

# PITT *IN* CHINA

compiled & edited by Wenfang Tang

A CULTURAL  
PERSPECTIVE  
BY AMERICAN  
COLLEGE STUDENTS



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## PITT IN CHINA

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Compiler & Editor: Wenfang Tang

Executive Editors: Deng Jinhui, Wu Yamin & Qin Tiantian

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# Editor's Preface

## My Experience with "Pitt in China"

I have been teaching comparative politics at the University of Pittsburgh for the past fifteen years. In 1997, I thought about moving my classroom from Pittsburgh to China. This would be a more effective way to teach about China as part of Comparative Politics. But the process turned out to be much more complicated than I expected. I had to write a proposal to my departmental chair, who would then send my proposal to the Office of Study Abroad for final approval. The most important thing was funding. Generous scholarships would attract higher quality students.

Professor Owen was the chair of my department at that time. Polite and soft-spoken, he was an expert in US urban politics and not too interested in what was going on in China. One day he called me to his office and told me that he could not approve my proposal.

"Why?" I asked.

"I think it's too much time if you spend an entire semester in China. You have responsibilities here on campus."

"But I will teach the same courses as I do in Pittsburgh. Besides, it will be much easier for me to collect materials for research." I didn't want to give up so easily.

"Your job is not only teaching and research. What about student supervision and serving on committees?" He spoke in his usual cold and polite tone.

"I can do this through the internet. It's so easy to communicate through e-mail and even internet video." I was still not ready to give in.

Any other person would be irritated by me at this point. Professor Owen was not any person. He did not lose his calmness or raise his voice, "I read your proposal. To be honest, I don't believe you will have enough students. Your problem is you don't spend enough time socializing in the department."



**Wenfang Tang, the editor, in the Fobbiden City.**

"I don't see chatting in the hallway is part of my job. I consider teaching and research my priorities," I said.

"You have your point. But this could influence your future evaluation and promotion," he sounded concerned.

I decided to talk to one of the Deans at the School of Arts and Sciences. There was nothing they could do unless I could make my chair change his mind, the Dean told me sympathetically. One way to save my proposal, she told me, was to change it from a semester program to a summer short-term program. That way, the university could directly approve it without my chair's consent.

I put out flyers and began to recruit students. According to the regulation of the Office of Study Abroad, I needed to have at least eight students in order to make the trip. I didn't think that would be a problem. Founded in 1787, the University of Pittsburgh had a long history of international studies. Finding eight students out of over thirty thousand would be easy. I was wrong. When the application deadline passed, I only had five students. I didn't want to admit it, but professor Owen was right when he told me that I would not get enough students.

Later I found out that most American students go to Europe for their study abroad

experience. The second choice is Latin America. Only a few of them want to go to Asia, though the number has risen rapidly in recent years. For example, the semester-long "Pitt in London" program recruits more than fifty students each time and there are always more students on the waiting list. "Pitt in China" is a four-week summer program and should be easier to recruit students than "Pitt in London". But that's not the case.

I was disappointed for several days. One afternoon, two students showed up in my office and asked me whether I'd accept their late applications. They were very apologetic about missing the deadline.

"Well, I will forgive you this time. But I don't want to see you missing another deadline if you want to participate in the program," I tried to keep my face straight and didn't want to show my excitement in front of them.

"Does that mean you accept our applications? That's fantastic! Thank you so much for your generosity. We promise that we will never be late again." The two students were thrilled, hugging each other.

As soon as the students left, I grabbed the phone and called the Director of Study Abroad, Dr. Yucas. I begged her not to cancel the program and to allow me make the trip with seven students. I emphasized that this program was too new and not too many people knew about it. "Let me think about it," Dr. Yucas said.

In order to further increase the incentive for students to participate, I drafted a second proposal, requesting six credits for the program instead of the normal three credits for most other study abroad programs. The Curriculum Committee of the Arts and Sciences informed me that it would not meet until after the Christmas break.

As I was waiting for the Curriculum Committee's decision, I began to look for funding sources. Generous financial support would no doubt help the students reduce the cost. Dr. Stranahan, the Director of Asian Study Center, told me about the Freeman Foundation. One of its activities was to promote American understanding of China. I drafted a third proposal to the Foundation, stating "Pitt in China"'s academic objectives, plans for lectures and field trips, the criteria for student recruitment and evaluation, and a three-year budget. Dr. Stranahan agreed to approach the Foundation. She thought it could be turned down because I was asking for too much money.

I couldn't wait for Christmas break to be over. I was dying to find out the results of the three proposals I submitted to the Study Abroad Office, the Curriculum Committee and the Freeman Foundation.



Two weeks after the winter break, I received a letter from Dr. Yucas, "I am pleased to inform you that the Office of Study Abroad is sympathetic of your situation and approves your program for the coming summer. However, we will have to cancel the program the following year if there are less than eight students."

Two days later, the secretary for the Curriculum Committee called me about the Committee's decision to grant six credits to the program. "Congratulations! It sounds like a wonderful program. Can I go with you, too?" She told me jokingly.

Another month passed. An e-mail from Dr. Stranahan finally arrived. "The Freeman Foundation has approved the grant for 'Pitt in China.' The full amount you requested!" Since 1998, the Freeman Foundation has provided generous financial support for "Pitt in China" for nine years. With this support, "Pitt in China" has become one of the most popular study abroad programs on campus. We are very thankful.

Many "Pitt in China" participants continued their interest in China after the program. Some continued to study Chinese. Some returned to China and found jobs. One student became the first foreigner working for a Chinese securities firm. Another student became a well-known model in China. Others entered graduate schools including Harvard and Princeton.

The essays collected in this volume reflect "Pitt in China" participants' original and fresh impressions of China. Many students are fascinated by the daily activities.

Others reveal their rare and interesting experiences. For example, one female student describes her "encounter" with some Buddhist monks. She talks about her American understanding of Buddhism as the other-worldly religion. But the monks ask her about her goals in life, a very this-worldly question. Like many American students, her response is that she doesn't know what she wants to do in life. The American student looks a lot more Buddhist than the monks.

Another student was fascinated about Chinese culture before her trip, acupuncture, the Great Wall and Chinese food. She is shocked by her experience once in China. She finds herself liking Chinese food in America more than Chinese food in China. Her comments on Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing will give the reader a small surprise.

Some other students are American-born Chinese. They benefit tremendously from their China experience. They usually gain a better understanding of their cultural heritage. Their annoyance is that no one can understand why their Chinese is so poor, since they look Chinese.

The essays cover a wide range of topics, political system, social and economic

conditions, family life and the position of women. Many of these essays also discuss the authors' change from before the program. Their views are original because they often frankly and sometimes bluntly react to things they find strange.

The Office of Study Abroad at the University of Pittsburgh and my alma mater, School of International Studies at Peking University, provided crucial support for the successful operation of "Pitt in China". We are grateful to the professors at Peking University, including Wang Jisi, Pan Guohua, Yang Xin, Wang Qifen, Li Chunxin, Jia Qingguo, Xu Zhenzhou, Li Kun, Pan Wei, Ding Dou, Wang Liangpeng and many other professors who taught us. As some authors in this volume describe, your teachings profoundly changed their views on China and even their views on life.

Congratulations on the tenth anniversary of "Pitt in China"!

**Wenfang Tang**  
**University of Pittsburgh**  
**November 21, 2007**

## Bargaining in China

Marwa B. Abulhasan

**B**uying things in China is a total different experience. Its flavor is definitely distinctive. Bargaining is the main mechanism that people use to interact in the marketplace, and using it in its correct art form will get you so much for a good decent price.

Of course, the sellers start with a really high price for the product since they recognize immediately that we are foreigners. They know that tourists would be able to pay much more for an item than what it is really worth after they convert the price to their own currency. The fun then starts as soon as we say “no,” “too much,” or “*bu yao*.” Then they ask us for our price. In a matter of seconds, the calculator is out and the numbers are punched on randomly by both the buyer and the seller, which triggers the negotiations. It is in these moments that one’s bargaining skills come into play. Plus, connections can be made between the seller and the buyer. It all depends on how one carefully uses persuasive tactics.

One example of such a negotiation is if the seller starts with 120 RMB, then you propose 15 RMB. Eventually, the seller starts saying “No” and “You crazy,” but you should stick to your price very firmly. I usually go a little higher depending on the item, situation and the general feeling coming from the seller. The seller sometimes fidgets and mumbles some words in Chinese. Smiling and insisting on your own price is the way to go. They then say, “Cheaper... cheaper,” with their distinct accent that I like. They follow it by also saying, “No! Give me a little higher, me no money!” I keep on repeating my price and sometimes moving away from the shop or vender helps you get what you want. As soon as I move, about eight feet away, he yells back another lower price on his own and I disagree until my price is reached.

I guess there is some form of art behind this bargaining. I do not want to seem like I am showing off, but I think I like my bargaining skills. I got several compliments from sellers after negotiating with them to get them down to my



**Shopping in China, a lot of fun!**

price. They said that I knew what I was doing. The nice thing about negotiating is that you know the seller would not sell his or her item at your given price if they know they would lose that way. They also agree on what sounds fine to them, a price they can afford. In some cases, if the seller absolutely disagrees with your price, it means that you are pushing it too low and need to give a better pricing. In that case, they would not say anything if you walk away. A more realistic price has to be given if you really want the item.

Another tactic that I go by while getting my price on the item is leaving the shop or the vender and making sure there is a smile on the seller's face. That makes me feel better and not feel as bad since I am lowering the price from what was initially asked.

There is always a comic relief in the negotiation where I say a price and if the

seller thinks it is absurd, then he or she repeats the price, but ending it with US dollars rather than *yuan* (RMB). This always makes me laugh because as a buyer, I try to get them low and they might think I am fooling them, so they say dollars to get back at me. Thus, it shows their strong disagreement with the price given. Their tone of voice adds more character to what they are saying and it gives the negotiation its light nature. Some sellers, especially women, resemble each other in the way they use the same limited number of English words while talking to us. What makes it fun is each one's distinct attitude while saying the same thing.

One of my personal bargaining stories is when I was at Holiday Inn Lidu, trying to buy place mats for my mother. They were hand made and silk embroidered. It was just one vender that had them, so I had to buy them from the nice young lady who was working there. She helped me choose the ones I wanted and as I was doing so, she kept on saying that each one is priced differently and that they are not cheap. I said, "It is okay, I will deal with that later, after I am done choosing."

Afterwards, she brought out a calculator and started punching numbers. The value kept increasing until it became way beyond what I wanted to pay. She looked at me suddenly and said: "I want 330 RMB for everything." I gave her a shocked facial expression. "It is too much," I said. She brought up the fact that they were hand made and silk too. I said that it does not matter; the price was still too high. I also said that I am a student and this is a gift for my mother. "I want her to be happy," I told the young lady. So I priced it to 90 RMB and she did not like it at all and said that it is no money for her. She will lose a lot.

This girl spoke very good English, so I tried to switch the subject a little and talk to her on a personal level. So, I asked her where she learned her English and how old she was. She said she has been taking English in high school, but spent a lot of time on it to get better. I thought that was a smart idea and told her so. It put a smile on her face. She was 20 years old. And when she was making me guess her age, she said, "I know I have a baby round face, but I am still old, so make a wise guess." It was neat how she said it. She seemed lovable and nice to me. So, I told her more about me while sitting in the steamy moist shop. Heat was filling the air, but I had to complete my mission before I left there.

We went back to pricing after some personal talk. She did not like my price at all, and I felt it coming sincerely from her when she said that a higher price is more legitimate. After all the negotiation back and forth, we got the price down

to 130 RMB. She finally said okay, but commented by saying, "This time I will make you happy, but next time you come, you have to make me happy." Her words are still ringing in my ears.

Here, the seller and I made some connections, talked, laughed and also made a business deal. I got a decent price that she also agreed upon. I got what I wanted for my mother and also left the store with a smile on the young lady's face. She is a person to remember always. Now, it is all a memory.

Honestly speaking, I wish I could sound humble, but I am proud of myself that I did a good job. I know that this sounds funny, but I need to give myself some credit. I would say that I give credit to the one person who taught me how to bargain in this life. It is my grandmother's close friend. I used to go out with her to specific markets in Kuwait where bargaining is possible. Those are few, but very fun and you can find traditional and exquisite stuff to buy. I used to watch what she does and pick up on it. So, now and in China, I got to use it nearly everywhere and succeeded.

As I said earlier, the art of bargaining is to get your price and still keep the connection between you and the seller pleasant and light.

(2002)

# Chinese Nationalism

Michelle Jose

Coming to China, not necessarily knowing as much as I should have known about the country, I most certainly had misconceptions and questions pertaining to much of the manner in which things were done here. Obviously everyone else on the trip was in the same boat as I, and whether good or bad, Rae, Ramona, Rachel, and Skywalker were the most easily accessible Chinese natives for us to fire our questions to. Many people on this trip were desperately interested in hearing their opinions on communism and their feelings on how the country is run—the students were constantly questioned on why this happened, or what was the thinking behind that ordeal, etc. More times than not, I think many of the questions were stated not necessarily condescendingly but not exactly in favor of China and its government.

But what struck me during all of this interrogating is that no one ever spoke negatively about China. They said that there might be things that possibly should be “changed to improve the way of life for its people” but none of the students would ever go about defacing their country. There is the thought that Chinese people are unable to say anything negative about the government for fear of the consequences, but from all of our lectures we’ve learned that no one really pays much attention to that. People now are free to openly express any negative feelings so long as it’s not disruptive. So often in the US you hear people complain about what is so blatantly wrong with the way the government runs the country. That only takes away from America’s patriotism—something we are supposed to hold so dear. But here in a country where Americans view its people as unhappy and unjustified by the government, you mainly hear people talk in its favor.

I’ve heard a few people on the trip say most Chinese people just have a hard time admitting when they’re wrong. That could possibly be true, on an



**Tutoring pupils.**

individual level though, not necessarily a cultural one. Luo Yanhua, in her lecture about Human Rights, spoke about the Chinese focus on duty, about striving for the good of the whole. I believe that the lack of complaints from Chinese natives has more to do with that than “losing face” per se. I believe that this can also be justified by our second trip to a *hutong*, where at the man’s residence that we visited he spoke about the government being wrong in the incident at Tian’anmen Square, but things have improved and nothing close to that has occurred since. The elderly man said that the government is working to improve the economy of the country, and the fact that the Olympics are being held in Beijing in a few years has given an additional boost in the efforts for improvement. He talked about all the plans for pollution control, and roadways and buildings to be built before the Olympic Games, all of which will ultimately benefit the good of China on behalf of the government. Overall, for a country of people who are perceived to be held down by their government, there seems to be a great amount of nationalism amongst them; as opposed to a nation of people who reside in a country run “for the people, by the people” that find



fault in much of what their elected officials do. Maybe the United States can actually learn a thing or two from China about the concept of patriotism.

Much could be said to disprove my opinion on all of this, and I admit that I have not observed things long enough to know the actual matter. But from the brief experience that I have had during my time in China, the positive outlook of the people I've come in contact with is overwhelming compared to any negativity that I've come across, which has mainly been given by foreigners to China. Given there are biased opinions being offered to the general public here and in the US; but even if all the unpleasant things said about China and its government are true, its population of 1.3 billion still support it and are proud of it. An entire nation cannot possibly have its values and heart misplaced.

(2002)