

China-World Cultural Exchange Series



# LIVING IN CHINA



23 people from different parts of the world  
recount their colorful life stories



新世界出版社  
NEW WORLD PRESS

# LIVING IN CHINA

By Lu Yang



新世界出版社  
NEW WORLD PRESS

### 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

老外的中国情结 = Living in China: 英文 / 绿杨等著.

北京: 新世界出版社, 2008.1

(中外文化交流系列)

ISBN 978-7-80228-501-9

I. 老… II. 绿… III. 中国—概况—英文 IV. K92

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2007) 第 170820 号

### Living in China

### 老外的中国情结 (英文版)

作 者: 绿杨 等

策 划: 李淑娟 张海鸥

责任编辑: 李淑娟

责任校对: 张民捷

封面设计: 王天义

装帧设计: 清鑫工作室

责任印制: 李一鸣 黄厚清

出版发行: 新世界出版社

社 址: 北京市西城区百万庄路 24 号 (100037)

总编室电话: +86 10 6899 5424 68326679 (传真)

发行部电话: +86 10 6899 5968 68998705 (传真)

本社中文网址: <http://www.nwp.cn>

本社英文网址: <http://www.newworld-press.com>

本社电子信箱: [nwpcn@public.bta.net.cn](mailto:nwpcn@public.bta.net.cn)

版权部电子信箱: [frank@nwp.com.cn](mailto:frank@nwp.com.cn)

版权部电话: +86 10 6899 6306

印刷: 北京外文印刷厂

经销: 新华书店

开本: 787×1092 1/16

字数: 170 千字 印张: 22

版次: 2008 年 1 月第 1 版 2008 年 1 月北京第 1 次印刷

书号: ISBN 978-7-80228-501-9

定价: 78.00 元

新世界版图书 版权所有 侵权必究

新世界版图书 印装错误可随时退换

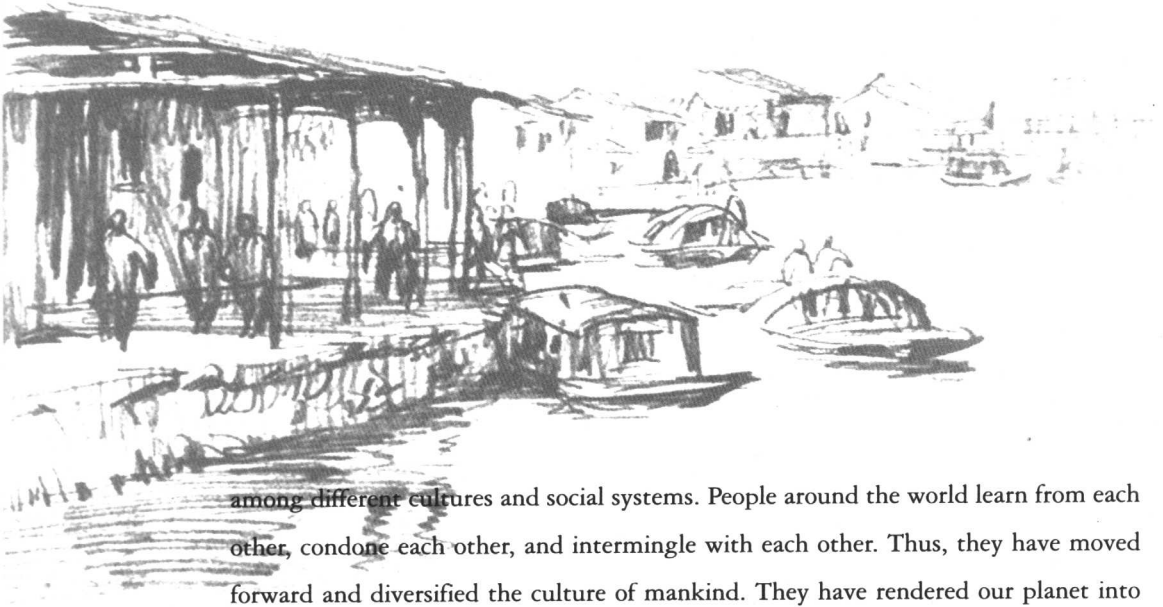


# Preface

The ancients nomadized with their flocks and herds for the sake of finding pasture and hunting grounds. Wittingly or not, they spread the seeds of primitive civilization all over the world. However, this process seemed endless in the age of small-scale production, when people were completely isolated from each other, though the crowing of their birds and barking of their dogs were within earshot. Some of them remained in their native land for their whole life; others devoted their whole life to exploiting new frontiers. The socialized large-scale production has given a great impetus to human flows. The globalization of the economy has expanded human activities to every corner of the world.

Nowadays, human beings crisscross this blue planet, reaching far beyond the boundaries of their ancestors. They have greatly expanded their sphere of activities, particularly due to the advent of modern transportation tools. Xun Zi (Hsun Tzu), a great Chinese philosopher of two thousand years ago, said: "Horse riders, though not fleet-footed, can travel thousand miles; Boat sailors, though not good swimmers, can get over turbulent rivers." We should now add "Aircraft flyers, though not winged, can travel through the sky." Aircraft makes it possible for travelers to reach the other side of the planet within a single day. The advancement of transportation means has greatly increased the traveling ability of mankind.

Traveling facilities have greatly promoted exchanges as well as collisions

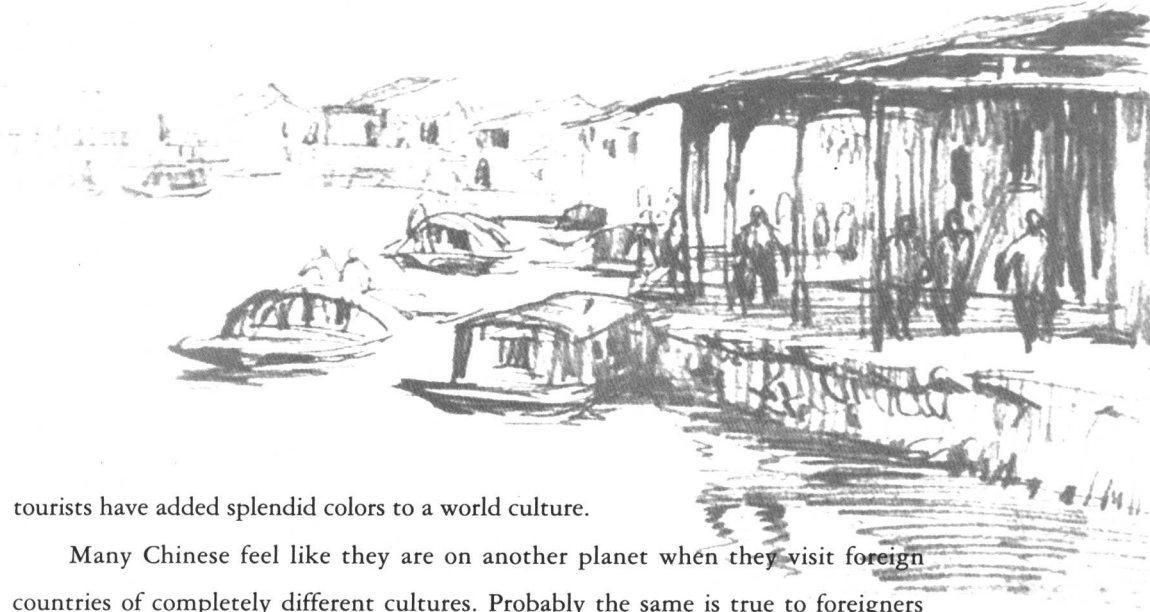


among different cultures and social systems. People around the world learn from each other, condone each other, and intermingle with each other. Thus, they have moved forward and diversified the culture of mankind. They have rendered our planet into a more colorful and wonderful place. Human beings of modern day have gradually grasped the concept of “citizens of the global village” while they strive for existence and development.

As Confucius is quoted in the *Analects of Confucius*, “Within the four seas all men are brothers.” This simple and plain ideal of the ancient time has been accepted by more. According to DNA sequences and structures, scientists infer that mankind may probably evolved from the same ancestor, that is, “Lucy”, who lived 3,200 thousand years ago in the East African Great Rift Valley. Her descendants probably left Africa about 60 thousand years ago and spread to the rest of the world and then evolved into races of different colors with different languages. This archeological finding has provided genetic basis for the idea of “Within the four seas all men are brothers.”

For more than one hundred years before the turn of the last century, China was self-isolated and cut off from the outside world. But its gateway was forced open by imperialist powers with modern guns and cannons. After the new China was founded in 1949, some foreign powers imposed a blockade and embargo against the new nation. It was not until the end of 1970s that China opened its door and ushered in a new era of open-door reforms. A large number of Chinese have visited foreign countries and numerous foreigners have come to China. This inflow and outflow of





tourists have added splendid colors to a world culture.

Many Chinese feel like they are on another planet when they visit foreign countries of completely different cultures. Probably the same is true to foreigners who visit China. When walking down the street foreign visitors would be followed and stared at by curious Chinese kids, which would make them uneasy and uncomfortable. This scene of looking at foreign visitors as E.T. really runs against the Chinese tradition of hospitality. It would also make the Chinese feel uneasy and ashamed too. Fortunately as more and more foreigners come to China, people become inured to foreign faces. The Chinese people perform the duties of host to foreign friends as the old adage tells them to do: "To be joyful to have friends come afar." The Chinese people try their very best to make foreign guests "feel at home", whether they come to China on business or on pleasure trips.

Some Chinese have settled down abroad; some foreigners remain in China. Both of them have taken a foreign land as their home and successfully mingled with the local society. The ancients roved about seeking rich pasture for their domicile; and it's nothing strange for contemporaries to choose places favorable for their existence and advancement in life. Europe and America have attracted some Chinese with their advanced science and living styles; China has attracted some foreigners with its high-speed economic development and a long-standing civilization. "During the 1980s, Chinese went to America seeking their dreams," as an American said. "Now it's time for Americans to come to China with opportunities everywhere." The enterprising spirit is an important link in human genes and it's the instinctive human nature to



go after opportunities.

We have interviewed a number of foreigners living and working in China. During these interviews, we found all of them have, more or less, “a Chinese complex”. They like Chinese culture, and are happy with their life and work here. Many of them have taken China as their home. Of course the Chinese people have never regarded them as outsiders. Leading a comfortable life and intermingling joyfully with the local folks, they share a similar sense of happiness, though their experience may be different. The Chinese call them “Lao Wai”, or old foreigner. The phrase does not have a negative connotation and is a type of greeting to friends coming back from afar. “Lao Wais”, with sentimental feelings to China, have deeply touched Chinese people. The achievements of these “Lao Wais” would be an inspiration to friends abroad.

It is interesting to have personal interviews with these “Lao Wais”. Through these interviews people can see the changing China and the changing life of “Lao Wais” much better. So it is meaningful to share with others their experience living and working in China. The interviewees are all common people and their accounts are all common stories. But many times these stories have rocked our spiritual world.

During the course of working on the book, we have got assistance from many friends. We cannot possibly express our full, sincere thanks to them. By sharing these touching stories with our readers, we hope this book will bring us joys of colorful life and food for thought.

*Lu Yang*

*October, 2007*



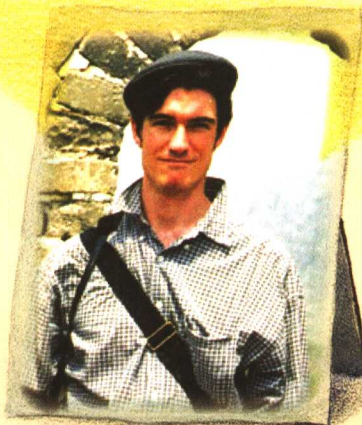
# Contents

- 🐉 East Meets West—A Young American's Cultural "Switch" <<<<<< 1
- 🐉 To Dream of Being a Dragon <<<<<< 13
- 🐉 A Briton Arrives in Beijing <<<<<< 27
- 🐉 Speak of the Devil... <<<<<< 37
- 🐉 Good Songs <<<<<< 53
- 🐉 His Love for Marco Polo <<<<<< 67
- 🐉 Standing Guard on the Great Wall <<<<<< 87
- 🐉 We Travel Together Forever <<<<<< 107
- 🐉 A Poetic Courtyard Life <<<<<< 129
- 🐉 A Finnish Mother <<<<<< 145
- 🐉 The Number One "Signage Police" <<<<<< 159
- 🐉 A Western Student of Chinese Painting <<<<<< 179





- ☞ The Pleasure of “Discovery” <<<<<< 193
- ☞ A Korean Doctor Sir Named “China” <<<<<< 207
- ☞ Towards an Open Future <<<<<< 215
- ☞ Touching the Souls of Blind Tibetan Children <<<<<< 229
- ☞ “Doctor Garbage” <<<<<< 245
- ☞ Seek Knowledge, Even in China <<<<<< 255
- ☞ A “Chinese” with a Strange Face <<<<<< 269
- ☞ “Married” to China <<<<<< 279
- ☞ Spring Rain in Dongxiang <<<<<< 291
- ☞ From an African “Prince” to a Beijing Tailor <<<<<< 315
- ☞ Chasing the Sun <<<<<< 325

**Personal File****Name:** Eric Abrahamsen**Chinese Name:** Tao Jian**Nationality:** American**Occupation:** Self-employed**Time in China:** 5 years

## East Meets West

### A Young American's Cultural "Switch"

Eric Abrahamsen is a handsome young American who has chosen a very Chinese Internet alias "Suo Zhuzi"—a common name meaning "Locking Post". To everyone's surprise, he was elected to be a moderator for a well-known Chinese literary forum called "Reading Life". He is currently occupied with compiling and translating 15 contemporary Chinese short stories for a collection to be published by Penguin, a famous British publishing house.



*A*t a little over six feet five, Eric literally towers over most Chinese when walking down the streets of Beijing or attending parties, like a camel standing out among a flock of sheep. Given his height, many Chinese people consider it a pity that Eric didn't play for the NBA. Having lived in China for just five years, his mastery of the language is extraordinarily admirable. He possesses a huge vocabulary, pure pronunciation, and an intimate knowledge of the latest lingo and expressions. Many people believe that his work as a free-lancer provides him with a great opportunity to exploit his linguistic skills. With his mastery of English and Mandarin, it would be another pity and waste of talent if he were not involved in cultural exchange.

When complimented on his mastery of the Chinese language and his humor, Eric reacts modestly, sometimes even blushing a bit. Eric's charisma and gregarious nature have made him popular throughout Beijing, especially within cultural circles. As a result, Eric always has a helping hand whenever he finds himself in need.

Eric recently found online fame with a six-month stint as a moderator on the "Reading Life" online forum. He has generated mild fanfare among Chinese online members excited to see an exotic "mottled bamboo" on the forum. The trend these days among the Chinese is to replace online words with their homophones. As you might have guessed, the Chinese pronunciation for mottled





bamboo is the same as the Chinese pronunciation for moderator. Note that the level of “mottled bamboo” is not just given to anybody. Only a person who has attained the highest acknowledged writing level is allowed to serve as a moderator, and given the power to edit and delete other people’s posts. Who could have imagined that a person whose mother tongue was not Chinese could occupy this position of “pointing to the mountains and rivers and setting people afire with his words”? Just imagine how high a Chinese level he has achieved! This of course has aroused a great interest among the news media. Why, even when we arrived at Eric’s home to conduct an interview we found a group of cameramen from a TV station busy shooting a program with Eric.

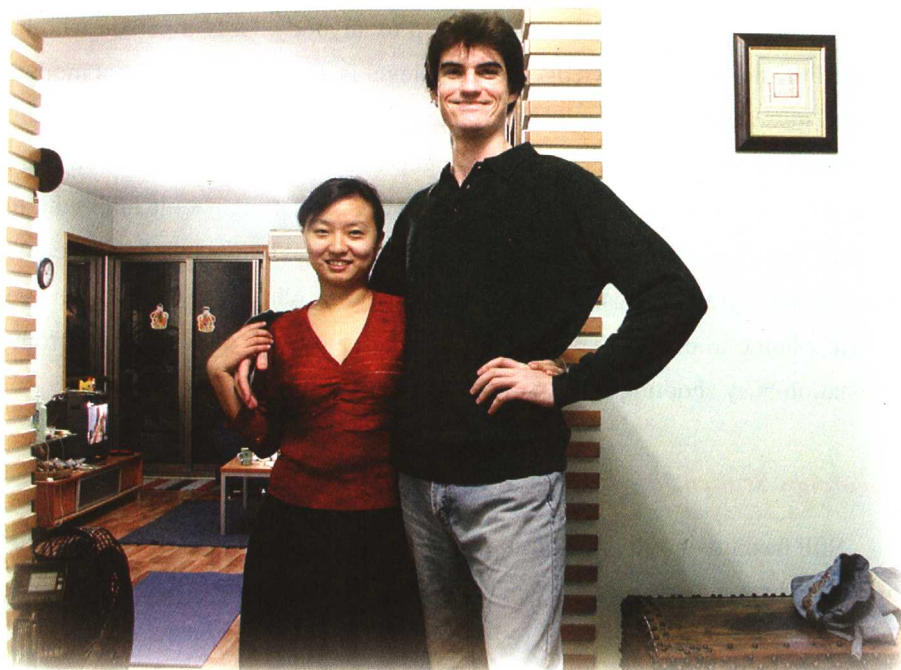
### *A Foreign Student at the Central University for Nationalities*

Still basking in the glow of newly wedded bliss, the cheerful-tempered Eric granted whatever was requested. The cameramen recorded his daily work as a free-lancer and even asked him to bake bread, grind coffee beans, and do other household chores in front of the camera to show their audience the graceful demeanor of an aproned husband. When not satisfied with the shot, the TV crew would require him to repeat the shot over and over again. It reached the point that even the cameramen felt it was asking a little too much of Eric. However, Eric kept assuring them that it was okay, saying “not a problem” in Chinese. No one present could conceal their smiles as Eric said this in a typical Beijing accent, with a heavily-emphasized final “r” sound that even many Chinese southerners cannot pronounce well. His tone and manner were very much that of a young guy from Beijing’s backstreets — full of honesty, generosity and tolerance.

Despite being tormented by the TV crew, Eric showed no trace of fatigue as he sat down for his interview with us. The interview began with the topic of how he ended up coming to China.

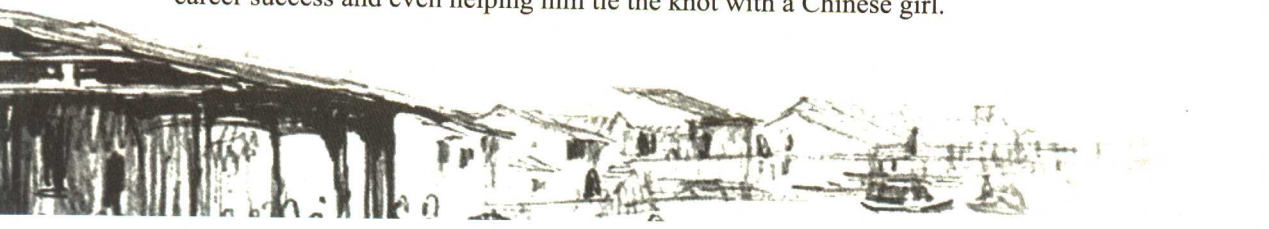
Eric’s ancestors immigrated to the United States from Northern Europe about a hundred years ago. Besides his height, the only real remnant of his Norwegian heritage is his name. Starting on the subject of his passion for China,

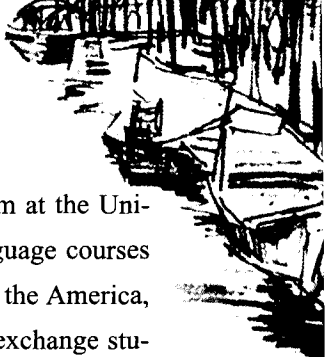




Eric said, “I actually first visited China when I was 10 years old on a trip with my family. We entered China via Hong Kong, passed through Guangzhou and arrived in Beijing. The magnificence of Tian’anmen Square and the Forbidden City left me in ... well, awe. Yes, I was in great awe. Of course I also climbed the Great Wall. However, I didn’t feel any sense of pride of being ‘a true man who sets foot on the Great Wall’. I was probably just too young to understand.”

At the University of Washington, Eric majored in international relations. When selecting a country for the main focus of his study, he wrote down China without a second thought. Was it because of the impression of his Beijing trip as a ten year-old child? Perhaps the allure of an ancient oriental culture? Eric shook his head at these suggestions and responded, “I can’t really say. I didn’t really have a reason behind my choice.” It turned out that Eric’s unintentional choice would have a profound influence on his life journey, leading him to his current career success and even helping him tie the knot with a Chinese girl.





One of the requirements of the international relations program at the University of Washington is that students must take two years of language courses related to the country of their focus. Rather than study Chinese in the America, Eric found that he could meet this requirement by enrolling as an exchange student at China's Central University for Nationalities, which had a study-abroad program with his university. Before his departure, he concentrated his efforts on Chinese for three straight months. He also asked his teacher to pick out a Chinese name which was "Tao Jianyou". Excitedly, he arrived in Beijing. He felt confident about his Chinese when taking courses at the UW to the point where he even admired his own talent for language. However, Eric experienced a rude awakening once he got to Beijing, and discovered that he could neither make himself understood nor understand others. "Too depressing," said Eric with an exaggerated expression as he recalled the experience.

That wasn't the only thing that had him depressed. "I only realized that I forgot to bring a coffee grinder when I arrived in Beijing. I am used to freshly brewed coffee and can't go back to the instant stuff. OK, forget it then. But it wasn't until I started getting daily pounding headaches that I realized I was addicted to caffeine. However, asking my family to send a coffee grinder all the way from the States wasn't the most practical of solutions. I was later told though that one could get a coffee grinder in Beijing. I rushed out immediately to get one. When I got to the store I found that not only did the store have a coffee grinder but all the name brands were there too. In reality, anything you could want, you can find in Beijing." With the ability to make his own coffee again, the headaches disappeared.

However the language problem proved to be a bit more challenging to solve than the coffee one. It's a good thing that Eric is not only smart but a hard worker as well. With the favorable language learning environment, Eric made huge strides in his Chinese. His progress really skyrocketed when he met his school-mate Ma Dongxiao from the English Department of CUN.

It is probably a short cut in foreign language learning: to have a sentimental sweet transnational marriage with a native of the foreign language that one is







studying. In the process of emotional exchange, the dating lovers would surely improve their linguistic skills by teaching each other their mother tongues. Unlike many other foreign students who speak fluent Chinese but are afraid of reading and writing, our fellow-student Tao boasts all-round excellence in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This should be attributed to mutual study and progress with his fellow-student Ma.

At CUN, around 80-90 percent of the student body is composed of Chinese minority nationalities. Ma is a member of the Muslim Hui nationality whose customs differ from the Han — the ethnic Chinese majority. However, when it comes to language, there is no difference at all between the Han and the Hui. Consequently, Ma provided Eric with a perfect linguistic environment. With the aid of his fellow student at CUN, Eric made daily progress in their dual world.

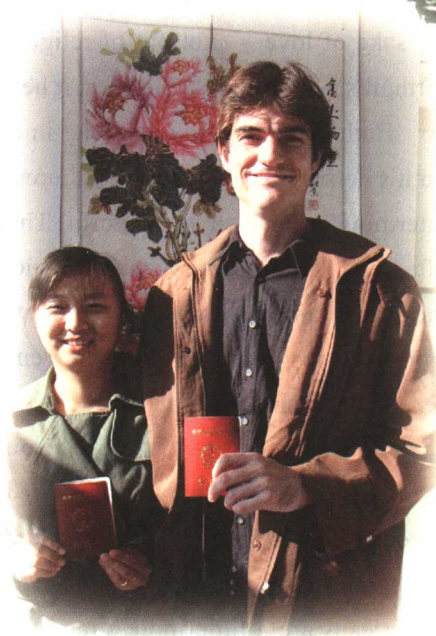
### *Foreign Son-in-Law of a Chinese Family*

Speaking honestly, Eric's oral Chinese was still lacking by the time he graduated from CUN. This was partly due to the fact that the "dual world" that he shared with Ma simply hadn't existed long enough. His speaking ability was still not quite up to par when he paid his first visit to Ma's family in Changchun, Jilin Province. Ma's parents, artists by trade, were people of traditional Chinese culture. The arrival of their daughter's international date took them a bit by surprise. The father, in particular, was having trouble with the idea. In private, the father scolded the daughter for her decision. "There are so many nice young Chinese guys out there. How on earth did you end up with a foreigner? He can't even speak Chinese well."

The next time that Eric would meet Ma's family was after he had lived in Beijing for quite some time. His speaking ability was no longer an issue. He had also become familiar with the Chinese way of life and thinking. Because of his knowledge of the Chinese culture, people looked at him differently. The would-be father-in-law began to warm up to him as well.

During this trip to Changchun, they had to stay longer than planned as they





were confined to Ma's home because of the SARS situation. This unexpected layover surprisingly resulted in great leaps of progress in both Chinese and love. It also resulted in the parents finally approving of the relationship. As a result, the mention of the SARS incident conjures up nothing bad or horrible for Eric. Instead, a slight feeling of sweetness and pride comes to him as he described the moment saying, "This is truly what you call 'turn bane into boon'," he said in a meaningful way.

After having spent four of his five years in China dating Ma Dongxiao, the couple ended their long distance love race in the sacred bonds of holy matrimony. They set up their love nest in a rented two-room apartment. Eric works at home as a free-lancer while Ma works at a radio station. They still communicate in both English and Chinese. The newlyweds don't have high materialistic expectations but value the quality of their cultural life. All their friends wish that the two can live forever in their honeymoon.

As his wife is Muslim, Eric gave up eating pork when he began dating her. "Giving up pork is out of respect for the customs of my wife's people. I do it for





the sake of love — not out of religious reasons. With so many other foods on earth, it's not a big deal. Besides, it helps avoid high cholesterol."

Both of them enjoy dabbling in the kitchen with their "ok" cooking skills. So it's no surprise that cuisine cultures from the East and the West are frequently intermingled in their little world. Their day jobs keep them busy and so they often have dinner with each other outside as well as at home. When eating out, they make an appointment to meet at a particular restaurant and leave directly from their respective offices. They enjoy eating out this way as it gives them a sense of occasion, meeting each other like secret lovers.

With different cultural backgrounds and different modes of thinking, is there any need to adjust their way of life when meeting relatives from their respective families, even if the couple loves each other dearly? "Of course there is," said Eric when asked. "They have different ways of expressing feelings. The Americans are a little more straightforward and the Chinese have a somewhat soft and warm way. I can't really say which way is better." He appreciates the Chinese consideration shown for others and also favors the independence of Americans. He and his wife take good, but not routine, care of each other. Now Eric can automatically "switch over" between the two cultures, treating American in the American way and Chinese in the Chinese way. "This 'switchover' is not hypocritical," Eric emphasized. "I use these two styles sincerely, and they come from the bottom of my heart."

That accounts for the ease with which Eric switches between two different cultures.

### ***An Exotic Mottled Bamboo***

After graduating from CUN, Eric worked as an editor for two years at *That's Beijing* an English daily-life magazine. The work load was quite heavy. In addition to his responsibilities as an editor, Eric had to conduct one or two interviews for each issue.

Interviewing is a difficult job. First, to make an appointment by phone is a

