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August 2, 2010 in [Interview](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [1 comment](#)

*As regular readers of this blog know, I spent late June and much of July in Shanghai, with brief trips to other parts of China. One aspect of this sojourn in the PRC that proved memorable was the opportunity it afforded me to finally meet several people whose reporting or commentaries I've admired, but whose paths had never crossed mine before, including Kaiser Kuo (whose [Sinica podcasts](#) we've talked up here before), David Barboza of the New York Times (whose [day-in-the-life of a South China worker](#) I singled out for praise in a [recent commentary](#)), freelancer Adam Minter (who has probably done more than any other single individual to help American readers understand China's first World's Fair, via posts like [this one](#)), and [Scott Tong](#) of Marketplace (whose excellent series on birth control was [recently flagged](#) on this blog).*

*Scott was about to head back to the U.S. when we got a brief chance to chat, so I came up with a way to carry on our conversation via cyberspace and also make it accessible to others. I asked him if he'd be willing to take some time on the long plane ride across the Pacific ahead of him to answer several questions. He was good enough to oblige. So here, in a continuation of the Q-and-A series I've done in the past with the likes of [Mara Hvistendahl](#) (who put me in touch with both Adam and Scott, incidentally—thanks Mara!), are the responses he sent me once he got back to America:*

**JW:** Do you have a favorite story you've done from your time in China that we can encourage our readers to listen to online?

**ST:** Nice to be with you, Jeff.

Since you've already mentioned our one-child policy stories (thank you), I'll go with a much less-serious feature on [China's group shopping phenomenon](#) filed for our personal finance show [Marketplace Money](#). I found it wonderfully radio friendly.

*Tuangou* translates to "team buying." Dozens, hundreds, thousands of Chinese shoppers connect online and then shop collectively for one item, negotiating and screaming along the way for a group discount. You can tuangou everything: vacations, wedding banquets, cosmetic surgery—though I wonder about consumers who choose a nose-job practitioner based on price. Yes, tuangou has been around awhile, it's not particularly profound, and *China Beat* readers likely know about it already. But the experience was so primal. And for all the criticism that the Chinese can only rip off others' ideas, that R&D stands for Receive & Duplicate, tuangou began as a fairly uniquely Chinese thing. In certain ways, each country comes up with its own developmental recipes.

Tuangou combines a couple trends I bumped into constantly in China: (1) in an increasingly atomized society, the new community in China is the web—whether it's e-commerce, social networking, or [online video games](#). And (2) he/she who negotiates the low price is thereby a superior human being.

**JW:** What aspect of your thinking about China changed over the course of your tenure here?

**ST:** We adopted our middle child, 7-year-old Audrey, from China in 2004. Every year around her birthday, my wife Cathy and I wonder aloud about Audrey's birth parents, assuming a mother somewhere in Hunan is pondering her child's fate, perhaps regretting her decision to abandon her own flesh and blood.

I'm not sure any more. Long before I filed a feature on [baby-selling in China](#), I realized I'd taken several American concepts and copied-and-pasted them onto China: I assumed the documents indicating where she was born, when, and who rescued her were trustworthy. That she'd been abandoned, not sold. That orphanage directors were in it for the greater good. Maybe, maybe, and maybe.

The point is not that it's China's problem—I'll leave that to others to evaluate. Perhaps it's my problem, as a person and a journalist, for not seeing what was before me: a low-trust, developing

country where the *laobaixing* look out for themselves first and foremost, a place where buyers and sellers of anything are ruthlessly pragmatic, a society where people obsess far more about the present and the future rather than the past.

**JW:** Is there a story you always wanted to do, but for practical considerations (time, access to a locale, the unwillingness of the right person to agree to be interviewed on the air, etc.), you just couldn't?

**ST:** I never looked inside the Foxconn plant where more than 200,000 workers assemble iPhones, laptops and most electronic products we use every day. Yes, my assistant Cecilia Chen and I did file a feature on [iPhone worker conditions](#), months before the spate of [mysterious suicides and labor strikes](#). We camped outside factory gates in Shenzhen and spoke to who we could—more than a dozen current and former Foxconn workers, plus interns, consultants, suppliers, customers, competitors and financial analysts—but never gained access to a manufacturing facility. Foxconn is notorious for secrecy. I should tell you, though, that the company responded in writing to workers' accounts and we posted it all online. And earlier this summer the company provided a brief, controlled factory tour to journalists, but I was unfortunately on the road reporting another story.

**JW:** Can you share with us any piece of advice you've given to your successor, [Rob Schmitz](#), whose name should already be familiar to *China Beat* readers from some stories he's done about the PRC while based in the U.S.?

**ST:** (1) Get out of Shanghai as much as possible. Not to diss the city and its 20 million inhabitants, but China's such a large and varied place. I've learned the most traveling the country—from [Inner Mongolia dairy farms](#) to [Shanxi's Loess Plateau](#) to [Kashgar construction sites](#) to [Macau casinos](#). And Rob knows what he's doing—he lived in rural Sichuan for two years in the mid-90s and is already anxious to return 15 years later. And 15 years, wow. By [one not-very-serious measure](#) of China's economic pace, that's 60 years of change for the average North American or European.

(2) Triangulate every piece of information. Trust but verify. Basic information-gathering can be so challenging in China. It's a low-trust place. And as *China Beat* readers know, most people are wary of foreign journalists. In the U.S., we wave a giant public-radio mic at folks and request an interview, and very often they think, "why not?" In China, they think, "why?"