

## **Into the Heart of Manchuria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Professor and Mrs. Hales taught at the Northeast China Institute of Electrical Power Engineering in Jilin City in the People's Republic of China during the 1992-93 school year.

The challenges of preparing to go and some of the early frustrations are recounted. Several illustrative experiences are detailed; then general observations are made about current conditions for young Chinese college graduates.

### **INTRODUCTION**

My wife and I taught at the Northeast China Institute of Electric Power Engineering from September 1992 until June 1993. The institute is in Jilin City, Jilin Province. Jilin City is about 350 miles north of Pyongyang, North Korea, and 300 miles west of Vladivostok, Russia. It is very nearly at the geographical center of the area in northeastern China commonly called Manchuria. This area was occupied by the Japanese from about 1932 until it was liberated in 1945. The Japanese used the city of Changchun as their Manchurian capital during the occupation. Today Changchun is the capital of Jilin Province. It is approximately seventy miles west of the city of Jilin.

The northernmost provinces in China are Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang. Jilin Province is south of Heilongjiang and east of Inner Mongolia. Changchun and Jilin are industrial cities on the Songhua River with a population of two million and 1.5 million people, respectively.

We would spend most of the next eleven months on this agricultural plain with rolling hills. How did we come to be there? We need to go back to events a few years earlier.

#### **The First China Visit**

In January of 1989 my wife and I were invited to participate in a People-to-People visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The delegation, consisting of forty individuals, fifteen of whom were spouses, were engineering faculty in universities all across the United States and representing a number of engineering disciplines.

Our objective was to visit and exchange ideas and experiences with engineering faculty at selected universities in the People's Republic of China. We were to visit three cities in the PRC and spend the last two days in Hong Kong. We went first to Beijing, then Shanghai, and finally to Wuhan, an interior city on the Yangtze River about five hundred miles west of Shanghai. The entire excursion was three weeks in duration.

We attended a five-day conference (The Fourth International Conference on Continuing Engineering Education) in Beijing and then visited several universities. This was at the time of

the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989. We watched the demonstrations there.

However, we got involved with the students in a unique way. Our hotel was about ten miles from Tiananmen Square but it was half a city block from The People's University. Many of the student activists and leaders were from there. Each evening some of us would go to the campus and spend several hours talking to the students and others congregated at the entrance. This occurred during the week of May 14-21. On Saturday, May 20, we left our hotel at 7:00 a.m. to visit the Great Wall. We rode on a chartered bus and at the outskirts of Beijing we saw the first attempt to bring military personnel into the city. The convoy was stopped by large throngs of people filling the highway.

The next day we flew to Shanghai; students were filling the streets demonstrating there also. Four days later we flew to Wuhan. Our hotel was on the opposite side of the Yangtze River from the airport. The bus carrying us was stopped at the bridge crossing the river, as demonstrating students had closed it to all traffic. We had to take a commuter ferry filled with people returning home from their work.

While in Wuhan we met with the Yangtze River Planning Commission and were briefed on the plans for the Three Gorges dam and hydroelectric project. The multi-billion-dollar project has subsequently been approved and is underway.

On May 31 we left Hong Kong and returned to the United States. We were very surprised four days later to hear news reports of the events in Tiananmen Square.

## RETURNING

While in China this first time we asked about opportunities to return and spend a longer period of time there. We came home with many business cards. I subsequently wrote to various locations expressing interest in working with them. None of these overtures generated any response. In retrospect I believe the approach was wrong. One needs to understand the concept of "guanxi" in dealing with the Chinese. Guanxi: "Not precisely translatable into English. Guanxi is often spoken of as something that links two people who have developed a relationship of mutual dependence." [1] A contact person is essential. Recognizing this, we were looking for an appropriate intermediary individual or organization.

In the fall of 1991 we read about a program administered by Brigham Young University. They arrange for placement of individuals to teach English at Chinese universities. We contacted them and in November of 1991 sent applications and resumes. I concurrently requested a sabbatical leave for the next school year from the University of Pittsburgh. Our application materials were sent to Beijing where they were reviewed by the universities which had previously developed a working agreement with the Brigham Young University program.

On Friday of the third week in February of 1992 we received an invitation from the Northeast China Institute of Electric Power Engineering (NECIEPE). The following day approval for a sabbatical arrived. We began a rush of activities consisting first of negotiating or confirming some details with the institute, and then detailed preparations were commenced--arrangements for the house, finances, passports, travel arrangements, scheduling, etc.

We would never have been able to make all the arrangements between March and July without the aid of FAX machines. The one-way time for air mail was usually nine days to two weeks. Their original invitation came in about two weeks and contained considerable ancillary

information. But most valuable was a FAX number. We compiled a succinct two-page numbered list of concerns and questions, and sent it along with our FAX number. For the next month we would receive or send a FAX message every two or three days. After this initial flurry of communication it slowed down; however, there were significant problems almost to the day we left. For example, with less than a month before leaving, we had not yet received visas from the Chinese government. Accomplishing this required action from the institute in Jilin with officials in Beijing. The Beijing officials intervened with the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., but we still had to make several trips to the embassy and endure long waiting (a thing which we were to learn is common with Chinese officialdom--reminiscent of one's days long ago in the military).

In anticipation and with the hope of some day returning to China, during our first visit I had asked our Chinese hosts what their needs were. They quite often indicated a need for English books, especially textbooks, and more especially technical textbooks. For the three years before returning I collected and accumulated a variety of books. I intended to use them for my own reference while there and then donate them to the library. So one project was the preparation and mailing of these books. They were sent by surface mail or the cost would have been prohibitive.

The U.S. Postal service has a classification for books called an "M bag." There are quite precise specifications and requirements, such as: The books are boxed in boxes weighing at least eleven pounds but not to exceed twenty pounds. They must fill one mailbag, not to exceed sixty-six pounds. We sent ten mailbags full of books at a cost of about \$400. These took between three and five months to make the trip.

### **Last-minute duties**

In the fall of 1991 before all of the above was initiated, I had agreed to be a Scoutmaster and promised to take the Scouts to summer camp. While we were in the midst of our frenzied preparations in the spring, our son who was attending law school announced that he was engaged to be married. Thus, the last week before leaving our home, I was at Boy Scout Camp. I left on Friday to participate in our son's wedding, and the following Tuesday we flew to the western part of the U.S. to attend a two-week seminar at BYU and spend some time with family members (our daughter and her family were living in southern California). We would be back home almost exactly twelve months later.

### **Financial Arrangements**

Our Chinese hosts provided the following economic perquisites: (1) an apartment on the institute campus, (2) a salary for each of us, and (3) the return air transportation to the United States for one. The salary, although several times that of Chinese faculty, was not very substantial by American standards. Our combined salary was approximately \$350 per month.

Additionally they enjoyed providing perks such as trips to visit scenic attractions, national treasures, or festivals. The most significant of these was a ten-day cruise through the Three-Gorges area of the Yangtze River (although we had to pay for our own meals).

Since I was on a sabbatical leave, the University of Pittsburgh was paying us one-half my normal salary. Our son and his new bride lived in our home while he attended graduate school full time. They used my (UPJ) salary to pay the mortgage, utility costs, and emergency house expenses (of which there were several, such as replacing the hot-water heater).

The University of Pittsburgh China Studies Faculty Travel provided a grant of \$1200 and the Brigham Young University paid our transportation costs from the United States to Beijing, China.

### **Living Arrangements**

The institute has a living facility on campus which they call the foreign experts' guest house. There were eight apartments in the front of the building, each on two floors. One of these was provided to us by the institute. We were in the first apartment on the second floor. In the apartment next to us was a Japanese couple who taught Japanese and next to them a Ukrainian woman who taught Russian. Below us was the president of the institute, and another Japanese teacher was in the apartment adjacent to his. The other apartments were used by various visiting foreigners (usually business people) or dignitaries. The rooms to the rear of the building were used as a typical Chinese hotel (for Chinese). There would be four to seven beds in a room, and guests would share the room. Their bathroom facilities were at the end of the hall. There were as many as fifty or more Chinese guests on some occasions. There was a restaurant as well as dining facilities for the permanent guests between the two sets of living quarters. The eight apartments in the front were Western style with Western bathrooms. We had a small kitchen with an apartment-sized refrigerator and two one-burner electric hot plates for cooking. Additionally we had a small bedroom (approximately twice the size of the double bed) and a general-purpose room (the Chinese called it a workroom) which was about two-thirds the size of the bedroom. It was not spacious but quite luxurious by Chinese standards. There was no air conditioning, and the heating was marginally adequate. We finally requested a space heater.

### **Eating Arrangements**

The institute had intended that we eat in the dining room provided, then we would be billed once a month for the cost of the meals. It soon became apparent that this cost was almost equal to our salary. We had decided after several days that we were not going to enjoy Chinese breakfasts (mostly pickled vegetables plus the ubiquitous rice, and orange soft drinks). So we had begun to prepare breakfast in our room. We prepared eggs in a variety of ways including French toast. Cracked corn was available, which we cooked for several hours in the evening, then warmed in the morning and ate as a cereal. After several weeks we began buying food and fixing all of our own meals. We had studied Chinese conversation in our home for six months before leaving. We spent an hour each day, using audio tapes. Upon our arrival in China I began to shop in the local stores and outdoor markets and rapidly developed confidence in what I was doing. Several months later we developed a routine of taking students or faculty out to a local restaurant once a week for our evening meal. On some occasions we invited students to our apartment to prepare a meal. It was somewhat laborious shopping and preparing meals under the conditions that existed, but we generally enjoyed the food.

## **ELECTRIC POWER INSTITUTES**

Chinese colleges (institutes) and universities are very specialized and often closely associated with a business or an industrial activity. If students are to study a foreign language, they attend a foreign language institute. If they are to study computer science, they attend a computer science institute.

An agency of the federal government in the People's Republic of China administers the production and distribution of electrical energy for the entire country. Within this obviously massive agency is a department of education. It consists of thirteen three-year institutes or colleges which prepare technicians and operators of the electrical power plants and power

transmission and distribution system throughout the nation. These thirteen institutes were in major population centers across the country.

There are four other institutes which award bachelor degrees. One was in southern China in the city of Changsha. Its principal function appeared to be the preparation of instructors for the thirteen technical institutes. Another was in the large city of Wuhan (population five million) in central China. This appeared to be the leading institute in the system. They awarded the PhD. in addition to M.S. and B.S. degrees. The next was in the city of Baoding about one hundred miles south of Beijing. The Northeast China Institute of Electric Power Engineering (NECIEPE) in Jilin City was the fourth of these.

### **The Institute (NECIEPE)**

There were five undergraduate departments in the institute:

- Thermal Power (mechanical engineering)
- Electrical Power (electrical engineering)
- Architectural (civil engineering)
- Information Systems (computer engineering)
- Applied Chemistry (chemical engineering)

Each of these awards the bachelor of science degree. Another department which they called the postgraduate department (and I will call the graduate department) offered the master of science degree in each of the above disciplines. The M.S. program required three years, two years of course work and a final year to complete a project (thesis).

There were about ninety graduate students, twenty-seven to thirty in each of the three years. The undergraduate complement was about three thousand students. All of these students lived in dormitories on or near the campus. The undergraduate dorms are typical for Chinese students, very crowded, six or eight students to a room in bunk beds that take up about half of the floor space. The graduate students were in dorms, two to a room. There were two dining halls where all of the students ate and two bathhouses where they all showered.

### **Arrival**

We flew from Los Angeles to Tokyo (Narita Airport) and spent five days touring in Japan. We finally flew to Beijing and were met at the airport by Han Shumin (our *waiban*--translator) and Fu Qiong, the head of the foreign affairs office at the institute. Also a Chinese friend, Lu Yulin, who had stayed in our home, was there to greet us. We were toured around Beijing for five days, including a trip to the Great Wall. We had dinner one evening in the home of Zhang Yan and Pei Yusen, who had spent a year as visiting scholars at our college in Pennsylvania.

We then flew to Jilin. The first day we were taken on a tour of the city and in the evening were welcomed at a dinner hosted by the president of the institute. He did not speak English but conversed with us extensively through translators. Four vice presidents were there, two of whom spoke English well (both having spent more than a year as visiting faculty at U.S. universities).

It had not been clear as to the motivation of the Chinese for having us there. In his conversation and a typical Chinese welcoming speech, the president was quite clear on this subject. They were desirous of advancing and developing their students' English capabilities in

every way possible--speaking, reading, writing and especially listening. They were also interested in American culture, living standards and life styles.

## CLASS SCHEDULES

The scheduling of classes was not begun until the students were on campus. As decisions were made, classes would commence. It was four weeks before the last class began. Since they were smaller and less complicated, the graduate classes were the first to begin.

In order to be admitted to a university, Chinese students must place at some minimum level in *national* entrance exams similar to our SAT or ACT exams. Entrance opportunities are limited and very competitive. About three percent of high school graduates attend colleges or universities. A part of the *national* entrance exam is a foreign language competency component. It requires four to six years of study to be adequately prepared. Most study English (probably about 80%) with Japanese the next most common and then Russian. Other possibilities are German, French or Spanish. However, most high schools are likely to teach English and possibly either Japanese or Russian. Once admitted, the undergraduates are required to take two years of their primary language and then a third year which they call technical English (Japanese or Russian). The intent appeared to be to translate technical material from the foreign language into Chinese. They were also required to study a second foreign language for a year. This, it appeared, was usually done in the junior year concurrent with the technical English course.

I was assigned to teach two junior-year undergraduate classes: Control Systems in the Thermal Power Department and Power Systems in the Electrical Power Systems Department. The students had taken these courses previously in Chinese. Those assigned to my classes were the most advanced in their English proficiency. Later I would learn that the classes I taught were in lieu of the technical English classes.

Although quite proficient in reading, writing and even speaking English, the majority had difficulty understanding me. Most had studied English six to eight years, but with one or two exceptions none had ever had a native English-speaking teacher. There were about forty students in each class. To compound their difficulty most of their materials in language labs were prepared by speakers from England or Australia, and many tried to listen to the BBC radio broadcasts. My "American" English was clearly different. They were, however, very excited about learning English and in having a foreign teacher. Within a month the majority were understanding the essential idea of any topic. I did try to control the vocabulary I used. By the end of the year only one or two were not able to understand. I gave exams that were 50% or more oral, that is, they would give a written response to my oral questions or statements.

My wife's assignment, as far as the undergraduates were concerned, was with the faculty. There were twenty-seven faculty who taught English at the institute. My wife had a seminar with half of them one week and the other half the next week. Their questions might range from grammar to U.S. history. They seemed, however, to be most often curious about American mores and attitudes.

## Graduate Department Teaching Assignments

It was not obvious to us at first, but as the year proceeded, we were able to discern that the primary motivation for our being there was dictated by requirements of the graduate program. During the first year they had two concurrent English courses--one a grammar and writing review with a Chinese instructor and the other an oral English course with a *native* English speaker. This class was my wife's assignment. She and the associate dean of the graduate department tested all the new incoming graduate students and placed them in two groups according to their English proficiency. They also were required to take a half-year review of

their second foreign language, developing a minimal reading capability. Completion of these foreign languages was an absolute requirement of the program. They were required to translate the abstract of their thesis into their primary foreign language.

My initial teaching assignment was a second-year class of graduate students whose major was electrical power systems. There were about eighteen in the class. Most had worked in the electrical power industry for three or four years, although several had come directly from their undergraduate studies into graduate school. They were typically about twenty-five years of age and an equal number of men and women.

A fourth course was entitled English for Young Faculty (the definition of young faculty was whoever wanted to attend). This class was divided into two sections. The first was those who understood English; the second was those who wanted to.

The decisions about the graduate courses were made early and classes began within the first week. The remaining courses were announced to us piecemeal and over an agonizing four-week period. The same agonizing and protracted procedure was pursued at the commencement of the second term in February.

During this first month we were learning about the Chinese "system." We were never quite able to accept and adjust to their way of interacting and reacting with others.

We developed close relationships with many of our students and some of the faculty. They came to our apartment often, sometimes too often. Some were at our apartment frequently, so frequently that we felt they were infringing on our privacy.

## **Flashback**

In 1987 several faculty at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown received a grant to "internationalize the curriculum." Other members of the faculty were encouraged to participate by developing specific courses. I developed and subsequently taught a course entitled "International Engineering Projects." Its objective was to introduce the students to the requirements and concerns when undertaking a major construction project in another country, using equipment manufactured in various countries, consulting engineering and management services from firms in different countries and finally construction personnel from perhaps a dozen different countries.

Electrical power plant construction was selected because of the variety of equipment and engineering requirements and the interaction required between civil, electrical and mechanical engineers. I visited with colleagues at the General Electric Co. in Schenectady, NY and enlisted their help in selecting three specific projects and providing detailed information about their conception, design, development, construction and start-up. The three projects selected were a three-unit gas turbine power plant in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, on the Red Sea; a power plant installation and power system integration project in Peru; and a new gas turbine power plant in Daqing, China, a new city on the southern edge of Siberia where oil had been discovered. Each of these had many unique features--one on the Arabian Desert, the next at 12,000 feet in the Andes mountains and finally on the tundra of northern Asia.

## **The First Class**

During the initial meeting with the graduate students in the power systems class in Jilin I took some time to introduce myself to them, then asked that they do the same. I asked that they tell me where their home was, where they had obtained their undergraduate education and their subsequent working experience and location. I thought this would help me begin to assess their English capabilities. They were progressing around the room when a young lady, Miss Teng

Guobo, was concluding her introduction with "I have been a supervisory equipment and control systems engineer at a thermal power plant in Daqing City, Heilongjiang Province." I said, "Really?" and then asked about the G.E. gas turbine power plant. She said she was familiar with it. I said, "I need to see that thing."

### **An Excursion into Siberia**

In November Miss Teng came to our apartment to tell us that one of her friends in Daqing was to be married and invited us to attend with her. As we boarded the train at Jilin, with the help of others we had seats; however there are usually more people standing than seated on Chinese trains. In Heilongjiang's capital city of Harbin, we changed trains. We barely got past the vestibule but not actually into the seating area and there we stood for the trip from Harbin to Daqing, packed like pickles in a jar. About halfway there my wife was given a window ledge to sit on. Passengers and train personnel were constantly crowding past.

The only train experience more challenging than this was returning from our Yangtze River excursion during the Spring Festival or New Year holiday in January. When we arrived in Beijing on the return trip, the only accommodations available were the three-tiered hard-sleeper cars. The window by my wife's head was held open about two inches by ice from condensation that had earlier run down the window and frozen it permanently open. Frigid air blasted into our compartment all night. We arrived back in Jilin very ill and would be for the next month.

We arrived in Daqing just at dusk where Miss Teng encountered her friend. They greeted one another with squeals of joy. We walked twenty or thirty minutes to where we caught a bus. It was the longest, coldest walk of our lives into a blistering, below-freezing wind. We were finally stuffed into a packed bus for the ride to a "company hotel" similar to the one we lived in in Jilin but with no Western-style apartments or accommodations.

The next day we were immersed in all of the day-long activities of the wedding, from watching the bride have her makeup applied and being dressed, to the picture-taking and finally the feasts, speeches and fireworks at the restaurant. We were even invited to speak.

The following day I toured power plants, a thermal facility with four or five units between 50-100 mw each and the 20 mw G.E. gas turbine. Most of the equipment was Russian-made.

### **CONCLUSION**

We are addicted China-watchers and have read many books about her. Some are listed in the References [2-6]. The attempt here was to give a flavor of what living with and enduring China is like. We wanted to experience it first-hand and did. We fell in love with our students and the Chinese people in general, even though officialdom and bureaucracy are often maddening to deal with. We wanted to see, feel, smell and taste it ourselves. We did. We found the stories and accounts of others to be accurate, but it was special to know the ecstasy and agony in a personal way. Obviously there were enough adventures to fill a book--Mrs. Hales' five days in the hospital in Hong Kong, our trip up the Yangtze River and back through the Three Gorges in a snowstorm, my week with a family on their farm near Mishan, forty miles from the Russian border.

Now that the computer and internet are sweeping into the Chinese business culture, we receive almost every week messages such as:

"Hello to Mr. and Mrs. Hales. We are Wang Dan and Wang Heifang. Do you remember us? We want to share our happy news. We married on June 1. We found your e-mail address on Yahoo," and

"Dear Mr Hales: This is Tang Yong. Still remember me? Time flows by like a river, doesn't [sic] it? How are you doing now? I'm now applying for some postgraduate courses/research abroad. Would you please recommend [sic] me some universities in United States? What about your university? My E-mail address is: tynt97@public.zz.hy.cn. My new corresponding address is: Ms Luo Xiangchun, Office of Retired Staffs, Zhengzhou Engineering Machinery Manufactory, Zhengzhou City 450007, Henan Province, P.R. China. In fact this is my mother's address. Thank you for your help and say hello to Ms Hales!"

## SUMMARY

China is obviously making dramatic and rapid changes economically, but we sensed more subtle and probably more important changes among people; their world view has been enriched and broadened just in the few years since we were first there in 1989.

The commitment to learning foreign languages, especially English, is impressive. It is not a small step from Chinese to Western languages.

The decision to adopt a free-enterprise economic system has forced them to come face-to-face with the concept of freedom for each individual. The years before we went to the institute, upon graduation students were assigned to the location where they would work. Subsequently they have been able to consider various possibilities and participate in an interview process. It is no longer a given that they will work in a power plant or in a power distribution and/or control center. Some have found positions in private companies and even with foreign corporations. Two of my undergraduate students who were in the computer science department now work for a bank in southern China.

Young talented individuals with very different attitudes from those of the past are assuming responsible and key positions in all parts of China. We remain not only hopeful but optimistic about their future and ours.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Brigham Young University for their assistance, seminars, financial aid and encouragement, and the China Studies Faculty Travel program of the University of Pittsburgh for their travel grant.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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