1) What are some of the major differences between daily life in China and daily life in the U.S.?

It depends when the question is answered. Differences were huge one or two decades ago. Today, however, the differences are becoming smaller, particularly among the younger generations. They enjoy wearing jeans, eating hamburger, dreaming of a lucrative job, a good car, and a comfortable house or apartment flat.

Differences are still great and prevalent due to different cultural backgrounds. Though private sedans are becoming increasingly affordable, public transportation and bicycles are still the common means of transportation. Taxis are numerous and very accessible and affordable. Therefore they become the favored means of transportation for white collar Chinese who hate to travel by bicycles but at the same time do not plan to own their cars, which themselves are not necessarily beyond their means. It is the fees and other expenses that are prohibitive.

Chinese parents have more pressure to see their kids successful in school because going to college is very competitive. Each year only one out of three or four high school graduates are enrolled. College entrance exam is thus makes a huge difference in one’s life. Children start the ordeal of preparing for it from elementary school. They need to be enrolled in better middle schools to better their chances to succeed in the college entrance exam.

2) What are some of the major differences in English and your native tongue?

The biggest difference is that English is a spelling language with inflexions while Chinese is not. Another difference is that Chinese syllables each have four tones that are semantically significant while English has only the rising, level and falling tones, which are semantically significant only on the sentence level (e.g. a rising tone may signify a question).

3) What holidays are of most importance in your culture?

The most significant holiday is the Chinese New Year, the counterpart of Christmas. Next in importance is the National Day on October 1 to celebrate the founding of New China in 1949. In recent years a week paid leave is given to employees to boost domestic tourism and the economy. International Labor Day on May 1 is another weeklong holiday with paid leave when people hit the road on their tour and spending spree. The Mid-Autumn Festival is also a very popular festival. It is the counterpart to American Thanksgiving. Interestingly, three American holidays are catching on in China. The government endorses Mother’s day while Valentine’s Day is a fad among the young and Christmas is the favorite of high school and college students. They mistakenly treat it as their carnival, a time of a lot of parties. Of course, both are favored by businesses that make a lot of money by selling flowers, cards, lights, fake Christmas trees and more… Ironically, the New Year is not a big deal to the Chinese as they are busy preparing for the
Chinese New Year in just half a month.

4) **What is the predominate religion in China? How does it vary from that of the tradition of Christianity?**

This is a most difficult and interesting question to answer. Christianity is in China, but is still regarded as foreign. Though gaining fast popularity, particularly among college students, it is normally a family tradition, that is, children of Christians tend to become Christians themselves.

Traditionally, there are three beliefs, namely, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. There are Temples of Literacy dedicated to Confucius (one in my city, for instance) and temples of Taoists and Buddhists. Taoists tend to be reclusive and usually found in remote mountains. Both the Buddhist and Taoist temples are like the Western monasteries, where devoted followers serve their gods therein. The common people go to pray, to give offerings and burn incense for various reasons, but do not belong to any churches. Therefore, there are no organized Buddhist and Taoist churches in the Christian sense. Their belief is an individual matter.

Scholars argue that the Chinese actually believe in a “popular religion.” Like the ancient Greeks, the Chinese also believe in polytheism -- a multi-god religious system. The gods are omnipresent: above, upon and beneath the earthly world. They consist of Buddhist and Taoist figures as well as Confucius scholars who became deified or, sainted, to use the Western terminology. The Chinese believe that a monarchical hierarchy governs each of the worlds, namely, the Heaven, the Earth and the Hell, with the Celestial Emperor being the supreme ruler. Traditionally, people worshiped gods of doors and stoves. The god of stove oversees the daily business of a household and reports their good or bad deeds to the Heavenly King at the end of the year. Before it departs for heaven, the Chinese would bribe him with a specially made candy in the shape of melon, called “tang gua,” hence the tradition of eating the candy when the day comes.

Another argument is that the true religion of China is the worship of “name” or reputation. There is a saying: “Wild geese leave their cry behind as they fly away; people leave their name behind as they pass away.” Therefore, saving face and reputation used to be a life and death matter.

Still another argument is that the Chinese believe in the worship of ancestry. The Chinese believe all things have their two sides, the yin and the yang, or the negative and positive. For instance, when a person dies, his or her spirit leaves his or body. It can become a ghost (gui) haunting the living or an angel (shen) to benefit the living. It all depends if the living show due respect to the dead.

5) **Are clothing styles similar in the two countries?**

Traditionally, no. Traditional Chinese pants were like a bag with two tubes for the legs. You fold over the top at the waist and use a rope to tie and hold it together. Today, it is obsolete as too corny. The traditional vest and coat, however, are having a strong comeback as a fad. It is known as Tangzhuang or the Clothing of Tang, the best dynasty in Chinese history that was chronologically
parallel to the Roman Empire. Tangzhuang is characterized by its propped collar, integrated sleeves and the body without seams, and buttoned front with knotted decorations. The garment material is mostly of silk, blue, red, or brown in color, with elaborate designs of dragons, peony, or Chinese characters of “fu” (happiness) or “shou” (longevity). Pants, jeans, skirts, suites, T-shirts, etc. today are all the same as what we are wearing in America. The only difference is that we are more casual while the streets in Chinese cities are sort of like cat walks for models. People like to wear their best when they are out and girls in particular enjoy displaying their latest fashion.

Before the initiative of economic reform and opening to the outside world at the end of the 70’s in the last century, for decades, the Chinese wore a uniformed suite called the Zhongshan (Yat-sen) zhuang known to the West the Mao zhuang. It has a short color, with seamed sleeves of padded shoulders and four big distinctive pockets. The color is a monotonous blue and gray. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 through 1976, nothing Western was allowed. At a time, the army was regarded as a model and their clothing a fad. The whole country is a color of gray, blue and green. Today, it is entirely another world. It is as fashionable as we can be in the States.

6) What types of food are popular among the Chinese people?

Traditionally Jiaozi is a popular dumpling-like food in North China, its stuffing made of vegetables, meat, or both. The favorite stuffing is Chinese cabbage and ground pork, seasoned with green onion, ginger, soy, and sesame oil. Use of vegetables is only limited by imagination, but the choice of meat confines to pork, mutton, and beef in that order. Jiaozi is significant to the Chinese New Year’s Eve in North China as niangao, a cake of sweet rice, to the South, both believed to bring good luck. More importance is attached to its cultural significance. Actually, the Chinese like a variety of food. With the world’s largest population with diverse cultural backgrounds on a land area smaller only than Russia and Canada, Chinese enjoy a variety of Chinese food. It is difficult to say what the favorite is. Generally, thousands of Chinese recipes are classified into local, royal, family, ethnic, vegetarian, and healer foods, with eight regional cuisines. The Shandong food is aromatic with scallion and garlic. Sichuan is complex with pickled chilies and Sichuan pepper. Guangdong offers more original flavors. Fujian’s seafood gives a "pickled taste." Jiangsu’s seafood is light and sweet. Food in Zhejiang is not greasy. Hunan cooking tastes heavier and pungent. Anhui is good at braising and stewing. These regional differences are popularly simplified as "sweet south, salty north, sour west, and spicy east."

As people aspire for a healthier life, growing rapidly is the market for new cookbooks on healer foods and recipes conducive to weight loss and beauty treatment. A 500-page Zuixin shiyong xiandaijiating yaoshanshipu (Latest Practical Healer Food Recipes for the Contemporary Family) sells for $280. Other bestsellers include ethnic recipes; ancient recipes, particularly of royal families; recipes of natural food sources; and ones prompted by new cooking devices like microwaves and rotisseries. Quality and format of cookbooks have improved. A new trend is to accompany recipes with photo samples. Digitized recipes are available on CDROMs, VCDs (video CD), and the Web. Television programs offer cooking shows like Tiantian yinshi (Daily Meals).

Each region has its famed food brand: Beijing is famous for its Beijing Duck, Chonqing its
Huoguo or Hot Pot, has a vessel with a shaft running through as a hearth and airway. A grate in the hearth holds the charcoal and drops the ashes to the base, where a door controls air intake. Method of cooking is the instant-boiling (shuan) of meat, vegetables, seafood and other foodstuffs. Shuanyangrou (instant-boiled mutton slices) is a northern Chinese favorite, known for its sauce of scallion, garlic, vinegar, sesame oil and chillies. Tianjin, my hometown, is famous nationally for its Goubuli baozi, a very savory steamed dumpling.

The Chinese are also notoriously adventurous in their eating habit. A saying goes that some would eat anything that walks except human beings and anything that flies except for airplanes. The dreaded SARS is probably a result of this morbid yearning for exotic animals and food.

7) At what age do students begin schooling and what age do they graduate? Is completing some type of higher education popular among the Chinese people?

Children normally begin schooling at six. Actually, starting from three, they begin to learn to read and count in kindergartens. At the age of 18, they graduate from high school and compete for entrance into college. To be able to go to college is not only popular, but a life and death endeavor. Parents who did not have a chance to go to college try to realize their dream in the efforts to get their children succeed. College education is a must for a better life, though not necessarily a guarantee.

8) How do teenagers differ in the two cultures?

Not much. However, they are still more dependent on their parents. They are mostly provided by their parents. Jobs are very few for teenagers. Parents do not think they should work at their “tender” age.

They are more prone to be fans of celebrities. They like western fashions, movies, music, holidays. They are also having more pressure in their studies. They seldom drive cars as Chinese are just beginning to own them. Cars are still expensive “toys” of affluent adults. They like to hang out in Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald.

Smoking is prevalent though they try to hide the activity from teachers and parents. Some do dye their hair but piecing is still rare. Both are strictly prohibited by school authorities. Percentage of teens having sexual experience is still very low due to inconvenience, and parent and social pressures. Comparatively, it has been rising considerably in the past decade as social norm is becoming laxer.

8) Any other cultural differences you would like to make mention?

One interesting cultural aspect that I like to mention is alcohol drinking. There is no legal age restriction to alcohol consumption. It is all right for a one year old to drink if his or her parent prefers. However, you find little binge among teens or adults. Getting drunk is shameful. While the Chinese party and drink alcoholic beverages, be it beer or the vodka like baijiu, each tries all
he can to avoid getting drunk. They would usually target the most vulnerable. Therefore, drinking is a mind game at which each tries to stay sober. Even when one gets drunk, he will not admit it unless he is too much inebriated to talk. The state of drinking enough without inebriety is the goal that everyone tries to achieve. The one that drinks a lot without being drunk is regarded as a “hero.” Incidentally, alcohol drinking is still a man’s thing. Girls usually choose non-alcohol beverages in public gatherings.