

3 April 2021 - Terry, first American to join Xicheng District safety volunteers

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“西城大妈”的队伍里不仅有大妈，还有大爷，还有位美国大爷，他就是 Terry Crossman，中文名叫高天瑞。

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<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fq-FDRy5dxtn-f5BP1gEgw>



Beijing's picturesque Houhai area, formerly the neighborhood of Prince Gong and Song Qingling, today is home to another well-known resident: an American man called Terry Crossman.

Terry lives in a hutong house in Beijing's Xicheng District and he shares his home with several stray cats, among them a tiny tabby he nicknamed Little Miss Piggy because of her insatiable appetite and 小小黑 (Xiao Xiao Hei, or Blackie). He keeps two cats indoors and he feeds the other strays outdoors, even providing a small cat shelter for them in his courtyard.

Terry talked about his life and experiences in China from the comfort of his hutong house. He has lived in Beijing for 25 years and is currently a lecturer at the Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture. Formerly, he worked 21 years in the executive search business recruiting high-level executives for positions in China as a pioneer in his field. Despite his corporate career in Asia, Terry appears to be equally at home in academia, doing research and reading.

It all started with a book

Terry described himself as coming from a family of East Coast "preppies." He first came to China in 1973 when he was 18 to take a gap year between high school and university, and his trip to China on the "slow boat" took 33 days. He remembered having to cut his long hair short when they stopped in Singapore to comply with local regulations. It was on this trip that he started learning how to speak Chinese.

After university, he moved to Singapore and then Hong Kong before eventually making Beijing his home. "The reason I stayed is because I just love China, I love the Chinese people; I love the Chinese language. I feel very comfortable here and I love Chinese food," he said.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Chinese and Western elements blend together harmoniously in his apartment: there is a scroll painting with the Chinese character 福 ("fu" or "good fortune") found next to shelves of English-language books festooned with a Chinese paper dragon for Chinese New Year and a tall money tree that is decorated with red and green Christmas baubles.

Terry called himself as a "bookworm" and his love of books goes back to his childhood. In fact, it was a book that started him on the spiritual leg of his China journey. "My interest in China originally started when I was 12 years old when I picked up a copy of Lao Zi's Dao De Jing. From that book I found that the philosophy of Daoism really resonated with me and led me to explore many more classic books from China and also led to an interest in Zen Buddhism, the Chinese version of it," he remembered. In high school, Terry dropped out of his college-level French literature course in order to take a Chinese history course, which really sealed his fate with regard to China, he said.



Terry is fluent in Chinese and said he believes his musicality facilitated his learning the language. "I think I have a musical ear. I used to be a choral singer, so that helped me with the tones. It is interacting with people, just being open and friendly, and absorbing the environment, that helped me a lot with becoming proficient in Chinese," Terry said, adding that he is also good at learning dialects and picking up accents. At home, he likes to listen to music from bands like The Grateful Dead.

The first foreign Xicheng "Dama"

Terry has become somewhat of a celebrity in China after serving as a volunteer for Beijing's Xicheng District, something his fluent Chinese made possible. "This really was an accidental thing. After I had a stroke, I used to go for long walks and I would always go to Starbucks for a little break during my walks," he recalled. It was at Starbucks that Terry had a serendipitous encounter that would eventually lead to a volunteer opportunity for him. Terry, who had experience running university alumni clubs in Hong Kong and Beijing, as well as serving on the board of a local international school on a pro bono basis, readily agreed to seize it. "At first it just started with them involving me in a video they were doing to promote volunteerism. They were called 大妈 (Dama, or Big Mothers), which is actually a brand name for the Xicheng District safety (or peace) volunteers."



"As far as I know I am the only foreign volunteer with a red armband. I usually volunteer giving tourists directions or pouring water for them... I love interacting with people and most of the tourists I interact with are Chinese tourists, so they are a little bit surprised to see a foreigner wearing a red hat, a red vest and a red armband," Terry said, referring to his Dama uniform, which is worn by the volunteer corps that is usually made up of middle-aged Chinese women. "In many ways I feel like we are a Neighborhood Watch group or like road crossing guards for school kids, but we do a lot of work also with older people, making sure they are taken care of." "The community of Damas welcomed me. They thought it was really cute to have a foreigner and we're all over 55," he said, adding that his involvement was a great way to immerse himself into and get to know his local community better. "I just love giving back to the community. I love making people smile; I love making them happy. I love being like a stone thrown into a still pond, the ripples going out. If I make one person happy, that person makes other people happy. My whole philosophy of volunteering is that you get more out of it than what you put into it."



He also explained the differences between volunteer opportunities in his native United States and China. "Here in China, the volunteering is a little bit more under the extension of the local government and the local community service centers, while in the United States it is more varied."

COVID-19 has affected Terry's volunteer work as there are now fewer tourists in Beijing. "I haven't been called upon to do that many things in the past year because of the pandemic. It's sort of sad in a way, our volunteer booth is unmanned. Right now, it's at the entrance of the area where they do testing for the virus. So, I can't give people directions; I love giving people directions," he said with regret.

A happy hutong dweller

Terry moved into the hutongs ten years ago and has been an enthusiastic hutong dweller because hutong life enables him to enjoy the beauty of nature while not foregoing the conveniences of city life. "Before this, I lived out in the suburbs of Beijing when I was raising a family here....I love being in the middle of the city but also having nature around me. I love seeing the birds, hearing the birds, hearing the pigeons flying around. I love having trees, I love gardening, and yet I am living in the middle of the city where I can get good medical care and (enjoy) good shopping," he said.

In fact, Terry can climb onto the rooftop of his hutong house to enjoy a bird's eye view of the Bell and Drum Towers and watch the sunset. Despite minor maintenance issues in his home, such as those involving heating, he much prefers to live in a one-story bungalow, or 平房 ("pingfang"), with his own yard where he can plant rosemary and eggplant, to an apartment building.

When asked how he now spends his time in China, Terry said: "I love taking walks around my neighborhood, I live near some beautiful lakes called Houhai and Qianhai and I love

photography, taking pictures of people and interesting things. So aside from teaching at the university, I spend a lot of time at home reading books, gardening, and just having a peaceful, quiet life here."

"My advice for foreigners living here in China is to go with the flow, to be able to laugh, and to expect the unexpected. In fact, that is what I love; I love the unpredictability of life here. But that's how I cope. I can't really say it's ever been a big challenge for me," he said. "I feel like a fish in the ocean here."

