

Students, professor journey to China, forge friendships

By Kelly Noyes
Staff Writer

The Ming dynasty pot, handmade butterfly paper cuts, wall-hanging scrolls and Chinese flag that Lawrence Kessler tucked away in his suitcase as souvenirs from a semester in Beijing all paled in comparison to the vibrant memories he kept in his mind.

Last August, two UNC students, seven from other universities and Kessler, their faculty director and Chinese history professor, arrived at the Beijing Foreign Languages Normal College and began their four-month stay with 100-degree temperatures.

"This always happens to me," said Kessler, a UNC professor of traditional and modern Chinese history. "It was the hottest August on record in Beijing for many years. It was so hot, but that lasted just for four or five days."

Melanie Kirk, a senior English major at Wake Forest University who accompanied Kessler, said the first few days were the worst part of the trip.

"There was no air conditioning, and it smelled really bad," Kirk said. "Now, I feel like I could go anywhere."

But the heat yielded way to better days. "September and October are absolutely gorgeous in Beijing. I have never seen a bluer sky. There was almost no rain. It was clear and crisp with blue skies and temperatures in the 60s and 70s," Kessler said.

The flatness of Beijing allowed Kessler to explore the city between teaching class and advising students. "You can get all over Beijing on just a one-speed bicycle," Kessler said. "Everybody buys these old, beat-up, used bicycles. They are extremely cheap."

Students participated in organized tours of factories, schools and neighboring communities and took trips to the Great Wall, Manchuria and Hong Kong. One of Kessler's students, John Dean, a junior history and anthropology double major at Wake Forest, took a 37-hour train trip to Hong Kong.

Dean was in a compartment with six Africans who had also been traveling in China. Dean said the group attracted a lot of attention when they spoke to each other in Chinese.

"There was always a big group surrounding us," Dean said. "They saw a big group of foreigners: two whites and six blacks, and we were all speaking Chinese. They kept asking us why we were speaking Chinese."

Because Kessler already had visited China three times as a tour guide, he used his semester to pursue other interests. "I'd been to some of these places on these previous tours, so I didn't feel as compelled to travel around. I've been to about 30 cities in China already."

Kessler developed many relationships with the local people in Beijing. He was able to see the Chinese up close and personal, he said.

The Chinese love basketball, volleyball and soccer. "I couldn't get any other Americans to play soccer with me, so I just went out and played with the Chinese."

Kessler developed a close friendship with Professor Ye, a Chinese historian and antique collector.

"We would exchange ideas about what life is like in America, college life, his own situation and Chinese history. We talked about his own background, his college life, his teaching."

He said he was thrilled with Ye's



UNC Professor Lawrence Kessler displays his mementos from China

gifts from his personal art collection, which included antique pottery, coins dating back to 100 B.C., pots from 1,000 years ago and Chinese porcelain.

"Of all the people I met there, we were probably the most alike. We had similar interests — historic or cultural interests," Kessler said.

Friendships between the American students and Chinese students were en-

couraged, but only to a point in male and female relationships, Dean said. He developed a friendship with his female tutor, but their contact was restricted.

The two would go to her house, where he would eat dinner with her family. Her father, a Russian professor, also coached basketball.

"The first thing the father asked me was if I knew Michael Jordan," Dean said. "I told him I had been to see him play and that he was famous because he lived in our state. Every time I went there, the father would ask questions

about him."

To show his appreciation for the family's hospitality, Dean had a friend from home send a Michael Jordan poster to give to his tutor's father. "I pulled it out — a picture of Michael Jordan's 'License to Jam.' (The father) almost fell out of his chair."

"He was so excited, he couldn't get over it. He was teaching 5-foot-10-inch Chinese people to play basketball. He had probably never seen anyone slam dunk the ball."

Kessler heard many stories as a faculty adviser. "Students would come and talk to me about some of the problems they were having," he said. "But more than that, they would really come and talk to me about some of the exciting experiences they had had — some of the places they had traveled to or some of the Chinese people they had met."

One student was questioned by the Chinese police, because he took a picture of the bumper sticker and album cover of a rock group called Carnival of Shame in Tiananmen Square, he said. "Afterwards, we laughed about it, but during the time I was concerned."

Kessler said he tried to experience Chinese culture. He never went out to eat a western meal but attempted to learn Chinese cooking and never took a taxi but always rode his bike or took the bus. Except for on Thanksgiving.

"We prepared a traditional Thanksgiving feast and then invited the Chinese staff to join us," Kessler said. He received positive response for most of the food.

"Mashed potatoes," he said laughing. "(The Chinese) are not into mashed potatoes. But we made some kind of apple desert that they thought was absolutely delicious."

The Chinese concept of table manners was surprising to Dean. "They don't have any. They slurp, drink the soup

from the bowl and eat really fast."

A culture shock for Kirk was the difference between the American and Chinese family systems. "Family life is so important (in China)," she said. "It was unbelievable to see generations of families that clung together."

Kessler's class, Contemporary China in Historical Perspective, helped the American students appreciate their cultural differences with the Chinese. "I learned so much in class," Dean said. "He made us work, but he rewarded us — things that he was teaching us, we needed to know. You can't put a value on that."

Kirk agreed Kessler's teaching was thorough. "He dealt with current issues. He dealt so specifically with Chinese politics, government and history."

Kessler's knowledge of China began with a class he took to fill a requirement as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. "I took a Chinese course for no particular reason. I got real interested and did real well," Kessler said.

"I lived in Taiwan for two years as a graduate student, finished up my Ph.D. and have been teaching (at UNC) ever since," Kessler said.

"(Kessler) was outstanding," Kirk said. "He was just the dad of the group, and there was no end to his knowledge of Chinese history."

Dean said, "Before we left, he got really, really sentimental. He was telling us how much he enjoyed getting to know us. He told each person how they had added to the trip. He fit right in with the students. There was nobody there who didn't love him."

And as if the weather knew leaving would be hard for the group, the day before Kessler's departure, there was an unusual circumstance that added the perfect touch to his trip. "The day before I left they had a beautiful, white, sprinkle of snow."

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AIR FORCE

Campus Calendar
MONDAY
10 a.m. Rape Action Project will have office hours in Suite A 215D Union until 3 p.m.
2 p.m. JOB HUNT 101: Orientation. Basic information on how to use the UCPPS office. 210 Hanes.
3:30 p.m. Internship session, sponsored by UCPPS.
4 p.m. American Advertising Federation welcomes Bill Cokas, 203 Howell.
Orientation interest session, Cobb Training Room.
5:30 p.m. Orientation interest session in Camichael Ballroom.
6 p.m. Black International Student Association will have Bible Study in Upendo Lounge.
UNC Feminist Alliance, 205 Union.
Orientation interest sessions in Craige Green Room and the fourth-floor lounge of Hinton James.
6:30 p.m. Peace Corps presentation, 209 Hanes.
7 p.m. BCC, Alpha Phi Alpha & CABJ will present Chuck Stone to lecture on "Black Politics in the White Power Structure" in the BCC.
Leadership Matters will present "Collidascopie: Exploring 'isms' and Understanding Difference," a skills workshop in 213 Union.
U.S. Department of Energy presentation, 210 Hanes.
Orientation interest sessions in Morrison Rec Room, Connor Lounge and Graham Basement.
Black Pre-Professional Health Society, 226 Union.
7:30 p.m. Ballroom Dance Club, 026 Woolen for Rumba lesson followed by dancing at 8:30 p.m.
Orientation interest sessions, Granville Cafeteria.
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