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A Year Abroad: Embracing Life in China

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A year abroad

Embracing life in China

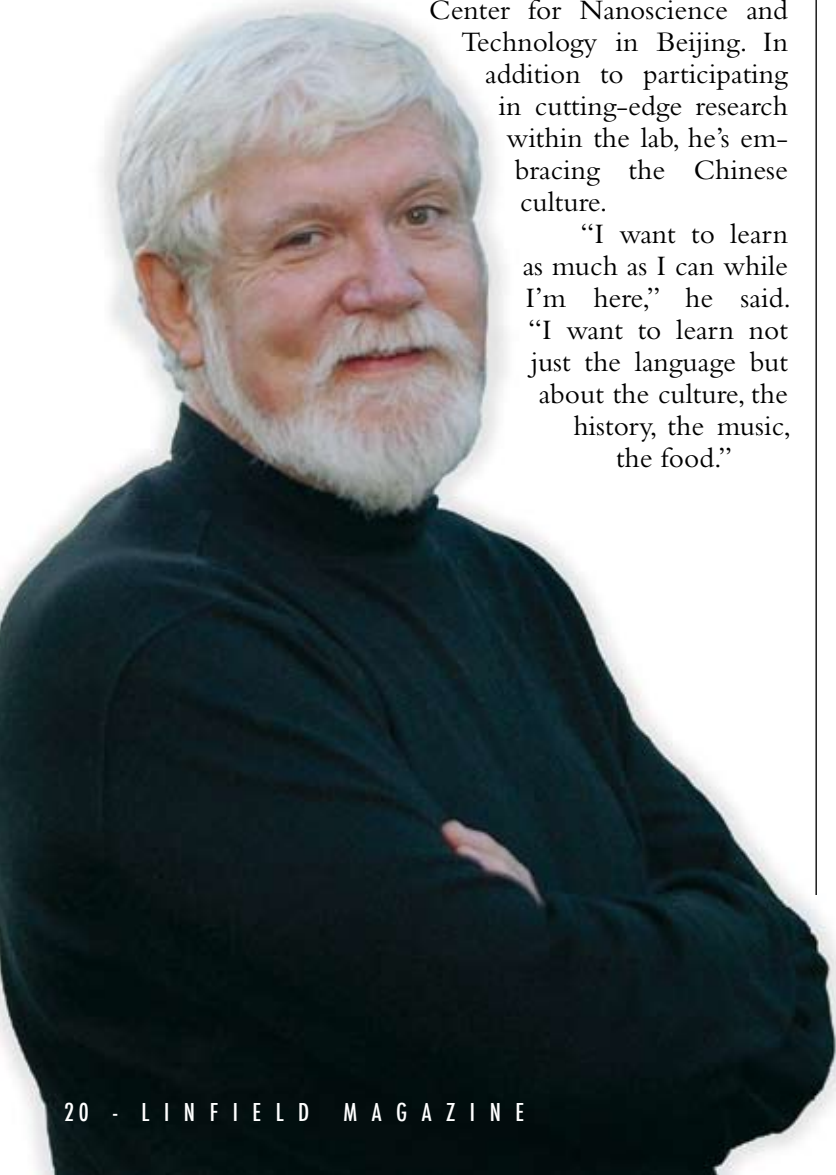
Jim Diamond hears a familiar call amid the crowd in Tiananmen Square and stops to have yet another photo taken with a stranger. “Sheng dan lao ren!” - Christmas Man!

Towering 6 feet tall with a full white beard, Diamond stands out in a crowd – particularly in China.

For Diamond, professor of chemistry at Linfield College, the past few months have been packed with unusual experiences, including his “celebrity.” He is spending the academic year working with former student Jingsong Zhu ’93 at the National

Center for Nanoscience and Technology in Beijing. In addition to participating in cutting-edge research within the lab, he’s embracing the Chinese culture.

“I want to learn as much as I can while I’m here,” he said. “I want to learn not just the language but about the culture, the history, the music, the food.”



With Zhu, Diamond is developing the quantum mechanical description of optical properties of nanoscale devices – which are at the core of modern miniaturized instrumentation.

“Jingsong’s research is in a field where there will be Nobel prizes,” Diamond said. “The caliber of research he’s doing is very high. To be part of it and see the difficulties as well as the success is exciting.”

Zhu, a professor at the center, has maintained a strong link with Diamond, a lifelong friend and mentor. At Linfield, Zhu and Diamond spent hours discussing quantum physics, but their conversations also touched on music, history and other subjects.

“My relationship with Jim has long been like colleague and friend, instead of professor and student, even when I was a student at Linfield,” he said.

Zhu said the second-to-none liberal arts education he received at Linfield has been the foundation for his career success.

“What I am, both professionally and personally, has largely been shaped by my Linfield education,” he said. “Linfield provides students with close interactions with faculty, who will not only provide them with knowledge, but also will shape students’ fundamental views toward life in general.”

Outside the lab, Diamond is doing his best to adopt a Chinese lifestyle, avoiding hangouts frequented by foreigners. Although he does not speak Chinese fluently, he’s learning.

“I can now tell a taxi driver how to get to my house,” he said.

His arrival in Beijing coincided with the 2008 summer Olympics. Within three months, he joined the Beijing International Festival Chorus. “I had to find some way to sing,” said Diamond, an accomplished musician who has performed with the Portland Opera Chorus and Symphonic Choir and appeared in numerous theatre presentations. His enthusiasm during rehearsals gained him an invitation to sing with the Deutscher Chor Peking chorus during a performance of “Carmina Burana,” which sparked friendships with a number of professional musicians.

Diamond also has created English voice-overs for a phone company and has made two TV commercials.

“I think I’m peddling some kind of quack medicine,” he said.

He even has an agent. When an English-speaking bookstore owner hosted a night of Christmas carols, Diamond prepared a performance by Bach. His later rendition of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” wearing a red hat, “drove them into a frenzy.”

“It would be foolish not to take advantage of every single moment,” said Diamond. “If you’re open to the experiences of living abroad, it really is extraordinary. I lead a charmed existence. I am very, very lucky.”

Yet there are challenges as well. Living as an illiterate is humbling and Diamond has a new appreciation for international students.

“Every day to be in a country where you can’t speak, read or understand the people around you; where everything you look at is totally foreign; where you can’t do anything for yourself,” he said. “It made me appreciate what it must be like for people who come to this country without knowledge of English.”

And when he returns to his Linfield classroom in the fall, Diamond said his teaching methods will be improved.

“There are real differences in the way our students behave compared with Chinese students,” he said. “Not better or worse, just different. I’ll be attuned to different needs in approaching learning after this year.”

For now, “Christmas Man” is savoring his days in China and hopes the experience will pave the way for future Linfield students to benefit.

“I am a different man than I was five months ago,” he said. “When you see me again in August, I’ll be even more different.”

– Laura Davis



Jim Diamond, professor of chemistry, loaded belongings onto a three-wheeled cart and bikes during a recent move in Beijing, China. Diamond is spending the 2008-09 academic year working with former student Jingsong Zhu '93 at the National Center for Nanoscience and Technology.

Jim Diamond is chronicling his Chinese experiences in a blog, complete with “nerd alerts” for scientific material. Read more at www.overworkedandunderpaid.org/jiminchina/

Nov. 3, 2008

We did it! Found a great apartment - 135 sq m for 4000 RMB/month (approximately \$590 per month U.S.), a real bargain. We packed, loaded up all of our belongings onto a three-wheeled cart, our bikes loaded, and set off on a beautiful Beijing fall morning, full of sun, clear skies, wafted by gentle zephyrs.

Nov. 7, 2008

No Power! I was working in the apartment this morning, when all the lights went out. The bathroom was a dark cavern. The kitchen as well. Each apartment has a meter with a slot for a card - like a credit card - with a small memory chip embedded in it. One buys kilowatt-hours at a local store, and information

about the purchase is written onto the chip. The card is inserted into a slot in the apartment’s energy meter, and those kW-hs are now available for use.

Nov. 11, 2008

I have been here in Beijing a bit more than three months. There are times when things are a bit difficult for me... the problems of quotidian existence outside of work, living in a country where one is illiterate, incommunicado, and dependent on others for assistance with the simplest tasks - such as buying energy - these can sometimes become more than I wish to bear. There are many more days when Beijing is so wonderful, it is equally hard to bear, but only because I am afraid my heart will burst with joy.