

# Teaching in Beijing: A Visiting Professor's Experience

Dr. Donna M. Jurdy

Teaching in Beijing was an adventure! Two years ago a former Northwestern graduate student, Han Li, invited me to teach at the Graduate University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (GUCAS) as a visiting professor. Han had just begun teaching there, so my principal motivation was to help her, as she was just organizing her courses, putting together lectures, materials, and problem sets. And of course I was excited and intrigued about the possibility of visiting China for the first time. So I enthusiastically accepted her invitation.

Academia in China was a mystery to me. Graduate students come from all over China to GUCAS, and the institution hosts large numbers of visiting faculty, presumably to expose their students to these international researchers. The College of Earth Sciences, one of the University's smaller divisions, alone had 25 visiting professors. That year about 40 enrolled in my offering, well beyond the minimum of 10. My offering in Beijing entitled: "Exploration of the Solar System", derived from two of my Northwestern courses:

## Exploration of the Solar System

<http://lunar.earth.northwestern.edu/courses/110/index.html>

and also

## Forming a Habitable Planet

<http://lunar.earth.northwestern.edu/courses/351/index.html>

So I used material from those, taking advantage of problems developed with colleagues and material already tested. Initially, my biggest concern in teaching was how to adapt visual aids to support the lecture material. Difficulties abounded in teaching in a foreign land: using my host's computer, saved me from bringing one - but it was daunting when an entirely Chinese screen popped up. Although I prepared figures for presentations in both .pdf and powerpoint formats, there was no guarantee that either mode would work in the classroom. So I brought a flashdrive, and also a CD with lectures in both formats, as well as having files on my computer back at Northwestern which

hopefully Secure Shell Protocol (SSP) would be able to access. Not one of these strategies worked! Login with SSP failed; the CD with figures could not be read; even my flashdrive somehow got infected. Finally



*Donna Jurdy (right) and Han Li (left) outside of GUCAS*



*Donna Jurdy (left) speaking with two students at GUCAS*



*The Kalvi Institute for Astronomy and Astrophysics*

Plan #6 succeeded! A colleague had suggested posting presentations on my personal website as a backup. So ultimately I obtained graphics through the Internet. Whew!

This whole experience reinforced the importance of having multiple plans run in parallel. One can never be sure which plan will work. Wonderful visual materials are available for the course topic on the solar system. NASA and LPI maintain excellent websites, both informative and authoritative. Also, there's a whole industry in marketing western educational films that play in Chinese or English with Chinese subtitles, enabling the students to view the film in English, grasping additional content from the subtitles in Chinese.

Thus June I returned to GUCAS. My course maxed out with over 90 registered, more than the total for the other 5 concurrent visiting professors, all male. Unfortunately, this large enrollment limited class discussion and interaction. Worse, I did not get to know the individual students by name, and course lists in Chinese did not help me either. One student went as far to give me a departing gift of a space DVD. The students were very receptive and appreciative, even applauding after each lecture. Honestly, having taught at a university for 30+ years, I know the lectures were not superb. Instructors are required to give two

tests. Although we posed questions in English, answers were accepted in "any combination of languages". And the responses came in a mixture: students used English, but also filled in with Chinese. Fortunately visiting professors have TA's; they help with grading, roll, and logistics.

The registrar had scheduled each class for 4 hours a day (courses met for a total of 20 hours). My class met every other day. Initially the prospect of efficiently utilizing 4 hours of class time was intimidating. But once I accepted that impossibility, then we seized upon the opportunity for enjoying intervening days to visit museums and see the sights. A friend accompanied me and helped organize our activities. We

were busy: visiting the Great Wall, Summer Palace, Forbidden City, Royal Astronomical Observatory. I made a special point to go to the Geological Museum, also the Natural History Museum, where many of the Chinese dinosaurs were displayed. The English documentation in the exhibits varied; sometimes descriptions did not adequately answer my questions. Gift shops at these institutions lacked appealing rocks, minerals and fossils for purchase.

We stayed on campus with the other visiting professors in the "High Energy Physics Guest House" with restaurant conveniently adjacent. Breakfast was



*Discussing Hubble images*



the most disconcerting meal with many unfamiliar offerings. We could just point. I tried to break the code for the dumplings: whether meat-filled, vegetable or just dough. Could information be contained in the swirls and chirality? Not so. Another visiting professor, a native speaker, revealed one has to ask in Chinese, and that the dumplings could have any possible filling or none.

The Chinese were wonderful, organizing many special events for us. A special treat was a visit with our host, Han, to the Beijing Opera housed in a 14th century mill, all arranged considerably in advance. For me the highlight of our trip was getting out to visit the Peking Man caves. A former student of another visiting professors devoted his day to driving us all out there. Caves in the karst region were occupied for 100,000's years. Numerous hominid and other mammal fossils were found. I was intrigued by evidence for a matriarchal Paleolithic society that derives from a

burial site of one woman surrounded by pottery and ornaments, as compared with the mass burials of males. However, the fossil hominid record does not record all the details of Paleolithic life. Also, we had fun with "Hong Kong Tailors", selecting material and having some outfits made. Clothes made the first visit worked out so well that we had to go back. Most successful was having a tattered, old, but beloved, blouse copied twice in beautiful new silks.

When the Chinese walk on the moon - perhaps before any US astronauts return, I'll always wonder whether my course sparked an interest in a young graduate student. Now that AWG has an international category for membership, I am pleased to sponsor my host, Han Li, to be a member of our organization.



*Peering into the Peking Man site*