing, and central-government officials, think-tank types, foreign journalists and businesspeople — even dinner with the former executive assistant to an army general, in the nation’s capital, Beijing.

Though I felt a bit like a spinning stone that had skipped across a large pond, the breadth of encounter over such a short period of time — from hinterland to coast, poverty to extravagance, rural to urban, from the politically insignificant to the country’s most powerful — created deep reflection and many images as I mentally responded to the U.S. government official’s comment on American perceptions of China.

What images best communicate China’s current real-

ity? How have Americans perceived China in the past? How can China be portrayed to the American people before, during and after Clinton’s visit? And most importantly, how should we formulate our images of China?

Images are powerful; they both reflect and influence public opinion. They influence foreign policy. They affect the way nations relate to each other.

“Two-hundred years from now,” a regional-security expert told me this week, “history textbooks will show that the 10 to 20 years surrounding the turn of the 21st century was a transitional period in China, a stage in China’s evolution that either ushered in an era of peace or resulted in yet another century of turmoil.”

The communication, therefore, of accurate images during this period of Chinese history — images that reflect a sufficiently complex and balanced mix of achievements, contradictions, longings and dilemmas — is critical to informing the way Americans relate to China at this important time.

FRACTURED ILLUSIONS

“According to the general appearance of things in the early 1890’s, China would gradually modernize, trade would grow, and the Imperial Government would acquire those attributes of sovereignty required to take its place in the modern world. The peaceful and orderly transition envisaged reflected the current faith in progress rather than the realities of the painful historical process. The traditional Middle Kingdom was, instead, on the edge of a cataclysm, the reverberations of which would be felt for generations.”²

During the late 1800s the United States entered a long and emotional relationship with China — an association in which, for the most part, Americans have failed to understand China and have almost continually sought to recreate her in their own image.³ The result has been wide swings in which Americans have either loved the aspects of China they recognized as similar to their own or feared and hated the China that refused to fit into their image. Indeed, no country has stirred the American sense of Manifest Destiny more powerfully than China; and no country has charmed, needled and confounded Americans more than China.

Generally speaking, the image of China prior to the communist revolution in 1949 was a country that was shedding a feudal past to embrace the same things Americans had struggled for, and, for the most part, won.

² Paul A. Varg, *The Making of a Myth* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), 14.

³ As in any historical overview, I am uncomfortably aware of the tendency to characterize at the expense of subtlety, detail and important exceptions. Nevertheless, I attempt in this newsletter to outline general trends — what appear to be extreme shifts — in American images of China.

A sense of inevitable linear progress blinded Americans to the continual fight for sheer subsistence among most Chinese, to the turbulence of national-identity crises and political power vacuums that embroiled the country in struggle. Most could not see, as one scholar said, that China would become “the great question of the Twentieth Century.”⁴

Writing during the early years of the century sociologist Edward A. Ross communicated this American optimism in the conclusion of his book *The Changing Chinese*:

“The exciting part of the transformation of China will take place in our time. In forty years there will be telephones and moving picture shows and appendicitis and sanitation and baseball nines and bachelor maids in every one of the thirteen hundred county districts of the Empire. The renaissance of a quarter of the human family is occurring before our eyes and we have only to sit in the parquet and watch the stage.”⁵

American missionaries, businesspeople, journalists and scholars were the primary conduits of perceptions that so powerfully attracted and colored the American imagination. And while there were well-known people who helped form and communicate these images — like Pearl Buck, author of *The Good Earth* (1931); Carl Crow, author of *Four Hundred Million Consumers* (1937); Henry R. Luce, founder of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune*; journalist Edgar Snow; and missionary-turned-congressman Walter Judd — equally influential were the lesser-known missionaries who returned to speak in their home churches, businesspeople who linked Americans and Chinese through commerce, and cadres of scholars and journalists that maintained the flow of images about China.

This is most certainly not to say that no foreigners “understood” China at the time or that all failed to communicate accurate images. The general tendency, however, to selectively choose and interpret images of China so that they might “look like us,” while minimizing the depth of difference and complexity of a country in the midst of a painful revolutionary process, colored American’s ability to see China as it was.

Moreover, American images of China were as much a commentary on how Americans viewed their own emergence in the world during that period as they were

about China herself. The result was characterizations that set Americans up for great disillusionment.

When American-educated Song Meilin [wife of Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek] toured the U.S. in 1943, for example, a trip during which she became the first private citizen to address Congress, she was described as an Americanized foreigner, a modern woman, a snappy dresser and model mother.

Even Chiang Kai-shek was sometimes described in the United States as a Chinese George Washington. China’s first couple looked like Americans, many proclaimed, all the while failing to capture the colossal ways in which the Chinese people were struggling to find their own identity. I guess Americans were unwilling, or unable, to see the sides of Chiang Kai-shek and his movement that had fallen out of touch with his people.

“The result has been wide swings in which Americans have either loved the aspects of China they recognized as similar to their own or feared and hated the China that refused to fit into their image.”

How else could a western political ideology like communism have found such fertile soil in China? As Doak Barnett writes in the preface to his book *China on the Eve of the Communist Revolution* — a compilation of the reports he

wrote as an ICWA Fellow in China from 1947 to 1949 — “It should never be forgotten that the threat of internal Communist takeover rarely becomes serious except in situations of great domestic crisis.”⁶

Prior to the communist revolution’s victory in 1949, therefore, Americans had created images — and hopes and dreams — for a China that looked much like themselves. So while Americans had come to relate to China in the spirit of reformers, they were unprepared to understand or accept it as it was.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

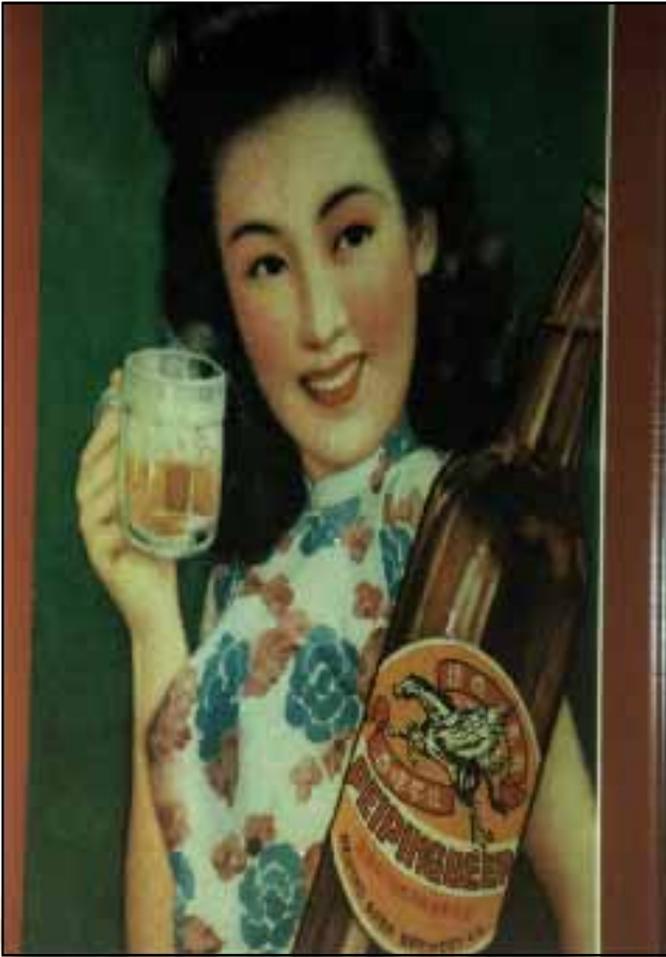
The communist revolution shattered romantic images of China. Images of Chinese playing baseball, compliant farmers and a Chinese George Washington gave way to a face that most Americans did not recognize — an angry, hateful face. American China-scholar A. T. Steele wrote in the mid-1960s: “The face that Communist China now turns in our direction — a face that is harsh, rigid, scornful and implacable — has chilled in many American hearts the warm sentiments that once motivated American attitudes toward China.”⁷ The once-friendly giant became a threatening colossus. American disillusionment was total, as demonstrated in the “Who Lost

⁴ op. cit.; 117.

⁵ Edward A. Ross, *The Changing Chinese* (The Century Co., 1920). And by the way, baseball is yet to catch on — or even exist — in Guizhou Province!

⁶ A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of the Communist Takeover* (New York: Praeger, 1963), v.

⁷ A. T. Steele, *The American People and China* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 59.



This Chinese beer commercial from early this century portrays a Chinese woman — like Song Meilin — who looks “a lot like us.” The result of a China created in our own image has been a trail of fractured illusions.

China?” debate and McCarthyist paranoia of the 1950s.

Fear of “Red China” was intensified by lack of access; American journalists, scholars, businesspeople and missionaries had been expelled. The closest American China-watchers could get to China was Hong Kong to interview refugee-émigrés. Added then to the fear in Americans’ image of China during the 1950s and 1960s — a face that shouted “Hate American Imperialists” — was mystery, the fear of the unknown. It all changed, however, when Americans and Chinese began to play ping-pong together.

PING-PONG, PANDAS AND THE GREAT WALL

“Ping-pong diplomacy” in 1971 cracked open the door to eventually normalized relations between the United States and China. A year after the athletes’ visit to Beijing President Richard Nixon made his historic trip to

China. Nixon’s visit resulted in an extreme shift in American attitudes toward China. Suddenly China was respectable.

Commenting on the almost overnight change, journalist Stanley Karnow wrote in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1973, “the monstrous China of the Korean conflict and the Cold War, which threatened its neighbors and enslaves its own people, now became the China of acupuncture, ancient art treasures, delicious food, purposeful peasants sculpting the countryside, and, of course, the brilliant, handsome, witty Zhou Enlai.”⁸ Within a short period of time Americans had substituted one set of illusions for another.

Karnow, for example, pointed out that even respectable journalists like “the usually perceptive *New York Times* columnist James Reston swung from calling the Chinese revolution a ‘ghastly mess’ in the 1960s to likening the revolution to an old-fashioned ‘cooperative barn-raising’ that ought to make Americans ‘outrageously nostalgic and even sentimental.’”⁹

The lack of depth or balance in understanding China throughout the 1970s obstructed accurate images of a country that was just emerging from one of the most stormy decades of its history: the Cultural Revolution. But this did not stop American images from swinging from fear and demonization back to extreme fondness and hope.

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, by that time China’s top leader, came to the United States for an official visit. The American public was taken with Deng, and so was President Jimmy Carter. Carter noted in his diary the evening of a Kennedy Center gala in honor of Deng:

“Deng and I, his wife, Madame Zhuolin, Rosalynn and Amy went on the stage with the performers, and there was a genuine sense of emotion when he put his arms around the American performers, particularly little children who had sung a Chinese song. He kissed many of them, and the newspapers later said that many in the audience wept.”¹⁰

During his U.S. tour Deng Xiaoping also visited a rodeo near Houston, Texas. The image of Deng Xiaoping, less than five feet tall, wearing a five-gallon cowboy hat as he rode around the rodeo ring in a stagecoach enchanted Americans minds. To many Americans Deng seemed as cute and cuddly as a panda bear.

He was also perceived as amazingly capable. Almost single-handedly, Deng had set in motion sweeping re-

⁸ Stanley Karnow, “China Through Rose-Tinted Glasses,” *Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1973.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ see Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 130.

form in China. Within a year or two of his visit to America, Deng Xiaoping was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year.

With the normalization of U.S.-China relations, Americans began to flow into China (as did Chinese into the U.S.). With the re-establishment of government dialogue, educational exchange and business contacts, it would have seemed that images of China would have emerged that more precisely reflected the uneven continuum China was traveling as it sought to reform and modernize. To a certain extent — particularly in the academic community — this was true; increased access resulted in a more sophisticated understanding of China. The general trend, however, was to see only the parts of the China-picture that looked like America. The result throughout the stop-and-go reform of the 1980s was the reincarnation of a myth about how American ideals would triumph in China. This image, as in pre-revolutionary China, continued to color the way Americans saw China.

The myth remained intact until a humid summer night in 1989 when real bullets began to fly as People's Liberation Army troops shot their way into Tiananmen Square.

PAPIER-MACHÉ DEMOCRACY

China scholar Richard Madsen says, "the Tiananmen massacre discredited an important American myth about China," a myth of how economic, intellectual and political freedom would triumph around the world.¹¹ Needless to say, the tragedy also left popular American images of China, which had been built since Nixon's 1972 China trip — Great Walls, panda bears and Deng Xiaoping wearing a cowboy hat — in ruins.

The images of late Spring 1989, some of which seemed to symbolize ideals of America's own past, powerfully attracted Americans. The papier-maché statue of Lady Democracy (*ziyou nushen*) that was erected in Tiananmen Square adjacent to the portrait of Mao Zedong — a seeming stare-down between democracy and authoritarianism — and the image of the individual who courageously stepped in front of the row of advancing tanks, stopping them in their tracks, convinced Americans, yet again, that the longings of this country were for what "we have."

Many Americans had overlaid their own democratic ideals on the student movement. And though their longings seemed admirable, many of the student leaders, when asked what they wanted in the movement, were not sure. One student said, "I don't know exactly what we want, but we want more of it."¹² When the People's Liberation Army (PLA) turned on those students, and anyone else



Americans have either loved the China created in their own image, or feared and hated the China that refuses to fit into the American image. This picture portrays a Red Guard in the 1960s, trampling his enemies.

in the way, it seemed to many like an assault on America.

Lady Democracy was felled; she did not get back up. The man was removed from the tanks' path; they proceeded into the Square. Dreams and images of a country moving in an American direction were dashed. As Madsen says, the crackdown was "a drama with an unexpected, incorrect ending."

Several weeks after the crackdown, Deng Xiaoping appeared on national television, wearing military clothes, to congratulate PLA officials for a job well done in Tiananmen Square. How different from the warm, people-loving image that just ten years earlier had brought tears to people's eyes in the Kennedy Center.

So while Americans saw themselves in Tiananmen Square's tragedy, they for the most part had fallen short of understanding the reality that the China of the late 1980s, like the China of centuries previous — and the China of today — is a country that continues in a painful

¹¹ Ibid., xvii.

¹² Ibid., 17.

*"Lady Democracy"
confronts Mao on
Tiananmen Square;
June, 1989.*



process of modernization. Social stresses produced by frenetic change, political tensions over how fast to reform, peculiarities of an economic system that exists in a neither-nor state between socialist-style planning and a full-blown market economy, and a moral and spiritual vacuum among a people who are unsure of what to believe have resulted in a three-steps forward, two-steps back advancement to find their own identity.

BEYOND BIC MACS

President Clinton travels to China to, among other things, update America's image of China. Good idea. But what will be conveyed to and popularized among the American public? As images of China are made current, I have two major concerns.

History shows that American images, time and again, have missed the point because they do not contain enough complexity, or understanding, to adequately hold together the contradictions of a country that is in the midst of the struggles of change. Because of limitations the media will face, both on the substance of the issues they cover as well as on the breadth of the territory they report on [Clinton will visit only a limited number of China's cosmopolitan centers], it will be quite difficult for their reporting to succeed in reflecting images that satisfactorily portray this country in transition.

Secondly, when American images of China are not sufficiently complex, they easily slip into conveying what looks like America. On the surface, China's large cosmopolitan centers have similarities that will surprise Americans: McDonalds (Beijing has 40 of them), cell phones, beepers, Dunkin Doughnuts, Pizza Hut, and much more. These superficial commonalities in a few of China's major cities may lure Americans into thinking that, finally, China is beginning to "look like us." They'll miss what

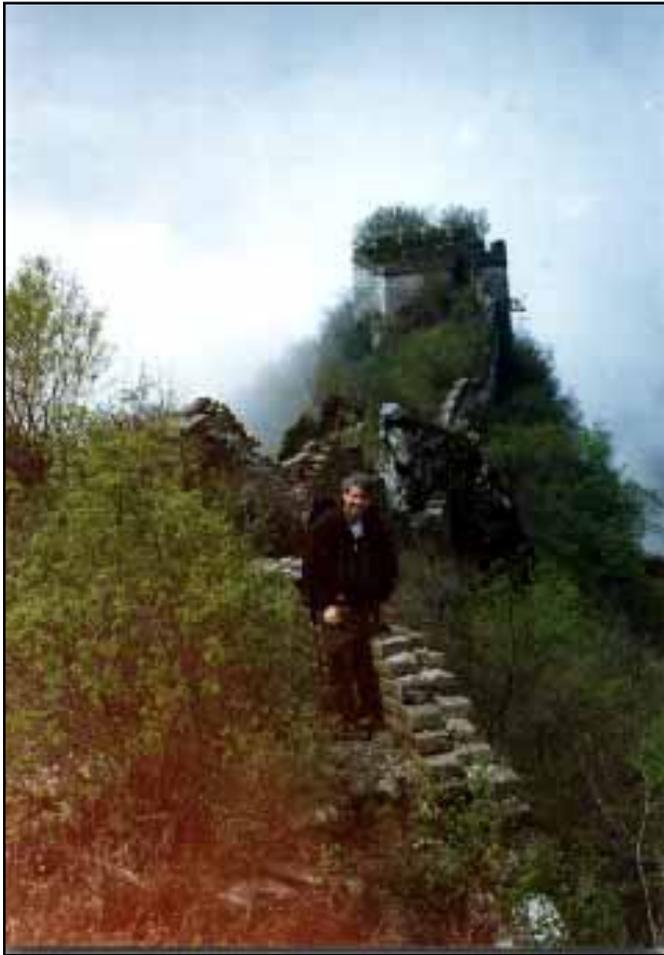
most of China is really like. If that happens, America will only be setting itself up for another round of disillusionment.

Tension between what Americans may recognize as similar to themselves and realities that defy American ideals must be allowed to exist when trying to communicate images that reflect China's evolving reality. If Americans were to accept such an understanding of China they would find a country that surpasses Americans' most optimistic hopes, while at the same time totally defying what Americans think of as progress. Americans would find both achievements and horrific shortcomings on a par with the dichotomy of one of America's greatest cities, Washington, D.C.

And most importantly, Americans could begin relate to China as it is — fully embedded in the continuity of its own history and full of complexity and contradiction as it continues to evolve through a painful, exciting, worrisome, yet hopeful historical process. Only in this way can Americans heed the important words of Ambassador James Sasser without, yet again, trying to create China in its own image.

"As the president reaches out to the Chinese people, we will meet a people who in many respects are like ourselves — proud of their heritage, hard-working, patriotic, and family-oriented people, seeking a better life for themselves and their children, and looking optimistically to the future. I know of no better kind of exchange than one at this high level to dispel the misperceptions that had grown up between us about who we are and what we want."

Early in the morning of May 1, after April's 30 hectic



The author backpacking on the Great Wall, one of China's most famous images — a great place to ponder American views of China.

days, I headed into the mountains north of Beijing to backpack for a couple of days along the Great Wall. With the thoughts I have written above stewing in my mind, two friends and I climbed, hiked and sometimes crawled along the ruins. Its trace, snaking along mountain-top ridges, is truly an awesome sight.

With large packs on our backs, and clothes soaked with sweat, we slowly moved across the crumbling fortification. As we hiked in silence, I pondered both the splendor of the Great Wall's ingenuity and accomplishment, as well as the ugliness of the incredible human cost that paid for its construction. So it is with the irony of China as a country — and any country for that matter. Those who communicate images of China to America, as well as those who receive the image, must be able to accept this complex paradox if they are to begin to understand what they see.

And only by accepting the paradoxes of both of our countries can the United States and China begin to move toward a more stable relationship, what Presidents Clinton and Jiang will be trumpeting during the visit: a "constructive strategic partnership."

Whatever images Americans choose to believe about China, the correct image is not a country that is gradually becoming more like America. China is China, and I expect that it will remain that way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dan". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'D'.

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the

lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andrae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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