

THE 'JING AND I

I SAY HELLO, THEY SAY GOODBYE

by George Ding

When I first came to Beijing four years ago, I thought I had stepped into an alternate universe. At the end of my first interview, when my supervisor was going over the contract, I could only focus on one thing: "You're going to pay me this much to speak English?"

No one in their right mind would have offered me this starting salary in the States, and certainly not for such little work. I was fresh from film school with no marketable skills. I had come to Beijing on a lark and the plan was to find a short-term job so no one could say I was afraid of the real world when I eventually retreated to graduate school. That's how I found myself being offered an American salary in a land of Chinese prices.

But the financial irregularities didn't end at my salary.

"This entire meal is eight dollars? And there's no such thing as tipping?!"

Life suddenly seemed full of possibilities. I felt like Cortez being led to Tenochtitlan – it was almost too easy, and I could hardly believe my dumb luck. I forgot all about grad school. I went back to the States, but when I returned to Beijing a month later, it was on a one-way ticket.

This isn't to say that everything was rainbows and butterflies in late 2007. Back then, I was living in Wudaokou. The traffic was just as bad and the weather was arguably worse. The subway only had three lines. There was no U-Center. The railroad crossing next to the subway station was an unpaved rut and the station attendant had to lower a primitive lever to prevent pedestrians

from running across the tracks when the train approached.

But it was also a Periclean golden age of sorts: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were freely accessible; pre-Olympic signs reminded Beijingers to queue properly and smile more; the skies, powdered with silver iodide and clear of any factory smoke, blazed an infinite blue.

It might be hard for newcomers to imagine what Beijing was like pre-Olympics, just like it's hard for me to imagine what the city was like for those who came around the millennium.

"YOU'RE GOING TO PAY ME THIS MUCH TO SPEAK ENGLISH?"

That's what thrilled me about Beijing – its mutability, its frenetic pace. I spent money as I got it. I refused to make plans. My company asked for a three-year commitment but I refused to be tied down. I believed that in a year or so I'd be back in America, ensconced in books, writing and reminiscing about my brief affair with Beijing.

Then my friends started leaving, and I was still here. Some had finished their year abroad, some missed home too much, and for others, it was just "time for something new." There seemed to be a going-away party every week.

I remember standing on a rooftop bar in early 2009, looking out at the new skyline of Sanlitun – the angular façade of The Village, the concrete ribcage that was to become Sanlitun Soho. I was at a farewell party for one of my closest friends. We

had only known each other a year, but the pace of the city which had made us such fast friends was now pulling us apart. Somewhere between the second and third round of drinks, I had turned sullen with the realization that soon I wouldn't know anyone in this city. The city's mutability, which had once inspired, now terrified me.

Toward the end of the night, as we edged our way toward a final goodbye, she asked, "So when are you leaving?"

It shouldn't have been a tough question to answer. ("In a year or two." "When they kick me out." "Never!")

But all I could muster was that I didn't know. The truth was I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else; somehow that had become a fact without me even knowing it. I was attached to the freedom and insouciance of living here, to my apartment which felt more and more like a home, to my job and the students I taught.

I've said goodbye to many more friends since and watched many more buildings rise and fall. I've seen a restaurant become a clothing boutique only to become a restaurant again, and my lifestyle has swung between going to Propaganda four nights a week and being in bed by ten. My real-world experience now includes movie producer's assistant, motivational speaker, and TV host for a show that never aired.

That night, as I looked out at the lights of Sanlitun, I realized that I was not just passing through. I couldn't say goodbye to this city because I had fallen completely, utterly and fatally in love with it.

