In December of 2007, I went to Beijing for three weeks to stay at the home of Shan Jiang and his family. Shan Jiang is a master violin maker, two-time winner of the Silver Medal of the Violin Society of America’s biennial competition, among many other honors. I first met him at the ASTA National Conference in Detroit in 2006 in the Exhibitors’ Hall. He and his brother Feng, another master violin maker based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, were selling Jiang violins, and I passed by their booth frequently to---practice my Chinese! Rather, I insisted on inflicting my beginner Chinese on them. Shan was very friendly, and we soon got into some hushed English conversations about freedom of speech and assembly in China. We exchanged cards, and that was that.

That was that until the following spring, when I was looking for a place to stay somewhere in China for my winter break. I took out Shan’s card, emailed him, and asked if he had any friends I could stay with as a “paying guest.” Quite a long while went by, and then I got a reply that he and his wife would be very happy to host me. Jubilantly, I began to prepare for my trip by upping my Chinese lesson study and shopping for gifts. This was a very difficult task, as everything I found had a label, “Made in China.” Although I knew that there was a good chance no one except the factory employees ever glimpsed the product, the label seemed to give the message that I was somehow not serious enough in my quest to really honor my hosts. I finally found suitable items in an American craft store: a clock in a curl of carved maple, a pewter picture frame, and various other items.

My flight to Beijing was scheduled to leave from BWI on Saturday, Dec. 15 at 9:00 A.M. Early that morning, at 4:30 A.M., I was awakened from my sleep by the telephone. It was Shan at Beijing International Airport. “Where are you? I have been here for two hours. I can’t find you.” I was overwhelmed with the special deep humiliation that only a person who has had contact with Asian people for over forty years can have: I had severely inconvenienced my host---by not knowing something so utterly basic as that today is tomorrow in China! I told him that I would make my own way to his house when I arrived “tomorrow,” and apologized an uncountable number of times.

I did finally arrive at Shan’s house via a very convoluted taxi ride, I met his wife Hai Hua, his 18-month-old baby Pan, and a distant relative of his wife, a 17-year-old girl named Jing Jing, there to help with the baby. All presents were opened, the wrappings were being chewed by Pan Pan, and we could relax and drink tea. I was shown to my room, I unpacked a bit, relaxed, and then we could eat!

Shan and his family live in a large flat in a high rise apartment building. It consists of a spacious open plan living room, dining area and office space, with hardwood floors and wooden cabinets filled with his violins, violin parts and precious items such as porcelain pieces and later on---my presents! Visitors could sit on white leather sofas to talk, watch television, or listen to violins. The bedrooms and two bathrooms were all off the main living room area. Altogether the flat was about 2000 square feet.

The violin making atelier was in another flat two stories down. I learned toward the end of my stay that Shan, Feng and his parents own a total of four flats---some purchased when they went on the market for bargain basement prices. All of the Jiangs are shrewd investors. Shan has a young man as his assistant; they have been working together for nine years. There is a small dog too--- black and white, a bit yappy, but companionable. Shan and his assistant work together along a spacious bench, with light from a southern exposure pouring through the windows. This flat is on the ground
floor, so there is a bit of soil for a garden of sorts during the season. This flat is smaller than the one upstairs, but contains largish storage rooms for woods and tools. There is another room set up as a photo studio with austere black drapery backdrops to document the instruments Shan makes. The violins and violas are made from aged European woods, bought via suppliers and his brother Feng; he has an ample supply.

The atelier hours are very consistent: work from 8:30 A.M. until 12:30 P.M., break for lunch exactly one hour, and then back to work from 1:30 to 6:00. Shan has dinner, relaxes, and goes to the computer to assess the day’s requests, orders, queries and other business. Hai Hua helps him with this, using her excellent English and business skills.

I was also able to take advantage of the excellent technological set-up of the house—mainly through making international calls back home. I actually purchased a phone card, which lasted quite a long time. However, I was more interested in everything else that was going on. My bed was of great interest to me, as it consisted of a hard board with a sheet on it, and a duvet and pillow. At first I thought that there was some mistake—no mattress! But no, no one else had a mattress. The first few days were painful, but I was so tired at night that I just went right into an extremely deep sleep. If I woke in the middle of the night, shoulders aching, I marveled at the plasticity of the brain that can block all the sensation of hardness and let sleep take over. A year and a half later, Shan called from a workshop he was giving in Ohio, asking me if I had thought my Beijing bed had been too hard, as he found that all American beds seemed very soft and cushiony. I told him that I had been able to increase my Chinese vocabulary with words like “board,” and “rock,” and tell a few good stories as a result of my bed, so it had been a good experience to sleep on it.

The second evening I was there, and many after that, I tested Shan’s violins and violas for him as he listened intently, pacing about. I would comment that “the D and A strings sound fuzzy.” He looked up “fuzzy” in the dictionary, agreed, and went to carving places on the bridge with a tiny tool until the tone became clear, then ringing. Pan Pan walked about pulling objects off tables, instruments out of cabinets, and tried to get his fingers into light sockets. His mother put on “Baby Einstein” DVDs for him, but he was not amused. We kept trying out the same instrument until all four strings were balanced. We all went to bed around 11 PM.

On some days, when Shan wasn’t in the workshop, he would drive to large hotels in Central Beijing to where members of touring orchestras were staying. Violinists set up appointments to try his violins, and he would go to them in a violin-laden taxi. Sometimes he would make a sale, and pack up the violin for England or Australia the next day. Sometimes there would be no sale, and he would return, nonplussed, and go back to work. There were in-country requests for his instruments coming in as well, so I could see that there was a comfortable flow of buyers. He told me that on average, he sold two instruments a month.

I myself tried to be a “good guest” by staying out of everyone’s hair. I did this by taking daily excursions. My first was in the neighborhood. Shan doesn’t live in Central Beijing; he lives in a satellite city outside “Ring Five.” Imagine Washington DC and the Beltway. Then imagine, five miles out, another beltway. Then three more! That’s where we were, in a real “city” called Tong Zhou. (Though in the official address, it is listed as “Tong Zhou District, Beijing.”) The surrounding land of Tong Zhou originally belonged to a village. This land used to be farms; today it consists of more than a hundred high rises, main streets, secondary roads, shops, restaurants, alleys and infrastructure. But it is all less than fifteen years old! The original village is where I went on my first outing. It is about the size of a small Maryland town, like Washington Grove or Sandy Springs, but very compact. I entered via a main street two blocks from Shan’s high rise complex, and promptly entered a time
warp fifty or a hundred years in the past. I saw mud houses, dirt roads, a few animals, scarcely any cars, round blocks of coal for fuel, outside vegetable markets. I got lost, and then, before panicking, found the original main road. But the village continued in a wandering maze-like way in between the high rises, morphing into long blocks of illegal markets selling fruits, vegetables, house wares, clothing. I made many trips into this maze during the month of my visit. According to Shan, the village sold its outlying lands to the developers for what were hoped would be unimaginable profits, felt itself cheated, and then refused to sell crucial acres, blocking main roads so that they ended abruptly in the middle of a dusty barren field. I followed one such road out of town, accompanied by huge magpies, and felt in such a Felliniesque and otherworldly atmosphere that I had to return.

I did a lot of sightseeing on my own—-to the Imperial Palace, Tiananmen Square, the Summer Palace, art museums—-as well as to the quickly disappearing hutong alleys that characterized ancient Beijing; these were the usual tourist-type excursions. I mastered the bus, subway and train systems, as they are all very well organized. Shan helped me find Chinese calligraphy classes with a master painter and his equally talented wife. These took place in an apartment in an old Beijing hutong scheduled for demolition; I went there every morning from 10:30 until noon.

But my best outings were with Shan. He would leave the sunny focus of his workshop on weekends to roam, looking for interesting and valuable things to invest in, such as modern art. So one day we went to Dashanzi Art District, another example of a village selling off plots of land, but this time for artists’ studios. A hundred warehouse-size studios spread over many square miles of former cropland, and all of them seemed to house contemporary art. I have no idea which ring road this was near; maybe it was farther out than Ring Five. I was told that the successful artists moved to Beijing, but in Dashanzi, they lived in their studios. To me it was overwhelming. Some of the art we saw was quite good; a lot was parking lot flea market variety. But all of the artists were zealously trying to sell. Although some of the more established galleries had a bit of heat, most were bitterly cold. Shan, anxious to find an investment, said later on at dinner that I slowed him up, as the artists were anxious to chat with me and sell.

On another day he took me to a street completely devoted to shops Chinese tea and all related paraphernalia. This was slightly bizarre, since he and his family didn’t drink any tea or any other caffeinated beverage. (My second day there, I had a monstrous headache, which put me to bed for seven hours—-until I realized it was from caffeine withdrawal!) On “Tea Street,” Shan set about learning about the quite complicated culture of buying, preparing and drinking tea. Together we visited at least ten shops, and drank 30 cups or more. Frankly, I lost count. He bought much tea and a few valuable accessories.

On the night of December 23, 2007, we went to hear Yuri Bashmet and the Moscow Virtuosi. It was quite a ride, getting to the concert, because around Ring Two, a traffic jam closed in on us, and we sat in it long enough to miss half of the Grieg Holborn Suite. It wasn’t from lack of skill possessed by our “Lao Siji,” Old Driver, who drove as if mounted on a quarter horse cutting cattle. It was just appallingly crowded. We finally arrived at a hotel/concert hall/mall complex. Shan had only two tickets, but for some reason which I still don’t understand, he brought along his wife and baby and Jing Jing for the ride. When we got there, he tried to get them all in with us, but it didn’t work, so they stayed out in the lobby. Yuri Bashmet and Company performed a lovely concert in an acoustically dead hall. The real concert seemed to start with the encores: a great number of breathtaking contemporary viola pieces. The audience clapped nervously. Hai Hua, Pan Pan and Jing Jing amused themselves during the concert in the mega-rich multi-use glitter palace outside the concert hall, losing themselves for two hours in the ostentation. When we emerged from the concert, they looked very contented.
Shan’s father is also an accomplished instrument maker. He not only makes violins, violas and cellos, but also tries to invent instruments. I went on my own one day through the maze of high rises to his building to visit. There, I listened to a rather nice sounding instrument vivisection of a cello-erhu hybrid. Please. I won’t even try to describe what this instrument looked like, but I suggest that you visit Shan’s website under his bio (cited at the end of this article) to have a look. The goal was to combine the sound of the two instruments, and the result was pleasing. I tried many violins, drank much tea, and read a few Christian tracts for good measure. Shan’s father walked me home, and described what life was like during the Cultural Revolution. From what I understood, it was thoroughly diabolical.

My Chinese language skill throughout my trip hovered around 1.5 on a scale of one to ten. On my second day, I realized that although I had covered a first-year college textbook in the months before, I hadn’t learned my vocabulary so that I could understand it or use it. Therefore, every morning before breakfast, I got up around five and studied for two hours. For a three-week stay, this was not sufficient at all, but I did learn a very valuable thing: constant self-testing on vocabulary recall will improve overall memory greatly. Shan and Hai Hua spoke to me very competently in English. When I was on the streets, I guessed, faked it or just didn’t understand what was said to me. I mostly faked it. This did not feel good. When I got home, I recorded elaborate vocabulary tests on MP3 players and mercilessly flogged myself until I learned. The results have been good, and the source of much amusement in my violin and viola teaching life. This will be another story.

I remain endlessly grateful to Shan and his family for their hospitality. I had a really good time with them. I felt very comfortable after three weeks of great interesting outings, great meals and violin lore. My Chinese baby talk became virtuosic thanks to many conversations with Pan Pan. I look forward to future visits from them—perhaps when Pan Pan is older. In the meanwhile, I follow the progress of Shan’s family, his violin making, US workshops where he is invited to teach, and other enterprises. He is an unusual person, a great artisan and an extremely kind host.

You can visit Shan’s website: www.jiangviolins.com You will find many interesting things there, including a picture of the cello-erhu with his father playing it.

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