

A large, low-poly, geometric panda sculpture is the central focus of the image. The panda is rendered in white and black, with its features defined by sharp, angular facets. It is positioned in an urban environment, with a modern building visible on the left and a stylized, geometric mountain peak in the background. The overall aesthetic is modern and architectural.

# TWO MONTHS CHENGDU

REPORT ON A STUDY TRIP TO CHINA

Dear interested reader,

After spending two months in Chengdu I would like to share some of my experiences and insights with you. Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan Province in south west China. The reason I visited this city was a scholarship I won from an essay competition by the Van 't Hoff Institute of Molecular Science. I worked on a joint research project facing the challenges of Carbon dioxide conversion with plasma catalysis. The idea of the collaboration is to prepare and characterize catalysts in Amsterdam and then implement and test them in the plasma reactors they have in Chengdu. We would both like to develop new catalysts, but also gain a deeper understanding of what is going on in the plasma, on the catalyst and how the plasma changes the catalysts properties.

As the project was just beginning, and I was the first student visiting, many things didn't work as expected or turned out differently. This meant I spent a lot of my time on setting things up. I explained the related chemistry and lab procedures to make catalysts to my colleagues in Chengdu, who are all mainly physicist. On top of that I found a plain white, never used wet-lab which I equipped and started using with my colleague. In return I learned a lot about plasma physics and chemistry but also the Chinese mentality, work life and bureaucracy.

Besides working I got to discover Chengdu which is a huge city with a lot to offer. Great and spicy food, beautiful surrounding mountains, friendly people, crazy nightlife, Pandas and tea culture are just a few things I experienced and learned to love. The air pollution which was bad, especially in December, was maybe amongst the only things that really bothered me.

For my experience in China I want to thank Aart Klein and his wife Ilona who showed me around 'their' Chengdu, took me to concerts or dinners with the rotary club and bike riding on Saturday. Furthermore, I'd like to thank Ximei for setting up and helping me through all the applications and visa necessities, and providing help in every situation when I got stuck with the little things one encounters on an everyday basis. Qiang was a good supervisor and always gave his best to explain things and get as many experiments running as possible, even while he was very busy with end of the year reports he was available when we needed help. And finally, there is my friend and colleague Diyu. He moved in with me and was a good roommate. We spent a lot of time together and he showed me around, helped me with setting up things or provided me with information about China and Chinese culture when I didn't understand. Without him I wouldn't have settled that easily and felt that comfortable to also stroll around by myself. And as this project did not only happen in Chengdu but also in Amsterdam I am grateful that Gadi Rothenberg and Shiju Ravendraan supported, supervised and took a lot of paperwork off me throughout the whole project. And finally, there is Maria, my lovely colleague which I worked on the catalyst with in Amsterdam.

During my time, I wrote a diary and tried describe the things I experienced or observed. This of course gives just a narrow and subjective view - although I would always read articles and talk to my Chinese friends, colleagues and internationals I met. So, if this little introduction has made you curious go on reading - or just have a look at the pictures I took.

All of this is also available on my blog, linked on the logo below with many more pictures and stories.

I hope you enjoy reading,  
Eric Schuler



## Week 1

### Saturday – 2016/10/30

Finally, I got on my flight to Chengdu after waiting around due to technical problems, which continued board meaning I couldn't really use the entertainment system for half the flight. In the end I arrived pretty tired in Chengdu but managed to get through all the immigration processes quite easily. Diyu, my housemate and colleague picked me up and the institutes driver dropped us off just in front of the apartment. The latter was quite nice as it's brand new, spacious and equipped with a comfy bed, couch and huge TV.

We went out for a horrible beef steak (although pricey) and did grocery shopping in a gigantic supermarket. China is not as Asian as all the other countries I've been to so far. Its streets seem quite good, consumption is huge and everything is rather clean. One can spot the differences (and I'm not talking about the people or the language) on how things work, but it was less of a culture shock as Vietnam and Cambodia were.

### Sunday - 2016/10/31

I went out for a walk today to the park next to our campus. It was crowded with people drinking in some of the cafes, exercising in the fitness places or fishing in the river. Especially the Mahjong parlor was quite busy – Diyu told me later that gambling is quite popular here.

In the evening, I went out for dinner with Diyu and his friend. We had traditional Sichuan food including spicy dug-head, tofu-sticks (of course spicy), tofu in spicy sauce and some vegetables on the side. Along with that we had Snow beer which seemed twice as bubbly than European versions but helped with the food. They think I might be ready for hotpot now.



Next to the restaurant is a huge shopping mall including the largest indoor aquarium in the world. Surprisingly they even manage to keep whale sharks (although pretty small ones) in there.

### Tuesday – 2016/11/01

This has been my second day in my new lab here at CIDS in Chengdu. It's actually not really in Chengdu but in Shuangliu – also where the airport is. They built this whole campus here in around 3 years and are still not finished, so I feel a bit like living in one of these famous Chinese ghost towns. I can walk through my apartment building and enter most of the flats as nearly none of them is being rented yet and all the doors are open. This being said, all of them still have their brand new 50" flat screens and fridges waiting for the people moving in. I guess no one tries to do bad things on a campus of a governmental institute closely related to the Chinese military.

The campus was named after the first atomic bomb they managed to blow up. This is not really surprising after having lunch just twice in the canteen, where everyone's obliged to watch their glorious new weapons on the news – right after Clinton and Trumps cockfight and the well covered current Korean state affair. Aart says the

military always gets its five minutes on the news. Yes, things are different. Lunch is at 11.30 and dinner at 17.30. There is no time wasted, the food gets stuffed in as quick as possible to get back to work. But not before having a minimum 30-minute snooze on the office table.

The work itself is quite fun. Things turned out to work differently and screwed up my plans, but in the end things might work out. We will see. Sometimes all of a sudden things happen you wouldn't expect.

Firstly, just after I wanted to start an experiment, a committee of 7 people with different not so clear roles entered the lab. After some hefty discussions (at least that's what I read as I didn't understand any word), and cable inspections for nothing less than 45 minutes they left again. I was told things would improve in the lab soon as they would re-wire everything, mainly the different power plugs, and put them under ground. Someone must have had this brilliant idea before and started this committee as it was a higher order of the main institute. I am not an engineer, but digging tunnels for the cables into the concrete floor didn't seem worth the effort to me. This was for around 5 power cables of machinery that is constantly moved depending on the experiments.

Secondly, the sturdy PC running on XP produced an error during the measurement. All datasets were auto-saved. As the PC decided it had done enough for today, my supervisor called it a day. We worked for three more hours in the office.

**Thursday – 2016/11/03**

Things are going slow at the moment in the lab and nothing is really happening. I left the campus yesterday for some grocery shopping and took the bike out to the mall around the corner. At least somewhat more life over there and some nice street-food and vegetable stands.

My roommate said he feels like the campus is an open prison – and what should I say. He at least speaks the language and can get his way out of there easily by just ordering a Taxi. You may wonder why I can't in the age of apps like Uber? Well, in China the driver will always ring you back to arrange and discuss for 5 minutes where exactly to pick you up. Yes, they do have GPS here and he can see exactly where you are but still he would call you. And of course none of them speak English so they just won't show up. Hail to the technology!



Friday – 2016/11/04

QR codes are dead is what I just recently read in a blog. Why would anyone still put these on ads, on posters, in museums, or for supporting information on conferences? No one uses them really.

No one?

Well I suppose the author of this article didn't make all his way to China. QR codes are big here. They are used in restaurants, supermarkets, well basically everywhere you want to pay for something. That's mainly because it's very convenient. Nearly every younger Chinese I've met so far uses either WeChat-pay or AliPay. The first is the payment system of the Chinese Whatsapp if you like – although this messenger is used for far more than just messaging. AliPay is the payment system of Alibaba, the big trading company which just blew the record on the NYSE for foreign companies when entering. Payment with these systems is just pretty easy. You scan the QR code of the shop or vice versa and the transaction is proceeded. It doesn't take expensive machines, just a smartphone both for the shop and the customer, you can easily track all your spending in the app and there are no service fees charged. The services are also used to call Ubers (or Didis – the Chinese Uber who bought Uber). Maybe it's also so successful as you don't need to apply for a credit card, you can hardly use it, and its way more spread out. You can also just easily transfer money from one account to another. Some also employ the fingerprints due to the new technology in smartphones or its just secured by password. I don't know how safe this whole thing is, but I have to acknowledge that it makes things quite easy if you just use it for you every day purchases.

Week 2:

Saturday – 2016/11/05

Today I got up early and caught a Didi to Aarts house. We put his bikes in the car and drove out of town. Finally, I got to see some rural china – he called it the real China. Things looked way more as one would expect things to look like from documentaries. Everything was a bit messier and laid back, people and kids were playing on the streets and the houses kept their height to no more than three stories.

We met three other expats who joined us and climbed the hills in the south-east of Chengdu for around two hours. The air was noticeably better out here, sadly the fog still was present so that we could not really see the rolling hills and the view from the top was rather disappointing. However, it was a nice ride and luckily less exhausting than I expected it to be in the first place. There were some nice single trails through bamboo forests, steep climbs on narrow paved roads and gravel. It had it all.



After that we went into town, as Aart gave us a lift to the Metro. There were enormous amounts of construction sides for new apartments on the way there and we were just about to get to the outer ring. This city must be

growing really fast. I thought I will try to come back and take some pictures of these blocks as many of them are quite hilarious in the way they are built.

The air quality in town actually was horrible. And so was my stomach. I was happy to be in China and not back in Germany where public bathrooms are way more scarce. We visited a few sites including a Taoist monastery (that's those with the Ying-Yang), the famous old narrow streets and the main square. At the end of the day both were really quite and we took a Didi home as the subway security wouldn't let me in with my Spray. It's all about the safety here so you'll get your stuff X-rayed before entering the Metro.

### Sunday – 2016/11/06

Shopping Malls in China are – just as everything else – a little bit bigger, a little bit more crowded, and of course different. Essentially they look the same in the first place. They are huge places with all the stores of various brands we also know in the west more or less. They have a huge supermarket on the lower level and a food court on the top floor.

So here comes what's different. Children. All of the malls seem to be packed with children as if there was no other playground around. And essentially that's what the idea is. There is no cooler place for children than in these malls. They have to attract people as ecommerce is growing and growing. Children seem to be the right target,



and also their parents – who will buy stuff for both the children and themselves. You most of the time feel more like being in a theme park than in a shopping mall. The one around the corner has a giant fish tank, they all have things to ride around the corridor for the little ones, and there I haven't seen one without a 3D cinema yet.

Yesterday I visited the Global Centre - the biggest mall of them all. Its huge and hard to beat by any other mall, as it's the biggest building in the world when it comes to floor area. They have the biggest plastic ball pool I have ever seen, a giant waterpark and a lot more. It's crowded with children as you can see on the pictures above. Whoever still thinks China is a communist country is wrong – it's all about consumption. Although they share the playgrounds.

### Tuesday – 2016/11/08

China and especially Beijing is famous for its air pollution. Days when one can hardly see the sun, breathing gets terribly exhausting and doesn't feel right. These are just stories, rumours I heard – actually I've never been to Beijing myself. However, I am definitely not

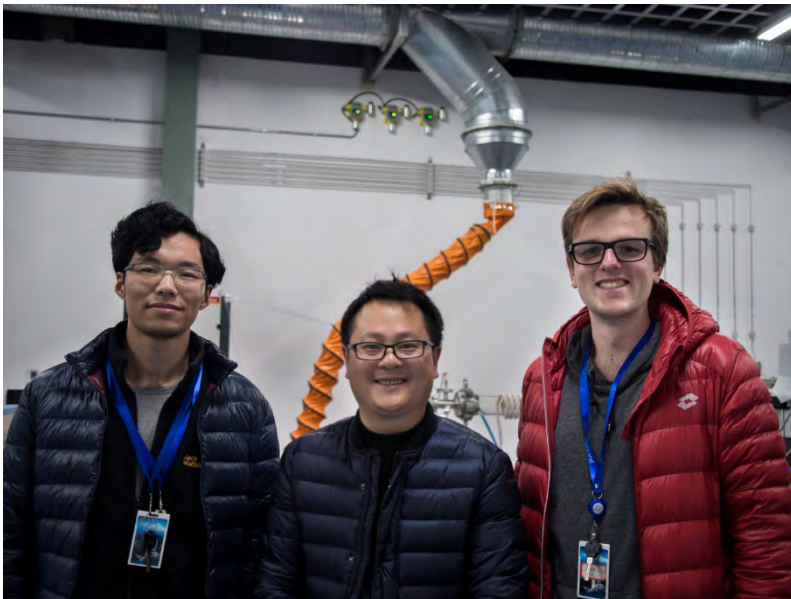
missing out on the pollution here in Chengdu. From the day I arrived things got worse every day. The geographic conditions here next to the mountains don't allow for any air-flow and rain is rather scarce. Thus, the pollution builds up over days and breathing or going out isn't as fun anymore. Although pollution reaches higher levels in the capital there are also good days there. This is not so much the case in Chengdu where pollution is constantly bad.

People would stay in or skip their running sessions until the next rain washes the particles out and makes things better for some hours. I never admired a cold rainy day as much as I did yesterday as the air felt fresh and clean – still I wouldn't want to compare it to western standards.

Surprisingly, I didn't see as many people wearing face masks to protect themselves from the pollution as I imagined – I counted three by now. Another remarkable fact is that it seems that most people think they are safe from the pollution when they stay at home or inside. If one has ever worked or lived in China and thinks twice this doesn't make any sense, as Chinese love to keep their windows open and rather wear down filled jackets while watching TV. Of course they have their reasons and argue that materials used in construction are very toxic and thus the house should be ventilated. How this goes with letting the pollution from outside in still is a mystery and will be further investigated.

### Friday – 2016/11/11

The madness started already yesterday evening with a TV show. A big TV show where all of the top stars of the Chinese music scene were performing, the Victoria secret models including Alessandra Ambrosio showing their skin and video conferences to Thomas Müller were arranged.



So what is all this for? It's double 11. Originally this day was called Single's day - because of all the 1's in the date. However, back in the day, the world's biggest online retailer Alibaba was looking for a date where he could promote sales without conflicting with conventional stores. And double 11 was just the perfect day. A national holiday, no other sales happening and just in between Christmas and the autumn sales. Since then double 11 has been growing and growing. This year Alibaba's platforms alone sold goods for 17,7 billion US Dollars. The first billion was in after just 52 seconds. And 86% of the things were purchased via smartphone.

Diyu happened to order 13 parcels, including some things for myself. So, I was excited find out how fast all these things would be delivered and if everyone was going to run around the campus with piles of parcels.

## Week 3:

### Saturday – 2016/11/12

The weekend started early with a bike ride in the fresh air of the eastern hills of Chengdu. This week we had a better view and the trail also included a pristine Buddhist Monastery on the top of the hill. The oranges are ripe at the moment and make beautiful scenery for riding. After our little workout I finally had some exploration time by myself.

I went to Du-Fu thatched cottage with a friend. This is a big park which comprises the historical house of the poet Du-Fu, one of the oldest and most famous Chinese poets who is still popular. The park is very pretty and has a museum in the buildings. However, you do not feel like you are in a museum at all. Everything is very open, well designed, and has a lot of bamboo around its little fishponds. I was told that these trees were very popular amongst Chinese poets and one of their sources of creativity. After all I can't deny that this place had a very relaxing atmosphere. You forget that you are in this busy and polluted city as the trees seem to absorb all the noise and bad air.

After this relaxing experience, I got my blood and sweat flowing. Today is the first time I'm trying Sichuan Hotpot. It's what we know in Europe as Fondue with the slight differences that the pot consists of 50% Chili and Sichuan peppers mixed with 50% oil and water. This makes quite a spicy combination. Other than that it works pretty much like fondue. You order all things you want such as different meats, vegetables, mushrooms and so on and just dump them in the pot. Also, everyone has a little bowl with sesame oil in front of him which can be mixed with vinegar, herbs, tons of garlic or more chili – just as one prefers. When the things in the pot are just right, everyone uses their chopsticks and fishes out what he or she wants, dips it in their very own sesame oil to stand the spiciness', and moves it to the mouth. It's a very nice way of having dinner with friends and the people here love it. It just takes ages to eat and is usually accompanied with a lot of beer to wash down the spiciness. This will not be the last time having this.

### Sunday – 2016/11/13

Chunxi Road is the most popular CBD in Western China and full of shops. Whoever might still have hope that China really is Communist (with some Chinese spice) – this is where you lose your illusion. This area is nothing but shopping. From really cheap warehouses up to high-fashion boutiques and department store - one finds them all. In between there are little alleys where street-food is offered.

This is the first shopping area where they don't seem to put playgrounds and toys for kids, it's just purely shops and some restaurants. The biggest shopping centre there is the IFS which has some nice sculptures on its roof. Especially the Giant Panda is a big attraction as it seems to climb up the facade of the centre and is 17 meters tall.

Surprisingly one also finds a really non-Chinese area around there. They built, of course, a shopping centre around an old





temple. However, instead of putting their 'bigger is better' skyscrapers, the houses are just two stories high and pick up the style of old traditional Chinese architecture. In between the houses there are little gardens and canals. This gives the latter space and creates a really relaxed shopping atmosphere as the temple seems to spread its vibe out on the streets. It is just next to the big centre full of madness, but the feel is totally different.

### Wednesday – 2016/11/16

Being a Master student in China is different compared to Europe. My colleague, who is in the same stage of his studies as I am, has different things to do. We have in common that we both had one year of courses in our first year of the Masters. However, he went to a university in Beijing, and for that time he had to take subjects related to his work here at the institute. This is the first difference – instead of being student at a university he is employed by the governmental research institute and is somewhat in between what we consider a student and a regular worker here. They provide him with a monthly allowance, almost free housing and cover his tuition fees. On the other hand, he has to write his thesis at the institute on the research project he was put on and works here full time.

The main difference is that he is mainly occupied with work here. He is the one looking after the lab and cleaning it, he draws the plans for the instruments following the instructions of his supervisor. If there are power cuts at the weekend he has to come in and restart the systems. Furthermore, his supervisor lets him do all the paperwork including all the bills for all purchased things or the purchases themselves. Speaking of paperwork there seems to be much more here than everywhere else I have been to before – every little tube or pack of gloves needs permission from the department above, they have to write weekly and monthly



reports on what they did. That's not for their professor but an institute regulation. These practices also led my professor to say 'that's maybe why Chinese groups have to be twice the size to work at the same speed' - just because there are so many forms to fill and regulations to look after.

Overall, my colleague here has different duties and much more to do. He can't concentrate so much on his education or research. On the other hand, this model allows him to do his Masters without any need of bringing money in. This is a great chance for children of the poorer population who otherwise could not afford this education.

### Friday – 2016/11/18

It has been a dusty week with really bad air pollution and nearly no sunshine. The only thing that was super shiny were the floors in our building. This is however not surprising as five ladies are around on a full-time contract and you see them wiping the floors and desks all the time. In the afternoon this squadron seems to enjoy having chats and they quite often enjoy the view from upstairs where you can look into our lab and see the busy scientists playing with their newest toys. Sometimes I wonder why they employ so many people to keep the house clean

and I am sure, if they were working more efficiently this job could easily be done by two persons instead of five. This does not just account for the cleaners here. There are a lot of guards employed on campus which seem to be unnecessary, in the supermarket one finds employees helping you with all sorts of things. In the metro line there are people arranging the masses before the train arrives and keep things safe, although they have these safety doors here. There are many more examples out on the streets. The spirit of kicking out people and just employing the littlest amount required, has not yet arrived here it seems.

## Week 4

### Saturday – 2016/11/19

I had to get up early today to catch the fast-train to Qingchengshan – one of the five holy mountains of Daoism. The weather wasn't really great as it was rainy still in the morning and the fog destroyed any hopes of really seeing the high mountains in the distance. It seemed to also have a good side though as the mountain was quiet. My colleagues had me warned before, that although it's a holy and spiritual place I should have no too high expectations of a quiet trip. With all the slippery and narrow paths, I was very grateful that it was not crowded.

The mountain itself is full of temples and little resting pagodas. There is a little lake over which one can take a boat or walk around in. Everything seems to be quite authentic although most was rebuilt after the 2008 earthquake, but it's still the old style. The concrete was hidden more or less effectively and to my surprise the paths were kept as narrow as before and not adapted to the masses of people. Nevertheless, you weren't in China if there were no such things like convenience and ways to be lazy. Firstly, one can rent two guys carrying you around on a seat they balance on their shoulders. And secondly they built a gondola bringing people half way up. They are very proud and mention it on quite a few signs that it is the latest piece of engineering from Doppelmayr in Austria – probably just good enough for the gods.

Overall, I had a great time on the mountain, enjoyed the fresh air, the hiking and the temples. The nature and the forests out there are very beautiful and dense and going in autumn with all the coloured leaves was an additional treat.



### Sunday – 2016/11/20

Parks enjoy a very high popularity here in Chengdu, especially on Sundays. Today I had a stroll around People's Park in the very centre of town which is just a view minutes' walk away from the Tianfu Square. It was jammed with people, young and old, a lot of kids and families but also friends. I discovered a lot of different activities that seem to be popular around here.

Firstly, there are the tea-houses. They are spread all over the park and are very similar to the beer-gardens one finds in Germany – except for the fact that people would drink tea. Tea is very popular, especially around Sichuan province where a lot of it is produced. People in the tea houses bring their food and order tea, they play card

games or Mah-jongg. The latter originally was a card game but seems to be way more fun to play with stones as they make more noise. Another fun thing in the tea-houses are the ear-cleaners. These are guys offering their services to clean your ears with little brushes. They wear headlights to see better and finish their cleaning with ringing your head like a bell – them holding a tuning fork against the brush whilst it's still in your ear changed my mind of trying the practice.

Other than the tea-houses one can find the poets. Mainly old people, but also a few younger ones write their poems on the stone surface. To do so they use calligraphic brushes the size of a mop and just water. The art of writing traditional characters is very appreciated here in China and a symbol for education and a higher stand. I found it astonishing how precise some of them could draw small characters the size of a A5 paper just by moving their wrist. The poems last just for a view minutes due to the use of water so some have already disappeared half already when they are finished.

Lastly there are the concerts. On a lot of corners traditional music is played, choirs sing old folk songs but also theatre plays take place. They don't require any stages just some free space. One does not get charged to follow the audience but it can happen that you are asked to participate if it's one of the Karaoke places. All of them have shitty sound systems which put the focus on being loud rather than crisp and clean. It took me by surprise though that every of the concert places had his official who measured the noise rate and made sure the performance was not too loud. Everything is loud in China, everyone loves the noise and rather turns the radio up than down, uses his horn although there is no need most of the time and tries to get customers into the shops with megaphones – all these noise-meters just seemed very odd.



### Monday – 2016/11/21

Getting a train ticket is a bit trickier in China – you can order it online but you have to pick up the ticket in person showing your Passport or Chinese ID (if you are Chinese). Travelling on a train without a passport is not possible. However, that one needs a passport to just purchase the ticket does not really make any sense because you can't enter the station without having your identity verified again. However, it goes in line with the strict visa regulations and their general concern about security.

Following the security debate about terrorism in Europe and the calls for passenger checks at train stations and on metros sounded bizarre for most people over there. Here it's just reality. Going on one of the new fast trains does not require less security checks than a flight. There are X-ray scanners for baggage and metal detectors for passengers. It's almost impossible to take some body spray on the metro, as I found. But that is just for the stations close to the centre of town. Although I got checked on stations further out, I managed to take some forbidden stuff on board. So it's a bit questionable whether all this fuss is worth it, or again is just showing the good will of the government.

To prevent too long lines at the entry they installed a lot of these checking stations – at least four for smaller metro stations. For the rush-hours they seemed to be prepared, too. One can see a lot of these zick-zack waiting areas.

### Tuesday - 2016/11/22

I am trying to read papers today in the office as the service guy is downstairs trying to fix our FTIR machine. Usually I am pretty good at ignoring things around me and my filter for Chinese is almost as strong as the Great Firewall. However, today it's pretty loud. Chinese see no need to gather somewhere to have a chat and respect that others are working or trying to concentrate. If there is a joke to be told – and there are many – the whole office will know, the whole office will laugh and start building up on these jokes. Chinese have a reputation to be loud if they are in a group, and up to now I can definitely verify that claim. This is also an easy way to



distinguish Japanese from Chinese tourist groups. If you hear them from 100 meters away they are most likely Chinese – if they see something surprising or nice they will tell each other and the noise will go up a lot.

### Wednesday – 2016/11/23

My Chinese friends like jokes. They use them specially to talk about things concerning the government or stupid rules and bureaucracy.

Regarding the news on TV there is the following joke:

'The first ten minutes on the news show how busy the leader is, the second ten minutes show how successful and happy Chinese people are and the last ten minutes present the wars in the world.'

See how great and good the government is, work as hard as your government does, see how happy people are. Of course the Chinese people know that it's a fair share of propaganda. Also they know a lot of things which are not covered by the news. At least they know that there are things that won't be covered. And when comparing the Chinese and Western news I get reminded that there is a strong bias on our side, too.

Friday – 2016/11/25

Due to the nice weather report I spontaneously booked a train ticket to Emeishan yesterday. That's the highest of the five holy mountains of Buddhism in China and just one hour away by fast train. As I had some experience now with public transport and delays of more than an hour I gave myself three hours to catch my train at South railway station of Chengdu. That's 16 kilometres on the bus and supposed to take 55 minutes. As I skipped my dinner I thought I would rather have it at the station than instead of missing the train. In the end I skipped dinner completely. So how did that happen?

First two trucks crashed horribly in front of the bus just after two stations. They ran into each other front to front as one of them decided to take a shortcut and go on the wrong side of the street (note: this street has 10 lanes of which the inner 8 are for fast and the one furthest out is for slower traffic and scooters). This, however, only cost me around five minutes as the bus driver didn't care all too much, pulled out backwards and continued our trip. A few minor traffic jams added some 20 minutes on the bill until the road got totally blocked. I was still 8 km away from the train station and had 90 minutes to go. Easy. But not if your bus driver wouldn't let you out. The traffic wasn't moving at all and people were already selling snacks through the windows. I checked for later trains and realized that they were all booked out. Another ten minutes of arguing didn't help - I was still stuck in the bus. The bus driver pretended to not understand and repeatedly said: Dangerous. So I started pretending, too. A passenger who would puke all over his bus finally made him change his mind - probably not my worst acting. I left the bus behind and started jogging next to the traffic jam. With 60 minutes and the next metro station just 3 km away my hope to reach the train was back. However, I didn't take the smog into account. After one kilometer of running next to the crowded street I gave up and hopped on another bus as the traffic seemed to be better. Although the bus just went past the metro station, he wouldn't let me get off for the same reason as before - too dangerous. At least the traffic started flowing again after some minutes and I had 25 minutes when I left this bus. Another 500 meters in the crazy air and there the metro was. From now on I got lucky. Every train just arrived, switching metros went smoothly and the people in the queue let me pass to get my ticket. The lady at the counter issued my ticket in no time, the security checks were empty and I hopped on the train - the guard at the entrance rang up the train that one more guy was coming. At 8pm straight the door closed behind me - from then on I enjoyed my tea with water from the hot water dispenser and once again was amused that even here toilets are for squatters only. Oh, and even here the bistro is the place to go for people without a seat.



I arrived without any further troubles at the Teddy Bear Hostel. After I checked in I got some crackers for dinner as all the shops already closed down. I met Julius in my dorm who I teamed up with for the hike the next two days to the top of the mountain.

## Week 5

### Saturday – 2016/11/26

At 8am straight we started walking and first headed up to the Fuhu temple. It turned out to be the nicest temple on the whole mountain of those we saw. Furthermore, the light in the early morning hours was just brilliant as you can see on the photos. From there we went up and were surprised that basically all the ways were pathed – there was no ascend where they did not build any proper stairs. This is impressive as a lot of the path is quite remote from any streets, massive limestone was used and the total distance is about 50 kilometres. On the way we crossed different vegetation zones beginning with dense jungle woods including various trees, bamboo forests and more rough terrain with smaller bamboo varieties and conifers. The most impressive was the jungle in the monkey canyon which was dense and features a lot of different species of trees, bamboo, flowers and grasses. The famous Emei monkeys could be found all the way up and were very nasty as they knew where to get their food from. Although there were lots of signs telling people not to feed the monkeys, the Chinese would stuff them with all sorts of food. Mostly sweets were handed to them and their bellies were round and fat. Our stop for the night was the Elephant Bathing Pool, a temple on 2000 meters above sea-level. We walked for 8.5 hours that day including lunch and temple stops and covered a distance of 35 kilometres including 2500 metres of climb. Although we had one more hour of daylight we decided to play safe and stay there and skip the sunrise at the top for safety reasons – actually we were quite tired, too. The facilities up there were pretty basic, such as the bathroom which was outside and the toilet that left little room for privacy. On the other side we got a good deal for the room and an electric blanket that kept us warm at night. All the Chinese sleeping up here had hot footbaths and a decent amount of schnaps to keep themselves warm.



### Sunday – 2016/11/27

The Chinese definitely had a point when they continued their way up to the peak even at night. Although we were already above the clouds, the peak didn't allow a full view on the sunrise. The walk up afterwards was really nice with the sun coming up and all the snow and ice covered trees around us. We were the only ones already making our way up - at least until we reached the 2400m high base of the ropeway. Dozens of buses end their journey here and carry people on the top of the mountain. From here a ropeway makes the last 600 meters of climb quite easy. We didn't go for that option and climbed all the way up. On top the golden Buddha statue was shining in the sunlight and waiting for us – a great treat after 3500 meters of climb and thousands of steps on our 50km walk. The view was stunning and overall we were really lucky with the weather. We went for the easy way down as the frozen stairs were quite slippery and no fun at all. My way back to Chengdu got a little fuzzier as I booked my train

for the wrong day so I had to take the bus. This took a little longer but rewarded me with a stop at a super delicious noodle place. The guy made the noodles fresh from dough which he stretched into spaghetti like noodles by hand. They were cooked perfectly al-dente and served with fresh vegetables.

### Wednesday – 2016/11/30

The smartphone is everywhere here and I will feature that in another article later on. But one thing I discovered today is quite odd. There are people performing live on the internet, just as this dude on the picture above. This is in front of Peoples Park in the centre of Chengdu and crowded as usual. So what is he doing there? Around his neck he is wearing a portable speaker through which he sings songs playback so that everyone on the street can hear it - note that no one except me cares. He sings Karaoke and uses the phone in his hand to make sure he uses the right word. Now comes the most important part: the phone on the selfie-stick. With the latter he establishes a live-stream of his performance on the internet. Just as Facebook live – I couldn't figure out which platform they would use here though. When asking a friend to explain me what happened here I was told that some people actually got reasonably famous and a lot of people would watch these performances. Quite contrary to the fact that on the street no-one cares at all, but rather stares into his phone – probably to watch another live performance?



### Thursday – 2016/12/01

There is this buzzy background noise here in the office all the time. And when I tried to locate it I ended up under my colleague's desk. They use small personal heaters here to keep themselves warm as it's getting colder here. After asking around it seems this is quite common. Two days after my first encounter, my roommate bought one for our home, so that he wouldn't freeze when working on his laptop. Apparently none of the residential buildings south of the Yellow river are supposed to have any central heating implemented – a decision made by the central government. This is one of the examples that central planning can go terribly wrong. There are a lot of towns, including Chengdu, where it gets quite cold in winter with temperatures just above 0°C. Thus, people have to heat their homes with their Air-conditioning system, little heaters, coal ovens or stay cold. On top of that people here would always keep the windows wide open, and insulation of the houses is not a topic they care much about. This all is, except for staying cold, very energy inefficient and explains the increased pollution levels in winter.



In our office building they implemented central heating and I am excited to see if the windows will get closed and the buzzy noise disappears.

### Friday – 2016/12/02

After a long week on campus I felt like going out for a little and took the bus to town. As getting back is both expensive and pretty difficult, I booked a cheap room in a Hotel in town. The latter can be really cheap and for around 130 RMB or 15 Euro, one gets a King-size Bed and breakfast. However, this time I found myself in a bit of trouble. When I arrived at the Hotel, I was told that they could not accept people without a Chinese

passport. The Hotel was just for Chinese people. Thus they told me I would need to go to another branch where this was possible. It took them another 10 minutes until they realized that I actually had a reservation – which I told them over and over before. They pretended to not know my name. It appeared to me then, that they just figured out that I already paid online for the room. From then on I was given a room without them even checking my passport, which is quite dodgy as usually every hostel or hotel won't let you in without a passport and a valid visa. They were playing around with some Chinese ID's when finishing up my room card. I suppose I was registered as another person but still was wondering why they were doing this. The answer followed in a long repetitive sorry, sorry, sorry followed by begging me to not give them a bad review on the site I booked the room on, and forgetting about the incident. I was put in a better room than previously booked – although it was still not very nice. Anyways, I learned my lesson and would double check in the future if the Hotel can accommodate foreign guests.

## Week 6

### Saturday – 2016/12/03

The Bookworm is a nice mix between Library, Bookstore and Restaurant. Many people in there, especially foreigners, seem to use it as a co-working space or a place to hold meetings. Others are just there for the delicious food – so was I. After two weeks of just Chinese I somehow felt like a western dish and thought I'll give it a try there. The food was nice and a VB on the side made my day already at lunch. In the afternoon I visited the Jinsha site museum. The place, almost in centre of town, is one of the main archaeological sites in china. Roadworks in the 2000s lead to its discovery and brought lots of treasures from the city of Jinsha to light. The town belonged to the Shu dynasty and is dated to 1200-650BC. The artefacts include ivory, jade artifacts, bronze objects, gold objects and carved stone objects. Most famous are the face masks made from pure gold and the logo of the sun and immortal birds. The museum is nicely done, quite huge and includes a nice park. One can see all the artifacts but also a big hall was built over the original excavation site which can be crossed on elevated paths. It's as always a good idea to ask for a reduced student ticket which cuts off 50% of the price.



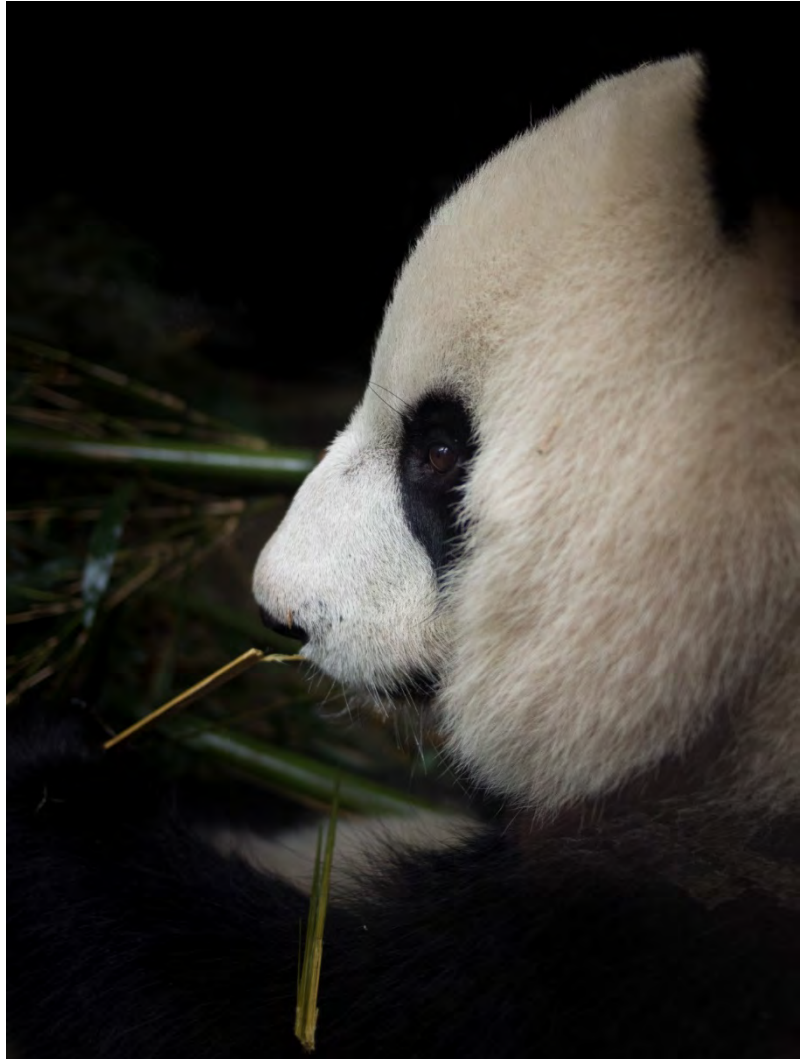
Sunday – 2016/12/04

Finally, I made it to the pandas today. The giant panda research base in the north of Chengdu is the biggest one of its kind and the most successful facility when it comes to reproduction. They have about 35 pandas there on display and one can see red and giant pandas of all ages. You have to go there early in the morning as they get lazy and start sleeping after breakfast. The facility is quite large and all the pandas have their free space and natural habitat. They are supplied with their daily portion of 15 kilos Bamboo, 1 kilo Panda bread for additional nutrition and a pound of apples. Watching them is quite a joy, they are lazy fellows and try to save on every little move when possible. Especially the little ones are very active and like to play on the trees or chase each other through the enclosure. Although tons of people visit the place, I had some quiet time enjoying watching the bears due to the large area and great number of enclosures.

Monday – 2016/12/05

All the construction here, especially all the closed communities pushing out of the ground like mushrooms after rain, is quite impressive. Another fact that adds up on that is the number of malls one can find. There are malls basically everywhere in the city, and always found close to the new housing development area. This seems to be no coincidence as I was told today. Investors building the apartment blocks would also invest in a mall close by. They do this of course to increase their profits based on the assumption that a close-by mall makes the apartments more attractive and thus increases their value. Furthermore, they can rent out the mall which gets customers from the newly built houses. The basic idea behind that is simple and seems to be logic. However, there are also issues which were neglected. They include the trend of people buying houses as investments without even thinking of renting them out. As they bet on a rising price for the apartment they do not want to rent it in order to be able to sell it quickly and as brand new. This in turn leads to a lot of empty apartments and those of course do not create any customers for the nearby mall. Additionally, some malls are quite close to each other, as is the case next to my campus. The malls are just 300 meters apart and both expire noticeable vacancies. Another fact that doesn't play into the cards of shop-owners in the malls are the rising apartment prices themselves. People buying and living in those are often on high mortgages, meaning less money they could spend in the shops.

All in all, to me things happening here at the moment look a bit like a housing bubble, as prices will not further increase if there are no people anymore which can possibly afford all these newly built apartments. Then, also apartments as investment lose their attractiveness and cause losses for people investing and them and a drop in



demand. The central government just introduced a new law to slow down the increase in apartment prices which shows the dimension of the problem. It regulates the availability of mortgages for people that want to buy a house and is meant to stop people from getting mortgages to buy a second, third or fourth ... apartment as an investment.

Tuesday - 2016/12/06

Speciality coffee is getting quite popular in the western world and the ways of its preparation and origin can't be fancy enough. They have something similar here with tea – with the difference that it has a very old tradition here. I am speaking mainly of green and black teas here of which a lot are grown in the mountains around Chengdu. One can spend absurd amounts of money for a good tea and I was lucky enough to be invited to a tea ceremony in one of the famous old tea houses where a company sells their teas which they claimed to be in the top 5 of the most popular high class teas in the world. As they try to sell their products sampling is for free – however I could just try the cheapest. One for which I would have had to pay around 150 RMB or 20 Euro in a restaurant.

The preparation requires various little pots, hot water of around 95°C, a sieve and a special tray for the table which allows the water run-off and keeps the table and people dry. First the brewing pot gets heated by flushing it with hot water. The water is kept in the pot with lid on for about a minute and subsequently disposed. Now the tea leaves get involved and put into the empty brewing pot. They get heated by the pot and the hot vapour open the pores of the leaves – one can now get a first smell of tea.

Now follows the actually brewing process. The hot water is poured over the leaves and the lid is closed for roughly five seconds. Then the tea and the leaves are separated via a sieve where the tea gets transferred into the serving pot. Every participant of the ceremony has its own little cup which compare to shot glasses in size and have to be pre-heated just as the brewing pot. After finishing the first round of tea the actual brewing procedure can be repeated up to twelve times. The sieve is not need after two times as the leaves are now back to their original size and can be hold back by the lid.



So why all the fuss for some cups of tea? Well the answer was given by the taste. It evolves over time. The first rounds are very mild and hold a variety of flavours. Compared to coffee the bitterness is much lower which makes it easier – at least for me – to distinguish the different notes. With ongoing brews, the tea gets more intense and bitter, however it is just bitter in the first few moments and then changes its character into something sweet and is very delightful.

Overall the ceremony was a great experience and I want to thank my friend for all the effort in translating what the tea-master told us. I would have missed out on a lot without that help. We left the teahouse tea-drunk – a drunk different from coffee or alcohol but definitely noticeable – we have been warned.

### Thursday – 2016/12/08

Some days I feel this country and its people are out of balance. Today is one of these days. All of a sudden the central heating in the office is working with a delay of just one week. My colleagues gathered around the controllers and happily announced this great improvement and started to turn it on. White flakes started snowing out of the vents in the ceiling just as if they were put there to tell winter is here. Having spent two hours in the lab which is way larger and where the snow procedure was repeated I returned to the office. Maybe it is because I got used to the constant cold here, maybe it's due to my down-jacket I had to wear till



now, whatever it is I felt hot. There was such thing like a moderate heating. My colleagues turned it up to 25°C straight whilst keeping the windows open for the fresh air. For me that's too hot, the air seems to contain zero oxygen in the office now and I see my skin getting cracks till we go to dinner. So I am working here at an institute engaged in making the world more sustainable whilst wasting energy for no reason and celebrating it as a big improvement. My colleagues still wear their down-jackets by the way and the fresh air from outside has PM 2.5 value of 231 today.

### Friday – 2016/12/09

My colleague had me warned - people would start talking, taking photos or just move around during classical concerts here. Today I could give it a try as I was invited by my professor and his wife to join them. In the Sichuan conservatorium they honoured Shostakovich's birthday with a concert. Before that it took us two hours to get to the centre from the office which reminded me of good old Amsterdam where people complain about a twenty-minute bike ride in clean air. The concert hall had nice acoustics and even heating. As in our office there were probably just full power and off available. It was incredibly warm and comfy – not the best combination with music as one doesn't want to fall asleep. The Cello concert in the first half was accompanied by a great soloist. People indeed got a bit nervous in the end and some of the numerous kids left with their parents – however, none of them were loud. The second half – no drinks in the break – was introduced by a nice and well received and funny talk of the conductor. I didn't understand a word but his expressions and the people's reactions told more than his words. The audience was very disciplined and not like how I was warned. The concert was really nice and a lot of applause followed the performance. I ended the long day with a reasonably sized Kentucky IPA and got once more surprised by the broad variety of craft beers here in Chengdu.

## Week 7

### Saturday – 2016/12/10

Sleeping in, playing with my friend's cat and just hanging out on the couch was all I did in the first half of this lazy Saturday. I stayed at my friend's place in Century city, one of these assemblies of flats. This one however has an interesting architecture and is not as boring as most of the others. I tried to capture it and the funny ways people improve their apartments with sheds on their vast balcony's.

Wenshu monastery is one of the many Buddhist temples and has a famous bakery for walnut cookies close to it. I spent the rest of the day strolling around there enjoying the many varieties of street foods from Kebab fresh sliced from the sheep hanging next to the grill, to various different fruits I had never seen before. Overall, the area is worth a visit with its many handicraft places offering everything one wants to buy and take home as Christmas presents. Especially the tea-sets were very beautiful but sadly not affordable for myself. The monastery itself has some beautiful tea-gardens to offer and the yellow coloured leaves of the ginkgo trees made stunning scenery.

### Sunday – 2016/12/11

In June this year the Chengdu museum opened for public. It is located at Tian'fu square in the very centre of town and well observed by chairman Mao. Apart from the spectacular architecture it offers a huge free exhibition covering Chengdu's long history. The area is rich in archaeological finds which date back more than 3000 years. I learned that many towns in China had a forbidden city as it consisted of many kingdoms once. The one in Chengdu was located just in the same place as Tian'fu square is today. Following the Feng-Shui of most Chinese towns it's orientated just in the same way. Furthermore, I learned that our campus was somehow special as it's orientation does not follow these rules which seemed to have caused some troubles.



### Tuesday – 2016/12/13

In Chengdu there are a lot of cars and traffic jams. As with many things, one can find a broad variety of cars here. They are available in many kinds and numbers of wheels and colours. As the car is a status symbol and European cars are known for their quality, especially German companies manage to sell a lot of them. There are hardly any different models available compared to Europe which I have seen differently in the rest of the places in the world I have visited. However, there is one major difference – all of the bigger cars are a little longer. The Chinese people like big cars and thus the companies started to sell longer versions of their models except for the small SUV's. One can easily detect them as they are indicated with an L on their back. I haven't seen any of these cars in a non L version really. On the other side there are also a lot of Chinese manufacturers which are not shy of stealing the looks of many famous old brands and their models. Just as in fashion they pick the best from everything and create a more or less reasonable new design from it. Sometimes, however, they copy almost one to one.

### Wednesday – 2016/12/14

It has been seven years now since I stopped playing ping-pong in a club. To be fair I never really played in these years. Here in our lab we have a room with a pin-pong table and some of my colleagues are playing regularly. I joined them today again and it was good fun. Playing in China, the motherland of ping-pong, was always a dream and although it was still just ping-pong it was something special. And of course people were surprised that I was actually able to play properly – and so was I after all these years.



The sport is still very popular over here and I have seen many people playing in the parks I have visited by now. They have decent numbers of tables which are illuminated by night and usually covered against rain.

### Thursday – 2016/12/15

Today is my last day working in the lab here at CIDS and I ran experiments till almost the last minute. It was a great time in which I learned a lot. This includes not only the science involved in my project but also the Chinese working culture. I am happy that I had such nice colleagues which were very supportive with my work. They always tried their best to get things done although they were busy with end-of-the-year bureaucracy. Wushufu who's the institutes driver was kind enough to take me to the airport straight from work. I took a plane to Beijing and was both amazed by the clean air and the sheer size of Terminal 3 – walking just half way through took forever but I caught the last train to the city. My hostel was in the middle of a Hutong and in walking distance from the station. That was a smart move as getting taxis is difficult without speaking Chinese and the metros just run till 11pm.

### Friday – 2016/12/16

After a short night, I took the bus in the morning and arrived at the great wall just two hours later. In winter they don't run the trains but the bus was cheaper anyways. The wall itself is just 70 kilometres out of town and one of the most stunning parts can be found here. Its takes sharp turns and winds itself up and down the hills. If one is lazy he can take the cable car up, and judging by the distribution of visitors between the part with and without cable car this seems to be a very popular option. It's possible to spend half the day just walking around but they just give access to parts so it is not possible to walk from one spot to another. Overall I was surprised by the size and how steep it was. Back in Beijing, just seven hours after I left, the blue skies turned to a heavy polluted city with PM 2.5 rising from 33 to 298 in the time I was gone. Although I was used to the pollution in Chengdu I was shocked how fast it accumulated here. For dinner, I went with John whom I met in the hostel and we enjoyed a Beijing barbeque which was great except for the not so tasty goat liver.

## Week 8

Saturday – 2016/12/17

Being in Beijing without visiting the Tiananmen square and the forbidden city would have been a crime so I went there today. One cannot imagine how huge that place is before having been there. However, that took some time as security measures were as high as usual but the number of people wanting to get in exceeded their capacities. Again I realized that none of the security guards nor the soldiers were wearing any firearms. The forbidden city



was less crowded than expected and especially the part with all the treasures of the dynasty was empty. I spent a lot of time here and loved to get lost between all the gardens and enjoying the details with which everything is made. This whole place is a giant piece of art and shows how skilled the craftsmen must have been. Including the architecture, wood and stone carvings but especially the jewellery they were able to produce. This seemed much more expressive than anything else I have seen in the western world so far. The same accounts for the temple of heaven which I visited afterwards. Especially the echo wall in the smaller temple is both fun and stunning and demonstrates how far their knowledge must have been.

Later in the evening I joined John for dinner in a world class brewery just next to our hostel. They served prime burgers and the best fries I had so far. On top of that the beers were delicious especially the IPA's of which they had three different kinds. From there we went to a blues concert in another Hutong bar with Shun Kikuta, the concert was great and John and I had a lot of fun.

Sunday – 2016/12/18

My last day in Beijing started late with a delicious meal at a local roasted duck restaurant. I never had roasted duck before but I could be convinced to have it more often if it was always as good as there. From here I went to the 798 art district. In this area a factory was built by eastern Germans in the 1950s, and a large number of art galleries popped up, followed by some smaller museums. The area combines modern architecture with the old industrial feel and seems to be ever-changing as Emma, the girl I went with pointed out. She went there a few times but new things seem to open all the time while others close down. I found it to be a great place to spend the day and explore. Overall Beijing was very interesting and busy town that has a lot to offer. Three days seemed to be not enough but on the other side, I was happy to leave the smog again.

Monday – 2016/12/19

Back home I go today. After cleaning up my apartment and trying to stuff all my things in the suitcase – I succeeded! – I went to say goodbye at the office. One last tasty meal at the canteen and Wushufu took me to the airport again. After ten hours on the plane I arrived back in Amsterdam where my roommates welcomed me with an extraordinary Christmas dinner.

Looking back, I had a very great time in China, with ups and downs but a lot of things learned and explored. Thus I want to thank everyone who made these two months possible and special. I made some good friends on the other side of the world and am happy to welcome them here. Being such a good host might be difficult but I will definitely give it a try.

