

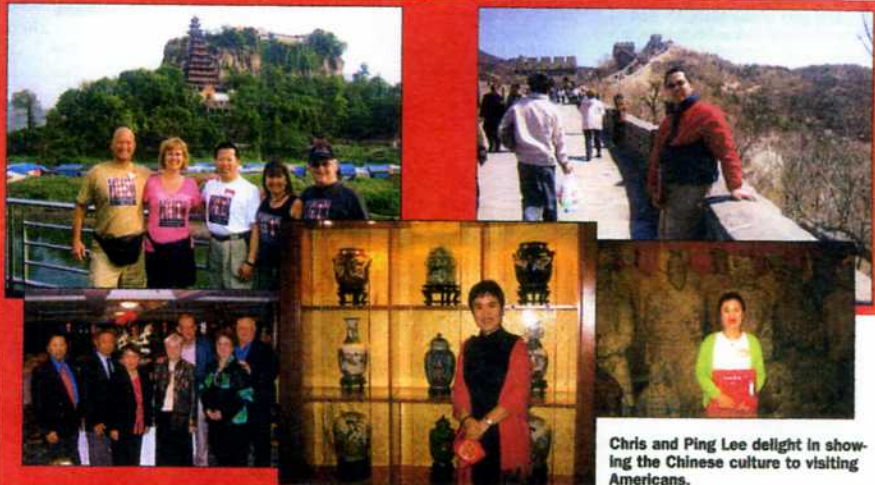
People

IN TOURISM

By Herb Sparrow

The Silk Road will always be home

The Lees love showing off their native China



Chris and Ping Lee delight in showing the Chinese culture to visiting Americans.

Hometown: Xinjiang Province, China

Age: Chris, 51, Ping, 50

Family: Son, Charles, 22, a law student at the University of Texas

Education: Bachelor's degrees in English in China. Chris, MBA. Central Oklahoma University. Ping, master's degree in foreign relations, Central Oklahoma University.

Hobbies: Gardening and shopping

"We try to provide more opportunities to see the Chinese people, not just the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and other historical sites. We try to bring people to families, schools, villages, to let them have enough free time to talk with these people and meet them, and let them know the real life of the Chinese people."

— Chris Lee

In the mid-1980s, Chris and Ping Lee were in their mid-30s and had careers in their native China — Ping as a project officer in the animal husbandry department of the Division of Economic Cooperation and Chris as the head of a major tour company.

Then a contact Ping made through her job led to a radical change for the couple and two years apart.

In 1988, Ping was accepted for an agricultural research exchange program at Langston University in Edmond, Okla. The one-year program ended about the time of the Tiananmen Square incident in China, and Congress allowed Chinese students like Ping to remain in the United States.

That meant another year away from Chris and their young son, Charles.

"At the time, I was already president of one of the largest tour companies in China," said Chris. "At first, I came here to just visit her; I had not seen her in two years."

Once here, Chris decided he needed more education, quit his job in China and enrolled at Central Oklahoma University, where he got an MBA two and a half years later.

Meanwhile, Ping had gotten her master's degree from the same school in international relations.

"I always appreciate my wife, Ping," said Chris. "She was actually the pioneer for the second part of

our life."

They decided to work for a while in the United States and got jobs at Langston University — Chris as a financial aide officer and Ping as a research assistant and interpreter.

Chris admitted that it was hard at first, but "now we feel like we made the right decision. We are very happy."

Chris wanted to get back into travel, a field in which he had worked since 1979, and took a group of Oklahoma residents to China while he was working at Langston.

"The second year, everything was ready for me to start my own company," he said.

In August 1994, Chris and Ping started ChinaPlus, specializing in tours to their native country. In late 1996, they moved to the Dallas area.

"At the beginning, Ping and I escorted almost every group ourselves," said Chris. "We built up the business gradually."

Chris said they started with individuals and couples, mostly in Oklahoma and Texas. They then discovered GLAMER group leader shows and the BankTravel organization and connected with the pre-formed group market.

"It was a jump as soon as we worked with them," he said. "It was an important jump in our business."

The couple relies on their knowledge of their native country — both are from the rural Xinjiang province in northwest China along the famous

Silk Road.

"We know China real well," said Chris. "That is our advantage, our expertise. We do China only. We really emphasize the Chinese culture."

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"I was born in the countryside, grew up in the countryside," said Chris. "I know the Chinese countryside and like the life in the countryside very much."

"If you just stay in the big cities, like Beijing and Shanghai, you do not learn about the real life of the Chinese people."

Ping and Chris still escort several trips a year, but with more than 40 tours a year, their business has grown too large for them to do all of them, so they rely on highly trained local guides.

Chris, Ping and Charles became U.S. citizens in 1998 and now travel under an American passport.

"Although we look Chinese, we have to apply for Chinese visas the same as our clients," said Chris. "We are regarded as Americans, but our friends in China still regard us as Chinese."

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