

Love conquers gap of cultures

Lu Xiaofeng and Xu Wei

In a tranquil garden in Anting New Town, which featured German-style architecture, beautiful lawns, a large beach umbrella and comfortable lounge chairs, Liu Meina, a native of Beijing, and her German husband Thorsten Niehues welcomed a Jiading news reporter.

Niehues, 33, clad casually in polo shirt and shorts, spoke lovingly of his family and his work as his little daughter Melina playing alongside him, trying to catch his attention. He stopped now and then to give her a gentle pat on the head and made her laugh with his funny faces.

The marriage of Liu and Niehues was born of destiny and coincidence, the couple said. It began in 2003 when Liu, then a new university graduate with a degree in German, decided to leave her hometown.

"Beijing is a big city, but I thought I should have a look around at the world outside the city," Liu recalled.

She was hired by a Sino-Austrian joint venture based in Danyang, Jiangsu Province, as an interpreter. Two years later, her wanderlust prompted her to apply for work in Shanghai, where she met Niehues.

He hails from Holdorf, a small city near the northern German port of Bremen. Before coming to Shanghai, he hardly traveled much at all. Then, in early 2006, his company decided to build a factory at Anting Town. Niehues was sent to help start up the business in China on a one-year contract. That seemed long enough at the time. Friends back home speculated he wouldn't even last a year in such a different culture.

They were right for the first



Thorsten Niehues and his wife Liu Meina speak lovingly of his family and his work while daughter Melina plays alongside him.

"China has given me a rare chance to start and pursue my own career."

two months. Niehues said he was homesick and eager to return to Germany. But soon he grew accustomed to his new life and gradually fell in love with Jiading, he said. Today only two of the original six colleagues who came with him to Shanghai are still here.

As a senior staff member of the Oldenburger Interior Products (Shanghai) Co, Niehues has devoted his work life to development of the company. The VIP lounge at the Germany Pavilion at the World Expo, the bar in the pavilion's

dining room and several interior products of the US Pavilion are made by Oldenburger.

"China has given me a rare chance to start and pursue my own career," Niehues said with pride.

But it wasn't work that cinched his enduring relationship with China. Shortly after Spring Festival in 2008, he and several friends went to a pub on Changji Road. There he met Liu. He wasn't quite sure how to proceed. He wanted to get to know her better but didn't know Chinese customs of courtship. He finally summoned the courage to ask for her phone number. The somewhat shy Liu just gave him only her email address. A romance was born. Niehues sent her greetings every day, and whenever she didn't show up at the

pub, he would email to ask if she was all right.

His concern and consideration moved Liu. One month later, she accepted his request to date, and the pair has never looked back. Six months later they were married. It was a brief courtship, Liu admitted. "After many years working and living far from home, I thought it was time to settle down and have a family," she said. Their daughter is now 18 months old and they are expecting a second child soon.

Football and beer are known to be favorites of the Germans, and Niehues says he is no exception. The day he sat down for this interview, Germany had just been eliminated from the 2010 World Cup. "What a pity!" he said. "Our team performed very well."

He and other expats living in Anting Town have formed their own football team, which plays regularly in local competitions.

"I used to be a good runner; but now I am fat, so goalkeeping seems to be the only position for me," Niehues said, pointing at his belly with a laugh.

Parents from both families have blessed this union.

"We had a very good chat when I saw his mother for the first time," Liu said. "I can speak German, and I know something about German culture. There is no communication boundary between us."

Although Niehues can't speak Chinese, his honesty and sincerity touched Liu's parents, who said they trust him to take good care of their daughter.

A Briton, awed by dynamic change, masters local customs

Lu Xiaofeng and Xu Wei

FOR the last 13 years, Richard Wilkinson, a British citizen, has watched first hand as Jiading District has made major strides in its development.

"What's happening here is just a reflection of China's rapid development, and it is a miracle," he said.

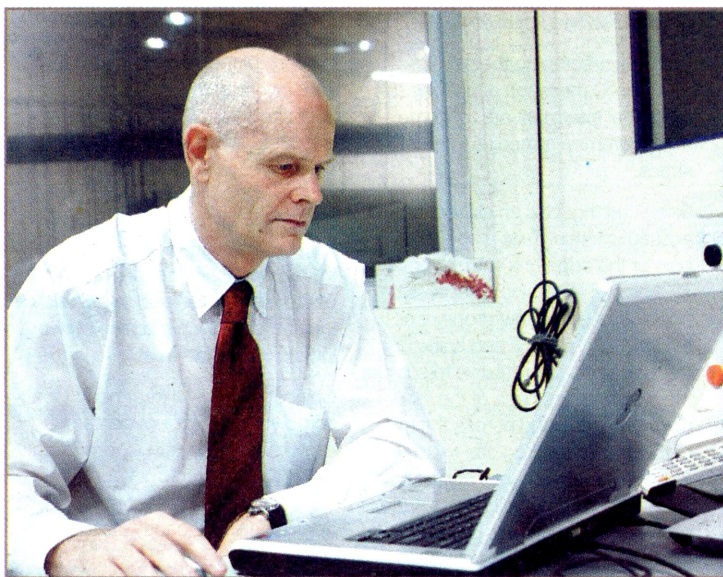
Wilkinson works for Fenner Group, a UK-based manufacturer of industrial belts and polymer-based products.

He is president of group subsidiary Dunlop Conveyor Belting (Shanghai) Co. and another unit based in India.

He spends three weeks a month living in the Jiading District and the remaining week in India.

In 1997, on his first trip to China, Wilkinson stayed in the Jiading District for three months amid preparations for the launch of the Shanghai Fenner Conveyor Belting Co Ltd. He said he still recalls that period clearly.

"At that time, many industries of Jiading were still in their infancy," he said. "There were very few well-known enterprises here except



Richard Wilkinson, said the pace of growth has been awesome. But equally impressive is his assimilation into Chinese culture.

Shanghai Volkswagen."

After fulfilling his start-up mission, Wilkinson returned to the UK. The next time he stepped foot in Jiading was 2004.

"That year also marked the first Chinese Grand Prix," he recalled.

Since then, Wilkinson hasn't missed any Formula One races in the district.

Over the past six years, he said, more factories and buildings have gone up in the district, ushering in new vitality.

"A lot of famous brands came to Jiading, such as KFC, Starbucks and Tesco, a UK-based supermarket chain," he said. "The world is becoming smaller and smaller."

Wilkinson applauded the rapid economic growth, but he said it's imperative for the local government to preserve Jiading's historic resorts and heritage, including Zhouqiao Old Street and the Qiuxia Garden.

A city needs memories, he said.

After many years living and working in China, Wilkinson has adopted many Chinese customs though he still doesn't speak the language.

He's become used to the slightly sweet tang of Shanghai cuisine, and like many local residents, he also loves spicy Sichuan dishes.

On weekends, he usually takes a stroll along the Bund.

"I have gotten accustomed to a life here," he said. "There's not a big difference between most Shanghai citizens and me."

He has also learned some "unwritten rules" governing conduct at Chinese social and business occasions.

As a senior manager, he has frequent meetings with clients. He knows that in China people usually talk business over dinner. He held a cup up, boasting that he can drink four cups of Chinese distilled liquor without problems.

"It is more comfortable and relaxing to talk business at the dinner table," he explained. "I think it is a part of Chinese culture."

The British are often stereotyped as starchy and reserved. But according to the company's project manager Hu Xiaozhong, Wilkinson has two sides to his personality.

He is very strict about work and demands excellence and commitment from those around him. But in a social setting, he is amiable and outgoing.

Wilkinson does share one trait with his native countrymen. He is a die-hard soccer fan. When his Chinese colleagues invited him to join the company's football team, he agreed without hesitation.

He plays forward on the team. He is also a runner who likes to attend marathon races.

"Sports bring passion to my life and help keep me young," he said.