

## Are the Fireflies Ghosts? · Priscilla Sears

A BEAUTIFUL JUNOESQUE colleague of mine at Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute in Guangzhou, The People's Republic of China, scandalized the Chinese with her gold-flecked eyeshadow and her black lace unmentionables—still unmentionable in China—which she flew like banners from the bamboo poles above her balcony. Ursula wrote anecdotal accounts for German newspapers about her language teaching experience. She used to say that if you stayed in China for three weeks you'd write a book, and if you were there for three months you'd turn out an article, but if you stayed for a year, you'd find it hard to write anything. She was right. The truths were too hidden, too intricate, too deep for me to dig them up with my little made-in-the-U.S.A. shovel.

Actually I didn't go to excavate truths about China anyway. I went to teach American literature and English composition to students who, as it turned out, thought Jack London's novels were still inciting revolution in the American ghettos and that Americans charged their parents when they came to dinner. I suppose I also expected, like many another American, to "front the essential facts of life" in the woods of the other side of the world, and see what life "had to teach."

First, however, I myself had to learn how and what to teach. The educational facts of life at Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute were, as I had expected, different from those at Dartmouth, where I teach in the U.S., but I hadn't anticipated how upside-down, how disorienting the changes would be, even the more superficial ones.

Dartmouth, for example, has about 4,000 outstanding undergraduates, male and female, whose annual college costs amount to about \$14,000. Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute has about 1,000 outstanding undergraduates, male and female, whose annual college costs amount to about \$80. Baker Library has 1.5 million volumes; the Guangzhou library might have had as many as 15,000. I counted 26 sports in the *Dartmouth General Information Bulletin*; at Guangzhou teachers, staff, students, and anybody else from the political unit who wanted to join in played soccer, basketball, badminton, track, tug-of-war, and ping pong.

Dartmouth students live in singles, doubles, suites, or off-campus housing. Guangzhou students live six to an 8 x 15-foot room. Dartmouth

students routinely take some foreign language courses abroad. I knew of one senior at Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute who had a chance of being issued a visa to study in the U.S. (Three professors had been granted visas to study in Australia and the U.S., but they had to leave their spouses behind.) Dartmouth students eat all they want from a varied menu—everything from granola to rare roast beef and triple-decker cheesecake brownies. The Chinese students eat rice or noodles and unidentifiable greens and tea and meat scraps (necks, knees, and knuckles) three times a day. Cooking in your room is forbidden, and, besides, there is no electricity from dawn until dusk nor after 10:30 in the evenings in the dormitories.

The sights and sounds are different. The Dartmouth students stride along the paths across the deep green grass of the central common to a study in the overstuffed leather chairs of Sanborn Library or the well-lit study rooms of Baker Library, a meticulous copy of Independence Hall, open until 2:00 A.M. Or down to frat row for a beer or a vodka jello or off to the Olympic pools or the four theaters in the Hopkins Center, or to one of the 1,600 courses offered annually, or to interviews at the corporate recruitment centers.

Students seldom hurry in Guangzhou. It is too hot. At 7:00 A.M. the students would be sauntering along narrow dirt walkways between the hibiscus bushes reciting: “Hello. How are you? Nice to see you again” or reading “Annabelle Lee” or *The Gettysburg Address* aloud as they side-stepped the freely ranging chickens. The pace quickened on Saturday nights, when students carried their chairs and umbrellas to the basketball court for the weekly movie. (Once I saw *War and Peace* from under my umbrella during a thunderstorm.) Students stumbled toward the soccer field at 6:00 A.M. for calisthenics while the loudspeakers crackled “The East Is Red” or “Que Sera Sera” by Doris Day. Once they played “Ave Maria.”

I confronted these and the more profound internal differences, but what I learned I can only convey by telling you about what Conrad calls the “life sensation” of being an American professor teaching American literature and writing in a “key” Chinese educational institution. I think I can do that best by telling you several stories, since stories are as close as we come to “the essential facts of life.” These stories, I should say, are in essence factual, but facts have been changed for rhetorical purposes and for the protection of my students.

On August 27, 1983, I was greeted at the Guangzhou Airport by a committee from the Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute headed by the dignified and deaf Shakespearean Professor Gu, a friend of a Dartmouth student's father. We bowed, "Ni hou'ed," and "joined our hands in shaking."

Professor Gu and a party official escorted me to the chauffeured car, a cross between a blue '56 Plymouth and a yellow New York taxi except for the lace curtains at the windows and the feather duster on the back shelf. I intoned in Chinese the Confucian speech I had prepared with Professor Susan Blader at Dartmouth about how across the four oceans all men are brothers and how honored and delighted I was to be there, etc. They laughed. I think they thought I'd done it for a laugh.

My first impressions of the other side of the world that day were of utter otherness. Nothing was familiar. Not the sparse eucalyptus and bamboo trees on the 800-foot White Cloud Mountains rising behind the Institute; not the dry, cracked sienna soil that looked like shards of ancient pottery; not the soldiers in khaki sneakers and oversized, wrinkled uniforms bent in the fields wrapping chrysanthemum heads in cellophane for shipping to Hong Kong markets. Not the smell of the nightsoil the peasants dumped bucketful by bucketful onto the bean fields or rice paddies surrounding the Russian, rabbit-hutch apartments where the foreigners lived at the Institute. Not the saucer-sized spiders in my bedroom, nor the spigot above the stone slab that was my sink which tilted toward a black, grilled drain hole in the floor.

The students, too, were other at first. I couldn't pronounce their names correctly, so I called them by the English names they'd been assigned by a British *litterateur*: Horatio, Araminter, Wellington, Bertram, Priestly. I was vexed, despite my resolution to be an exemplary American, by their classroom formality, solemnity, and passivity: only their watchful eyes moved. They referred to themselves as "boys" and "girls," even though most were 22 to 24 years old. They began many conversations with apologies for their inexperience and immaturity, conversations that continued, after we came to trust each other, onto subjects such as where babies came from; who Freud was; if Buddhism was a real religion; what homosexuality was; why Westerners considered sex so important. In general they defended the no-dating, no-dancing, no-falling-in-love policies of the Institute as necessary measures; otherwise, they said, they

would be distracted from their primary objective: realizing the Motherland's Four Modernizations Program in industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology. I felt, as Saul Bellow says, as if I were "in the suburbs of reality."

But after a month or so, the students began to come to my apartment across from the police station, despite the official discouragement and sometimes prohibition from associating with the foreigners who were characterized in the press as "germs spreading an ideology infested with decadent bourgeois ideas and styles of life."

Priestly was the first to come. He had been assigned to my writing course and later audited my American literature course, which included selections from the Old and New Testaments as background material. One evening he brought me some of his treasures, a little sesame seed oil and a bag of dried peas. He asked if he could do anything for me: interpret, translate my book into Chinese perhaps, scrub my floor. He apologized for being so presumptuous as to come to my house and to bring me presents. He said that he had come to consult his "dear teacher . . . in his rough way," if it were not inconvenient, about religion. He wanted to know if all Americans were religious and how they could believe in science and God at the same time. I explained about different ways of knowing and about science as an answer to the question "how" and religion as an answer to the question "why." Priestly nodded vigorously and muttered "of course, of course," but I don't think he understood much. The next day I discovered that the peas were infested with bugs, but I felt that Priestly had anointed me with the oil.

Our conversations continued, although seldom in the classroom. (My Chinese students had been trained to listen and to record and to memorize two-hour lectures verbatim. The first question on the national literature examination is: "Write the longest passage you have ever memorized from American literature." They were not encouraged to comment, criticize, or question.) Priestly described Americans as energetic and hard-working and introduced me to the more common misconceptions about the U.S. Why, he asked, do Americans "throw away" their parents when they become old, and why do we send our cats and dogs to pet hotels? We talked about the decadence of disco dancing; the puzzle of why our God should have created mosquitoes to plague his favorite, man; Marx's debt

to Hegel; the “loving funny” (“fun-lovingness”) of Dartmouth students – which confounded Priestly. (The “loving funny” didn’t confound me only because I had become familiar with these “Chinglish” expressions.) Priestly had 26–28 hours of class a week, and he studied in his screenless room along with five other students and a host of tropical pests, principally cockroaches, lizards, ants, and spiders. Or he could study in a small library, also with no screens, and no heat in January and February either, when the temperature was in the thirties and forties. The library had one reading room for 300 students, many of whom lined up outside before it opened in order to get a seat under 6-foot unshaded fluorescent lights hanging from the cracked and stained ceiling.

I showed Priestly pictures of the Dartmouth campus and the countryside. He said it looked like Heaven, and he sometimes dreamed of being admitted. He was astonished that students were allowed to dance and to marry. If the authorities in China discovered that a student had a “friend,” his or her life-long job assignment given after graduation might be to translate directions for assembling bicycle parts in cold Xinjiang near the Russian border. The dating regulations were practical. If you fell in love before graduation, your unit wouldn’t give you permission to marry, and upon graduation you might be sent to Tibet and your friend to Beijing. Forever. And since the low wages (about sixty yuan, or thirty dollars a month) preclude travel, it was best to sublimate your energies into realizing the Motherland’s Four Modernizations.

Priestly didn’t buy it, as he confessed to me after we had been talking for five or six months. First, he was a very emotional man. Whenever he spoke, whether the subject was puritanical repression or the Italian songs that he had learned in a song-and-dance troupe in Xian before he became a student, he spoke so operatically that the “wall tigers,” little lizards, would run behind the door in the kitchen. Secondly, Priestly objected because he was in love with a former middle-school classmate from Beijing now studying in Szechwan. In the journal he kept for American literature he copied one of his “sugar reports” to his sweetheart. (I asked Priestly if I could make a copy of his journal, since I was collecting material for an anthology of Chinese students’ prose. He agreed. I have the only copy now, since the journal was later stolen. As a precaution, I had had a British colleague take my copy to Hong Kong to send home because my mail was being read, and some letters had been destroyed or censored.)

Priestly's "friend" had written to him first and enclosed a picture of herself standing before Heaven's Pool in the snowy mountains of Szechwan. She said she loved the "green" of Guangzhou and hoped "the people" there would also love the "white snow" of Szechwan and hoped that he would post her a "green leaf." Priestly said he fell before the picture and added that "even a complete fool" could understand what was "meant." At that point he resolved to cherish her friendship, "pure friendship, not beyond, because I feel abased: I am small; she is tall. I am a mortal; she is an angel. I am a clay pot; she is a jade statue."

Priestly was confused about the letter and consulted the political monitor of the class, a fellow student responsible for herding his peers along the ideological straight-and-narrow, as well as solving practical problems like taking notes for absentees and securing hospital beds for those with hepatitis, a common disease at the Institute. Holmes, the monitor, confirmed it was a love letter, and admonished Priestly not to worry that she was beautiful while he was not, because it didn't matter: "Man for ability, woman for beauty."

Priestly answered the letter to ask if her meaning "kissed" his. He said he was intoxicated by her letter but tried to be as calm as the water in Heaven's Pool, since he must not be diverted from his studies and the realization of his ideals. Yet, he said, "It seems that I can feel the beating of your pulse, and feel that your face is covered with a transparent silk, but can be seen clearly. It is I that should take it off." He added that he knew what she "meant" about the leaf. "If it were a mere green leaf you asked for your wish is not so difficult to satisfy. But I am not so simple as to take the leaf you ask for to be the leaf of a tree. I needn't, now, pretend to be a fool. . . . Chen, the snow in the West is pure and the green leaf in the South is tempting. If the two are combined, we'll see a bewitchery." He concludes, "Have you ever thought of a jade girl statue? If I can have it, I'll be the happiest; if not, I wouldn't be so regretful. For I have no right to have it."

Priestly and I not only talked, we also sang together. He had a resonant basso profundo voice, and he had learned parts of the two Italian operas he'd taped from the Hong Kong BBC. We sang first at the class' request: they wanted to add to their own repertoire of "Do, a Deer, a Female Deer," "Blowin' in the Wind," "Way Down upon the Sewanee River," and "Que Sera, Sera." So I taught Priestly "Summertime" from *Porgy and*

*Bess*, and we sang it to the class. At one of the three parties of the year, I, as usual, was asked, along with everyone else, to perform a dance or a song or a Kung Fu move. Priestly and I sang "Santa Lucia" in Chinglish-Italiano, he with such tremolos and sighs that I was afraid he would break into sobs.

We sang "Santa Lucia" at my farewell party too. All my students were there, shucking and eating peanuts and drinking orange soda (they called it orange juice) and cheap Chinese beer that tasted as if it were mixed with apple cider. They stood and clapped as I entered. Wellington, tallest and most handsome "boy" in the class, presided. He thanked me for my "cordial teaching" and my erudition and "charity heart." Araminter assured me that they would never forget me, pledged the students' eternal gratitude and everlasting respect, and announced their great grief at losing me. Gordon gave a Kung Fu demonstration, Margaret and Dorothy sang a duet of "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean," Bruce recited "Annabelle Lee," Holmes played the harmonica, and George and Sherman performed a Cross-Talk, a sort of comic linguistic routine satirizing the policy of requiring short hair and non-Western clothes. They portrayed a gatekeeper at a factory who refuses admittance to a woman because of her long hair. She offers to tie it up with "robber bands" after being instructed to "bandit." George and Sherman coached us "to keep smiling on our face," and at the end they bid us a "night good from the heart of our bottom." The entertainment concluded with Priestly and me singing "Santa Lucia." I gave a little speech assuring them that they would be forever dear to me. Dorothy cried.

Priestly gallantly escorted me home. (There were snakes about, he said. He didn't say, since the Chinese were expected not to bring bad news to the foreigners, that a girl had been raped the week before. As far as I know, it was the only rape case that year.) As we walked I taught him "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'Tis a gift to be free," but gave up on the duet from *The Pearlfishers*. Priestly asked if I thought the millions of fireflies flickering over the rice paddies were ghosts.

The day before I left, I found Priestly sitting on the steps in front of my door. He was waiting to tell me that he had been asked to stay at the Institute to teach. The committee claimed the confirmation of acceptance that he had received from the music school in Beijing had been bogus; that in fact he had failed the examinations. They wished, therefore, that he

would stay at the Institute since Chinese schools needed to improve the quality of the teachers in order for the modernizations to be realized. China, the Party Chairman said, was his mother, whom he must serve. They said they knew he had a friend, and they would be willing to see to it that she was assigned to Guangzhou if he accepted the job. They reluctantly granted his request for three hours to consider his decision about his lifetime.

He asked me what he should do. If he refused this job, he said, they would give him a terrible job—or no job at all maybe, and he would lose the jade statue. But he didn't want to be a teacher. He had no aptitude for it. No interest in it. His English was poor. The pay was poor. Chances of advancement were poor, too. Could I get him into Dartmouth? Could I be his sponsor? Could I get him a job? I promised to do what I could. We drank some brandy. "Mei you quan chi," he said at last in a tired, resigned voice. "It doesn't matter . . . It doesn't matter."

In his last letter Priestly wrote about a dream he had had of his grandmother, who said, "Since Adam and Eve with the sins came the world. You are doomed to have sins. But if you are willing to send the stones to Jesus, he will burden them on his own back." Priestly continues, "At that point I looked through the window and I saw the White House in America is face to face with me. What is the matter, I say. The speaker is not my grandmother. She has become my beloved Dr. Sears. She was teaching us American literature, explaining the Bible, and we are in America in my dream."

Priestly took the job. The snow in the west is still pure, and the jade statue is still in Szechwan.

Margaret was in the third-year advanced composition course with Priestly. She had two extra chairs next to her desk piled high with books: *War and Peace*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Jane Eyre*, the poetry of Li Bo and Du Fu, as well as texts for the courses most everyone in third year took—intensive reading, extensive reading, English literature, listening and speaking, lexicology, Japanese, and political studies. Although most students had had four to eight years of English, few spoke it proficiently.

Margaret was the first student in many senses: she sat in the first chair in the first row; she was the first to arrive; she was the first in ability and achievements. She always wore pearly plastic sandals, knee-high nylon



stockings, a navy-blue skirt and an opaque white blouse, buttoned all the way up. (In Guangzhou a woman with two buttons on her blouse unbuttoned is regarded as indecent—maybe a “wild chicken,” a prostitute.) She wore no jewelry. (Very few students did. Jewelry was evidence of bourgeois decadence.) She wore no make-up. She had round glasses and a round, moon face. Unlike many students, she had good teeth. She was about 5’2” tall and very small and very slender by American standards. “Sticky,” Holmes said. (At 5’6” I was taller than all students, male and female, except two from the North.)

In September Margaret was very reserved. She blushed if I looked at her. She spoke in whispers. I thought of her as a communist nun. Although she didn’t belong to the young communists’ organization (very few students did: it was too hard, they said, and many had been disillusioned with communism during the Cultural Revolution), she was fervently devoted to China and to its modernization. In an early essay she said she aspired to be like the silkworm:

The silkworm is an ordinary beneficial creature. She is so ordinary that many people ignore her; however, she has a noble spirit. As soon as she grows up, she will begin to work spinning silk. She is so attentive and patient that she spins every thread of silk carefully without even winking her eyes, and never gives up halfway. She pays all attention to her work, and is never absent-minded. She strives hard to reach her goal—the cocoon—until she spins her last thread of silk. Though her life is short, yet she makes a great contribution to society. She is like a candle, burning herself out to give light to others.

I like the silkworm. I like her modesty, unselfishness and concentration. I will learn from the silkworm, and do as Premier Zhou Enlai said, “We should be like silkworms to spin out the last thread of silk to contribute to the country and people.”

Margaret’s innocence was nunlike. She said she knew nothing about love and romance and didn’t care to. Boys had asked her for her picture, a daring gesture, but she had always refused. She was also innocent in the sense of being pre-Freud, pre-Maslow, pre-lapsarian even. She did not

assume—it didn't seem even to occur to her that people care for others only if they satisfy egoistic needs or that social values such as altruism, concern for friends and family, and devotion to others are understood to exist only insofar as they serve the individual's best interests, as Freud and the neo-Freudians suggest. "Self-love" and "self-actualization" weren't in her vocabulary. I once read one of her papers in class as an example. She asked me in private not to do it again because, she said, it singled her out and made it appear that she was better than others.

She was not innocent of suffering. Her family, like the families of most of the students, had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Her father, a professor, had been tortured and sent to rusticate in the countryside, to work alongside the peasants caring for pigs and spreading nightsoil in the fields in order to learn humility and the dignity of labor. Her mother, a doctor, had been sent away to another rural locale for schooling in dialectical reality by farmers. The family had been separated for five years, the children being sent to communal kindergartens. Now that they were reunited, they often spent their evenings singing songs or writing poems collectively.

In June, eight months after the silkworm essay, I asked the students to write a letter to America. Margaret began by saying she was flattered to have the opportunity to communicate with American youths, whom she knew only through the movies, "wherein," she wrote, "they have shining eyes, sunny faces, silver laughter, and always strike me as vigorous, energetic, adventurous and bright." She went on to comment honestly on women's equality in China. This required some courage, since the official line on sexual equality is that in China "women have become co-masters of the country." The National Constitution of the People's Republic of China asserts that "men and women enjoy absolute equality both politically and economically."

Margaret argues that "conditions have improved since the Chinese communist party has paid serious attention to the liberation of women both in the struggle against imperialism and against feudalism as in pre-liberation days, and in the socialist construction afterwards." She goes on to say, however, that equality in law has not meant equality in fact.

So women are still found to be humiliated, abused, or even persecuted under various circumstances. For example, a woman will be

rejected or abused by her husband's family if she bears a girl child; women hold only about five percent of top jobs in the country; some enterprises and government offices openly declare that women are not wanted; some universities and colleges have raised the standard of admission for girl students. Some people still have the traditional view of "a talented husband and a beautiful wife." Some people cling to the idea that women are not as intelligent as men. I should say "No!" If women are given equal time, equal chance, equal treatment, they will do as well as, or sometimes even better than men.

I think we women should do something concrete. As for me, a university student, I am no longer willing to lag behind the boys, as many girls deliberately do. I study hard and even try to surpass them, and indeed, I have. If more women in China in more fields surpass the men, then what would they say? Can they say women are not as intelligent as men? Women are only fit for household chores? No! Dear American women, let's brace up and do some concrete things. Let's crack the hard nut together, though it calls for more effort and patience. I am sure we shall triumph if we hold fast.

Margaret, "never giving up halfway," had metamorphosed from a selfless, sacrificial silkworm into a self-respecting, life-affirming woman.

Ivan's story is told with his permission in his own words from his journal. "Ivan the Terrible," the other foreigners said. "Ivan the Magnificent," Priestly, his friend, said. They often walked around the campus hand in hand, and at the party, late in the year, where waltzing was allowed for the first time in twelve years, Priestly attempted to teach Ivan to tango. (This was common in China. People of the same sex were very demonstrative—they kissed and caressed, embraced, walked arm in arm, hand in hand, danced together.) Priestly and Ivan were a curious pair: Priestly a tall (in Chinese terms) 26-year-old Northerner, rather cosmopolitan (in Chinese terms); Ivan a caricature of the kamikaze pilots in old World War II movies. If he had had a Western face, you might have characterized him as a hick. He had fuzzy teeth, small thick glasses with black frames pieced together with black electrical tape. He wore thin white shirts and wrinkled black baggy pants and brown plastic sandals. He spoke in nasal tones. He sniffed.

One day in October I met him as I walked along the paths, avoiding the ducks who were being herded by a boy who, along with many other working children, should have been in school, according to the Chinese constitution. Ivan said he would escort me to the bus stop and advised me to push hard to get on, otherwise I might not be able to fit in or I might get caught in the door and be half in and half out. Ivan apologized profusely for the rude people who failed to give me, “an aged woman and distinguished professor,” a seat, but “since the Cultural Revolution. . . .” He sighed.

I complimented him on his essays, and I remembered that he was an editor of a controversial campus magazine in English, *The Looking Glass*. Ivan said the essays were “feeble” and apologized again. He explained that he was studying four languages this year — English, Japanese, French, and German — and therefore he had to work hard and neglect his editorials, but he had no regrets, for “knowledge is power.” I said his parents must be proud of him. He said his parents were illiterate peasants, but their children weren’t: his sister was a doctor; his brother was an engineer; he hoped to be a professor.

The bus was late. Ivan waited with me, shielding me from the sun with my umbrella. He said I should know he had often made his parents sad. He was a “naughty boy.” He hated kindergarten, where he only learned “Long live Chairman Mao.” He kicked the teacher who tried to beat him. When he was ten or so, he had run away to Tongbai to avenge the death of the heroes of a novel he had read. He had stowed away on several trains and traveled hundreds of miles, begging for food, and at one point ended up eating watermelon rinds and seeds for several days. At last he arrived in Tongbai and became dejected when no one knew the names of the heroes and heroines, and the place was “nothing special.”

We squatted beside the road as we waited. Everyone did. My back hurt.

At last the beetle-backed bus came, and I didn’t get to know Ivan any better until he began to keep a journal. He wrote about trying to find light to read by. The electricity was shut off in the students’ quarters at 10:30 P.M., and Ivan tried to read in the faint red light of the bulb in the bath house where the rats came to drink. He says,

As I sat on the floor of the bathroom under the light, I wondered why Francis Bacon was described by Pope as “the wisest, brightest

and yet meanest of mankind”; why John Dryden always turned with the tide and placed himself on the winning side. I admired Thomas More, who met his death on the scaffold with great courage and raillery, and Daniel Defoe, who sang his “Hymn of Pillory” as he was made to stand in the pillory. I at last found myself in John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. Merged in illusion I sensed More, Satan, Samson, and Defoe approaching me, and our hearts began to beat at the same frequency, and the blood ran from their veins into mine. Arm-in-arm, shoulder-to-shoulder, braving the turmoil of the world, we laughed confidently. . . . And in a sudden ecstasy we merged into one person.

Ivan’s reverie in the bathroom was interrupted by the footsteps of a fellow-student, Abbott, who sat in the back of my class reading T. S. Eliot and brooding about suicide. Ivan was startled, because if he were caught red-handed, he might be reported to the political instructor, “a power seeker who does good things only to distinguish himself.” But Abbott was sympathetic:

He looked around to see if anybody were there and then put his mouth near my ear and told me the political instructor had said I was a reactionary. I tried to appear unaffected. “What reasons does he have to say I am a reactionary?”

“I don’t know. And when we said you keep very good academic record, he replied that you only know several more words than others.”

I was angry that he should have profaned knowledge, which I regard as the most sacred thing. . . . Milton and More and Defoe were gone. I thought of Yu-loke, the great fighter during the Cultural Revolution. He loved the country and loved the people and loved truth; he hated the poverty of the country and he hated the ignorance of the people and he hated the distortion of the truth. He refused to be silent. He was executed. And Zhang-zixin, who defended truth and died for truth during the Cultural Revolution. In prison she composed a song of truth. On the execution ground she sang this song of truth. While she was singing, her throat was cut into halves. Her blood splashed the enemy. I feel my blood run cold; thinking of you, I feel myself fighting in a battlefield.

Ivan had to give up studying in the bathroom. The lights were turned off there too because we had exceeded our electric quota. He moved outside to study with the cicadas and the “fireworms with their greenish lanterns,” but the mosquitoes became intolerable. So he oiled himself with the L. L. Bean Maine Woods Insect Repellent I had given him and stood under streetlights reading *Paradise Lost*, but these lights go out at 11:30. Once he felt his way in the dark up the stairs of an unfinished building to a light on the roof, but two workers were living there. He returned to the bathroom with a flashlight, and at last snuck into the library reading room, which was open until 12:30 A.M., but only to teachers and postgraduates. There he continued reading Milton and the philosophers who “had written on behalf of liberation, revolution, and freedom. [I must read,] for he who would make history, must study history.”

The answer to Ivan’s question about the political instructor’s accusation wasn’t long in coming. Soon afterwards the political instructor spoke at a compulsory meeting:

*I am to emphasize the discipline. Some students have recently behaved badly, absent from classes and morning exercises, late for meetings and for going to bed. I order every monitor to announce the absentees to the class every week, then submit the rolls to me, and every two weeks I announce the absentees to the whole grade. Every dormitory cadre will register those who make noise, talk, or do not go to bed before 10:30 and will announce them to the dormitory every week and then submit the rolls to me. And . . .*

Ivan stopped listening. He wrote:

I once dreamed that many people came to visit and learn from our advanced unit. Rousseau, the French philosopher, came too. I boasted of our decent order to him, but he sneered, “a veritable prison.” In an illusion I saw Rousseau change into one of the students in this prison. He resisted. “I am not a slave,” he shouted. But it was only a dream. Here, in reality, Rousseau couldn’t come. But I? “I am not a slave either,” I whispered to myself as I took my hands off my ears.

The political instructor was relentless:

*Recently I read two magazines. Songbird [a Chinese magazine published by the sanctioned Youth League Committee] is good—very, very good. Even the working staff read it actively, while the so-called periodical, The Looking Glass, is only waste paper. It can only lead the students astray. The editors . . . let off their personal dissatisfactions, grievances, and unhealthy ideas. . . . They [complain] about meals, hot water, supply service. But among the working staff, who can understand English? The magazine is of no avail, unable to solve any problem. The editors and writers are sheer anarchists and humanists. They scatter the magazine as leaflets to spread seditious ideas. Students, you should be fully aware, whoever writes such seditious articles cannot be qualified morally. If not qualified morally, they cannot graduate.*

Ivan comments:

It is no surprise that the political instructor was not forced to stop, for four-fifths of the students are cadres. And every cadre has his specific job as every carrot has its pit to grow in. The instructor dominates all his cadres from the Chairman of the Student Union to the cadres of the toilets to form a very effective network. If a cadre expresses different views, he will be replaced. The political instructor has created 45 new rules, for the rules and regulations of the Institute are not sufficient to enforce his authority. The students seem quite willing to accept the rules. But Rousseau, not in the hands of the political instructor, has come out to express his wisdom and foresight, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.”

The political instructor had just begun the fight. He requested that the collective leadership of the Institute break up the unity of the editors by appealing to some as “comrades”; to replace the current editors with his own flunkies. He unjustly accused one of the editors of lying, a moral offense comparable to filching money from the Salvation Army pot; he posted new versions of the contaminated magazine articles, edited by the Division of Propaganda and approved by the Bureau of Public Tranquility. Ivan says:

The political instructor hankers over power. So do I. But the way I take is different from his. He shoulders and elbows his way forward, and kicks those who are in his way. I plough forward for knowledge. Knowledge is power. He gets the power to dominate; I get the power to serve. He may kick me, but he best be careful not to kick me too hard, for I do not fear him nor the loss of my life.

Ivan wasn't exaggerating. He appealed the case to the collective leadership, even though, as he says, "the political instructor is a party member and officials here are all colleagues and neighbors." [All of the faculty, Chinese and foreign, lived within a few blocks of each other.] He argued his case valiantly in print as well:

The political instructor's condemnation of the writers of *The Looking Glass* is unreasonable. As our supervisor says, "A good mirror always gives a true reflection of what there is. No distortion, no exaggeration, and no diminution, just the bare facts of life."

Furthermore, nobody dares say that he never makes mistakes as the political instructor has. We will not stop working because of making mistakes, as a person will not stop walking because of tripping and falling. As the former Chairman Mao Tze-tung said, "Let one hundred flowers blossom; let a hundred schools of thought contend." The more the truth is debated, the clearer it becomes. The political instructor has made mistakes. He has, with unsufferable arrogance, unjustly accused us of being criminals. He fabricated accusations. He tried to replace us. He threatened us. And he has not acknowledged his mistakes. One has to make mistakes. From a Marxist point of view, validity and mistake are the unity of opposites. The law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law of the universe. If one presumptuously asserts that he never makes mistakes, his assertion should be taken as the ravings of a madman.

We demand that the political instructor redress his wrong of making the students believe we are liars by confessing his mistake publicly. We demand that the writers of this magazine be allowed to continue to write freely and expose the drawbacks of our Institute without meddling from the mistaken political instructor.



The die was cast. As Ivan lay in his bunk bed that night, he reflected:

I thought of the millions of Chinese history, all the great men of the past, their valour, their sacrifices, and their glorious deeds. I pondered over why Japan and Germany had so quickly rebuilt their countries and forged ahead with giant strides, while China, the great ancient country, had fallen behind. I was distressed about the Chinese people's spiritual backwardness, their passivity and inertia. I resolved to help scatter the forces that were stifling the people's vitality, and to flay China's weaknesses, turn the silent China into an articulate China. China's history is full of bloodstains. But we have survived. Those who died for its integrity and those who would fight for its revival were the nation's backbone and mainstay. I would be a man of unyielding integrity; I would be a fighter for revolution and reform. Difficulties and obstructions will be many. But I will be helped by my passion for truth, my love for my people and my devotion to my country.

At last report Ivan's and the other editors' fight for reform had been partially successful: the political instructor had recanted after he had been criticized by the Party Secretary, the highest-ranking official at the Institute, as "too simple and arbitrary" in his action. Although all articles must be approved by a committee, some freedom of the press has been granted. But Ivan and his comrades, far and away the best students in the grade, have not, according to Ivan's most recent letter, been awarded any of the few scholarships for graduate study, and they are fearful about their assignments.

I left Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute on July 15, 1984. My students and colleagues came to my flat for a farewell ceremony. They brought paintings and fans and scrolls and chops and tea and Priestly sang "Home on the Range" and Golden Fish set off firecrackers. When the car for the airport tooted, Ivan was called on to recite a poem by Langston Hughes.

Hold fast to dreams.  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams.  
For if dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

When I returned to Dartmouth, things seemed, as Fitzgerald says, “material without being real.” Had I always drunk water from a faucet? Had the dining hall always had an all-you-can-eat policy? Had I always had so many books I didn’t need? Had my desk always been big enough to play ping pong on? People casually ask me, “How was China?” Sometimes I have said “unreal” or “utterly other.” That is not, in essence, factual. The unreal became both material and real, and the other is neither the other nor the same, but the sum. That was the lesson I learned in China by heart.