

China Images

by Nancy Pine

Volume 6, Number 1

March 2009

How on Earth Do Children Learn to Write?

I watched Danielle bend into the writing task, her seven-year old fingers clutching a thick pencil. She mouthed each sound. "Sssss, ssss, ssss. Uh, uh, uh. En, Ennnnn." Straightening, she admired her large letters. "Sssssuuunnn. Sun," she read. Leaning down again, she began the next word. I glanced around my Pasadena first grade classroom, struck by the children's concentration. Almost all of the energy-packed six- and seven-year-olds were engaged in their new skill of writing. Some wrote more automatically than others, but only three seemed hesitant.

I moved across the room and stood behind left-handed Marisol. She had begun on the right-hand side of her paper, making the letters in reverse order, from right to left. As I thought about how best to help her form the habit of starting on the left, I recalled the writing attempt of a Moroccan four-year-old I had seen recently. It looked like imitation Arabic, flowing loops and bends along imaginary horizontal lines. Had the child 'written' from right to left, the same direction his parents wrote? I bent over Marisol and had her point to the side of the paper her classmates were starting from. I then turned her paper over and put an X at the left end of each line to remind her where to begin.

That night when I sat down to plan the next day's lessons, I pulled out my battered secondhand books of other countries' writing systems. So far I had collected Korean, Greek, Russian and Chinese. I was

becoming increasingly interested in these different ways of writing and why people in various parts of the globe wrote with unique systems. My students seemed to love it too. As they learned more and more about how to write English letters they were drawn to these books and to one that showed scores of ways people in the world write. What was it about the creative human spirit and drive that made us invent distinctive ways of writing and talking? And why did children derive such pleasure from it? A month before, one of my students' mothers had visited the class and taught them some Russian phrases, including мороженое, ice cream. The next week I could hear the approximation, 'maroshnaiyee,' sprinkled through their conversations with each other. Learning language and writing was serious business for them, but it was also like playing.

I picked up the Chinese book from 1910 and flipped through the yellowed pages. In those days Chinese print ran in columns from top to bottom. Did the columns start on the right or left? I marveled at my ignorance. I could not figure out anything about individual characters. They looked more complicated than English letters, that was for sure. In English and other European and Latin American languages the same letters are repeated many times in one line. That was not true for Chinese.

As I thought of children learning to write those complicated-looking characters, I

blanked. How would you teach them to do it? What sounds went with the characters? I imagined crowded classrooms in China with dark-eyed children listening to their teacher's instructions and then trying to write, but my image was fuzzy.

My mind drifted back two years when I made a curiosity-driven decision to begin a PhD program, mid-career. I was taking one night course at a time so I could keep teaching. My advisor, John Regan, was fascinated by young children's abilities to make meaning from words. Traveling to China often, he had become intrigued by the visual memory skills all Chinese seemed to have. He often alluded to how Chinese focused on visual characteristics. They would point out their favorite character on his name card, for instance. When he asked us to point out our favorite letter, we balked. For us, it was a ridiculous request. But what did these differences mean?

Leafing through a few more pages in the Chinese book instead of getting on with my planning, I thought about a question John had raised in a recent seminar. What kinds of visual processing abilities must children in China develop? I looked at the yellowed pages of characters again and the intricate patterns of small lines in each one. They were so different from the few simple lines that comprised the English letters my first grade children worked so hard to perfect.

I put the books aside and turned to the children's papers, my planning book, and the teachers' guides spread around my cluttered desk. A room full of energetic first graders would be ready and waiting in the morning, eager to learn and bursting with impulses that I needed to channel.

I have been surrounded with educators all my life. My mother was a crack elementary teacher in our village school and curious about the world; if she had had the resources she would have taken many trips to Europe.

The next best thing for her was to instill a love of travel and cultural inquisitiveness in her daughters, especially in me, the youngest of three. Her own mother had been a teacher of music. My older sister was a junior high school teacher. When I finished college, a natural move was to a job running seminars for high school students at the United Nations, in Washington, D.C., in Harlem, and in migrant labor camps. From there I went on to teach high school English. My husband is also an educator -- a science professor who spends part of his time encouraging the use of inquiry science teaching in kindergarten through college.

When our two children were young, I stayed home for a few years working part-time jobs in the community and schools. During that time I became fascinated by how young children learn, and when ours were well into preschool, shifted to a career teaching elementary school and improving my Spanish in order to work in bilingual classes.

The longer I taught, the more fascinated I became with the beginning writing process, and a few years before entering the PhD program, my curiosity led me to collect writing attempts from friends' two- and three-year-olds. The toddlers of course could not form words, but they seemed to think writing was serious business and made loops and scrawls across the paper until it was quite full. Once I started graduate classes, I found myself being drawn more and more deeply into the learning processes children use starting at very early ages. I also was increasingly drawn into John Regan's interest in the unique characteristics of vastly different cultures such as those of Chinese- and English-speaking communities.

My commitment to graduate school increased until, with some regret, I left the first grade classroom and took a university

position in teacher education. I missed my students, but at least I was able to continue thinking about how children learn as I observed and advised new teachers. In addition, with a few other graduate students, I began to work with John Regan on his China-related projects.

When he headed for a sabbatical semester in China, I asked if he could gather pretend writing from children while he was collecting his own data in preschools. I had no idea, however, if young Chinese children would even try to make marks on paper at this age.

When he returned to California and handed me the Chinese children's 'scribble,' I stared, speechless. It was completely different from what the English- and Spanish-speaking youngsters had produced. Small and detailed, it mirrored Chinese characters. Did this mean our own children's pencil marks reflected our writing? Maybe it was not scribble after all. Maybe we should call it 'prewriting.'

That summer I spent my free time analyzing the Chinese children's papers. My daughter and son were grown and semi-independent by then, and I was free to follow my curiosity. I realized I was beginning an adventure related to the knowledge these small children had poured into their writing attempts. I spread the papers on the floor in John's empty office. Used mainly by a few graduate students and surrounded by summer-green sycamores, it provided a sanctuary for thought. Most waking hours I spent in urban elementary schools helping beginning teachers channel the energy of their enthusiastic students. I loved that challenge, but the quiet interludes studying the Chinese children's work were like drinking from a cool spring.

It was just me and those papers. I loved the puzzle of how to think about the children's work. I knew nothing about Chinese. Could I even tell if a printed page

was right side up? I took a Chinese book from John's bookshelf and inspected the characters. They were squarish, had varied numbers of lines; some seemed to have sub-parts. What would happen if I turned the book upside down? Would I know that that was wrong? It certainly looked different. But why? After a while I realized that when it was right side up the characters had a slight droop to them. Eventually I bought a book on how to write Chinese. But for the first weeks of working with the children's papers I wanted to experience for myself the visual impact of being surrounded by characters. How would it be different from seeing Latin letters all around me? The squareness, lots of detailed short lines, and no circles were certainly different from English print.

September arrived and teaching responsibilities piled up. During the endless hours spent on Los Angeles freeways as I drove from school to school to visit teachers I wondered about children's development. What did the prewriting tell us about what they knew? The writing attempts the toddlers in the United States and China had made suggested they had learned plenty about their own culture's writing system long before anyone taught them. Yet we assume they know very little when they enter school. I wondered how Chinese was taught in elementary schools. China had millennia of education tradition. Did they teach children how to write characters the same way they had hundreds of years ago?

Our own schools seemed always at war over how to teach reading, and writing was often left far behind until the upper grades. Could we learn anything from the Chinese to improve our literacy instruction? Received knowledge said we should learn math teaching from them, but nothing was ever said about reading and writing, I assumed because the Chinese writing system was so mysterious to us.

Then in October an invitation came. John's colleagues at Nanjing University, where he was a consulting professor, asked if he would consider returning during Christmas break. And would he be interested in inviting a graduate student or two? They knew that after the Tian'anmen Square chaos, which had forced him to leave the previous June, China was no longer favored by the West and especially by the United States, but they hoped he would consider their hospitality. John invited two of us. Joe Stephenson, a special education expert, and me.

Years earlier, just out of college, and long before I was married, I had been captivated by the impossible dream of going to China. Americans could not go there. I had met a woman in Philadelphia who had lived most of her years in China and decided to go back to see life-long friends. When she returned, her US passport was confiscated by our government. She had visited a forbidden land. I volunteered to organize conferences for Quaker college students and recent graduates who, like me, wanted contact with China. We called ourselves "The Committee of One or Two to Recognize China"-- a humorous jab at Time Inc. Henry Luce's "Committee of One Million to Keep Red China Out of the UN." Yet the paranoia of McCarthyism still lingered. We found it incredible that the US government continued to assert that one billion people on the mainland of China did not matter, and that the small island of Taiwan had replaced them. We held conferences; I got to know most of the China experts in the US. We were determined to find ways for US citizens to communicate with people in China. Through medical or art exchanges, by sending English language books to universities. We had lots of ideas, and our commitment was strong. Then to the surprise of the nation Nixon, ping-pong

diplomacy, and the tenuous language of the Shanghai Accords opened the way.

My life had moved on to marriage, raising our children, and following a profession in education. By the time John's invitation came our children were teen-agers and I had just spent several years perfecting Spanish, but it opened a strong and lingering desire to spend time in the ancient Middle Kingdom that had been through so much upheaval in recent decades.

Joe and I accepted the invitation and spent the next two months frantically preparing for a three-week research trip in which we hoped to observe in preschools and elementary schools, and have as many children as possible participate in activities and informal tests that would help identify Chinese children's learning patterns and knowledge base.

With John guiding us, we designed potential test materials, had explanations of our work translated, got the right visas, and collected presents for our unknown hosts and preschools. I read every tourist book I could find about travel in China and packed every bit of long underwear and sweater layers I could squeeze into my suitcase. The word was that it was cold in Nanjing in winter, both inside and outside.

December 30, 1989. I pressed my forehead against the window of CAAC 981 as it banked smoothly toward the scattered lights emerging from beneath scudding clouds. "Shanghai," I whispered.

Pushing harder against the cold glass, I could see mist-softened buildings and roads. I was sure my eyes glowed with excitement, even though anxiety clawed at my stomach. What if no one was down there to meet us? Where would we stay? John, our advisor, had called from Shanghai two days before to tell Joe and me that he and others would meet us. Would they really be there? We were already three hours late, and we were

penniless. Chinese money could not be bought on the international market.

The wheels of the 747 touched the rain-washed tarmac. Five Chinese men in front of me sprang to open their overhead bins. A stewardess reseated them, and we all turned our restless attention to the passing runway, an occasional truck, and very few lights.

Joe and I checked our seats for stray papers and books, hefted our briefcases bulging with the testing materials we had developed and followed the crowd into a grey, bureaucratic building. During three weeks in Nanjing I hoped to collect young children's prewriting, and we would both investigate how children learned to read and write Chinese. How exactly we would do this research was unknown because school arrangements could not be made until we arrived. Our first major hurdle, though, was to get through customs.

Pressed together, we climbed the long set of stairs to the cage-like cubicles of Immigration Control above us.

"Make sure all your documents are ready," I instructed myself. My heart pounded in my ears.

Joe leaned over to me, "Sorry, Ma'am. You're visa is no good." Some friend. Joe almost never traveled and was probably more nervous than I was, but I did not need that kind of joke. A lean and friendly throwback to the 60s, in ruffled khakis, pullover and a worn, hand-knit hat, he was a quiet observer of life, his laconic comments encapsulating the essence of a situation.

I approached the wire grid that separated me from the Immigration Control officer and, trying to appear calm, handed my passport through the small window. Expressionless, he looked at it and me carefully, then at his computer screen. I held my breath. He stamped several papers with resounding thwacks, and handed back my passport with a nod. The person behind

me pushed forward. I picked up my briefcase and took my first step into China.

It was near midnight. A few passengers and customs agents were left in the cavernous Shanghai airport. While we waited for the checked luggage, most of the Chinese from our Los Angeles flight exited with their carry-on suitcases, threading their way through the bedraggled crowd waiting outside in the nighttime drizzle for flights that were arriving even later than ours. Whoever was meeting us at this hour must be among them, shivering wet. There was no indoor waiting room. Peering through the glass doors into the winter darkness, I sent a small message to whatever spirits might be listening. Let there be someone out there we recognize.

Baggage in hand we walked tentatively toward the exit. A few people held up damp, handwritten name signs in alphabetic letters hoping we might respond. None read 'Joe' or 'Nancy'. We moved to one side so we could see faces better. Toward the back, a tall person's blue-jacketed arm waived tentatively. Then more assertively. Yafei! He had been in California the year before as John's guest. His face softened with relief as we moved toward each other. Several others were with him. John had returned to his hotel, the long wait too cold for him.

Introductions ricocheted off our heavy jackets. We piled into a van, clouds of breath floating among us. Subdued exhilaration animated every word, every gesture. The engine turned over, and windows wide open, we headed across Shanghai.

"You'll stay in the Foreign Language Institute tonight. Tomorrow we'll take you to Professor Regan's hotel, and in the afternoon you'll go to Nanjing by train....," Yafei began. Tall for a Chinese, and serious, Yafei was beginning a PhD program in linguistics at Fudan University.

On leave from his regular college English teaching job, he was fascinated by John's cultural and linguistic insights and drawn, like so many Chinese, to his enthusiastic and slightly audacious ways.

Settling into the freshness of the wet cold, I soaked up Shanghai. Traffic was still moving along the wide streets. Near the airport, billboards advertising China's march to the future displayed larger-than-life washing machines, industrial gears, and new factories. I could hardly believe I was in throbbing, three-dimensional China. A man walked along pushing his bicycle, roped-together cartons stacked on the back fender. A two-story concrete building slid by, then a row of darkened shops. Signs announcing their wares told me nothing; one twelve-hour flight had rendered me illiterate.

I must have slept, but before morning light pushed through the grey mist, I was peering out my hotel room window at city life as it began to stir. On pins and needles of excitement, I stuck my head under the cold sink water to make my hair lie down and ran up the stairs to find Joe. On the outskirts of Shanghai, we piled our luggage into the van and, with Yafei as escort, headed into the city center to the Hilton where John was staying. A uniformed doorman with white gloves helped us out. The disconnect between this and the China beyond its driveway was palpable. The polished elevator delivered us to the 32nd floor where Yafei tapped on a partially opened door. Several young Chinese had been sharing John's room, and Hong Mao, a self-effacing engineering student with a mane of wavy black hair, let us in.

Dressed in an uncharacteristic pinstriped suit, John was talking energetically on the phone to someone who had been in the US consulate visa line all night, directing the hotel maid with hand-motions not to clean the room right now, and commanding us to

notice the Shanghai skyline. "But don't lean out too far," he added with a mischievous glimmer in his eyes. The sill of the open casement window was at knee height.

A discussion erupted about what Joe and I should see. John herded us out the door. "Come on. Come on," he said, not quite pushing. He had been going to China since the early 1980s. If he had his way we were going to see all of Shanghai in the next three hours before taking the train to Nanjing. In the elevator discussion bounced back and forth between Chinese and English. As we stepped into the lobby, noodles had become the first stop.

We burst into Shanghai and made our way down a side street thick with pedestrians strolling in the crisp December air. John pointed his chin at a toddler held in his father's arms and looking around. "What do you think that little child is learning, right now? What is he seeing? The people, the signs? What's he learning by looking at all of this?"

I didn't answer and slowed my step to pull back from the conversation. As I walked I began to notice a low undulating hum, the sound of thousands of people talking to each other. Like a river sliding and tumbling past, the unfamiliar tones and pitch of the language flowed around me. John was right. Children obviously learned from their environment. Yet right now, I was so enthralled by the intensity of life surrounding me, I couldn't name what I was learning let alone what that child was soaking up.

Too soon we were at the Shanghai railway station, settled into the plush upholstery of a first-class 'softseat' car where foreigners were required to ride and where Party secretaries, their drivers, and a few other Chinese enjoyed the privileges. As the engine strained to pull its load up to speed, a blue uniformed attendant poured tea and a raucous card game gained momentum

among neighboring passengers. I leaned back, the ceramic tea mug warming my hands and watched the fertile, carefully tilled fields of Jiangsu Province roll out before us toward Nanjing, five hours away.

My thoughts turned back to John's earlier question. What was that child soaking up about his culture as he was carried along by his father? His eager, dark eyes focused on one thing, then another and another. What was he seeing and what did he think about it? Maybe more important, what did his parents point out to him? What did they believe was essential for him to notice?

I began to wonder what Jerry, my husband, and I had highlighted for our own children. And how they had learned to write. We had both read to them a lot, certainly as soon as they could enjoy pictures. And of course they had been enveloped by the sounds of speech from the beginning—the rise and fall of its tones, the cadence of phrases and sentences stringing together into conversations. We spoke to them directly from the beginning and beamed at every syllable they uttered, encouraging them to shape them into recognizable English words. But how did they make the connection between those sounds and letters and words? Did sitting close to an adult and helping hold a book and turn pages boost their interest? Did we actually point out words to them while we were reading? I had no idea. I know we called attention to words in signs or storefronts. I could remember being startled (and pleased enough to take a photo) when our daughter spelled STOP with the letters in a flannelboard set my mother had made for her. We sang alphabet songs and probably told them the most obvious letter sounds, and they watched Sesame Street that featured a letter "advertisement" in each

program. They struggled to write their names so they could get their own library cards and somewhere in there, they began to write letters and words.

So how on earth did Chinese children learn to write characters that appeared very complicated to me, an outsider. Were there songs? TV programs? Traditional poems that helped? Did parents teach their children before school? I was focused on prewriting, and that was obviously a beginning step, if it really was true that the US and Chinese toddlers produced marks that were related to their community's writing system. But that was just the start. What else was embedded in this ancient culture that led to children's literacy development and beyond.

The attendant came by with hot water and replenished our cups.

"Quick. Look over there," John said, pointing toward a field. "A new grave. They aren't suppose to use farmland for those anymore."

Joe and I peered at the large white and multicolored wreaths beside a mound of fresh earth standing alone at the field edge. My gaze followed the landscape for many kilometers, passing small villages and ponds where lotus must grow in the spring. The train passed over a river filled with barges of coal, agricultural produce, and barrels of fuel. Family washing flapped in the breeze on one; a couple, jackets buttoned up to the chin, ate under a roofed area on another.

I felt light years away from my familiar Los Angeles hillside home and the schools I knew so well. It was as if I had entered a novel set in a strange and distant land. My watch said an hour to Nanjing. Our journey into the educational world of China would soon begin.

Resources

The River at the Center of the Earth: A Journey up the Yangtze and Back in Time by Simon Winchester (Paperback edition published in 2004). A well-written book that gives a vibrant and in-depth description of the Yangtze River, the central highway of China. The river divides China in half, north and south, and yet unites the country in many ways. Millions of people live along it and it carries a major portion of goods—coal, fuel oil, produce, and more—to market and to homes. As it moves downstream this massive waterway forms the northern edge of Nanjing before flowing into the China Sea at Shanghai.

Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze. (Paperback 2002) I have recommended this book by Peter Hessler earlier, but if you have not read it, you will likely enjoy it. It chronicles his Peace Corps years as a college teacher of English in a small city on the Yangtze River, where he learns about China through his students and through his gradually improving Chinese. Hessler has devoted his life since college to comprehending and describing China, and has written many articles for *The New Yorker* about life in China.

Previous China Images

First and Continuing Impressions, 1(1) January 2004
Urban Elementary Schools, 1(2) February 2004
Telecommunication Gaps and Growth, 1(3) April 2004
Lessons from An Shang Village, 1(4) December 2004
Shanghai Jews, 2(1) March 2005
From Bicycles to VWs, 2(2), September 2005
Angst in Shaanxi Province, 3(1), January 2006
The Confucian Thread, 3(2), March 2006
Understanding or Misunderstanding, 3(3), October 2006
A Fifteen Year Journey, 4(1), February 2007
Staring is Okay, 4(2), August 2007
Opera and the Soul of China, 5(1), March 2008

If you know others who would like to receive China Images, send along their names to me, or they can sign up at my website, <http://nancypine.com>

If you do not want to receive China Images, please let me know at npine2003@yahoo.com. I will not be offended.