Jim Guy grew up in Paragon, Indiana, and Indianapolis. He owes his interest in things beyond the state to Mrs. Gephardt, his third-grade teacher at Chapelwood Elementary School, who filled story time with tales of Marco Polo and of the Great Wall of China. “The Great Wall was a dream I could never get out of my mind.” In Mrs. Lynn’s fourth-grade class, he studied explorers. “I loved those stories. I wrote extra reports.” Jim finally found his way overseas through the Air Force. He lived in Germany and worked on F-4 fighter jets. Back in Indiana, Jim followed a friend to IUPUI in 1995. Through his work in student government, Jim learned about I-House, moved in, and found new friends from Egypt, Kuwait, Malaysia, Albania, and elsewhere.

Helen Du was the youngest child of a large family with a long tradition of government service. She grew up in a traditional Beijing courtyard house at a time when China was just beginning to encourage doing business overseas. “The youngest is always the rebel,” Helen said. “I wanted to do something different.” She earned her bachelor’s degree from the Tourism Institute of Beijing Union University and began working for a Japanese hotel in Beijing that catered to international business travelers. Through contacts there, she did some moonlighting, helping American clients set up offices in China. One of those clients was Cummins, which provided Helen with her first taste of Indiana at its offices in Columbus.

“I helped many small businesses set up offices in China. All of them wanted their own website. This was a new thing in the 1990s. I realized that I needed to learn computer skills. Cummins encouraged me to take courses. I enrolled at IUPUI as a computer science major.” She took up residence in I-House.

When Jim first spotted Helen at I-House, she did not look like the typical reserved student from China. “She was sitting outside I-House waiting for the shuttle to take her to class. Blue hat with USA across the top. White shirt also emblazoned with USA. Red skirt.” When that same student knocked on his I-House room door in response to a flyer Jim had posted about a car for sale, Jim decided that this was an individual he wanted to impress. For a first date, he hired a private plane at Eagle Creek Airport, and the two got to know each other while flying over Indy.
When Helen finished her degree in computer science, Jim gave up on his in psychology to follow her to China. He proposed to her in front of I-House friends during a visit to Kuala Lumpur. They planned to be married in Indiana (on the Fourth of July), but immigration officials wouldn’t allow Helen to travel to the United States for that purpose. Their first wedding license was granted in Beijing. Wedding ceremony followed later on his dad’s farm in Paragon. (Helen came on a business visa.)

Back in Beijing, Helen’s career moved forward quickly, first as an IT consultant, later as marketing director for Microsoft, and more recently as senior team lead for Apple in promoting products and ecommerce in East Asia and Japan.

Jim’s career was a bit rockier. In rapidly growing Beijing, he sold concrete blocks (“okay, but no way an exciting career”). He was successful as a real estate agent working with foreign clients, but he wanted to do something on his own. So he set up a pizza restaurant in Beijing and learned a great deal trying to make “Pizza Guy” a success (“especially the need to respect everyone—all the way from those cleaning the floor to the boss”).

While pursuing a commercial career in Beijing, Jim got a call from a friend asking if he would like a small role in a film. He would play a general and fly in a helicopter. “It was awesome. I made 50 bucks out of it.” Jim had done orientation videos for I-House but had not considered applying those skills. But he made friends in the film industry at Hengdian, “Chinawood” as it has been called, China’s version of Hollywood on steroids located in Zhejiang in East China.

Those friends called him for other roles speaking English, German, and Chinese. “I was lucky last year to have a lead role in a film with Kung Fu master Sammo Hung. I play a Russian mafia boss, a cold-hearted business man who comes to China to buy diamonds and gold. He puts them in a duffle to take back to Russia, and the duffle is stolen. He spends much of the film determined to find the thieves and teach them a lesson.”

Since “falling into” this new career, Jim has appeared in nine films and been part of eighteen television programs, including a role as Russian property owner in “The Old Farmer,” a popular series that portrays rural life in China near the Russian border. “I’m at the beginning of my
career,” Jim said. “There is so much more I need to learn.”

The Guys spend much of the year in Beijing and now have a summer home south of Bloomington. Their two sons have caught the film bug. Younger son Augustus wants to be an actor. Older son Alex appeared in a lead role when he was eight. In a film about a Chinese father and an English mother, Alex played their son, “a little brat” (Alex’s words), and had to deliver a tearful scene over his mother’s grave. Alex is interested in becoming a director, though privately he admits that a career as a professional soccer goalie would trump the cinema bug.

When Helen came to Indiana in the mid-90s, she had no intention of staying, but she learned much more than computer science in her time here. “The values and beliefs of Indiana culture were an important influence. People are down to earth, very real. The environment is welcoming and inviting. Life in the city is money driven. Here you sit back and think deeply about what you really believe. These values help me to connect even in Beijing. They remind me of traditional Chinese culture that respects learning, self-knowledge, and curiosity.”

Jim and Helen keep close contact with friends made decades ago at I-House. They hope that school in Beijing and summers in Indiana will assure that their sons feel a part of both worlds. “We love coming to Indiana. During exam time at the end of the school year, the boys get crazy in anticipation.” And as IU ratchets up its programs in cinema, Jim would like to be a conduit for connecting the university to the people he has come to know well in the Chinese film industry.
Jim Guy and Sammo Hung

Sammo Hung, “the living king of Hong Kong kung fu movies,” had not directed a film since 1997. In his much anticipated The Bodyguard (2015), Jim Guy, known in China as 盖吉利 (meaning very lucky), plays the Russian crime boss, Sergei, who spends much of the movie tracking down a thief and avenging the theft. Said Guy, “The bloody pic of Sergei comes later on in the movie, but I will not tell you what happens. You’ll have to wait and see it.”