

Your Neighbor

School board trustee visits native land for working va

BY IFAY CEANG
SPECIAL TO THE SOMERS RECORD

As a Chinese-American living in New York State for over 40 years, I have always had an itch to visit China whenever I could.

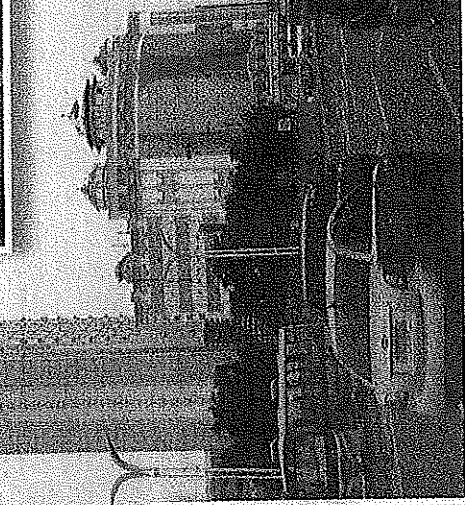
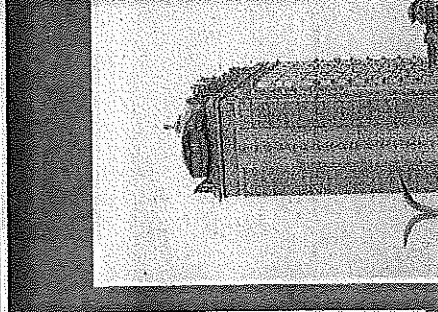
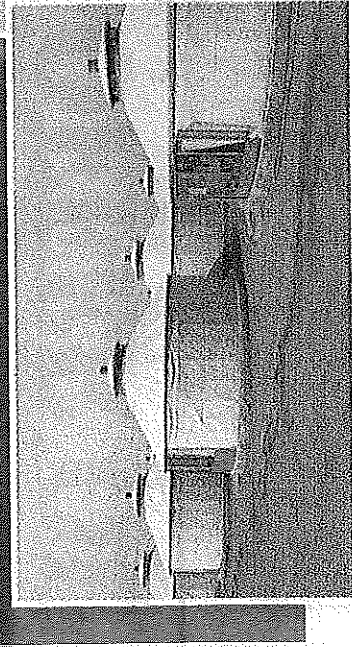
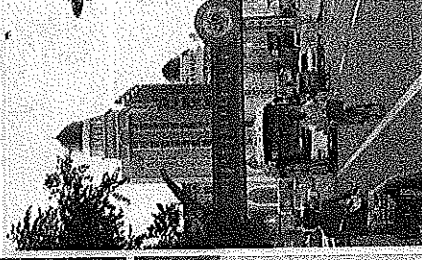
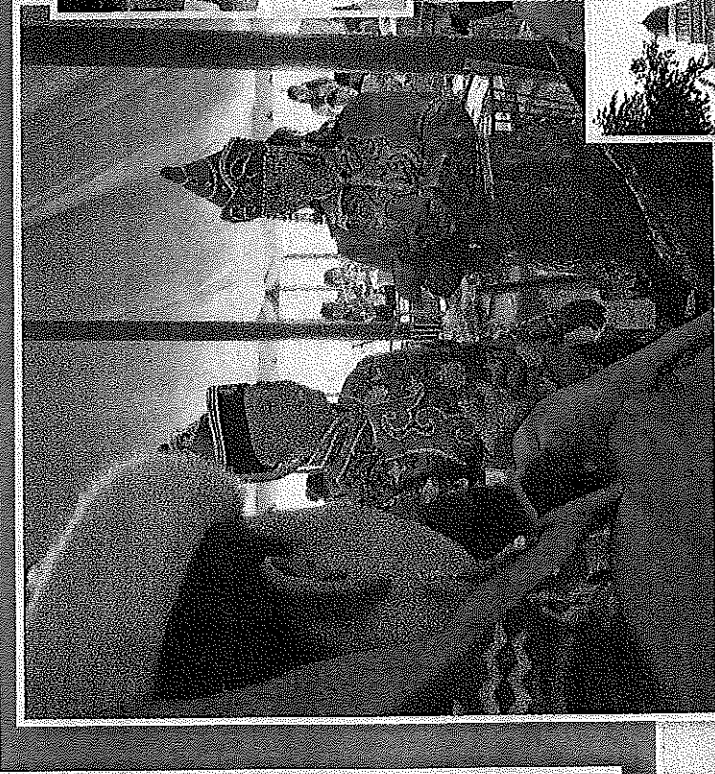
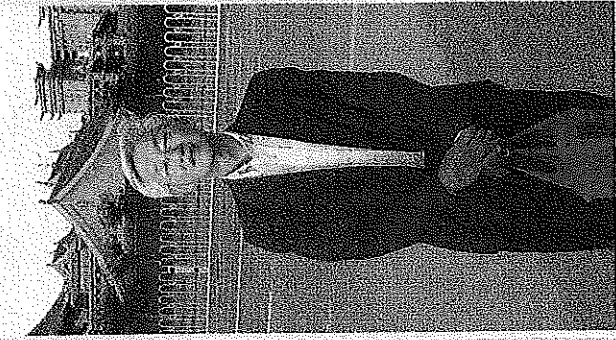
This summer, I had an opportunity to join a volunteer group spending one month in China teaching English. Our hosts provided accommodation and meals, and our responsibility was to teach English to Chinese children. We were expected to speak American English with an American accent, which apparently the Chinese very much prefer. Luckily, I was not discriminated against - despite being a first generation immigrant - among my fellow volunteers, who are all young native speaking American or Canadian college students or fresh graduates.

The group first arrived in Beijing from North America and then got assigned to different parts of China after a few days of orientation and sightseeing (Palace, Great Wall, shopping...). I skipped the orientation due to my commitment to an important school board meeting in Somers, but got there in time to be assigned as an English teacher.

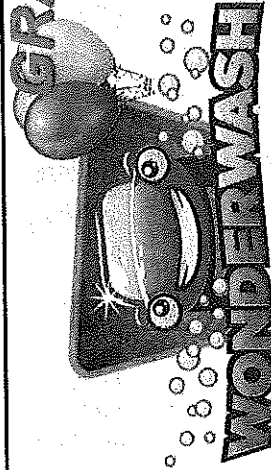
Although I was born in China's Chongqing City, and left when I was 4 years old, to my great surprise, my colleague Mark and I were assigned to teach at Hohhot, a city in Inner Mongolia instead of a Beijing suburb. My knowledge of Inner Mongolia was limited to the textbook I studied in elementary school. Mark, a man of Russian descent who came to the U.S. as a baby, quickly enriched our knowledge using his Google skills throughout our stay. Later, with my help, he began to use Baidu, the most popular search engine in China.

Inner Mongolia is sort of just outside of Beijing beyond the Great Wall, geographically speak-

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ing. However, it is a province of 457,000 square miles, 12 percent of China's land area (New York is 54,556 square miles) and shaped like a long jagged and crooked Chinese egg plant buffering between Mongolia and the rest of China (curved around the southern Mongolian border, some historians say that right after the Allies won World War II, the Mongolia and Inner Mongolia border was created artistically by Stalin and Churchill with Roosevelt looking on; but that was history).

Our 10-hour night-train from Beijing to Hohhot gave us a proper perspective of the vast size of Inner Mongolia and our host's spontaneously organized teaching schedules gave us a realistic definition of a Chinese weekend, that sort of squashed Mark's initial desire to spend weekends visiting Xiann (known for Terracotta Army in Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum), Shanghai (most populated city in the world) and even Chengdu (near Chongqing, where I was born). Although our teaching loads were relatively light, they covered six days in a week plus lots of lunch and dinner meetings. We really couldn't complain since the wining and dining got better and better as we became more acquainted. By default, we decided we would just settle in Hohhot and experience a month of summer teaching in Inner Mongolia.

Hohhot is the capital city of Inner Mongolia, with about 2.9 million people. The city has an elevation of 3,500 feet, with very dry weather and lots of blue sky, hence the nickname Blue City. The people in Hohhot are simple, content and peaceful, which may have something to do with their good economy due to land rich with energy and mineral resources.

We were staying in a small hotel with a computer and Internet in the room and the hotel was within walking distance to the tutoring school. Although the school facilities were far below the New York State public school standard, the children were very disciplined, if not very eager to learn. The fact that some of them enrolled for six hours per day and five days a week to study math, science and English during summer was amazing. Asked why they committed to so much time in the summer, their answer: "I will be ahead of my class next year."

My students, who were middle school age, were definitely handicapped by the way their regular school English teachers taught them. Poor pronunciation and poor understanding of sentence structure hampered their ability to converse or write in sentences even though their vocabulary was

adequate. I did a lot of storytelling to train their listening skills and made them act in roles to practice speaking. Mark taught younger grades and we even taught kindergarten and pre-K kids at some weekend schools, but they really wanted to have native American speaking teachers to start the young ones right. I was told by one principal, who runs a weekend English school of 1,500 children in downtown Hohhot, the demand for American English teachers is

so great in China that both full-time and part-time salaries are far above the Chinese native teachers, who are reasonably paid. It is no wonder why one American in our group had accepted a full-time teaching job starting this fall. We were also asked to come back and to tap our American friends to consider their teaching posts.

We went on a weekend grass-land tour, which is a must for tourists.

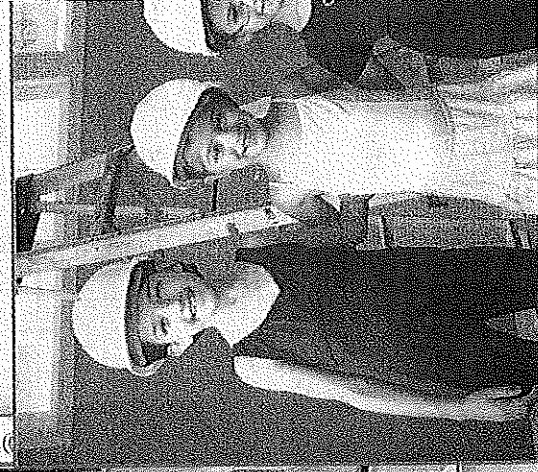
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ists; but one word of advice – there are so many tours available, you should really research them, never take the cheapest and be aware of the hidden charges when you arrive at the grassland. We had heard so much about grassland experiences. Riding in the grass waves is comparable to surfing in the ocean waves.

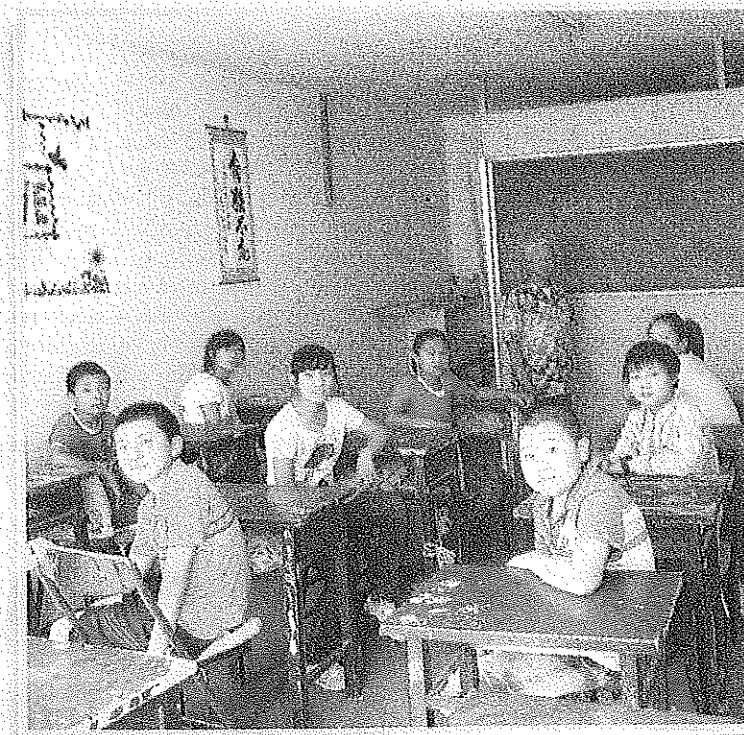
Unfortunately, our two-day \$50

tour was hastily chosen, and we were destined to a somewhat dried grassland. Unluckily, it rained a day. I got up 4 a.m. from my ger or yurt to watch the sun rise from the mountain, but instead it was dark and cloudy, eventually turning into a pouring rain, which rarely happened in Hohhot. Nevertheless, it was still a grassland experience, we saw Mongolian style wrestling and a horse riding contest. We also witnessed a Mongolian wedding performed by tourists.

The city is quite charming from an architecture and décor point of view. The Mongolian ger-based structures (circular portable structures with a wooden accordion frame) are mixed with Tibetan and Chinese influences. Muslim building features are very prominent in the 'old city' of Hohhot. It would take an expert to distinguish between the detailed differences in various building structures and their decorations.

During our stay, the city was celebrating a cultural event called Zhao Jun Cultural Festival. Wang Zhao Jun was known as one of the four beauties of ancient China. She was offered to marry Mongolian Emperor Huhanye by the Han Emperor to keep peace between them. She survived Huhanye's death and by Mongolian custom remarried the next emperor, Huhanye's oldest son. The peace was kept for 60 years between the Mongolian and Han Dynasty.

Today, in Inner Mongolia, there are about 80 percent Hans and 17 percent Mongols, whereas in Hohhot, the Mongol population is less than 10 percent. During the festival, there were a large number of vendors gathered at Da Zhao, a place in the middle of the 'old city.' We were lucky to be able to buy some souvenirs with reasonable prices, such as a leather wine pouch, decorative dagger and a camper's multifunction toolset. What we did not buy – but other tourists might go crazy for – were all sorts of jewelry and stones offered by hundreds of vendors all lined up on a winding street surrounding a big temple area. Obvi-



ously, there is enough foot traffic to attract hundreds of vendors offering similar categories of goods at one place. This reminds me of Hong Kong's jewelry stores, which also seem to be doing business the same way.

One month seemed to be a long time, but it did not seem to be long enough for us to learn everything about Hohhot. We had plenty of interesting and delicious food, complimentary from our host, but we were in no way near exhausting the varieties of food at such reasonable prices. Mark especially marveled about the quality and price of local beer in Inner Mongolia. His favored brand is "snow deer," which costs 60 cents

for a regular wine bottle serving. My favorite food was a yellow skinned honey-dew like fruit. It is juicy and sweet, and perfect for the summer.

Everything has an end. Now I am back in New York, missing those melons.

My TV screen shows the stock market tanking and economic recovery not in sight. I wonder, perhaps, if my Hohhot experience is a good investment ... I heard them say: 'We don't want British. We don't want Europeans. We just love the Americans!'

Ifay Chang is a member of the Somers Central School District Board of Education.

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