Teaching In China
E. Russell TePaske
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614

Introduction

Looking in upon another culture as an outsider and then interpreting what is occurring within that culture is subject always to errors of observation and cultural bias. When a member of a western culture experiences and interprets an eastern culture the bias is greater than when he/she experiences and interprets another western culture for even the assumptions that eastern and western cultures make concerning the universals of human nature are not universal. Acknowledging that my perceptions are limited and culturally biased, I am sharing the experience of an educational exchange that occurred during the Spring of 1986. The term exchange in this context is not a one-for-one exchange but rather that our university has a sister relationship and formal guidelines for staff and student exchanges with Shaanxi Teachers University in Xian, China. Xian is an old city in central China, the former capital and the northern terminus of the overland trade route from the mideast.

Chinese Educational System

The benefits of the People’s Revolution to Chinese education are unmistakable. Before 1949 more than 80 percent of the population could neither read nor write. Now there are hundreds of millions of pupils in primary, secondary, and tertiary schools throughout the nation. The whole country can be thought of as an enormous school where every citizen spends part of his time learning and another part passing on knowledge to someone else. Everywhere one goes in China one sees people reading books and newspapers or making notations. There can be no doubt that literacy has produced a new-found joy in living.

Before 1949 more than 80 percent of the population could neither read nor write.

If one visits a kindergarten in China, he/she is impressed by the self-assurance of the children. They stand up and sign or dance without a hint of shyness or embarrassment, and the observer is enchanted by their candidness. This is one of the few occasions in China when it is probably best not to understand Chinese; the performance raises doubts for some observers when they learn that many of the songs are little more than political slogans. Chinese children are remarkably well-behaved both inside and outside the classroom. Rarely does one hear a Chinese child cry; they run, play, sing, and dance, but rarely appear to be misbehaved in public. Their good behavior has been attributed to handling, touching, fondling, and affection given in their early years, a practice that is centuries old. Good behavior, whatever its
cause, is so characteristic of Chinese children that it is assumed by Chinese adults to be normative and characteristic for children's behavior the world over. Abuse of children by adults, a problem all too familiar to Americans, was incomprehensible to the Chinese.

**Primary School**

Children usually start primary school at the age of six, depending on whether openings are available. They are subject to firm but not harsh discipline and regimentation. Compared to American education, far greater emphasis is placed on collective activities, on construction of physical objects and on manipulating objects physically. Items constructed from sand, erector sets, plastics, stones and wood occupied classroom perimeters. Aquaria, growing plants, germinating seeds and objects made of paper mache were also visible. Group projects constructed from reusable materials had a remarkably untemporary look; some showed evidence of recent partial revision, others seemed to have been weeks or months old.

Both primary schooling and secondary education are six years in length. Both are compulsory according to officials, but the reality seems to be that somewhat more than half of Chinese students complete secondary school.

**Secondary Education**

Secondary education in China is referred to as middle school. Children are about age twelve when they begin. In middle school there is study of literature, science, mathematics, foreign language, geography, history and political study. I had so little contact with middle school students that comment concerning the process of educating in these years is conjecture. From my experience with middle school students who subsequently became college students, I concluded that education in world geography was considerably superior to education in that discipline in the United States. I never met a Chinese student who lacked a reasonable conceptualization of the shape, size and ecological regionalization of the United States or any other continental land mass. I was surprised at college student knowledge of their own country's history and how little I knew about that history from my own schooling. Many Chinese students had some knowledge of western writers and western history, but this knowledge lacked a philosophy of history/literature.

---

A "humanities approach" was not evident in any comments made by students I talked with.

---

A "humanities approach" was not evident in any comments made by students I talked with. I discovered without intending to that my knowledge of history and literature was really my interpretation of history and literature and that culture bends (and blinds) that interpretation.

Chinese students claimed there were conspicuous differences in the achievement levels of secondary students in the cities as compared to those from the country. Rural students were claimed to be at a marked disadvantage academically on tests that give access to college-level education.

**Tertiary Education**

The uppermost level of educational hierarchy in China is attendance at a tertiary institute such as a university, specialized
Institute, technical university, or teacher-training college. About a million students currently attend tertiary institutes. Tertiary education has suffered a severe identity crisis from changes in political policy over the past two decades. Since tertiary institutions occupy an exposed position in Chinese society, they were buffeted by pressures resulting from differing doctrinal viewpoints in the communist party. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), universities and institutes of higher learning were criticized by communist party members for turning out an "elite" of technicians and bureaucrats who were insufficiently motivated by political ideology. It was further claimed that sons and daughters of bureaucrats, military officers, and party cadres were gaining entrance to universities in preference to other members of society. As a result the tertiary level of education was changed. Entrance examinations were abolished, student numbers were reduced and courses were shortened from five to three years. Selection procedures for beginning students were revised so that worker-students who had completed two years of industrial work after middle school could apply for tertiary education provided they had the support of their fellow workers. If they had worked more than five years before starting their studies, they could even continue to receive their wages while at the university; otherwise they would receive a state stipend of 15 yuan ($5) per month. In American dollars, this is a miniscule sum, but in Chinese currency it is about one-fourth the salary of university staff members and it comes in addition to the costs of education which are borne almost completely by the state. In short, the emphasis in tertiary education during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was on political ideology and not on academic or technical expertise.

In 1983, but not in 1986, I saw hundreds of college students memorizing political ideology; I presumed this exercise was for subsequent recitation or testing. Their study resembled that of American college students "cramming to pass" for an upcoming examination in a university-required course; it lacked conviction. I was impressed also in 1983 that Chinese students generally seemed broadly and knowledgeably committed to their country's political and economic ideology, including family planning. One English speaking student in 1983 stated that "The most important thing is not whether we all have TVs, but how to realize the Four Modernizations." He ticked off the national goals: that everyone seemed to have internalized: modernization of agriculture, industry, defense, and science. "If we achieve the Four Modernizations we can have a happy life." He added, "I believe that." By 1986, zealously for political ideology was no longer evident on any of the three campuses I visited. The opinion was sometimes ventured by staff and students alike that the Cultural Revolution had lost China millions of tertiary graduates at the time when the nation needed them most.

About 270,000 middle school graduates now enter China's universities each year without undergoing prior farm or factory work. Candidates must pass qualifying entrance examinations, and all
vacancies at institutes of higher learning are now filled on the basis of these tests. As an additional assurance of educational accomplishment, students must complete comprehensive examinations before graduating.

The singleness of mind with which most Chinese students pursue their university educations is difficult for Americans to grasp. Rock and disco sounds are rare; students seem not to date or dance; keggers and drug abuse are incomprehensible; premarital sex is synonymous with expulsion. One 1983 exchange teacher from Germany stated "I'm spoiled here, I'll never have such diligent students again." Less definitive, but carrying a similar message, were the comments of a Massachusetts couple who were concluding a year's faculty exchange at Shaanxi Teachers University in Xian. "The rules are that foreign exchange faculty members may not have sexual, political or religious exchanges if they're going to remain invited." "Even so," said the wife, "this has been the single most significant year of my entire life, and I'm the mother of 5 grown children, so I've done quite a bit of living."

Most Chinese intellectuals are underemployed.

Classes meet 6 days per week and all tertiary students have some facility with a second language. In the early 1980's 2/3 studied Russian and 1/3 studied English, but that balance had exactly reversed by 1986. One middle-school educated hotel worker stated "the language of commerce is English; we must understand it; read it and write it, if we are to compete in a world of commerce." University students in language courses often use their day off to meet tourists with whom they practice English. In 1983, I was delivering a lecture in English on animal imprinting to some 150 Chinese students at South China Agricultural College in Nanning. It was clear to me from the students' facial expressions that both the concept and my language were foreign to them. I had been speaking for an hour, so concluded my topic reasonably gracefully and asked if there were questions or comments from the audience. I assumed it was Chinese courtesy that had kept the students' non-comprehending eyes so closely trained on my face as I spoke. The first student who spoke said "Please go on, you speak English like they do on the TV; most of our visitors speak Australian English." Quite obviously I was an itinerant English teacher; my stock as a "speaker of English" increased in value between 1983 and 1986.

**Government Jobs**

By 1986 the Chinese government permitted students at tertiary education levels to state their preferred institute and subject major(s). They no longer assigned students to institutes or courses without the student's consent. Students could express opinions on what they would like to do following graduation but the reality is that students have few choices in matters of employment. It was the most frequently expressed concern of the students I met. Almost all students expressed strong support for Deng Xiaoping and top party leadership but almost all also expressed reservations about party leadership below the top. Repeatedly I heard of the inertia within the system and of power struggles within existing educational, military and industrial hierarchies. Repeatedly students expressed the view that resistance to change and/or modernization was caused by middle level administrators (straw-bosses/professors generals) who clung to
privileged and/or political positions within the old system and who were sabotaging modernization while ostensibly implementing it. Students with whom I visited (with only one exception) identified with those graduate students studying abroad who did not return to their homeland. Students were pessimistic, bitter and relatively hopeless about their foreseeable futures as workers. Although young intellectuals are relatively rare, the Chinese economy is not directed at all toward valuing their skills. Students expressed dissatisfaction that they would be rewarded with neither salary, status, nor job choice for having tested into one of the coveted and extremely limited places at an institute or university. The recent attention by the party leadership to the successes of private entrepreneurs and peasant collective entrepreneurs seemed to have exacerbated student resentment.

**Entrepreneurs**

If university graduates reject their state-assigned jobs and become private entrepreneurs, they are required to sacrifice college diplomas and any record that they attended a university. This rule is enough to dissuade most students from attempting entrepreneurship since state-assigned jobs at least are a sure thing. The non-agricultural private sector for all its media-touted successes, has many failures and is a scary no man's land for those with academic success but who are without private funds and who are experientially naive. Denied the possibility of modest wealth as entrepreneurs, young Chinese might reasonably hope to exercise their talents by contributing to China's modernization effort. In fact, they are denied this satisfaction and it is this limitation that produces the greatest resentment. Most Chinese intellectuals are underemployed.

It is a cynical joke among Chinese how little work there is done on the job. One industrial worker expressed his bitterness "We all squeeze on the buses in the morning, but as soon as we've punched in we spend an hour in the bathroom and another hour changing into our work clothes. We all have to keep diaries, and at the end of the day we all write nonsense about how oh so very busy we were today."

---

**There can be no doubt that literacy has produced a new-found joy in living.**

This anger is probably the primary reason for China's so-called ren ca wai li - its brain drain. Is it surprising that someone who received a doctoral degree in physics in the United States would be loath to return to teach a fixed physics curriculum to secondary or tertiary students under the supervision of a conservative and rigid school bureaucracy? It is not the large car and house that are the seductive charms of life in the United States for a Chinese person; it is the well-founded fear of a meaningless career in China, and the promise of an intellectual one in the United States. While the government officially has urged pursuit of the "Four Modernizations," it has frustrated individuals' efforts to do it. It has spouted fine words about democracy and political participation, but then has often denied students even the most elementary participation in matters that affect their own and China's future.

Another tough problem facing universities is what to do with the large number of professors, now in their late 30's and 40's, who have no academic qualifications and who are given no teaching assignments. Each university has staff members
who got there during the Cultural Revolution without academic credentials and who have continued to hold these positions. The Chinese leadership is concerned about this, but it doesn't want to create bitterness by throwing people out. The irony is that avoiding bitterness of tenured workers has produced bitterness in students. If U.S. reports were even approximately accurate, student patience had become exhausted by the close of 1986 and good-natured but serious demonstrations of protest occurred. Although the protests were illegal and soon terminated by the party, the message of protest apparently was taken seriously, for the 1987 party congress enacted policies that broadly liberalized student academic options but narrowed retirement options for bureaucrats.

Visiting Professors

Visiting professors typically live in a "foreign experts' building." The accommodations, luxurious by Chinese standards, consist of two to several rooms with bath and include a refrigerator, a heater and an air-conditioning unit. Surprising to me was that there was no evident resentment of the double standard in living accommodations among my Chinese colleagues. They said, "Foreigners have their ways and their habits. They need what they've become accustomed to. We understand and accept this."

The university itself is a compound and subject to elaborate security. Shaanxi Teachers University was surrounded by a 6-8 foot high brick wall with gatekeepers at each entry/exit. On the campus itself there were additional wrought iron and brick fences with gates and additional security personnel. Gates were locked at 11 p.m. and re-opened at 6 a.m. If I was not in by 11 p.m. or wanted to get out before 6 a.m. I had to rouse keepers of two gates. They slept in the gatehouses, and were remarkably tolerant of disruption.

Most staff and students live within the campus compounds. My housing was a 2-bedroom apartment in the Foreign Experts Building. I ate in the visitor dining service adjoining my building, rode a rented bicycle, exercised with the Chinese in early morning and tried in China to live as the Chinese do. Usually I described my day as lecture preparation all morning, teaching all afternoon and practicing English with students all evening. That was an overstatement, but not by too much. I made it a point to keep busy; to keep records of persons I met who wanted to pursue education in the States; to practice English with prospective students; to discuss Chinese perceptions of their own and my country; and to facilitate their applications to American graduate schools. All the activities I did seemed worth doing to me and each helped to enrich my China experience.

Visiting Students

A small but growing number of foreign students, including Americans, now come to China to study, some for technical training but the majority to increase their understanding of the Chinese people and language. Some students from developing nations also study in China as part of a program to produce technicians for Third-World countries. Foreign students in China get a closer glimpse of Chinese society than almost anyone else. Many write and all speak Chinese; some are ideologically receptive to the Marxist philosophy and the Communist system; others are drawn by curiosity or to the apparently simple but basic values of life in China.

A group of 10 students from the United States and a second group of 10 from Japan ate their meals in the same dining facility where visiting staff ate. The students
seemed generally to accept the spartan living conditions, poor food, and lack of outside entertainment, but they did object to attempts by government authorities to stifle friendships. The students frequently commented that the Chinese authorities were evasive and secretive. One discussion with American students described the experience of China as going through an emotional tunnel, beginning with initial euphoria and then passing successively through a phase of self-questioning, lurking doubt, determined goodwill, seething frustration, and ending in either active or passive aggression. Some students returned to the United States early, blaming themselves for taking China too seriously and for having believed that it offered more for humanity and its problems than it could deliver. I visited with professors from America on three widely separated campuses while I was there and all expressed many of the same feelings that the students had expressed. In addition, professors expressed anger that their areas of academic expertise had been treated cavalierly by their Chinese hosts. Teachers of mathematics never expressed this reservation to me but those who taught English, geography and sciences did. I never felt that my treatment was cavalier, but that was partly because I had correctly ascertained beforehand that my value to the Chinese was greater because I spoke good English and understood its grammar and construction than that I was a biologist.

My train travel was sleeper class (4 persons per cabin) with meals in a dining car. Sleeper class train travel costs about the same as flying but the value received in sight was worth the cost in time (56 hours).

"Foreigners have their ways and their habits. They need what they've become accustomed to. We understand and accept this."

I never grew tired of South China's rice paddies with their hundreds of water buffalo and thousands of peasant workers. It was a holiday and an education in agricultural conservation and land use all rolled into one.

I also followed the overland trail (silk route) from Xian as far into West China as rail would take me. In the West China city of Urumqi I stayed on the campus of Xinjiang University and had an Islamic Uygur student as my guide and interpreter. She had majored in English and I was her senior practicum.

The Uygurs are Turkish speaking descendants of the people who conducted the silk/tea trade. She escorted me to the Nanshan Grasslands where the nomadic Kazakh people live. The Ghenghis Khan invasions into eastern Europe were by ancestral Kazakh and Cossack (now outer Mongolian and Soviet) peoples. Even today they are such superb horsemen that it made invasions of eastern Europe by men on horse seem plausible.

On the way to Urumqi I stopped in Dunhuang to see the Mogao Caves. These are the remains of a Buddhist monastery abandoned in the 12th century and
rediscovered in 1900. In spite of myself I became absorbed in the symbolism of the Buddha and its historical, religious and philosophical messages.

As part of my homeward journey I went to Tibet. By some stroke of good fate I was in Lhasa (Tibet's capital) on Buddha's birthday, something of an equivalent of Christmas in a Christian country. I trekked with the Dalai Lama Buddhists (the Tibetan sect) through their largest temple and later through their largest monastery.

Not insignificant to me was the cultural understandings I was able to glean while in Xian from visits with colleagues and graduate students in my classes. One colleague had worked in a medical clinic in Xian for 8 years of the cultural revolution. As a medical clinician, he had conducted tests to determine the gender of fetuses and he also had conducted research on cottonseed oil as a male contraceptive. He had come to know the medical community of Xian well and he gave me 2 superb tours of Chinese medical services, with special emphasis on Chinese folk medicines (massage, rolfing, acupuncture and herbal).

Several persons shared experiences of their own and of their families during the difficult days of the cultural revolution (1966-1976). For me, there is no academic experience that compares with the reports of first-hand experience, and there is no perception of culture more plausible than that of individuals who are part of that culture. In short, I'm saying I got more than I gave by the exchange experience and I'm grateful to China, the Chinese and my university for making it possible. I have few illusions about my usefulness to the Chinese as an exchange biologist. I knew, because I had been there previously, that Shaanxi Teachers University was no intellectual utopia and certainly not a physical one. I knew of the claustrophobic congestion of too many persons using too little space; of the odors of "schoolhouse" and of too many people serviced by too few facilities; of too much night soil grime and too little shine; of too many foot paths of hard earth and too few of concrete; of too many thermoses but too little water; of the inscrutableness of the Chinese mind but also of the courtesy and fundamental decency that characterizes the relationship of Chinese persons to each other and to foreign visitors. It's not an experience for everyone, but it was for me.

Helpful Organizations

The following organizations can provide information to faculty members seeking opportunities to teach at higher-education institutions in China:

1. The Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China includes among its projects a Visiting Scholar Exchange Program, which provides support for short visits to Chinese universities. While the program is for researchers in the natural and social sciences, engineering and the humanities, it offers opportunities for scholars to give lectures and conduct seminars if they are an integral part of a research project. The September 1985 issue of China Exchange News, the committee's quarterly magazine, contains a special section on the Fulbright Scholar Program in China. For more information, contact C.S.C.P.R.C., National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington 20418; (202) 334-2718.
2. The Chinese Embassy accepts applications from academics interested in teaching positions at Chinese universities. For information, contact Yang Meng, Education Division, Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2300 Connecticut Avenue,
N.W., Washington 20008; (202) 328-2535.
3. The Institute of International Education maintains the Register for International Service in Education, or RISE, a computer-based information service that matches foreign institutions seeking American experts with academics and other specialists seeking positions abroad. For information about teaching opportunities at Chinese universities, contact Sandra L. Cervera, RISE, IIE., 809 United Nations Plaza, New York 10017; (212) 984-5344.

WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY VIDEO TAPE PURCHASE FORM
Department of Biological Sciences

Tapes Available:

A. The Life Cycle of *Nematospiroides dubius* - 9 minutes

This video tape illustrates the various stages in the life cycle of a nematode parasite of mice, *Nematospiroides dubius* (*Heligmosomoides polygyrus*). Living material is used throughout to show adult, egg, and larval stages. Propagation methods of the life cycle are emphasized.

B. The Life Cycle of *Philophthalmus* - 27 minutes

This is a detailed presentation of the various stages of the life cycle of the eye fluke of birds, *Philophthalmus*. Living, preserved, and graphic material are used to illustrate these stages. Detailed coverage is given to the adult organ systems, the egg making process, egg hatching, miracidial host finding behavior, cercarial movement, cyst formation, and encystment of the juvenile worms.

Order Form:

A + B (N. dubius + Philophthalmus) on one tape $50.00
A (N. dubius) $30.00
B (Philophthalmus) $40.00

Check One: Beta _____ VHS _____ 3/4" _____

Send Orders to and Make Checks Payable To:
Dr. Paul M. Nollen
Department of Biological Sciences
Western Illinois University
Macomb, Illinois 61455

Vol 14(2): June 1988 Midwest Bioscience 15