



Winter 2002

Lasting Impressions

Andy Sur '03

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Sur '03, Andy (2002) "Lasting Impressions," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol11/iss4/6>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Lasting Impressions

By Andy Sur '03

Editor's Note: Illinois Wesleyan senior Andy Sur spent the second semester of the 2001-02 academic year studying in China as part of a program for the School of International Training. He traveled through many small villages conducting research centered on the process of elections in China's village government system. The following piece—the first in a series of essays by IWU alumni, faculty, and students—focuses on Sur's visit to a small, isolated Hui Muslim village called Wenming.

I traveled to Wenming while on a weekend research trip with my close friend and translator, Liu Rui. I had read about the village's large, Arabic-style mosque in a Yunnan guidebook. Liu Rui was apprehensive. She had heard that the Hui frequently fought violently with others. When we arrived in the village, the massive building immediately impressed us. Who would expect to see an Arabic-style mosque in the middle of the Chinese countryside? We were greeted by a shy Hui boy, his face covered with dirt, who was obviously curious about my presence. I said "Ni Hao" ("Hello" in Chinese) and waved to him as he ran behind a pole and blushed.

Liu Rui and I chuckled at his reaction and proceeded into the mosque. Without our notice, the young boy slowly followed us after recruiting a friend. They eventually gathered enough courage to approach me after Liu Rui assured them that I was friendly. I spoke to them in my limited Chinese, and they answered and giggled. I reached in my backpack and gave them a coloring book of famous American people and places. Initially, they refused to accept the gift, relenting after further explanation from Liu Rui. I also put an Illinois Wesleyan sticker on each of their arms before they quickly disappeared.

Five minutes later, the two boys returned with about 20 friends. They gave the coloring book back because no one had crayons. I asked Liu Rui to tell them that they could each rip a page out of the book and put it on a wall at home. They immediately began to distribute the pages. The ensuing scene reminded me of children tearing open gifts on Christmas morning. A few older



Shy at first, Hui villagers eventually gave Sur (above center) a warm welcome, even allowing him to attend a service at the Arabic-style mosque, visible in the background.

Hui boys, probably in their teens, and some adult men had come to watch the children tear apart the coloring book. They invited us to return to the mosque for the 6:30 prayer that evening.

The children followed us out of the mosque and decided to serve as our guides on a tour of the village. My once shy friend was no longer afraid of me. He proudly marched in front of all the children, grabbed my arm, and told me he was taking us to his home.

While his family warmly welcomed us with food and tea, other children noticed the sticker on the boy's arm and asked if they could have one. I pulled out two sheets of IWU stickers and was swarmed. No matter how fast I peeled the stickers, I couldn't keep up. The line grew longer and longer. Fortunately, just as I placed my final sticker on the last child, my supply was exhausted. Most, it turned out, had put the stickers on upside down. One brave little girl came through the doorway and ran her hand up and down my right arm in response to a friend who had pointed out the blond hair on my arms. There is a joke among the Chinese that waiguoren, or foreigners, have to blow on their arms to see their watches.

We thanked the family and left as the Arabic prayer call blasted from loudspeakers placed throughout the village. Once we reached the mosque, a sea of Hui came to look at the waiguoren. I was surrounded. I could see nothing but smiling Hui faces. They asked questions in Chinese, and I answered those I could while Liu Rui fielded the others. One teenage boy was jumping up in the air behind me, trying to see if he could match my height. Soon, a young boy began to sing in Chinese and all the men filed into the mosque. They turned and looked at me during the first five minutes of the service. After they completed their prayers, they helped Liu Rui and me find our way to the nearest village that offered public transportation service. As we said goodbye, I turned to Liu Rui and asked, "Are you still afraid of the Hui?"

"No," she replied with a smile.