

By Barbara Gastel

# Giving thanks in China

**G**olden autumn. The best time of year in Beijing. I'd just flown in from the United States to start a position teaching scientific writing in English. I hadn't been to China before, much less taught there, so I didn't know what to expect. "Will I be able to establish rapport with my students?" I wondered. "Will we communicate adequately?" At the start of my first class, I looked around at my students: 17 scientists. The year was 1983, and some wore jackets that resembled the type popularized by the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong. The students gave me hesitant but welcoming smiles, and I proceeded to tell them that my main goal was to help them publish internationally. I hoped this venture would work out for them—and me.

My path to China began the previous autumn. I was an assistant professor at the time, teaching science writing in the United States. One evening, I returned to my apartment and saw the light flashing on my answering machine. The message was from the head of a U.S. institute devoted to furthering academic exchange with China. He suggested that I apply for a position teaching scientific writing at a medical college in Beijing.

I had dreamed of international work ever since I'd received my medical and public health degrees and embarked on a science communication career 4 years earlier. Yet I hesitated about applying for the opportunity in Beijing. I felt unsure about spending a school year in then-isolated China and putting my tenure-track position at risk. I also worried about venturing so far from my parents, one of whom had been seriously ill.

My parents, however, encouraged me to explore the opportunity. My program director offered me a leave of absence. And there was a good omen: Months before I ever thought of moving to China, my New Year's resolution—one of the few I've kept—had been to master chopsticks.

So I found myself in Beijing. Most of my students were female faculty members approaching my parents' age. They made a point of taking care of me outside the classroom—inviting me to make dumplings, showing me where to shop, and taking me to Chinese operas—and I immersed myself in my host culture. In return, I enjoyed sharing bits of U.S. culture with my students. In November, I told them about U.S. Thanksgiving and the traditional dishes, such as sweet potatoes and turkey. Within a week, the students proposed having a potluck Thanksgiving dinner. They would provide the main courses; I would bring dessert.



**"I hope younger colleagues will take chances on unexpected opportunities."**

When I reached the potluck, sweet potatoes and Chinese favorites awaited. But the main dish had not arrived. Eventually, one student brought a package—and an apology. Turkeys were hard to get, he said, so he hoped we wouldn't mind Peking duck. We went on to eat a delicious meal, complete with the best Thanksgiving bird I've tasted yet. The potluck gave us a chance to meld cultures and build bonds—some of which endure to this day—and in that moment I knew I had much to be thankful for.

My first year in China proved so rewarding that I gave up my U.S. faculty position to work there for one more year. Fortunately, I was able to land a faculty job after I returned to the United States, and

I've now been tenured for more than 25 years.

I look back fondly on my time in Beijing. I've been proud to see class members publish internationally and to see one elected to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Some have shared what I taught them with their own students.

The experience showed me that I greatly enjoy exploring other cultures and helping nonnative speakers communicate science in English. I've pursued those interests ever since. I've given workshops in many countries, and each year I welcome international researchers to my university to take an intensive writing course, treasuring the chance to establish bonds with scientists from other countries.

I hope younger colleagues will take chances on unexpected opportunities. The bird that appears might exceed all expectations. ■

Barbara Gastel is a professor at Texas A&M University in College Station. Send your career story to [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).