

WTE column of Jan 28, 2013. Editor's headline: "A visit likely to be marred by pollution"

It was in Nashville in 1998 that I first met Qi (pronounced "Chee" as in "t'ai chi") Deng. In the U.S. on a ten-year visa, Qi was finishing graduate studies in business and accounting while TA-teaching at Tennessee State University. She's the age of my youngest son. I would become her "American mom."

I'd arrived in Tennessee with a master's in English. When I met Qi, I had accepted a position as lecturer at TSU but had not finished doctoral work, which meant I was paying tuition. Qi had advertised subletting a room in her apartment.

When I rang her doorbell she was apologetic, saying another woman had stopped by earlier to become her new roomie. A huge living room with no furniture whatsoever was where we chatted.

"What do you use this for?" I asked.

"Nothing," she answered. "I'm never home."

"Would you sublet it to me?" I owned no furniture to speak of, having left California with what fit into my Toyota Camry stationwagon: a suitcase and a few boxes of clothes; my guitar; a McIntosh computer. Previously I'd rented a succession of furnished rooms in Murfreesboro. But I was coming up in the world—or so I thought.

Suffering as I did from recurring back pains, a side effect of the stress of doctoral studies, I used a floor mat for sleeping. In her cavernous living room I proposed to rig up a curtain that would conceal my bedroll during the day, along with my boxes of clothing. When the other roommate agreed to the arrangement, I moved from Murfreesboro into Qi's living room, teaching at TSU and concluding doctoral studies at MTSU. The following year I migrated to a teaching job at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, SD, but returned to Nashville a year later.

By then Qi had finished her studies and found employment with an international trading firm that allowed (and paid for) one university course per semester. Qi enrolled at MTSU for one course, intending to qualify for a student visa when and if she lost her job. As anticipated, her company was acquired and revamped. Qi was booted out. She enrolled fulltime at MTSU and I helped her move to Murfreesboro, a town I knew well.

A while later she was hired by Gibson Guitars in Nashville, who wanted to send her to their China plant. First, however, she needed to work in their Nashville offices for a few months. By then I owned a house and Qi rented from me. When it came time for her China assignment, we put her belongings into storage, including her automobile, which I periodically took out for a spin so the battery wouldn't run

down. Once I took it for annual smog-control check and re-registration; another time I had a flat tire repaired.

Qi remained in China for eighteen months, then returned to Nashville. Unable to attain the hoped-for green card, when her job at Gibson ended, she moved to California on my advice. There she attained her CPA license and began working for an accounting firm.

One time her parents came to visit. Qi couldn't get free until evening and, since I was visiting nearby, I picked them up at San Francisco airport in my son's humongous SUV. This was a good thing, for they arrived with loads of luggage, planning to stay for six months or more. On my son's couches they crashed and fell into sound slumber.

When Qi's California job terminated she wanted to remain in the U.S., so she applied for and was accepted into yet another graduate program, this one in Southern Illinois. By then I lived in Cheyenne, had invested in a wheat farm, and acquired a home (with the financial help of a son). I flew to California to help my friend drive to her new destination. En route we stayed in my home for a week. Qi wanted to visit Colorado, specifically, the town of Aspen; I was eager to acquaint her with the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone Park. In the end we did both, overnighing wit travel-club members whenever we could.

The visit to Tetons and Yellowstone was most memorable, as I knew it would be. We hiked around Jenny Lake to Inspiration Point, crossed breathtaking waterfalls, gawked at geysers. Qi was enthralled, exclaiming over and over how she never knew such beauty existed.

The following year I visited Qi in Southern Illinois. Disenchanted with her academic program, she felt exploited and disillusioned, sentiments I knew all too well. Her ten years were up and she'd been unsuccessful in the "lotto," which allows some few individuals to extend their visas.

"Ten years of my life I've given America," she said. "What do I have to show for it?" Her car, her one possession of value, would have to be sold.

Qi resigned herself to having to return to China where job prospects, she confided, weren't good. Highly educated women often have to contend with below-par pay, especially if they're unattached, she said.

But she was lucky. After extensive searches she found employment with a large accounting firm in Beijing. She describes her job as "very good." Already her company has sent her to Amsterdam for an annual meeting. Next year she'll extend her Amsterdam stay to visit my namesake cousin in Germany, whom she met when Edith visited in Nashville. My cousin plans to take Qi on an auto tour to visit her son's family in Switzerland.

Qi looks forward to welcoming me in her one-bedroom apartment, where her parents also reside. “We can share my bed,” she tells me. “My parents sleep in the living room.”

We’ve shared sleeping arrangements before, Qi’s head at my feet. It’s the Chinese way. Cramped quarters I don’t mind—but Beijing’s notorious pollution? When the city hosted the Olympics, all its factories were ordered shut down. For a few weeks, long-lost blue skies reappeared. That’s not likely to happen for my visit.