

JADE DRAGON

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ROUTLEDGE



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Sarah Milledge Nelson

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*For my sister Eleanor Decker,
my best critic since she was two
and laughed at the stories
I made up to entertain her.*

Other books by Sarah Milledge Nelson

FICTION

Spirit Bird Journey

NON-FICTION

The Archaeology of Northeast China

The Archaeology of Korea

Ancestors for the Pigs

Gender in Archaeology

Denver: An Archaeological History

Ancient Queens

In Pursuit of Gender

Equity Issues for Women in Archaeology

Powers of Observation

Han River Chulmuntogi

Studies in Bella Bella Prehistory

**Reviews of Spirit Bird Journey,
the first Clara Alden book**

“This is a **delightful** book, whimsical yet based on solid scholarship.” *Bibliophilos, James G. Patterson*

“Nelson has given us a **creative and full-of-life set of images**, a truly “peopled past.” *American Antiquity, Margaret Conkey.*

“This is . . . a **lyrical novel, which both entertains and informs** without being self-indulgent.” *Asian Perspectives, Brian Fagan*

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“. . . a **marvelous read**. . . superbly crafted.”
C. Leon McGahee, M.D.

“I was absolutely unable to put it down. . . **completely absorbing.**”
William Dolen, M.D.

“I just finished your book and I really like it a lot!! The book **haunted me for several days after I finished it.**”
Sociologist and poet Prof. Anne Rankin Mahoney

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Prologue

I don't think of myself as an adventurous person, although I enjoy foreign travel and meeting people of other cultures. I might have turned down this adventure if I could have seen the future, but maybe not. There were pluses and minuses.

It began with a phone call from my partner's father. I was just back from a year doing archaeology in Korea, and Ed and I were experimenting with living together. So I was surprised and intrigued, but not overwhelmed, to be invited to lunch by Mr. Howland. I assumed Ed would be there too, but I was wrong.

Mr. Howland is an intellectual properties lawyer, meaning copyrights and such. He's medium height and slender, with a lot of wavy gray hair. If Ed looks like him in twenty-five or thirty years, I won't mind. We met at his office, and his secretary brought chicken salads and iced tea for both of us into his conference room. He put me at ease with a friendly smile.

"I'm hoping you can help me," he began. "I understand you're extraordinarily good at languages."

When I began to say something modest, he held up his hand to stop me. "You learned Korean in a year, both speaking and reading, correct?"

"Not with native fluency in either case," I answered honestly. "But sufficiently for my purposes, yes."

"Have you ever thought of learning Chinese?"

"It would be useful for understand Korean archaeology to be able to read Chinese. Otherwise, no."

"How about adding Chinese to your studies?"

"Why?" Mr. Howland's interest in my linguistic abilities made no sense at all.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. She works for a national committee and her job is returning stolen Chinese artifacts.. She has a proposal for you. Would you like to meet her?”

I put down my cloth napkin and left my half-eaten chicken salad behind, as we pushed back our chairs and went into Mr. Howland’s office. On the way in he made a hand flick at his secretary, and within seconds a buxom woman in an expensive suit and lots of gold jewelry was ushered in.

“Sandra Wold, Clara Alden,” Mr. Howland introduced us. We shook hands. I regretted wearing jeans and a cotton sweater. I felt it put me at a definite disadvantage.

“Sandra, Clara is an archaeology student who picked up in a year what the U.S. Army classifies as the most difficult language in the world. With some study she can certainly handle the language side of your project. Tell her about it.”

Sandra folded her arms across her black-clad bosom. She was all business.

“The U.S. has signed an agreement with China which stipulates that stolen antiquities, however they get into the country, will be returned to China.”

“Just as it should be,” I agreed.

“I hoped you would see it that way. The problem is, tomb raiding has become an industry in China, and the amount of illegal Chinese antiquities entering the U.S. is overwhelming. We suspect that westerners are organizing and even financing some of the tomb robbing. Some auction houses, dealers, wealthy patrons, and museums are involved in this traffic, but it’s hard to catch them, and even harder to prosecute them.

“This brings me to you. We need a legitimate archaeologist who is not Chinese but who speaks Chinese well, to be our eyes and ears in China.”

“There are several westerners who have cooperative projects with Chinese archaeologists,” I said, “and most of them are fluent in Chinese. Why not ask one of them? You wouldn’t have to wait three years for me to learn Chinese.”

“Some of them have been helpful to us, but the thieves avoid them. As a student or newly fledged archaeologist, you might be

in a position to learn more. Would you be willing to learn Chinese well enough to perform that role?"

"Korean and Chinese are in completely different language families. All I know of Chinese are some loan words in Korean, and they aren't even pronounced the same. Surely there are Chinese-Americans who could watch for you more easily."

"We haven't found a trained archaeologist who is willing. They all believe they are watched closely, and probably they are right. We think you would be above suspicion. And we are very impressed with your linguistic skills. We'd like to sponsor you to learn Chinese for three years, in exchange for your listening in China. We agree that it's important to stop the looting of Chinese sites."

"I need to think about it." I squirmed around in my chair, crossing my legs the other way.

"Sorry, it's now or never. When people think about it, they talk to their nearest and dearest, and leaks develop. If you agree, we'll pay the tuition for your Chinese classes. Do you need other tuition aid?"

"No, I have a full scholarship. But you're assuming I can join an archaeology project in China, which isn't that easy. And supposing I do get to China with a legitimate project, what if I don't learn anything? Will I have to pay you back?"

"The tuition support will be in the form of a grant. All we ask is that you listen and report." Sandra leaned forward and handed me a document several pages long. "Read this over and decide."

I read the whole document, fine print, boiler plate and all, while Sandra watched. The idea of learning Chinese was appealing. The idea of helping to catch looters at archaeological sites was also appealing. Why was I hesitating?

I signed, and enjoyed three years of Chinese language study. Some of it interfered with my love life, but Ed was busy too. He never questioned my sudden desire to learn Chinese.

When I was invited to join a short archaeological project, I was thrilled. I tried not to think of myself as a mole, but I would keep an eye out for theft of archaeological objects. I reported my plans to Ms. Wold through Ed's father, but heard nothing back before I left.

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We waited until all the baggage from our flight had come around on the carousel, but no large orange instrument was in sight. It would be impossible to miss – six feet long and two feet wide, in a carrying case with both shoulder strap and handles.

Joe and I looked at each other in dismay over its non-appearance. Joe had tales of customs officials in other countries freaking out when they heard the word ‘radar.’ In China we didn’t know what to expect. The unit is way too conspicuous to sneak through customs, since it begs for attention by both its size and its color. When Joe checked it in at the Boston airport, we heard comments of the “ha, ha, who are you going to shoot?” kind. Did they think we were going big game hunting in China? One skinny bearded guy and three young women? C’mon. But the radar unit was essential for our project, and this kind wasn’t available in China.

“Report it missing, Clara. You speak the best Chinese,” Joe ordered, handing me the baggage tag.

I took the tag. The order was typical of Joe. Of course as grad students we are his slaves, and we know it. Joe is likable in his gruff way, and I suspect it’s a pose because he was so recently one of us. Anyway, speaking Chinese was part of my job on this expedition. My Chinese was pretty good in class, but it hasn’t been tested in the real world. For example, I don’t know the word for radar. If pushed, I would try “ra-da” and probably be in the ballpark. With luck, I can get away with describing the bag, and not its contents. I want to see all of China, but I don’t want to see the inside of a Chinese jail.

I looked around for the desk to report lost luggage, but instead I saw a sign pointing to oversized baggage. Sure enough the radar unit was there, looking twice as big as life-sized. Okay,

the first hurdle leaped like superwoman. I slung the strap over my shoulder, feeling like a bearer for the great white hunter on safari, and staggered back to where Joe, Laura and Ashley were protecting the rest of our luggage – mostly battered duffels and backpacks that wouldn't look enticing to thieves anyway.

“Ta da! Faster than a speeding bullet.” I twirled around with the radar unit and almost fell over.

“Good one, Clara,” Joe said with half a smile. “So far so good. Now we have to get it through customs.”

Joe had requested that our hosts from the Beijing Archaeological Institute be present in case of trouble getting the radar unit through the customs procedures. But of course, even if the posse were here to rescue us, its members were outside the baggage area, and couldn't see if we had trouble or not. I hoped they were there for backup, though. The last hurdle was looming.

We inched our worldly belongings for the coming month ahead of us in the green line. A Chinese man in uniform walked up to me, pointed at the radar device, and asked, “*Shenme shi?*”

I was startled, but I tried not to look guilty.

“*Shi ige kaoguxue de dongxi,*” was the best I could do for an answer. Sounded like Chinese 101 to my ears. I hoped I could do better as time went on in China.

“She said, ‘it's an archaeological thing,’” Ashley giggled nervously behind her hand, explaining what I said to the others.

Joe tensed his muscles, although what he thought he could do, I can't imagine. The fight or flight readiness, I suppose.

The customs inspector showed a lot of teeth.

“*Hao, hao, kaoguxue de dongxi,*” he said, as if I had made a delicious joke, and he slapped a sticker on its side and waved us through.

“Hao means good, or okay,” I explained to Joe. “Let's get out of here before he changes his mind.”

On the other side of the barrier, in a crush of people meeting planes, a young Chinese man anxiously scanning the crowd held high a sign we found reassuring. It read “Welcome American archaeologists.”

We pushed our way through the crowd toward the sign, but the guy holding it ignored us. Joe worked his way right next to him, and asked in his ear if he was from the Beijing Archaeological Institute. The Chinese man jumped, and then looked at Joe and smiled.

“You must be the radar guy. Welcome to China,” he said. “Call me Xiao Li.” This means “small Li,” but he was taller than any of us, and probably about our age. I had thought ‘Xiao’ was only used for children, but I was obviously wrong.

“Nice to meet you, Shelly,” said Joe, offering his hand, which Xiao Li grasped and shook heartily.

“I saw you but I think you could not be the right people,” Xiao Li said, by way of apology. “I look for four Americans.”

Ashley batted her beautiful dark eyes at him, as she does in the company of any male. “We are all Americans. Four” And pointing to each of us, Joe, Laura, me, and herself, she counted, “One, two, three, four.”

Xiao Li looked baffled, so I stepped in to help. “This is Ashley Woo. Her parents came from Hong Kong, but she was born in America. Thus she is American. She’s a specialist in Chinese jades. I’m Clara Alden. I was born in Korea, but adopted by Americans and became a citizen before I can remember. Thus I am American, too, with an English name. My specialty is the Neolithic period. I’ve worked on archaeological sites in Korea, and would like to work in China.”

Then, having dealt with the Asian anomalies, I presented Laura Wolsky and Dr. Joseph Martinez, experts in ground-penetrating radar.

Joe looked like an archaeologist: well tanned, with the obligatory beard and muscular arms. Laura is as tall as Joe. She has the all-American-girl kind of good looks – healthy, tall, blue-eyed, pink-cheeked. Ashley is medium height and willowy, like a princess in a Chinese painting. Even in jeans she manages to look like a fashion model. I’m the shortest of the bunch, and skinny, too, but I can do my share of the heavy work on an excavation.

Xiao Li volunteered no information about himself, but later we learned he’s an advanced archaeology student at Beida, who has excavated Hongshan culture sites.

He made small talk as he guided us to a waiting taxi, and I was impressed with both his English and the ease with which he

chatted. The driver, who was standing beside the taxi, shook his head when he saw what I was carrying. The small taxi was clearly not going to hold the five of us and our luggage, let alone the radar unit.

“Two taxis?” I suggested to Xiao Li.

“No, we need van. I not know you would bring something so large. That monster thing too big for taxi all by itself.” We all laughed together, in my case out of relief that this had become someone else’s problem.

Xiao Li disappeared, while Joe, Laura, Ashley and I huddled together on the sidewalk. I felt conspicuous holding the radar unit, with unbelievable crowds pushing by. It was bumped into several times, so I shifted it to a vertical position in my arms. With a large pack on my back and another bag over my shoulder, this wasn’t easy, and my arms began to ache.

A Chinese man spoke to us, but neither Ashley nor I could understand his accent, so after several tries he gave up and walked on. Ashley thought he was trying to pick us up, but I thought he was asking directions. So much for our combined fluency in Chinese!

The crowds had begun to thin when Xiao Li reappeared with a driver and a van. Our China adventure was about to begin.

“In Beijing you stay three nights at Overseas Chinese Hotel,” explained Xiao Li to Joe, as the taxi pulled out onto a wide highway. “Very convenient. Right across street from Archaeological Institute. Not far from Gate of Heavenly Peace Square.”

Ashley saw that Joe didn’t react to the latter, so she leaned toward him and whispered, “That’s Tiananmen. You know, where the students tried to take a stand on democracy in 1989, and were run down with tanks?”

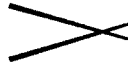
“Ah,” said Joe, “Ancient history.”

It was a joke, which we acknowledged with small groans. But there’s some truth to his lack of investment in world events. Joe is such a techie type that he doesn’t pay much attention to anything else. As a post-doc shepherding his little band of grad students, it’s his considerable experience at using and interpreting ground-penetrating-radar in archaeological sites that

had brought us all to China. As far as he was concerned, he could be anywhere. Often, he was.

Joe doesn't have any Indiana Jones tendencies. He doesn't search for lost treasures or raid tombs. He's a serious researcher, and I respect his knowledge. Just the same he's had many strange adventures taking his radar unit to faraway places. I smiled with the pleasure of being a member of this project, which no doubt would spawn other mythic tales to entertain future grad students.

I was eager to see the Hongshan culture sites, in the far northeastern part of China, a region once called Manchuria. I was especially interested in the site with the 'Goddess Temple.' The truth is, I hope to write my dissertation on leadership in Hongshan sites. I know a lot about what's been found in the sites, but I need a data set to work with.



"Three days in Beijing," Joe grumbled. "I hate delays. Why can't we go straight to Daling, Shelly?"

"It is holiday," explained Xiao Li, "Labor Day, May first. In China, Labor Day holiday ten days long. Liaoning province archaeologists cannot go to Daling until May 11. Better you wait in Beijing."

"We could go ahead and get a feel for the site, make a grid, and plan which areas to sample," Joe persisted.

Xiao Li said "Tsss," drawing air in over his back teeth.

"It's an order, Joe, phrased politely. Roll with it," I said in Joe's ear, recognizing the teeth sucking sound as an indirect negative from my time in Korea.

"What are we going to do here for three days?" Joe kicked the back of the seat, more or less accidentally.

"Since we're here anyway, we have to see the Great Wall of China," said Laura, her eyes sparkling. "It's one of the world's most famous sites."

"The Forbidden City is a must, too," Ashley said. "You've heard of it?" she teased, but Joe didn't react.

“And Tian Tan, the heavenly-blue-roofed Temple of Heaven. And the Summer Palace,” I added, remembering the tourist places from a lesson in my first-year Chinese book. I hadn’t dared to hope we actually would have time for seeing the sights. I considered the delay a gift from the fates, although Ed will come sightseeing with me after the fieldwork.

Xiao Li blinked at our list of places to go. “Well, okay, interesting places, but archaeologists at Beida and Archaeological Institute expecting you. They want to hear your thoughts about the Hongshan culture. Also already arranged for you to see History Museum and exhibit on archaeology in Gugong.”

Three days to do all that? Really two, because today was almost over.

“We’ll see what we can squeeze in,” said Joe. “The archaeological preparation is important. Sight-seeing will have to fit into any extra time.” Laura made a face behind Joe’s back.

The highway from the airport was packed with cars and buses, and as we neared downtown, traffic barely moved. After edging into the right lane, the van driver said something I couldn’t catch to Xiao Li, and turned off the elevated road. The ramp plunged us into the narrow streets of old Beijing.

A year in South Korea was my first venture into Asian archaeology. As I told Xiao Li, I’m an adopted Korean, and I look it except for my American clothes and attitude. Looking at the old streets, I was reminded of Korea. Down the side streets called *hutong*, the old architecture is similar – brick houses topped by roof tiles with slightly up-turned corners. The charm is in these unexpected alleyways. Otherwise, colorful, milling crowds had to compensate for drab buildings. Most newer buildings are made of concrete, giving them the look that Ed called “instant old” when he visited me in Korea. The new skyscrapers could be anywhere in the world, except for the large neon Chinese characters flashing their names.

The sights and sounds made me think back to my year in Korea. They were a reminder, too, of the strange dreams or visions I had that year - dreams of being a yellow bird participating in the life of Flyingbird, the leader of Bird

Mountain Village, home to a small segment of the Golden Clan. I learned a lot about prehistoric life at the sites I was working on. Maybe I would have visions of the sites we would be working on in China.



Daydreaming as I reminisced, I found I had spread yellow wings again and was flying into a small house. It was like those of Bird Mountain Village in having only one room, but the large room was divided into sections. It was clean and sunny, with light entering through an opening near the roof. Fuzzy hangings with patterns in black, white and brown adorned the walls, and reed mats almost covered the dirt floor.

Several women bustled around, helping with a birth. A black-haired woman beat a hand drum, and another woman wearing white jade ear ornaments danced barefoot around the mother-to-be, clapping her hands. The shells hanging from her belt made a rattling accompaniment a few tones higher than the drum. I could barely see the woman giving birth, squatting in the middle of all the commotion.

I was perched on a high ledge made of twigs, to observe the proceedings, but when I heard the child cry, I flew to a lower ledge to have a better view – and got a shock. The baby girl had green eyes and wavy dark brown hair. Her skin was pale, too. Even the people of the Golden Clan were not as pale as this child.

Her mother, I noticed now that I could see her clearly, had eyes as dark as mine. Her straight black hair was held back from her forehead with a band of yellow flowers. I wondered about the father of such a pale child, but no men were present.

The mother was helped to sit up, leaning on the drummer. Her change of position revealed a pendant of pale green jade, winking in the firelight. The jade was carved in the shape of a small contorted head. It startled me. I'd seen jade heads like that before, when Flyingbird was on her quest to the sacred mountain. She was given one to wear while she traveled through

unfamiliar territory. The heads were sometimes used for making magic, but their real use was to identify the wearer as an inhabitant or friend of Jade Village.

After the baby was bathed, she looked around with bright eyes and seemed to smile. As before, I knew I was in this place because it would be my job to protect her. I hoped I would be up to the job.

One of the women pushed aside the bearskin hanging in the doorway and beckoned to a man outside. "You have a beautiful daughter, Carver. Come in and greet her."

A tall man with a full brown beard entered and sat beside the mother and child, enveloping them warmly in his arms. The beard must have tickled the baby, but she didn't cry.

"Owl, my love, what a pair of beauties you two are."

Carver's face was turned toward me. His green eyes were so different from the others that I gave a squawk. This caught the attention of the birth assistant with the drum.

"Look at that yellow bird," she said to the others. "It has to be a good omen for this child."

They all looked in my direction. To my surprise, the baby's father recognized me. "I think this is the yellow bird in my favorite song. Haven't you heard me singing it?" Carver asked Owl. "About the bird who guided a strange woman into my village long ago?"

When Owl looked puzzled, he added, "I often sing it while I carve."

The baby's mother nodded. "Now I know, dum-ti-diddle-um" she hummed a tune, and then sang "Golden Flyingbird. . . Do you think this could be the same bird?"

"I've heard you sing about the Spirit Bird protecting a girl from a tiger at the Heavenly Lake" said the smallest of the women, a teenager, I guessed.

"Yes, that's the one, Little Shell. She was real, not a made-up story. She left a feather in my village, which my mother keeps in her treasure basket to this day. It's still bright yellow. Ma uses it to cure jaundice."

That was the first I knew of the medicinal properties of my feathers, but it made me feel proud of being useful.

“Your mother told me a story about a bird once,” the new mother remembered. “Flyingbird, your great-great-grandmother of the Golden Clan, was named for that bird.”

Owl put her finger on her cheek. “Oh – that means our child descends from Flyingbird on your side. Do you think Flyingbird sent her Spirit Bird to watch over her?”

“The bird must have been sent by a spirit, because none of us called her.”

They contemplated both the infant and me.

“What should we name this lucky baby?” Carver asked, now that her ancestry had been verified.

“She belongs to my clan of Wu, of course. But because of the bird she should be called Golden, too. Her eyes are the color of some of the jade you carve. Golden Jade? Is that a good name?”

“Of course I’ll teach her to carve if she wants to learn. But you’ll tutor her in your arts, like calling the rain spirits, and healing and seeing the future, won’t you? Should that be part of her name, too?”

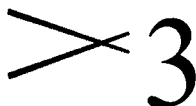
“The name Wu means those things. My clan members are diviners, magicians, and healers. I’ll instruct her in music and dance, and medicine and divining. You’ll teach her how to recognize good jade-stone, and how to see the spirit in the stone and carve it out. Jade can choose for herself which path to follow. They are all kinds of magic.

“Look at those long fingers,” Owl smiled as she uncurled the baby’s fist with her own finger. “They’re made for carving. And jade is one means of clear-seeing. Golden Jade should be her name.”

Carver carried Golden Jade outside, and formally announced her name to the waiting villagers.

A flutist and two drummers had been waiting for this moment, and began to play a lively tune. A tall thin man imitated a crane, as he plucked Jade from Carver’s arms and began dancing with her, holding her close in one long arm. He picked up his knees high and flapped one elbow. Then everyone joined in, dancing the crane dance in a circle, joining Golden Jade to her kinfolk of the Wu clan..

I dropped a yellow feather for good luck. Maybe this one would cure some other kinds of diseases.



“Wake up, Clara, we’re there.”

For a moment I couldn’t think where “there” might be. A big hotel sign flashing neon Chinese characters was the clue I needed.

The sun was still high in the sky, so I suggested that we check in quickly and walk to Tiananmen Square. Xiao Li looked at his shoes, cleared his throat, and said “Tsss” over his back teeth. It got our attention, and we waited.

“Mmm. The archaeologists from the Institute want to greet you,” Xiao Li finally brought forth. “I said I would bring you over as soon as you put luggage in rooms. You already late. It is holiday, and they wish to go home. How long you need to put luggages in your rooms? I tell archaeologists you coming.”

“Ten minutes,” Joe said, just as Ashley announced, “Half an hour.” Joe narrowed his eyes at her.

“C’mon Joe, after 24 hours traveling, I need a shower. I can’t meet anybody smelling like a sewer rat. You could do with a shower yourself.” I thought Ashley was pushing her luck, but Joe smiled one of his rare full smiles.

He lifted his shoulders and sighed. “Tell them half an hour, then, Shelly. We’ll be as quick as we can.”

As we waited in line at the check-in desk, I saw Xiao Li crossing the street to the institute. Since he was out of the way, I said to Joe, “His name’s Xiao Li, not Shelly. Say Shh-ow, like be quiet, it hurts. Rhymes with ‘how.’ Li is his family name. You could call him Mr. Li.”

“Shouldn’t it be Mr. Xiao?” asked Laura.

“Good for you to know that in East Asia the family name comes first. But in this case Xiao means small, or young. He’s assuming Joe is older than he is. Or there might be another person named Li in his *danwei*, his work unit, who’s older than he is.

On the plane, Joe had held three pieces of paper, one marked with an X, so that Ashley, Laura and I could draw for the single room in Beijing. Ashley won. Laura and I suspected Joe had rigged it so he could sleep with Ashley.

“I don’t care,” Laura had said. “It’s over between Joe and me. He can’t bother me that way.”

I brought only one city outfit, since I wasn’t expecting to be meeting Chinese archaeologists in Beijing. It was just navy pants and a nice blue top, but for a grad student, that counts as dressed up. I examined the outfit critically. It had survived being crammed in my duffel bag pretty well. I looked at myself in the mirror, and added the gold locket that Ed gave me just before we said good-bye. It’s in the shape of a heart, and says “Safe Journey” in Chinese characters on the back. How sweet of Ed to worry about me. I hadn’t told him anything about my mission.

I brushed my shoulder-length hair, which is dark brown and wavy – Korean, not Chinese hair. But there’s no question, I thought, examining my eyes with their epicanthic folds, that I’m Asian.

Will the archaeologists think I’m Chinese, like Xiao Li did, I wondered. They’ll realize I’m not Chinese as soon as I speak. It will be easier than in Korea, though, because the Chinese won’t expect me to know the culture in my bones.

Laura bounced out of the shower and slipped into hip trousers and a skimpy tee shirt. I wouldn’t have worn that outfit in China, but it wasn’t my business to tell her how to dress, and she wouldn’t change anyway. She brushed her streaked hair into a high ponytail that swished enticingly when she walked.

At the Institute we were given a brief tour before we met the archaeologists. The front part of the compound looks like an old manor house for a noble family, but the building with the labs is a concrete addition. Serviceable, but lacking charm. I was impressed with the sophistication of the archaeological laboratories. I expected them to be crude and dusty, but that must have been old news. They had facilities for macro-floral analysis, thin-sectioning pottery, and sediment analysis, among other high-tech analyses.