

China Images

by *Nancy Pine*

Volume 3, Number 1

January 2006

Angst in Shaanxi Province

Standing on the heat-drenched village road, the choices before me were impossible. Jia Zhenhua, earnestness etched in every line of his face, had just explained that my husband, Jerry, and I were to go to his school. He pointed down the lane, "The car is waiting." "My family invites you to visit them after you visit my school. Then you will go to the Tang tombs—for no charge." He seemed to assume that we could go with him for many hours, but it was 1 p.m.. I was shocked. That was not the plan that his mentor, An Wei [Ahn Way], had made with me. I leaned into the implication of his words as my inner voice shouted that if we traveled to his school I would be hours late to the banquet I was giving in Xi'an that evening to honor my Chinese colleagues. We were supposed to visit Jia Zhenhua's school with An Wei on the way back to Xi'an [Shee Ahn]. But An Wei had disappeared an hour ago and it seemed that if Jerry and I didn't go I would somehow be forsaking Jia Zhenhua [Jee-ah Jen-hoo-ah]. I did not understand where the plans had evaporated, and I certainly didn't understand the concept "loss of face," but I sensed we were in the midst of it. Somehow we had to extract ourselves from this quagmire.

I had met Jia Zhenhua, whom I know by his English name, David, while teaching teachers in An Shang village last year. As lead teacher for the project, he worked hard to make the others' village stay successful, and he worked hard at improving his English pronunciation. He gave extra time to

answer my incessant questions about elementary school education and he patiently taught us American teachers complex dance steps and carried out endless communications between the Chinese teachers and the project directors. When I returned to Los Angeles, he sent emails about how much he appreciated my teaching and my model of being an adult learner. We also emailed about Jerry and me going to his school during an autumn trip to Xi'an, and we had made some tentative plans. But then An Wei, David's respected mentor and a director of the English teaching project, invited us to An Shang village to see its newly finished school. We accepted this gracious invitation, and I told An Wei I was concerned about the possible conflict with David's invitation since we had to be in Xi'an the same night. An Wei responded that he had talked with David, and "on our way back to Xi'an we could visit David's school and the tombs." What I didn't know was that later, after I had left for China, David had sent a final email to my U.S. address with quite different plans—he would pick us up in the village, we would go to his school and the tombs, and we would stay overnight in his town, returning to Xi'an the next day. I did not receive that email until I returned to Los Angeles. And I never have unraveled how that plan could have been made in relation to my communications with An Wei.

When Jerry and I reached Xi'an in September during our family vacation with

my sisters, we were on a tight schedule. While my sisters went to the terracotta warriors, we would go to the village with An Wei, whom I had known for several years. We'd return to Xi'an in time for my banquet and the next day Jerry, my sisters, and I would fly to southern China.

An Wei picked up Jerry, me and three other alumni of the Global Volunteers at 8 a.m. for our trip to An Shang, an hour and a half away. All the way to the village we chatted about our China experiences and the passing scenes with the two other Americans—Kathy, a lawyer, and Fred, a retired air force pilot who had taught English in Xi'an—plus "Ellen," a Chinese volunteer. An Wei, in the front of the van, talked on his cell phone and interjected occasional sociological comments for us.

As we pulled into the village the new, three-story school built by U.S. and Chinese volunteers shone in the morning brightness, so different from a year ago when it was a grey unfinished hulk halted by the SARS epidemic. The school flag fluttered against a cornflower blue sky, its doves symbolizing the children flying off to bring peace to the world. Much to my surprise, David came walking across the schoolyard, greeted me enthusiastically, and introduced his principal's son. Why was he in An Shang I wondered? Weren't we going to his town later? But I remained polite and didn't ask the question. Maybe An Wei had arranged for David to come to the village instead of us going to his town since it was fairly out of the way.

We began a leisurely morning—disastrously leisurely it turned out. We talked with teachers, took photos, and enjoyed An Wei's descriptions of other volunteer projects. He pointed out Kathy in photos of the first lawyer seminar as she discussed legal issues with Chinese counterparts. Fred tried out his considerable Chinese on the school principal. As we

headed for the home of An Wei's brother, An Ke Jiang, he began encouraging us to move more quickly. "Why the haste?" I puzzled to myself. Perhaps lunch was waiting. But we continued to mosey along, admiring the many accomplishments—newly paved lanes, bean plants climbing each cornstalk, the red peppers and golden grain spread to dry along the road in neat rectangles. Enthusiastic greetings met us as we entered An Ke Jiang's home where I had stayed last year and where lunch was waiting. It was wonderful to re-savor the hospitality. In the kitchen I shook hands with the cooks, admired the steaming bowls of food, and introduced Jerry, while the others said their hellos.

Over a delicious lunch of vegetables, bean curd, soup and much more, Kathy, Fred, Ellen, Jerry and I conversed about China and our various experiences. An Wei had vanished to talk with some teachers; David joined us briefly then left to answer his phone. At one point David returned and beckoned Ellen into the hallway where they chatted, and later during a lull in the conversation she had leaned across the table to me and said quietly, "David's family is inviting you to visit his home." It seemed a strange comment since I assumed David had come to the village to meet us. Besides An Wei had told me we'd go to David's school on our return trip to Xi'an. There certainly would not be time for a polite visit to someone's home during such a quick trip. So I said that was very kind but we would not be able to go. We had to be back in Xi'an by 5 p.m..

As lunch ended David seemed to have disappeared, and we decided we had been left on our own for awhile. Everyone seemed relaxed, and we made plans to walk around the village until An Wei reappeared. In the courtyard we took photos of An Ke Jiang and his family, said our good-byes, and stepped out onto the road where I was

startled to discover David was waiting to take us to his town.

David and I stood on the dusty lane, red peppers and grain drying at our feet. He was saying again that Jerry and I were going to his school, his home and the Tang tombs, while I knew we were going with An Wei to visit David's school on our return to Xi'an. With all the sincerity and clarity at my command, and unwittingly relying on my senior status as a teacher of teachers, I responded to David's insistence, "It's not possible. I appreciate your invitation, but we have no time to make a new trip so late in the day." An Wei was nowhere around. We were on our own to solve this. David shifted, looking at me directly, "Yes, yes. I know. After you go to my school and the Tang tombs, we'll send you back to Xi'an in a car." I was startled he didn't give ground. He listened to my reasons, and then would say, "I'm sorry it will be inconvenient, but..." Back and forth we went. His tone, the silences between words, and his gestures communicated we had to go with him. I'm not sure how he did that, but it was obvious once I tried to say "No" that that wasn't going to work. Somewhere my mind was screaming, how could this misunderstanding be happening?

I began to acquiesce—negotiating and knowing I might miss the banquet I was hosting. No alternative seemed possible. I asked how far his town, Qianxian [Chee-ahn Shee-ahn], was from the village. About one hour or a little more. How much more? Maybe 15 minutes or so. How far from his town to Xi'an? About an hour or so. The numbers weren't adding up. I knew each estimate needed more added—especially the Xi'an run since I calculated David had not recently driven in Xi'an rush hour traffic. Like everything else in China, it is increasing exponentially. I reasoned with him about time, trying each time to explain

that I was giving a banquet at 6 p.m., moving it up 30 minutes to hedge my bets. I needed to be back at 5 p.m., without fail, to order the banquet food. Back and forth we went. Jerry was standing on the edge, incredulous at this conversation. At one point he stepped in and said to me, almost pleadingly, "It's just impossible. You will end up having your banquet ruined." I knew he was right, and yet I felt trapped by David's staunch though calm insistence and the message that was coming through to me that it would be a disaster for him if we didn't go. (I was beginning to feel the meaning of "loss of face.")

I continued negotiating, not really aware of how many long-made plans I must have been trampling. We couldn't go to the Tang tombs. "Okay," David said. "Another time." We couldn't go to his home. "Okay," he said without showing his disappointment. "Another time." But we would have almost no time at the school. If we got there at 3:00 (which would be a stretch) we would have to leave at 3:30 in order to get back to Xi'an by 5:00—if we were lucky. Back and forth, back and forth. The more discussion, the more time we were using up. Yes. Yes. But the discussion went on. Finally we had it pared down to the barest possibilities—we would meet with the principal of his school, then teach the students for 30 minutes, and leave the school by 3:30. Agreed.

But then there was Fred, who had planned to go back to Xi'an with the missing An Wei. He decided it was best to go with us, since we would get back to Xi'an long before An Wei. David seemed uneasy about this. Fred had a commitment with An Wei. Nevertheless, we climbed into the car that was waiting for us, leaving room for David and the principal's son. Moments passed when nothing seemed to be happening. Then David reappeared and said apologetically, "Wrong car." He pointed to one down the lane. My heart sank. It was half the size—a

silver mini, much used. How could that car get us there in the necessary time. How would the six of us fit into it? It could never go at an adequate speed on the expressway into Xi'an to meet the time schedule. I thanked myself that I had grabbed a friend's phone number in Xi'an before I left. Zhang Li [Jahng Lee], a young faculty member, might have to do the ordering for the banquet, and I could call my sisters, who were visiting China with me, and have them welcome the guests. I just hoped we would get there before my banquet was over.

Resigning myself to whatever happened, we clambered out of the car and eased into the mini. Jerry, Fred and I in the back seat, arranging our legs and bodies to allow for each other. The principal's son in the front seat. Where was David? The driver started the car up slowly; David was walking behind it. My heart sank again. Were we going to Qianxian separate from him? How could that work? But it was obvious the mini was more than full.

We stopped at the end of the lane and David vanished. "Wait a moment," the principal's son said in studied English. Wait a moment? I was having apoplexy by then. We couldn't wait a moment if we were going to get to Xi'an before my banquet was over. David reappeared an eon later—probably in a few minutes. He opened the car door by Fred and reported that he had checked with An Wei and it was fine for Fred to go with us if he wanted. David then opened the front passenger door and slid onto the miniature front seat with the principal's son. "No problem" he said. "There's plenty of room." Plenty of room? Those two nearly 6-foot-tall men were sitting in a space that two American 5th graders wouldn't be able to occupy. "He's my nephew," David said, pointing at the principal's son with his chin. "The driver's my brother-in-law. He's very experienced. It's his car." We pulled onto the main paved

road that leads away from the village. David pulled out his phone and, I assumed, called his principal to say we were on our way. And probably much more, including making arrangements for our brief visit and canceling the plans for the Tang tomb and his family. (I'm sorry, David, we probably caused you so many problems.)

We settled into our crowded space in the back. David and the driver talked; we drove at a steady speed through villages, around carts and bicycles and people walking. Passing slower cars and tractors, steadily and with skill. This was a driver we could trust. He was pushing that little car as fast as it would go, even overtaking a Passat. But always with skill, with assurance. Nothing reckless either for us or his expensive asset, this car. I sat back to soak up as much of the scene as possible and tried to let some of my anxiety subside. The fresh, dusty air combed my hair. I double-checked my bag for Zhang Li's phone number—and the hotel number. They were there, along with the Xi'an map which I suspected we would need getting across the city at rush hour. Fred was enjoying the scenes out the window. We were passing through country that many visitors to China never experience up close. Village after village, field after field. Corn harvesting had begun and three-wheeled tractors and trucks were hauling carts spilling over with cornstalks that would be dried for winter fuel, animal bedding, and more. Older men sat talking beside the roadway in the villages; a toddler was scooped up by an adoring grandmother. It was a good trip, the wind and dust blowing through the open car windows. It was hot out there. Unseasonably hot. We talked of this and that. David talked on his cell phone.

We asked at one point if the students at his school had opportunity to talk with foreigners. He said once there was a foreign teacher who was supposed to come for a set

of lessons, but cancelled the last moment. It sounded like a dreadful situation. I realized, with a pang, how awful it would have been for the school, him, the principal, if we hadn't agreed to this impossible trip. Yet another foreigner would have let them down and caused enormous loss of face for them. Chagrin was added to my anxiety.

On and on we went. Jerry and I tried not to look at our watches too often. That silver workhorse of a car was pushing steadily on without a break, through a town where we watched vendors and motorcycles, shop attendants and children. It looked slightly familiar to me. "Fufang County," David said enthusiastically. My anxiety increased noticeably. Fufang County? That was fairly close to An Shang village in my recollection; it's where we went to send email last year. Only about 25 minutes from the village. Well, Nancy, we'd been driving 25 minutes. I got out my map which had a tiny inset of this part of Shaanxi Province. I was beginning to have an idea of where we were going in relation to Xi'an, but not much. I kept the map out. Jerry quietly pulled out his compass and we tried to gauge where we were headed in relation to Xi'an. I hoped that having a printed visual of where we were headed might reduce my mounting anxiety.

Out into the country again, up and down through terraced land. We dropped into a valley with awesome views of the countryside spread out before us, the road curving among the terraced fields in various harvested states. On and on across the valley and into another town. I was lost by now, but Jerry's compass said we were headed northeast. Another good sign for we were headed more in the direction of Xi'an than away—that is, if the compass wasn't being affected by the metal car. This meant a better possibility of actually getting there by 5:00—or so. David pointed out Famen Si,

the famous Tang Temple that houses a relic of Buddha. We'd been there last year on a trip with the teachers. It didn't allay my anxiety though, because I knew we were still farther away from his school than I would have liked. More countryside, but by then I was losing my focus. We were not going to get there at the early edge of David's prediction; time was sliding away from us despite the incredible job the driver and the car were doing hauling this load of people.

Fred, Jerry and I readjusted our legs. I began wondering what we would find at the school. We were meeting with students. I turned to Jerry, "Get ready to teach." I realized that, although nothing had been said, Fred and Jerry were also going to be made visiting teachers. They were up for it. David was back on the phone. He must have been telling the principal where we were and to get ready.

"There are the Tang Tombs," David announced. Sure enough. Empress We Zetian's tomb, showing the symbolic head and two breasts, could be seen through the dusty haze on the left. We were too tightly packed into the car for Jerry or Fred to see it. "Never mind," they said, but it allayed my anxiety a little that we were near David's town. "My students run track on this street," he said. And as we approached a blue-glassed building, he announced with some pride, "There's my dormitory. Those two windows are my rooms." He lives there with his family, and with a lot of high school students who board at the school because they live too far away to return home each day.

We slowed nearly to a stop. "My school," he said. We began to open the door. Wait a moment. Someone adjusted wooden blocks at the curb, the gate was opened, and we pulled into the school entrance. It was a big upper middle school. "4000 students," David said. "And 22 English teachers." A woman stepped forward to greet us. The

principal's wife. And with quick handshakes and hellos we were ushered into the principal's office for the briefest greeting ceremony I had ever witnessed in China. We were given bottles of tea and enough time to take a swig as we sat down, the principal said a few sentences of welcome, introduced the vice-principal, and we were whisked off toward classrooms. I noticed someone videotaping us as we crossed the schoolyard and said something about my hair as I futilely attempted to run my fingers through the snarls. "Never mind," David said over his shoulder. "No matter." We were led into three adjoining classrooms, introduced fast, and the students began asking questions. Their English was understandable even though they were sophomores. David teaches the oldest, and these were not his students. They asked plenty of questions about U.S. basketball players, movies, and schools, but they focused most on how to learn English. They were engaging, enthusiastic, and a bit shy. At 3:25 we ended!

Meanwhile commotion was growing outside. The whole school was gathering for an assembly. As we exited, a sea of students came toward us each carrying a chair or stool. The principal's wife took my hand. David looked for another route, but the only exit was through the students. We stayed tight together, and David threaded us through 4000 congenial students. In the principal's office we collected our tea, and tried to turn down two enormous watermelons. "No, no, thank you. We can't use them. We're flying to Chongqing tomorrow." They insisted, "They're for you." "No, no, no," we reiterated. "We insist." David interjected an aside, "Please take them; they were bought for you." They went into the back of the car.

We climbed back into the silver mini, clasping the hands of the principal and his

wife and several others. We put Fred up front to be more comfortable—and started off. There were only five of us now. Jerry, David and I were in the back seat. Off we went, turning left to Xi'an. It was 3:40. We had an hour and 20 minutes to make it to the far side of Xi'an—more than a two-hour trip in rush hour I was sure. As I settled back somewhat resigned, the car pulled over to the curb. "Water?" David asked. "No. No thanks. We need to keep going to get to Xi'an in time," said my broken-record voice. David got out and returned with five bottles of water. They had wanted them too, and they certainly were nice to have rather than the sweetened tea. Two blocks later we stopped again. Jerry and I were near apoplexy by then trying to urge this trip onward. Our expert driver got out and another slid in. "He knows the Xi'an roads better," David explained. The drivers exchanged comments and off we went. The new driver was assured, but our tension increased as he settled into a comfortable speed with other traffic passing us. We finally asked David if we could speed up. That helped. We could, however, see where we were on my little map—too far away and we were going to hit the far side of Xi'an at rush hour. Unlike the trip from the village on rural roads, we were heading into urban China with loaded lorries and traffic lights slowing the way.

We reached the long freeway into the city with relief. It was barricaded, and vendors were parked in the entrance lanes, their wares spread on the pavement. Groan. "Closed," David and the driver observed, "but that's okay. We usually go a different way." We retraced our steps a mile, and headed for a bridge across the Wei River. Not too bad. The outskirts of Xi'an appeared. I opened my city map and Jerry and I, never having navigated through Xi'an, plotted a way around the old city—down the west side of the city wall that surrounds the

densely packed old city and far enough south to escape impenetrable traffic jams (we hoped). Then east toward our hotel at the southeast corner of the wall. What a scene we must have made. Jerry and I plotting the next move; us telling David where they should turn next or go straight, David translating to the driver, and me trying to gauge where in fact the turns were going to be, never certain that what we were seeing on the map was going to translate into reality. Luckily there were enough Chinese characters on the map to give David a hint as to what streets we were after.

“Look for the Hawaiian Hotel,” David said as we turned onto the East-going street. We found it and prepared to turn left. No left turn. The next street was a long way off and the traffic getting denser. “No problem,” the driver said. He drove to mid-block, made a neatly executed u-turn across three solid lines of traffic, and a few minutes later we pulled into the Sino-Pearl Hotel. It was 5:45.

Fred peeled himself out of the front seat. “Well, thanks Pines for an adventure.” The first words he’d spoken since we left Qianxian. David, Jerry and I clambered out of the back, David apologizing for getting us there so late. “I didn’t realize what Xi’an traffic would be like these days.” We asked if they would have a chance to eat. “No, I need to be back for the students’ study hall tonight.” We lugged the melons into the lobby, shook hands all around, and I tore up to our room.

We were dusty, sticky and very glad to have made it. I had 10 minutes to soak my head, change, and walk into the hotel lobby to greet Zhang Li and her roommate and order the banquet food. A bit too close for comfort, but at 6:30 I was standing in our elegant reserved dining-room shaking hands with guests as Zhang Li quietly finished up the banquet arrangements. Perhaps in some small way we had all saved face, but I would rather not repeat the scenario.

Resources

If you know of good books or resources about village life in China or about “face” I would love to know what they are. Here are a few, but my number of such references are very limited.

Rural China Education Foundation, <http://www.ruralchina.org> This foundation was begun a few years ago by a few hard-working and talented graduate students at Caltech and elsewhere who are committed to developing and enhancing quality education in rural China. The foundation, which plans projects thoughtfully and carefully, has an annual volunteer program in rural schools that is staffed by international volunteers and mainland Chinese college students. It’s website includes photos of rural Chinese schools and living.

Colors of the Mountain, by Da Chen. Published by Anchor Press, 1999. Da Chen describes his incredibly difficult, but still up-beat childhood in a small town in southern China. Born in 1962, he managed to get an education in spite of the odds, and this very readable book is filled with descriptions of a devoted family and of rich details of rural living.

A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman, by Ida Pruitt (& Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai). Published by Stanford University Press in 1967, with a reprint in about 1990. (Available through Amazon). Although not about rural life, this is a remarkable book. Ida Pruitt was a social worker in China during the early 20th century and has carefully documented the life

of this working woman who became her friend. Very readable and also filled with detail of Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai's life.

If you do not want to receive this publication, please do not hesitate to ask me to remove you from the list at npine111@aol.com. I will not be offended! Also, if you have friends or acquaintances who would like to receive it, I'd be glad to add them to the mailing list.
Nancy Pine