

CHINA

An Interview with Doug and Corene Parker

BY SCOTT W. CAMERON

When most people retire, they move to Sun City and buy a golf cart. Not Doug Parker. Instead, he and his wife, Corene, accepted an invitation to spend a year teaching English to postgraduate medical doctors at Shandong Medical University in Jinan, a city of about four million and the capital of Shandong Province, People's Republic of China. Instead of "late Postum and oranges" on the condominium patio off the ninth green, it was rice and garlic greens cooked on a two-burner hot plate in the bathroom of a 300-square-foot apartment. Rather than tanning by the pool, it was teaching in classrooms where the students and the teachers kept their parkas on throughout the winter to keep warm in unheated buildings with broken windows.

But it is too easy to commence a description of the Parkers in China like this. If you really want to know their experience, you have to listen and suspend judgment, or else you will get only a superficial report. Over the course of a month, I had to express my interest several times before they would speak to me about this priceless year of discovery and service. Corene said it was hard to discuss at first, because it was like two separate worlds: being home was one reality, but being in China was a different reality. Returning home from China was a more difficult cultural adjustment for them than was going.

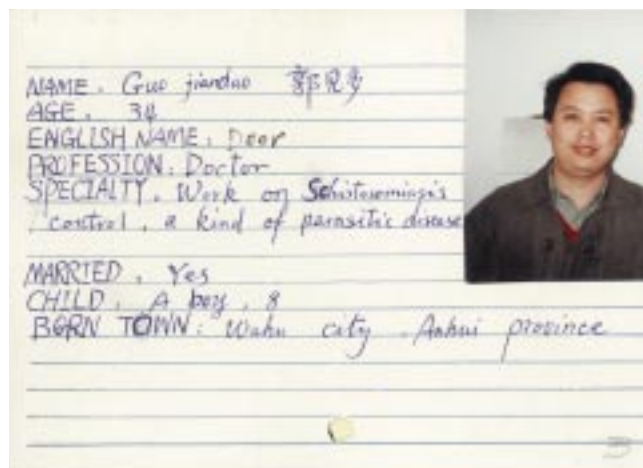
Near the end of their stay in China, Doug wrote in a letter to his children: "We did not come to China as a means of

filling our conversation with others when we return. Our encounter with new students, friends, and colleagues, whom we have come to love, is one that cannot be fully conveyed. It is enough if we carry our experiences to the grave, unrecounted. Our experience here has been one for experience's sake."

This was not a casual nine-month stay. It was intense, immediate, and personal—not distant, quiet, and reflective. Doug and Corene had decided before they left that they would not compare China to the United States. Doug maintains, "The foreigner cannot avoid seeing everything comparatively, which only conveys to him or her what the country 'is not,' not what the country 'is.' The Chinese do not see their country as a comparative phenomenon. Whatever the water temperature, the toilet facilities, the wattage of the light bulbs, the disposition of the garbage, it is their uncomparing reality—the only reality they know, their existential realm, their

skin and bones." The Parkers wished to see and experience China as the Chinese see and experience their own culture, and they vowed to avoid making adverse comparisons. It was the process of shedding the skin of the foreigner that brought them so much joy.

Each of them taught speaking, listening, reading, and writing to four sections of students. Corene had two postgraduate master's classes, a PhD section, and a section of staff doctors; Doug had three postgraduate classes and one first-year medical school class. Each class had about 48 students and each class period lasted between two and three solid hours. In addition the Parkers sponsored extra, unassigned free-talk sessions with their students, which consisted of walks around the campus or meetings at the central garden. Free talk could be on any subject (except religion and politics, which the government prohibited) and crowds would gather around to hear Doug or Corene speaking English



to their students. Some members of the public would join in the conversations. The Parkers fielded tough questions from “Why are there so many guns in the United States?” to “Why does the United States have such a big problem with homosexuality [and] with racial prejudice?” and “What do you think of the O. J. Simpson verdict?” They were expected to be experts on all subjects.

Early on, Doug and Corene became close friends with their class monitors—one or two students in each class, usually communist party members, assigned by the university to report on the content of class discussions and writing assignments as well as to be of assistance. They were also the ones who planned class parties and dinners. Those monitors quickly became Doug and Corene’s dear friends.

At the beginning of the year, the Parkers told their students, “If we are just your teachers, then we will have failed, we want to be your friends.” This concept was somewhat foreign to the students. To have an American as an English teacher was a great honor, and the Parkers were like celebrities. At first the classes were hard, because the students would freeze if called upon. To respond incorrectly would be a source of considerable embarrassment to these practicing physicians. To get them to speak in class (their participation in free-talk sessions came much easier), Doug and Corene had to discover methods for leading them into the conversation with short answers from which the students gained confidence to move on to more extensive participation. When they gave written assignments, the Parkers tried to have them returned by the next class period. With about 200 pupils each, they found that the logistics of learning names and reading papers for each student was a considerable challenge. So that their classroom teaching would be directed to individuals as friends and not as impersonal members of a class group, Doug and Corene took pictures of each student—all 400—and mounted them on separate four-by-six cards, with accompanying data concerning age, medical specialty, years of practice, hometown, occupation of spouse, and age of child. They constantly sought to relate names

to faces and to call upon students by name. A few students chose English names for use in class. A few of the more interesting names were Door, Fairy, and Glad.

The People’s Republic of China has made a formal commitment to teach English as China’s second language in its middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities. English is recognized as indispensable to China’s progress, development, and growing world leadership. The doctors in the Parkers’ classes were intense students. To catch up and stay abreast of western medical science, they recognized the need to be able to read the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the many other journals published in English around the world and the need to publish and share in English their own research contributions to medical science. Their traditional Chinese characters (over 20,000 of them) are a written barrier to sharing with the world. Their drive to master English caused the students to bring a high level of enthusiasm, interest, and excitement to class. They reported that of all their postgraduate courses, English was the most difficult.

Living conditions in China were challenging and interesting, but adequate. Doug and Corene had only two hours of hot water a day, from 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Often they would keep their breakfast and lunch dishes in the bathtub to be washed when hot water was available. Some nights they were so exhausted from their day’s teaching that they wondered if they could delay going to bed until after the dishes had been done and they had taken a hot bath, particularly during the cold months of the winter. At 10:30 p.m. all water, both hot and cold, would be off until 6:00 a.m. But both Doug and Corene agreed, “These were small inconveniences compared to the joys of associating with such lovely people, who were so anxious for us to have a good experience and to love and to enjoy China, which we most surely did.”

Frequently, ideas for teaching English would come in the middle of the night, and Doug would awake to find Corene

preparing for the next day’s class. They were thrilled when new ideas would come that would stimulate their students to read, to write, and to think. Their assigned readings were eclectic: from Lee’s surrender to Grant at Appomattox to Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, from Freud’s theory of dreams to extracts dealing with Hitler and *Mein Kampf*. From these readings, writing assignments would be drawn on topics such as “An Individual’s Moral Responsibility for Participation in the Immoral Acts of His Government” and “My Views Concerning the Existence of an Afterlife.” The Parkers bonded with their students spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. Their students weren’t used to expressing emotion, but at the



The Parkers with students at a free-talk session in the park.

end of the year they thanked Doug and Corene with deep feelings for teaching them how to think as well as how to read, write, and speak in English.

The Parkers joined in the life of the community, frequently attending class parties with their students, ballroom dancing with the senior citizens Saturday mornings in the park, and wandering and shopping in the many street markets. They did not see a single gun while in China and never felt any fear for their safety. Without hesitation they joined the crowded buses and used the plentiful taxis to traverse the city. They often rode their bicycles or walked to explore new places. Because of traffic congestion—



Above: Having borrowed the costume from a colleague at a different university, Doug Parker delights his class with a special appearance during the holidays.
Below: A surprised reaction to a first glimpse of Saint Nick.

streets were shared by pedestrians, donkey-drawn carts, buses, bicycles, taxis, and cars—bicycle riding was a real adventure. “Everyone rides slowly,” they explained, “and the movement is like the ever-flowing ripples of a river.” When asked if they wanted to own a car someday, the doctors all said they had no desire for cars, as there was no place to park them and no more room on the overcrowded roads. Heart surgeons, neurosurgeons, and obstetricians alike rode bicycles to do their surgery and deliver babies.

In addition to their assigned teaching responsibilities, the Parkers frequently received pro bono requests for their services, which they generously accepted. During the winter term, both of them spoke on a weekly basis to students in the nursing college. Corene undertook editing services on several lengthy papers written in English by Chinese medical professors that were accepted for publication in western journals, subject to corrections of awkward or inaccurate English usage.

Doug’s background as a lawyer and law professor soon became known, and he was invited to lecture to a class of practicing Chinese lawyers who were studying English at a neighboring university. His friendship with the lawyers extended beyond the classroom, and they would visit him in his apartment for additional discussion sessions.

In addition to the treasured friendships, the experience as colleagues was a rich one for the Parkers. In another letter to his children, Doug shared his feelings:

As intense as our experiences with others have been, even more intense has been our experience with each other, as husband and wife, as sharing colleagues, as best friends, attempting to understand together the inexplicable revelation we are having of the feelings and thinking of Chinese people who have opened their feelings and thoughts to us. I have experienced competent, effective colleagues before, but never have I experienced and observed a colleague who prepares and

teaches with the earnestness, intensity, and love as does Corene. I can’t express to you my admiration for her. I have never seen a person so anxious to do well, so anxious to help others. She does not live for compliments, she does not serve for credit, she does not seek recognition, and so it is even more my privilege to say she is a teacher par excellence. We often tried different approaches in our classrooms and sometimes used different materials, but both of us were intent on the same goal: lifting and helping our wonderful, dedicated students. Together we had daily, fervent prayers that we would be equal to their need and desire to learn, and have shared our love for our students and the privilege and inspiration it was to work with them. We know what is meant when reference is made to “tears of joy.”

One frequently hears that the encounter with the Far East can be a significant, even traumatic, event for a westerner. Doug and Corene had this experience. Doug described the encounter well:

Everything we have known and in which we have had faith has been examined from a new vantage point. We have looked at our life’s beliefs from a new hilltop, surrounded by new friends who possess and share none of the assumptions that serve as the starting premises and starting foundations for proof and evidence for matters for which we have taken proof and evidence for granted, as self-evident. Our hopes, expectations, and convictions stand more deeply held by us based on a faith that we see and understand as faith, held, I believe, as God intended when he sent us to earth and wiped our memories clean.

It is difficult to return from a life of such intense single focus to the fragmented life of the materially overindulged western city and 20th-century American convenience. However, the Parkers have missed their children and grandchildren, and their return has been as sweet as their experience. It takes time to process such an experience, but Doug and Corene can speak of China with an evangelical fervor that would be enough to convince some of us to scrap the golf cart and head straight to that 300-square-foot apartment in Shandong.