A simple lesson on Chinese life

By Bob Wasserman

I could barely contain my excitement as I waited for the last passenger to get off the plane from the West Coast. On it, I knew, was Trinh. Yes, the first exchange student from China to attend MIT for almost thirty years, and although only a sophomore at the Institute, was to be her guide for the first semester here.

Trinh was quite short in stature with short black hair and small wire-rimmed glasses, she had an intense expression of studiousness. In short, she looked like a herd. But I was soon to be proved wrong.

"Iquired about his identity," said Trinh, "I'm your guide at MIT. Welcome to the United States!"

After exchanging greetings and other formalities, we left the airport and prepared for her first tour of the institution which she and her government had chosen for her studies.

"Walking through Building 7, Tranh and I spotted a gray-haired gentleman smoking a pipe. Sensing the importance of the man, she inquired about his identity.

"I'm the President of MIT," I replied gleefully. "He's been a very popular and respected President, but unfortunately he's getting too old to go on much longer."

"Oh really," said Trinh, "And when is the Revolution to happen which will replace him?" To my science and technology that advanced as you can even predict your revolutions?"

"No, no, we're not going to have a revolution at MIT to find a new President. The MIT Corporation has set up a committee to select Winner's successor," I explained.

"Corporation? Hm, very American," she commented. But she still seemed very interested and so I continued. "Where are your wall posters?"

"That's not the way to do it..." I replied in desperation, I was attempting to explain political processes at MIT further when she was rescued from the talk by bumping into an outgoing, medium-height student.

"That was Barry Newman," I told her, eager to change the subject.

"He is the President of the Undergraduate Student Association. He's been working hard as UAP this year, and has even succeeded in reviving the UA General Assembly, a governing body which had been replaced by the students for the last thirty years."

"This student body of yours, Tranh asked me, "is it sort of a government-in-exile, right?"

"Yes, sure, when you think about it," I admitted.

"All, we have the same phenomena in China, also. We call it the Tech."

Just then a speeding taxi roared down Massachusetts Avenue, nearly hitting us. "Those automobiles, they are disgusting," Trinh observed.

"They are one of the most successful inventions of all time," I countered.

"Long ago automobiles were very pleasant, but then bicycles came along and threatened to make the automobile extinct due to the obvious advantages of the bicycle. In short order, automobile-makers began to manufacture as large, as noisy, and as dirty as they could in order to force the public to reject them."

"Of course, but bicycles can't ride in the streets, because all the traffic," Trinh responded.

"Just then a speeding taxi roared down Massachusetts Avenue, nearly hitting us. "What will you do about this?"

"I would be delighted to play ping pong," she answered. "It is an old Chinese custom, even dating back from the building of the Great Wall. There are an ancient Chinese proverb about it, from Confucius. It goes:"

"Wu, wu, I interrupted, (now I was the one who was confused) "are you sure?" Not wanting to hear her answer, I decided to try one last time to impress her with American life.

"Look at the Christmas tree over there," I exclaimed, pointing to the lighted evergreen near the Student Center steps. "Christmas is our most important holiday, a time when the spirit of giving spreads throughout the land."

"Under American business is so successful," Trinh replied. "The culture here gives moral and religious creedence to buying and collecting material possessions. I believe I am finally beginning to understand what it means to be American."

Now if I could only find the ring shop around here...