

Maps

By Erik Anderson

On a stifling September afternoon in North Carolina I sat in a crowded lecture hall, having returned from eight weeks in Beijing. The class, International Relations – Global Politics, was taught by Peter Feaver, an advisor to former President Clinton and President Bush. The topic for the day's lecture was the hierarchy of a governing body's obligations. "The base of the pyramid is security," Feaver said. "If a country is not secure, it is difficult to focus on education, health care, or even economics."

"Jacob Wood," he called out to a random student, "If China becomes the world's strongest economy is war an option?" Jacob Wood gave a vague answer about the ethics of pre-emptive war and our global responsibilities, in short, a, "maybe?"

"Well," Professor Feaver challenged, "did you know that aside from the United States during World War Two, no second largest economy in the modern world has ever overtaken the largest without a war?" Neither Jacob Wood nor I knew that.

"In fact," the professor continued, "analysts predict that a war with China is likely within the next 10 to 15 years." A blanket of confused undergraduate concern fell over the lecture hall. An eager freshman drew a careful circle around the word, "China," extended an arrow, and wrote, "War likely - 10-15 years."

I considered her note. "China" is a buzzword in the news, and to many of us it is just a word that can be circled on a piece of paper. This word steals our jobs, paints toys with poison, and belches smog over what would be a crystal clear day in Los Angeles. The word could be more powerful than "America," and one Duke University professor believes we will go to war with it.

I thought back to an afternoon on the 11th floor of Capital Normal University in Beijing. My classroom offered an impressive view of the sprawling metropolis, the smog, the traffic, the fruit vendors, the bicycles, and the buildings that shot up and were torn down so fast it seemed God was playing Whack-A-Mole.

One afternoon in particular I was studying with my Mandarin language partner, Wangli. She was 23 and has since graduated with a teaching degree. She had a kind face and stood a few inches taller than me. Her stylish t-shirts often contained a combination of Mickey Mouse,

gaffes (“Independent Mickey Rock N’ Roll Rebel!”), and sometimes the Eiffel tower, but given the number of equally nonsensical Chinese tattoos in America I couldn’t judge.

We’d just finished discussing a lesson titled “Traditional or One-Time-Use Chopsticks” - a metaphor for China’s leap into modernity. After the lesson she asked me where I’m from in America. I asked her if she knew New Hampshire, but quickly recognized how absurd a question this was. I remembered that I couldn’t accurately place Beijing on a map, let alone name the smaller Chinese provinces. Besides, many of my friends don’t even know whether my home state is next to New York or Maine.

She justifiably didn’t recognize New Hampshire, so I quickly sketched a map of the world. I drew a rough rooster (China) pecking at a worm (Japan), then Russia, Africa, a misshapen Europe, and the Americas. To show where my grandfather came from I drew an arrow starting in Stockholm and ending in a circle around New England. “Oh,” she said, “Bo Shi Dun!”

“Boston,” I said. “Close enough.”

“Ni de jia zai Bo-Shi-Dun ne?” *You live in Boston then?*

People often don’t realize that my state is not a hub of Boston, a twin of Vermont, or a stop on the way to Maine. This frustrates me, but given my difficulty explaining this to Southerners, I refrained from going into greater detail with a girl whose family has lived in the same place since the Ming Dynasty.

“Dui, Bo Shi Dun.” *Right, Boston.*

Unlike my blurred genealogy, Wangli’s family is simply Chinese. As far as she knew, there wasn’t a drop of foreign blood in her gene pool, and she was proud to say her family had lived in the Beijing vicinity for centuries. On a digital camera, she showed me her family, two dogs, friends, dorm, and cafeteria. Then I showed her pictures of my life in America. Lost in nostalgia I showed her my high school, hometown, and albums full of images at which she could only smile and nod.

Over the next six weeks I learned about Wangli’s life via broken Chinese and a great deal of charades. She told me about her favorite actors, boys she likes, and what I need to eat to grow taller. What I will remember most was something she said to me that afternoon looking at maps. She said that she suspects I will travel a great deal in life. My roots will always be in Bo Shi Dun (close enough), but if I want to I can also be a part of China. Some of that may have

been confused in translation, but I believe she was inviting me into her world despite the fact that I will never be Chinese.

So, looking at the freshman's notes, I had to stifle a laugh. It is not that I thought war is funny or that I don't believe Professor Feaver, but I found it comical to imagine that the 23-year-old geography graduate, or any other Chinese person I met, is my enemy.

If a nation is thought of as a collection of its people it is difficult to simply circle the name and draw an arrow to war. With this concept comes a sense of responsibility. If my notion of China evolved from a word, to a place, and finally into people then conversely, I am responsible for what foreigners think of America. To at least one Chinese girl, I am America. I returned to China in February and I would urge anyone to consider the 1.3 billion people instead of the one China.