



China's National English News Weekly Since 1958

BEIJING REVIEW

American volunteer makes people smile in China's capital

7 April 2022

By Kang Caiqi

http://www.bjreview.com/World/202204/t20220407_800281475.html



Terry Crossman saunters around the Shichahai area in Beijing's Xicheng District on March 1 (ZHANG WEI)

One can easily find Terry Crossman wandering around Shichahai, a picturesque area in downtown Beijing's Xicheng District. Wearing a red uniform with armband, he blends right into the team of community volunteers, a group of retirees still eager to contribute to society. This 67-year-old American has a very natural Chinese name, Gao Tianrui, which sounds very similar to his original name. Adding to his almost undetectable true identity are his fluent Chinese and familiarity with Beijing's intricate routes. But eventually, the blue eyes peering out from under the red cap give him away. Twenty-seven years of living in Beijing have enabled him become a native—well, almost.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in Chinese studies, Crossman's first job took him to Hong Kong where he engaged in the executive scouting business, helping companies find high-level talents. Retired today, he finds himself in one of Beijing's most traditional areas.

Volunteering journey

How Crossman ended up becoming the first-ever foreign neighborhood volunteer in Beijing could be summed up in one word: "accidental." After suffering a stroke in 2016, he would venture out on long walks to recover his walking ability, and one of his destinations was a Starbucks near his home, where he met Liu Xiaoxia, head of the Shichahai *dama* (aunts), a nickname for these elderly female community volunteers in Beijing. In Crossman's understanding, the job of a *dama* is like that of a grandmother watching over society. "It's sort of the equivalent of the U.S. neighborhood watch," Crossman told *Beijing Review*. Liu invited him to teach the volunteers some basic English phrases as the Shichahai area, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, was host to many foreign tourists. And so Crossman embarked on his volunteering journey.

Due to the pandemic, his current services mostly cater to Chinese tourists. The sheer shock and awe written all over their faces when realizing he is, in fact, a foreigner, leave him feeling

fulfilled. "I get a lot of joy from these interactions with people," he said.

His story went viral on Chinese social media a few years ago, making him quite the famous local about town. "I figured the wave would eventually die down, but thus far it hasn't," he laughed. Online celeb or not, Crossman goes about his day-to-day life, patrolling the *hutongs*, Beijing's zigzag network of traditional narrow alleyways, giving tourists directions, filling their thermoses with hot water; duty always calls. "Volunteering brings me happiness. I love to make people smile," he added.

Residing in history

Crossman moved into the hutongs over a decade ago and has been an enthusiastic alley dweller ever since. "The thing about the hutongs is that they are really older parts of the city. Living here is like being part of history." He loves to climb onto the rooftop of his courtyard and take in the views of central Beijing. "From my home, I can actually see the Drum and Bell Towers, which have been proudly standing there for hundreds of years," Crossman said. As old as the hutongs are, they still make for a convenient choice of residence. "It's just amazing what I can get delivered to my doorstep," he added.

But for this volunteer, history isn't the only good thing about *hutong* life. "I'm close to nature, still. There are trees, there are birds singing, there are Siberian weasels and there are feral cats," Crossman listed. He actually shares his home with several stray cats and even created a shelter for them on his patio. One of them would come around so often he earned himself a name, Blackie. "It's really interesting to live in the middle of a major old city, home to some 20-plus million people, and yet be so close to nature at the same time," he told *Beijing Review*. When asked what he usually does in his spare time, Crossman answered, "I love taking walks and photographs around the neighborhood." He showed a picture he took, featuring a pedicab driver with a beaming smile. "He is a good friend of mine, and he always tells his passengers about me," he said.

Crossman is also a gardening aficionado. With planting season around the corner, he's already begun cutting back the perennials to their basal growth. "Getting your hands dirty in the garden has a certain therapeutic value," he explained.

The fengshui of life

At the age of 12, Crossman came across an English copy of the *Tao Te Ching*, the Taoist classic written by ancient Chinese philosopher and writer *Lao Zi*, which profoundly resonated with him. "That led me to explore Zen Buddhism, which in turn led to an interest in Tibetan Buddhism," he recalled and joked. "Maybe in a past life I was Chinese or, more likely, a Chinese monk." Afterward, he further studied the *Zhuang Zi*, a Taoist text from the late Warring States period (475-221 B.C.), and even worked on the *Huainan Zi*, a text dating back to the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 25).

"I hold a very deep interest in Chinese philosophy, which has influenced my outlook on life. I truly live a life that follows events as they unfold. I go with Mother Nature's flow," he said.

Crossman still remembers one of the most illuminating classes he ever took, courtesy of a professor at Stanford University. It was about Chinese culture and anthropology, and helped him understand traditional Chinese society and family relationships and so many different aspects of China. He even wrote a *fengshui*-themed paper, combining China's ancient geomancy concept with modern geography.

Many concepts in the Chinese language appeal to him; take the term *yuanfen* as a prime example. In his opinion, its translations, like "destiny" or "connectedness," are all subpar substitutes. Uncovering a better fit to explain these concepts in English has become a passion of his. "I'm 67 and I started being interested in what I ended up falling in love with when I was 12," he concluded.