



Stuart Rader photo

Despite the cold weather, a professor from China finds a warm welcome at Mizzou. After boning up on American history and observing present-day Americans, Wenhui Hou tells what she discovered about us.

By WENHUI HOU

A VISIT TO MIZZOU

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In my mind, my life has been very uneventful. But to other people, it seems that I should have nothing more to wish for: My husband and I both work at Lanzhou University in north-central China, where my husband is a professor of Russian history and I teach the history of the world's Middle Ages as well as ancient Chinese history. At the university, we are considered to have a good future. Besides this, I have two adorable children. It seemed that I should be content because life had blessed me with so much. The only thing I needed to do was to preserve the normal flow of this long river of life. But, as I was born with a nature that is never willing to maintain the status quo, I inevitably created some ripples in the calm stream.

In the spring of 1983, I received a notice from the authorities of the university. Under the auspices of a cultural-exchange agreement between Lanzhou University and the University of Missouri, I was selected to represent my university as a visiting fellow in 1984. I was to do research in American history at the history department of the University of Missouri in Columbia, Mo. Naturally this news was very exciting to me. Since 1979, when China began to dispatch students to study abroad, I had wanted to see the world. And so, in 1980, I studied English in my spare time (my first foreign language is Russian) so that I could be prepared for any opportunity that arose. When I received the notice, my dream became reality.

However, even in the midst of my excitement, I felt apprehensive—if the plan went through, it would mean that for one whole year I would not see my husband or my children. Furthermore, in order to fulfill the assignment from my university, it was necessary for me to disregard my original field of study and switch to that of American history. Although I had read a bit about American history in the past, I had never considered the subject from a scholarly point of view. So my biggest responsibility in America would be to start studying anew, which would be arduous work. For instant, I hesitated. But in the end, my hesitation was overcome by my belief that we should control life and not let life control us. Thereupon, my eyes brimming with tears, I took leave of my beloved husband, children and friends, crossed the vast Pacific Ocean and arrived in a country that I had never been to, but that was not entirely unfamiliar either—the United States of America.

To be honest, when I boarded the China Airlines jet on its way to San Francisco, I was in a nervous and fretful mood. I worried about my future superiors and colleagues, and I worried about the environment of the university's campus. Every possible type of question flooded my brain. It got to the point that when my comrades from the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco took me, and

other comrades who had just arrived from China, to view the sights, I did not have the heart to appreciate the invigorating sight of the elegant shore and the Golden Gate Bridge. I decided first to telephone Professor N. Gerald Barrier, who is the chairman of the history department of the University of Missouri. I nervously dialed the number and awaited a response. Almost instantly the telephone receiver transmitted a soft but clear voice: "Ah, Miss Hou, I am Professor Barrier. We are all waiting for your arrival..." At that instant, I suddenly calmed down. This warm and friendly welcome caused me to realize that, whatever happened, it was sure to be wonderful; the thought of living among gracious and caring American friends reassured me. And this confidence was justified by all the experiences that followed.

From the middle of February to the middle of July, following Professor Barrier's suggestion, I started taking some English courses to improve my speech and listening comprehension. I also took several courses in American history. During this period, because I was reading quite a bit as well as attending classes, my interest in American history grew dramatically. Before I came to Missouri, the America I had admired was the America of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. The glory of America's War of Independence, her extraordinary support of people's rights and her exalted humanitarianism have all made America occupy a special position among the countries in the world. In this position, America shines a bright and luminous light. I particularly like the Emma Lazarus poem that is engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

Yes, I love and respect the American spirit of freedom and liberalism. I admire the fact that Americans do not blindly revere the past but instead bravely continue to reform. I think highly of their emphasis on taking real action and their willingness to work strenuously and endure hardship. As a result, the part of American history that interested me most was the period beginning with the War of Independence and going up to the beginning of the first world war.

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However, I do not like the America that is full of racial prejudice. I do not like the America that incites wars in other countries, the America that treated the American Indians so violently, the America that treats black people unfairly, the America that ruthlessly bombed Vietnam. This America leaves me feeling uncomfortable and horrified. Being of a plain and gentle character, I was too timid to criticize these darker aspects of American history. Hence, I adopted an attitude of resignation. Also, I supposed that Americans themselves didn't dare to face these problems. However, in just five short

months, the materials that I read as well as the classes that I took all served to change my opinions. The attitude of Americans toward the Vietnam War is a most striking example of how mistaken I was about this.

After experiencing the longest war in American history, most Americans recognized what a big mistake the war was and how it should serve as a lesson. American historians used facts, maps, television, mathematics—in fact, all sorts of materials—to demonstrate and expose just what America was doing in that Asian country. Many of the historians unabashedly criticized the foreign policy of that time while praising those who participated in the anti-war movement. Now this is what I call the true spirit of self-criticism!

Perhaps this is one reason the United States is able to stand in the forefront of the world after a mere 200 years. I think that only this type of spirit enables a nation to relentlessly reform and continue along the road of progress. I was deeply, deeply moved by this spirit, and I want to tell all my compatriots of this new discovery. While we Chinese feel pride for our brilliant and ancient past as we forge ahead on the road toward modernization, perhaps we also can learn from this American spirit of self-evaluation.

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fter all these new revelations, I decided to switch my field of study from America's early history to the period after the second world war. In August, I began to do my own research. My topics were "The Vietnam War and America of the Sixties and Seventies" and "The American Civil Rights Movement." Before I went back to China, I read and collected a large amount of material. I also wrote some articles on these subjects, which have now been published in China.

I devoted almost every day to research and studying. It was a trying and busy life, but since I knew that my work was useful, I also felt comforted and satisfied. Moreover, when I had leisure time, I was able to travel and to experience other aspects of American society. I visited Hannibal, Mark Twain's hometown, as well as St. Louis, Kansas City and Washington, D.C. I even had the opportunity to admire George Washington's mansion, Mount Vernon. Finally, the night before I returned to China, I visited New York. These trips not only gave me much pleasure but also allowed me to have a taste of some of the customs and of the genuine hospitality of Americans that one cannot learn from books. I was left with some very deep impressions.

Above all, the placid beauty of the small town of Columbia, Mo., was very special to me. I loved the small hills, which become gloriously verdant in the spring. I loved the soft sounds of the summer streams. I loved the autumn paths blanketed with colorful leaves. And I loved the campus wrapped in



BACK IN CHINA, Professor Hou uses a map of North America to teach American history to students at Lanzhou University. Students want to know about American youth, the living standard of American Indians and whether racial prejudice still exists.

PRECIOUS MEMORIES of her year in Columbia include friendships with history department colleagues, an abundance of books in the library and a bustling student body.

white and silver during the severe winter. I loved the abundance of books in the library. I also loved the student union, which was filled with the breath of youth. But the most important reason I loved Columbia so much was the close relationships I had with the people there. I made a lot of new friends. Besides my colleagues in the history department, I also made friends with some young students at the university. In short, I got the feeling that all Americans are broad-minded and loquacious, but most of them are not willing to reveal any of their personal thoughts. They are happy to help people, and they do not expect any reward, although they are certainly career-minded.

One person who is a perfect example of the kind of friends I found in the United States is Professor Susan Flader. This distinguished history professor has devoted all her energy and time to the expansion of the new field of environmental history, in which she has become one of the foremost scholars. As our friendship grew, I slowly began to understand her and inevitably grew to love her. I spent many holidays and weekends with her.

Of all the days I spent with Susan, the most memorable ones were during a Christmas vacation that she graciously invited me to spend with her. We traveled through five states: Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan. The imposing northern scenery coupled with the thrill of meeting new people delighted me. Everything I saw and heard during this trip made me revise previously held prejudices about America.

In the past, information picked up from newspaper articles and books had planted a few notions in my head: Americans are not prone to express sentiment, and they have no sense of family. But at Susan's mother's house, in a lakeside town in Wisconsin, I saw a vivid and touching scene of family life. At Christmastime, except for the second-oldest child (who was working abroad), all the children brought their own spouses and children home for a grand reunion. There were about 10 or so people—certainly enough to create a lovely atmosphere! Every day Susan's 74-year-old mother would prepare and organize all the activities. Although it must have been exhausting, it was evident that she received great joy from her role. I was moved by the respect and consideration that the

children showed toward their mother. On Christmas Eve, while laughing and joking, everyone circled the tree and gave presents to one another. I couldn't help thinking, "Could anyone deny that this was true emotion and family love?"

Besides Christmas, there was another event on the trip that impressed me. In a huge forest in northern Michigan, I met Lynn Day and her husband and grown children. I liked Lynn at first glance, for she had an amiable voice and a delightful face. I originally thought that she was a scholar of natural history, but then I found out that her husband is the manager of a large and famous company, and that she herself was heir to a huge fortune. Natural history was just an outside interest. This made me a little curious because I had never met a rich capitalist before. In my countrymen's eyes, capitalists are people who glut their stomachs but don't use their brains. But the capitalist couple before my eyes were caring, carefree and gracious. Their four grown children were vigorous and lively. Not once did they exhibit the slightest in-



dication that they felt superior because of their affluent background.

What struck me most was the fact that they had no servants; they relied on themselves to do everything. Lynn's husband not only drives a car, but he can repair cars, too. (The morning we were to leave, Susan's car wouldn't start. Lynn's husband and his oldest son braved the freezing rain and helped her fix it.) When preparing a meal, Lynn's husband looked at recipes. When the meal was over, he helped everyone wash the dishes. Also, it was obvious that they were used to this type of living. I was made to think of a fine in a book by the French author Andre Maurois: "Americans love the word 'freedom' . . . if anyone because of his wealth, background or position thought that he was better than someone else, Americans would say, 'Who do you think you are?' and put him back in his place; they would treat him as they would anyone." I think I am now really able to understand this statement.

I must admit that my year in America was a very rich and colorful one. I had wonderful experiences. Is there anything I didn't like? To be frank, there are some

things that are not very nice. For example, Americans are overly introverted (it is only on the surface that they pretend to be outgoing). This introvertedness did on occasion make me feel troubled and perplexed.

Another thing is how the idea of freedom controls their life style so much that it can seem as though no one cares about anyone else. This caused me to feel lonely and alienated sometimes as well as distrustful. Perhaps these problems are the products of an advanced society where competitiveness is the only means of survival. These two aspects of American society remind me of New York—a bustling, thriving city where below the surface is a dark, dank subway track.

Right now I am back in the country of my ancestors. I have reunited with my family and have started my new teaching position. My students are juniors and seniors. Because they all have some knowledge of America (they took a course in world history as sophomores), added to the fact that American history is very short, I do not need to use a detailed chronological approach in my teaching. My emphasis is on analyzing history rather than narrating it. We treat the period from the War of Independence up through the '60s and '70s of the 20th century, stressing the social and cultural aspects—for example, religion, civil rights, women. When lecturing on these areas, I try not to talk too much about famous politicians—the students already know about—I want to place emphasis on lesser-known figures like Thomas Paine, John Adams, Earl Warren and Martin Luther King Jr.

In addition to lecturing to the students, I have also prepared a reading list. Because most of my students have difficulty reading English, my list consists mainly of Chinese books. One of them is Huang Shaoxiang's *An Abrupt History of America*. (In China, Huang Shaoxiang is the leading authority on American history. He has studied in America and is now more than 70 years old.) My list also includes a Chinese translation of *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890s*, edited by Arthur S. Link and William B. Catton. I also include a Chinese translation of William Manchester's *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972*. All three books are required reading. Besides these are a few essays written in English for those students who are interested.

The book that the students like most is *The Glory and the Dream*. It may not seem the most authoritative American history

text, because Manchester relied heavily on his personal experiences, but the author's vivid style coupled with his humor and objectivity combine to create a work that is worthy of high esteem.

As for my teaching methods, they are not that different from methods used in America. However, because Chinese students are conditioned by the traditional axiom, which demands that students respect the teacher, practically no one will ever interrupt my lecture to ask questions. Instead, the students wait until the class is over. Although this tradition may seem very polite on the surface, I actually feel it is a handicap for the students. On the other hand, because both the professors and the students live on campus, students can freely go to a professor's house to visit, and professors often take the initiative to go to the dorms and help solve problems the students may have. In this respect, the relationship between students and professors is much more intimate than in America. I'm happy that my students seem to like my course.

The questions most often asked by students are: "After the turbulent years of demonstrations (1960s and 1970s), what are today's young Americans like? Are they concerned about their government and politics?" "Is there still racial prejudice among Americans today?" "Where do the American Indians live? How is their living standard?" "What was the social milieu that gave rise to McCarthyism?" "How do Americans view Communism?" There are always many questions. But since the students are very sharp, and their inquiries always stimulating, I really enjoy discussing these questions with them, and I always try my best to give them an answer.

After these young men and women graduate, they will engage in many different occupations, such as politics, social work, historiography, journalism. There will also be those who, like me, will teach at universities and high schools. Hence, through my class, my hope is to make other Chinese better understand America.

Ihave written so much, I guess I should put my pen to rest. But thoughts are still running around in my head. It's true that this experience was an unusual and special one, one that I will always remember. It would, for instance, be hard to forget the optimism and smiling faces of most Americans. It would be hard to forget the grandeur of Lake Michigan, hard to forget the expansiveness of the Missouri plains and hard to forget the active, bustling, but, at the same time, organized student life in Columbia. Of course, the one thing I could never forget is the unlimited kindness shown to me by my friends.

These moments are some of the most precious and brilliant of my life. □