

Editor's Note: Gaoying Bolinger first wrote about her initial trip to Pittsburgh in the October 1989 and January 1990 *Pittsburgh Magazine*. An excerpt from that article edited slightly for presentation here (and used by permission) is a good place to start her story. — LG

I WAS THE FIRST one in the history of my Chinese family to go abroad. I was the first one in my neighborhood — the railway working-class neighborhood and the vast farming areas — who had ever been out of my country. I could not forget the morning I had left home. It was August 6, 1986, a date my father had chosen for me.

My family had tried to keep the date of my departure a secret, for we did not want to disturb our neighbors and friends. But when I stepped out of my home at dawn, I found myself and family walking through our neighbors. An old woman stopped me, grasped my hands in hers and asked: "My daughter, you're going to school in the United States, aren't you?" "Yes," I answered. "It's a wonder. I've never heard of such a thing — going so far to go to school." My mother's tears were rolling down her cheeks again, I saw, but she tried to dry them.

[Boarding a plane in Beijing, Gaoying's introduction to America en route to Pittsburgh came when she landed first in San Francisco.] As soon as I entered the huge San Francisco Airport lounge, I began

Bridging Two Cultures

by Gaoying
Bolinger

to see how strange this foreign land was. I was stunned to see such a variety of peoples — whites, blacks, browns, and yellows; variety of clothing — dresses, trousers, shorts, jeans, skirts, jackets and windbreakers; variety of languages. No one looked odd, and no one got special attention. It was so different from China, especially from my hometown, where there was only one skin color — yellow. If a foreigner passed by, people would watch him and get a kick out of him, because he was so different. Once two foreign engineers came to my hometown. They got stuck in the middle of a staircase in a department store for half an hour, because people from the outside climbed up the stairs to have a close look at the "big noses and blue eyes," and people from the upper floors rushed down to feast their eyes on the "mustaches and high foreheads." My father asked me to be fully prepared because [in] the United States I would also be watched and laughed at. So I expected people to watch me, follow me and ask me questions. But no one noticed me, and I felt disappointed.

At 11 p.m., I got on a USAir flight to Pittsburgh. At 8 a.m., August 16, 1986, the plane landed at Greater Pittsburgh International Airport. I was the only Oriental getting off at Pittsburgh. I followed a stream of people through a big hallway which seemed to be endless — not knowing what was next or how I was going to get to the University of Pittsburgh. I was alone. I did not have any friends or relatives in this city. I did not know where to get my luggage.

[In fact, Gaoying's luggage, along with her addresses of sponsors at the University of Pittsburgh, had been lost by USAir. After a series of

serio-comic mishaps and misunderstandings, Gaoying managed finally to get to the university, only to learn that all the offices were closed because it was Saturday. With less than \$60, she looked for a place to stay until Monday. She was directed to the University Inn Hotel, where she learned that the rooms were much too expensive for her. Sitting in the hotel lobby, she began to cry. Soon she was approached by a policeman and a woman.] “Hi, my name is Carmella, the manager of the hotel.” The manager asked if I had any friends or relatives here who she could help me call and locate. After I told her that I had lost everything, including my address book and my admission letter to the University of Pittsburgh, Carmella went back into the reception section with the policeman. I could hear them making phone calls. At last they came to me and told me that they could not locate anyone who could help me out. I began to cry again, and I pleaded: “Could you please allow me to stay in your lobby for one night? Tomorrow I’ll try to do my best to find a —”

“No, we can’t let you stay here,” said Carmella. “Follow me. Don’t worry. I’ll give you a very comfortable room to sleep in,” said Carmella kindly.

I was nervous. I was afraid that she did not know that I did not have much money. I did not have money enough for even the cheapest room in this hotel. How did I dare to “sleep in a very comfortable room?” “I can’t afford —” “Don’t worry.”

Still in the same kind tone, Carmella assured me, “It’s a gift. You don’t have to pay.” She led me into a very big luxurious room and showed me how to turn on the air conditioner, the TV, and all the lights. Then she patted me on my shoulder, saying, “You must be very tired. Take a bath and have a sound sleep. Don’t worry about money. Don’t worry about anything. Just have a good rest.”

Gaoying stayed at the University Inn, trying to figure out how things worked in this strange new land, and receiving help and encouragement from Pittsburgh strangers. In the meantime, Carmella and the hotel tracked down USAir, who by then had found her luggage. Gaoying went on to have a successful academic career at the University of Pittsburgh, from which she got a masters of fine arts degree in non-fiction English writing in 1989.

In the meantime, Gaoying met another student, Jeff Bolinger, whom she married in 1987. Originally they intended to return to China, at least for a while, but the Tiananmen Square massacre and other governmental obstacles made that not feasible. So Gaoying set out on an odyssey to adapt to Pittsburgh and to find a place in her adopted community. I contacted Gaoying to learn about her subsequent adjustment to Pittsburgh. Her story has similarities to that of many immigrants. The struggle has perhaps been eased somewhat for Gaoying because she speaks good English and possesses an outgoing personality. Gaoying loves to meet people, and this — combined with a quick smile, a hearty laugh, and a zest for life — helps endear her to others and overcome cultural differences. Her husband is a corporate accounts representative for Roadway Package System, and Gaoying has held a variety of jobs that have allowed her to learn about Pittsburgh and its people, and given her an understanding of American culture. She has worked in a Chinese grocery store, a Chinese restaurant, a fast-food restaurant, a bar, a gas station, in the credit department of a department store, and as a social worker, first with children and now with the aged. Gaoying lives with

her husband, her son Alex (almost 3 years old), and her parents. She invited her parents to Pittsburgh when Alex was born, partly to help raise him and avoid day care. Her mother had been a physician in China but has adjusted well to life in Pittsburgh, although she has not been able to practice her profession and works as a manual laborer in a local factory. Her father also was a physician in China but is unable to practice here. He is more homesick for China, and feels more isolated by the language barrier. Gaoying speaks here about being Chinese and becoming an American.

I feel sort of like an outsider. My husband’s not Chinese, and so when we go to someplace like the Chinese school, I only see two Americans there, also married Chinese women. My husband doesn’t speak Chinese, so I have to speak English. Also, I don’t know how they look at me. Because I’m married to Jeff, I’m sort of an outsider to the Chinese.

For me and Jeff to understand each other is also hard, you know. He’s never been to China. I’m part of Jeff’s family. I go to their family reunions — Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other holidays. At first it was a courtesy, but now I’m really excited about them because of my son. I never knew those festivals. I was never interested in Halloween, in July 4, in Thanksgiving, but since my son is born I think everything is so important. Everywhere I go, I have to bring him along. He knows all the American holidays.

Me, I don’t know what I am. Most of my friends are Chinese. But to speak the truth, [although] I know a lot of Chinese, they all need help from me or I need help from them. We’re always busy helping each other. When one calls, I ask right away how can I help you, and vice versa. We exchange information — how to bank, life insurance, car insurance, best school, how to buy a house. It’s almost always about information when we call each other. All my [Chinese] friends are like me: we “settled down” but we didn’t really settle down. One of the most helpful things I remember in adjusting to America was every Sunday at CMU, one person always organized speeches by two people from different professions who would talk about American society, about jobs, life insurance, a career.

Pittsburgh people are very nice. When I started the new job, I felt like an outsider. White people [workers] talked among themselves; black people talked among themselves; I really felt the difference. They went to lunch in different groups, talked about each other, and I really felt left out. I would come home and say, “Nobody likes me.” Jeff said that was good — that way people leave me alone. But I said, “No, I want to be a part of it. I want to be friends.” Of course, at first they didn’t know what I was like; I was the only Chinese in the agency. But I tried very hard, I tried to work hard. I have a different perspective. I got accepted. My supervisor and my director both support me, the workers are nice to me, they give me a lot of confidence. I love my work.

My co-workers treat me very nice. They celebrate my birthday; they gave me a baby shower when Alex was born. One thing that was very special for me: they all came to the ceremony when I received my American citizenship. The director even gave me the day off! I go to their weddings, baby showers, promotions, and every Friday if they have some activity, I try to be part of it.



Gaoying Bolinger, left, with her family: from left, husband Jeffrey, mother Shuwen Gong, father Shusheng Gao, mother-in-law Marjorie Bolinger, and father-in-law Willis Bolinger.

I'm invited to everyone's baby shower, and if anyone's family member dies I go to show my condolences. But outside of work there's not much contact. This is largely because my husband wants to have our house all fixed up before we begin inviting people over. Our house is a beautiful old house but is what the realtors call a "fixer upper," and we are still "fixing up"!

Children become the thing that ties me to the community. My son Alex, for sure, is a bridge. He goes to Chinese preschool on Sundays, to American preschool on Mondays and Wednesdays. The Chinese preschool is at Community College of Allegheny County. There he learns his own language. There are a lot of Chinese there, and they learn a lot. When he goes to American school, he plays, when he goes to Chinese school he sits and learns. He's very clever. He knows both languages, and speaks without an accent. He translates for my mom and dad, and is teaching them English. He's amazing. He's taught my dad the names of animals and trees and other things, such as the American national anthem and Christmas carols. My dad says Alex is a better teacher than me! Alex is not just our bridge to the American community. He's also our bridge to the Chinese community. He

helps keep me in touch with my Chinese culture. I hadn't done much about Chinese holidays, like Chinese New Year. I wasn't that interested in all those holidays before, but now I have to get into Chinese New Year for my son.

Alex does not go to church now. But he'll go to church when he understands more, when he's 4. We'll follow my husband's religion — Presbyterian. He's definitely also going to go to the Pittsburgh Chinese Church, the PCC, so he can learn the Bible in both languages. My mom and dad also want him to go back to China for school in the summer. I send him to dancing school, piano, art. He likes pictures. I explain everything to him. It's difficult for us; we're very busy because we have to keep with both communities. We don't want him to forget Chinese, and we want him to know about things American. Already he knows a lot about American culture — "Beauty and the Beast," "Snow White," and all that. I never knew American songs, but now because of my son I know how to sing them.

I even learn about America from the food he wants, such as hamburgers. I don't know all the drinks he wants. I ask advice from my coworkers about American foods. Alex's food is Chinese and American. I want to make sure he knows all American foods. He'll know about all the junk food, too. My husband asks why the cupboard is full of American junk food — cheese curls, chips, cereals? "Why don't you have him eating nutritious Chinese food?" I say, "Hey, he's American, he's got to know all about America as well as about China!" It's funny.

The Chinese community is organized more around Taiwanese than mainland Chinese. There are several organizations. One is called Chinese American, but it is really Taiwanese. There is an organization of mainland Chinese students, but it is very loose since students are very busy, and when they graduate they go to other cities. I don't have much contact with mainland Chinese students I knew at Pitt. The Chinese school, I think, is run by the Chinese American organization. But it's mainly for settled people, like doctors, professors. You have to pay for the Chinese school, and pay also for the outings. You have to pay for Chinese New Years celebrations. The PCC is also mainly for professionals — people who are settled. The average mainland Chinese person in Pittsburgh — restaurant workers and other low paid workers — do not go to church [because] they work very long hours struggling to make a living. And besides they don't have the money. As a student at Pitt I couldn't afford to pay for those things, and I was too busy studying and working and surviving. And I've been busy with my family and job. But now with Alex I'll get more involved.

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Gaoying has prepared a manuscript for a book on her subsequent impressions of Pittsburgh. An early, descriptive title was "Painful Memories That Will Be With Me Always." The following excerpts show that Gaoying loves America and Pittsburgh, but she is troubled by many of the same social and moral issues that also worry the rest of us.

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I have lived in Pittsburgh for nine years, and I have heard and seen not just the good side of America, but also the bad. The streets here are not paved with gold, and the land not always

bathed in sunshine. There are lots of dark, cold and hopeless corners here.... I remember interviewing prostitutes in downtown Pittsburgh while I was a student in the English Department at Pitt. One young woman told me she chose that career because with a waitress' salary she could not buy her two children brand-name shoes and clothes. She left her two children with their grandmother in the country and sent money home so that they could go to school wearing the same expensive clothes, the same expensive shoes and the same hair styles as the other children. While working as a child welfare worker I met a 23-year-old woman who had seven children by five different fathers. The youngest three children were tested cocaine positive at birth. The young mother had never had any prenatal care, and two of her children were born in front of the entrance of a hospital.... The last time I saw her was in front of a dirty bar....

Once, out of frustration, I asked a 15-year-old girl: "Martin Luther King said that every child had a dream, where is your dream? Why don't you pursue your education? Can't you be a teacher, a nurse, a doctor or just any kind of worker, who contributes to the society instead of taking, taking and taking?" She replied, "Why? I don't want to be a teacher, or a doctor, or do any kind of work. My sister lives on welfare, \$350 a month. Her children live in a nice foster home. She lives very well. I don't mind living like that." I told her: I mind....

I left child welfare, heart broken. I have been working for the aged Americans since. This job has opened my eyes even wider. I have seen people spend over \$100,000 in a nursing home, and then be turned away by that same home after it had taken their life savings. Nursing homes are purely business — set up for making money. I met a mother who had raised her children and made them all successful and well-to-do citizens...but these children would not pitch in to pay their mother's daycare or personal home care expenses. They dumped the mother on the government.... It's not unusual for wealthy adults' parents to be on welfare.

The saddest social phenomenon I have noticed... is young Americans who become disabled by gunshot wounds. In fact, gunshot wounds have recently been listed as "Other Related Condition" in a formal government document used in applications for medical assistance for nursing home coverage. This worries me and frustrates me greatly — the safety of American streets, parks, schools and working places. I am so frustrated that such a beautiful and great country would be helpless facing such terrible crimes. I always pray to God: please don't let me die before I raise my child. There are so many things I want my son Alex to learn, to share, to enjoy and to contribute. I don't want any bullet to rob him of all those beautiful things in life.

Alex is considered a lucky child by most of my Chinese compatriots just because he was born in the United States of America — the land of freedom, wealth and beauty. I want Alex always to remember his origins and his fortune, and to appreciate what both China and America have offered him. I want him to work to make both countries more beautiful and liveable. I believe that many parents think the same. ☸