

TEACHING IN CHINA: A MISTI POSTCARD

BY SAL SCATURRO

Salvatore Scaturro, Jr. (BS, Civil and Environmental Engineering, '04) spent the summer with a small team of instructors who introduced the MIT-China OpenCourseWare Initiative at Qinghai University. Based in part of the success of their trip, MIT-China is currently scouting additional host institutions.

Having been in China for a total of 12 months over the past four years on various MIT-China program internships, and having spent time in both large cities and small towns throughout the country, I honestly thought that I would not learn too much more about Chinese education and culture on this, my fourth trip to China.

I have never made such a foolish and naïve assumption in my life.

The unique experiences I have had this summer as part of the MIT-China OpenCourseWare Initiative at Qinghai University have been among my most meaningful, thought-provoking, and—at the risk of being cliché—life-changing.

During my internship with the Environmental Education Media Project

for China (EEMPC) in Beijing during the summer and fall of 2001, I first became exposed to issues facing the developing world. I was so deeply influenced by working with my dedicated colleagues at that organization that I decided to shift my academic focus from structural engineering to environmental engineering upon returning to my undergraduate studies at MIT in the spring of 2002. I felt that this change would allow me to get closer to my newfound interest in understanding—and helping—those in the developing world who lack the opportunities and infrastructure to improve their lives.

Now, three years later, with a bachelor's degree in Civil and Environmental Engineering

and a much clearer understanding of what 'development' implies, I am in Qinghai province, at the heart of China's developing west. Like my internship at EEMPC, this project at Qinghai University has deeply influenced my academic interests and personal growth.

Pilot Project

The purpose of this summer's pilot project was to provide a basis for cultural exchange by introducing the concept and benefits of MIT OpenCourseWare to the students and faculty at Qinghai University. From late June until the end of July, my four teammates (Yiqun Bai '06, Siqi Chen '02, Peter Jeziorek MS '05, Michelle Tiu '05) and I taught biology, computer science and environmental engineering to approximately 100 students.

We modeled our teaching schedule after the MIT system by making use of lectures, recitations, and lab sessions. This type of schedule—and our Western style of teaching—was a new experience for our students, who were accustomed to the more traditional style of Chinese education. There was a definite period of adjustment for them at the beginning of the summer, as they became comfortable asking questions and actively participating in class activities.

Similarly, there was an adjustment period for us as we tried to figure out ways to increase participation. The most effective way was simply by becoming their friends and interacting with them outside the classroom. Our students frequently visited our apartment, and we often cooked and ate with them. They accompanied us on our half-day trips into the city of Xining, approximately 30 minutes away by the number 15 bus. Several of our students even came with us when we took a weekend trip to Mengda Nature Preserve, home to some of Qinghai's most beautiful scenery.

It was during these out-of-class interactions with our students that I experienced the most cultural exchange. The students were especially interested in the details of my family life, American food, and the American education

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Environmental engineering students work on a lab in one of the university's irrigation channels.

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system (specifically student life and the college application process). Many times, the conversations would shift towards a political topic and I'd end up in a discussion about American foreign policy or the education system in China. The development of the western provinces, namely Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia and Shaanxi, is currently a hot topic in China, and several of my students were eager to share their views on this subject.

One conversation was particularly interesting because of the students' sharply differing views on what they feel are the most important

factors influencing China's development. In addition to the clear-cut economic and political factors, there exists a multitude of underlying cultural, historical, educational, environmental and geographical aspects that all play into western China's development.

Immersed in this stimulating environment over the past several months, I

have come to believe that understanding the complex relationship among these underlying aspects will be essential for the effective and responsible development of western China. I have thus made the decision to apply to graduate programs for the fall of 2005 with the intent of researching these factors of China's development.

Teaching Fluid Mechanics

As the summer drew to a close, my teammates went back to the States to continue their studies at MIT and I came back to Qinghai

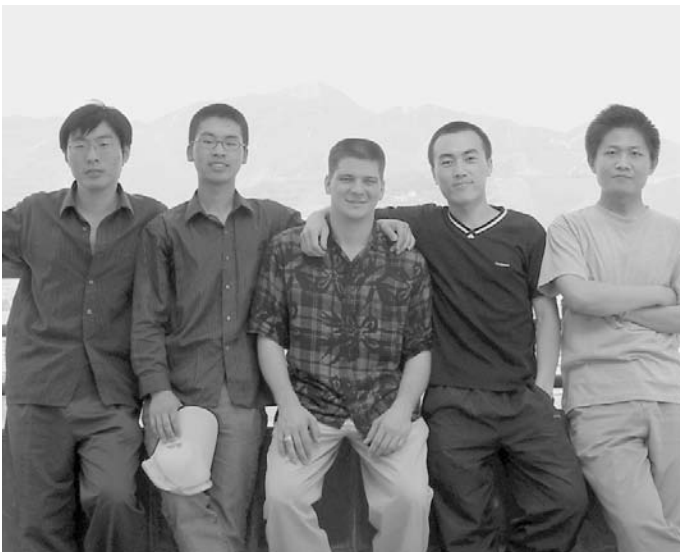
University to begin teaching my fall semester Fluid Mechanics class. The arrangements for this class are a bit different than those for our summer classes; the students are taking my class in place of the class they would normally take within their major. Qinghai University has continued to be extremely accommodating, allowing me full freedom of teaching style.

I am responsible for every aspect of my class: preparing lecture notes, assigning homework, administering tests, and giving a final grade. None of my students has taken a Fluid Mechanics class before, so nearly all of the material I present to them is new. To help them learn the material, I have developed a class website. They download my notes, Chinese translations of the important technical words, homework problem sets and practice example problems. Online course content is a new concept at Qinghai University (and most other Chinese universities), and the students are still getting comfortable using it as an integrated part of my class.

Changing the Face of Education

I also learned an important thing about myself: I thoroughly enjoy and get much satisfaction from teaching. No matter where my life's path takes me, I am certain that it will involve teaching. I feel that this is an extremely lucky time for me—or anyone else—to begin a career as an educator, due to the presence of open-content educational materials and the free sharing of knowledge across cultures. Though open-content materials are only starting to become omnipresent in the educational world, they will always be available to me during my career as an educator. This is why I consider myself lucky. It's similar to how my generation has grown up with computers as a part of everyday life, but my parents' generation did not.

The concept behind OpenCourseWare is revolutionary, and I am certain that it will change the face of education around the world. It already has begun to do so—I've seen it here at Qinghai. ■



Enjoying Nanshan Park with students in downtown Xining