

China Images

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Into the Schools—January 1990

A draft chapter of an up-coming book on Chinese and U.S. education.

Martial music blared from a loudspeaker outside my room. A campus alarm clock, I thought, as I leaped out of bed at six o'clock. We had checked into the Nanjing University hotel for foreign experts the evening before, the three of us--John, Joe, and me--in adjoining rooms. I scurried out to stand in the winter mist as it curled among the bare tree branches. Five stories above me a tile roof swept up toward the grey sky, its curved eaves and wood beams carrying me to pictures of ancient temples. In juxtaposition, bamboo poles loaded with student laundry jutted from windows. Damp bras, shirts, socks, and long underwear hung limp in the morning air. I gaped, while sleepy students straggled past on their way to calisthenics.

Back inside John was pounding on Joe's door. "Breakfast," he called. At the cafeteria I found a cruller-like pastry and nibbled it as we rushed back to John's room to make hot tea. Coats on to ward off cold drafts coming through the window cracks, we listened to John describe the schools he wanted us to visit and the protocols of gift giving, an important Chinese tradition that shows respect. He was distressed, however, that he had not reached Zhang Weibo, a beginning faculty member from another university who was supposed to get us permission to visit schools. Before Joe and I could comprehend the plans and problems, John stood up.

"Let's go. You have to take a walk while people are still out exercising. We headed down the stairs and across the large campus, breath dragons rising as we talked.

By the time we returned, John's friends and old acquaintances began to arrive. Liu Haiping, who had met us at the station and was chair of the English Department, appeared first to check that everything was all right and make arrangements for John's lecture to the faculty. Minutes later the assistant director of the university Foreign Affairs Office, who had made sure John was safe last May, came to say hello and arrange translation of the introductory letter we needed for school visits. Getting permission to work with children, I began to realize, required layers of approval just like in the United States.

Another knock. Li Wei, a young lexicographer, entered. We had met him the night before in John's room when he discussed girl friend problems and his role in the student protests. He was to be one of our assistants and interpreters. Short, with black-rimmed glasses, his amiable face lit up when he shook John's hand. Eight of us must have been in the room by then, sitting on the bed or leaning against the wall, with John and me in the only chairs. The Chinese had switched to English so we three foreigners could understand. Everyone seemed to be talking at once.

“Where’s Weibo?” John said. “His mother-in-law or some relative knows the superintendent of that school district where we should go. He said he’d be here when we arrived.” Someone said they thought he had gone to his parents.

"Where's that?" John asked.

"In another province," someone else added.

John had been in only one school in the spring, and we hoped to visit several. It would take time to arrange.

A knock on the door. “Leave it open,” someone called.

The phone rang again. "For you," John said handing it to Haiping. He turned to Li Wei, “Tiger Bridge Preschool is where those magnificent children wrote complicated characters from memory. That’s where Joe and Nancy need to go. Tomorrow at the latest. They should start testing children by Thursday." We hoped to work with children several different days so we could develop activities that would teach us about their learning.

John saw me talking with Liu Haiping, who had asked about my PhD program. “Nancy, are you listening?”

He continued, “I was sitting there in May watching those two- and three-year-olds make their complicated marks--their pretend writing, while students roared protests outside. Can you take us there tomorrow morning? 8 o’clock?” Li Wei nodded, eager to join our adventure.

Qian Jio Ru stuck his head in the door. Liu Haiping’s and John’s greetings resounded off the walls. “Hey, come in. *Ni hao, ni hao.*” A quiet scholar and senior professor of about sixty, he was respected in many parts of China for his careful intellect. He deflected the accolades John used to introduce him.

“What time can we have the English Department banquet,” he asked. Discussion went round the room. A Foreign Affairs

Office banquet tomorrow night; maybe dinner at Liu Zhimou’s home the next evening. In Chinese tradition, everyone wanted to welcome us with a meal.

The Chinese negotiated at length, deciding when we were going to eat with whom. Joe and I just took it in, names and places beginning to drift into meaninglessness. I felt I was in a movie on fast forward.

By the end of that first day, January 1st, we had joined a meeting and research discussion in the Foreign Affairs Office about mistakes children make when they write characters, lunched at a hotel with the head of the Chinese/English dictionary project, walked a half-hour to the city center to buy a small electric heater that would keep us from freezing, prepared materials for school visits until 9 p.m., and then returned to the city center to an up-scale (and empty) Western hotel for hot coffee, warmth and, I discovered, bathrooms with soft toilet paper.

Early next morning Joe and I finished preparations for the school visit. Protocol letters, presents for directors and classes, descriptions of our research in Chinese, and more. By seven o'clock John was at the door introducing two more people. Being someone who prefers spaces of quiet, I was slowly resigning myself to the endless procession of greeters and visitors. By 7:45 Li Wei, our guide for the day, was checking the translation of our letters and approving the gifts we had selected--a Sierra Club calendar for the director and a set of twelve felt tip pens for a class, if we got to visit one.

A cab scooped us away, and we slid into traffic, the young woman driver honking her way through seas of bicycles. On a tree-lined street, we pulled up to a grey concrete building with no evidence of a school nearby. There must have been a sign, but I

would not have known. Characters were like decoration to me.

The four of us peeled ourselves out of the red-velvet seat covers of the taxi. Joe and I followed John like sheep as he led us enthusiastically through a set of courtyards to Tiger Bridge Preschool. We stepped over the low sill of a circular entranceway.

"It's a moon door," Li Wei explained. "It symbolizes peace and unity." A nice touch for the preschool children and their parents, I thought, as they passed through every morning and evening. Li Wei explained our mission to the attendant, who recognized John from his earlier visits.

The director came to greet us. To John's surprise, he did not know her. He had worked several days in this school last spring with the enthusiastic collaboration of the director. Our arrival morphed into confusion. Li Wei negotiated the complicated territory. The director John knew had moved on, and this one was distant. Too polite. She gave the distinct impression that this invasion of foreigners was disrupting her school.

We spent half an hour in cordial tea drinking and discussion in the school office, with John lamenting in asides our missing go-between, Weibo.

Just as our situation began to feel hopeless, Mrs. Li, an assistant director arrived. Her face brightened when she saw John. She had helped him in June. They greeted each other heartily, and after a fast interchange between her and the director, we headed to our first Chinese preschool class.

Passing rooms full of children, bundled in colorful, well-padded clothes against the 45-degree indoor temperature, we entered one where four-year-olds were creating forsythia branches by gluing bits of colorful tissue onto paper. Using the large set of felt-tipped pens at each table they added stems, flowers, and scenery. I was instantly at home, even though somewhat distracted by the

ridiculously small pen set I had brought as a gift. The atmosphere felt just like a healthy preschool in Los Angeles with youngsters engaged in their work and adults helping when needed. As they finished, the children clustered around me to show off their pictures, happy to tell what they had drawn. A girl in a yellow jacket with high-colored cheeks held out her picture that included a girl with flying hair. The teacher intervened and tapped her forehead, then the picture.

"You need a forehead in your picture," she said more than once. I was taken aback that anyone would insist a four-year-old include a space for a forehead on a drawing. Was the teacher demonstrating to us that they had a demanding curriculum? Or was this the norm? I had no idea, but I knew I had never required such precision from my own children nor from kindergartners I had taught.

The teacher played a foot-pump organ, while the children sang and danced in a circle with partners, breath-catching grace in their movements. As they changed partners they pulled Joe and me into the circle, and after several requests from the teacher he and I, embarrassed, sang "Jingle Bells" and "Clementine." The songs seemed completely out of place in China.

As children vied for our attention, Li Wei suggested we leave and that I give them my gift. With embarrassment on my part, and graciousness on theirs, I thanked them for their hospitality and presented them with the puny set of felt-tip pens quite inferior to theirs.

Back in the school office we found John with the missing Weibo. He had come directly from the railway station, a little ruffled. His mother had had a heart attack, and he had just returned from his parents' home, an eight-hour train trip away. He had no phone.

He and John were in intense discussions with the director. No, we could not come

back in a couple of weeks. We needed to work with the children now. Lean and energetic, with a lock of hair he kept brushing back from his eyes, Weibo gestured emphatically. We had to come tomorrow.

Li Wei quietly interpreted for Joe and me. The mother of Weibo's brother-in-law was superintendent of schools for this area. He had connections the director could not ignore, but he used his advantage sparingly. He knew the right combination of politeness and assertiveness. When we left fifteen minutes later, we all shook hands amicably. I would test children the next morning, and Joe would observe in the attached primary school.

That evening our banquet hosts from the Foreign Affairs Office were already seated around a large lazy-Susan table in the faculty portion of the university dining hall when we arrived. They rose to greet us--the directors and former directors of the office, the head of propaganda for the province and staunch Party member, and a former vice president of the university who had gone on television in May in support of the students demonstrating in favor of the Tian'anmen Square protests. All were friends of John; all seemed to respect and enjoy him. It became a cheerful, good-hearted dinner filled with camaraderie and remembrances of John's visits over the last seven years. The banquet was a way to honor him and to welcome Joe and me.

The dishes arrived quickly. Cold ones first, then varied hot choices, some delicious, and a few I ate for politeness. Toasts with Maotai, a strong clear liquor made from sorghum with an after taste of soy sauce, began early—to John, to us, to China and the U.S. “*Gam bai, gam bai.* Bottoms up.”

Halfway through the meal, John took over, toasting first our hosts, and then to

calming current political tension. He urged all to avoid chaos and for all factions in China to work together, bury their hatchets, allow more freedom, and hold on to the essence of China. I was startled he was so direct, considering the possible friction that existed among our hosts.

Each of his toasts, as protocol requires, was toasted back by others. Twenty-five dishes later and more glasses of Maotai and sweet Chinese wine than could be counted, the dinner wound down.

We shook hands multiple times and pulled our jackets tighter to ward off the night temperatures. Walking down the stairs from the dining hall, I tugged my scarf over my mouth to ward off acrid coal fumes as John set off at his usual brisk pace across the dark campus.

“We need to find Li Wei,” he said over his shoulder. “I promised we’d visit him tonight to meet one of his friends. His dorm is over behind the English Department somewhere.” I found John's vagueness unsettling, but somehow things always worked out although it was never clear how.

The overload of Maotai, mixing with cold air, gave me a chance to let some of my sensations sink in. Replaying the banquet, I could not imagine that the head of propaganda and a vice president willing to support demonstrating students could agree on much. But I had to remember I was a neophyte to this culture. One thing was clear. It had been an emotionally laden evening, a coming together across the difficult events and distant cultures to a common ground of understanding that communication between universities of the United States and China should be kept intact. Too much was at stake to follow the easier path of both countries turning inward and sending verbal barbs at each other.

I focused on the uneven sidewalk as we passed a classroom building. In dimly lit

rooms, students huddled over their books, jacket collars turned up, many with gloves on.

“Study hall,” John said, pointing. “They’re required.” Some of the windows were open. I wondered if it were warmer outside than inside the concrete structure. The women who cleaned our rooms in the hotel certainly thought so. They arrived in the morning, shortly after the one hour of allotted heat had taken the chill off our rooms, and opened the doors and windows to air them out.

We stopped by a large dormitory.

“This is it, I think,” John said, pushing against a door. It opened to a stairwell lit by a single bulb hanging from the floor above. We climbed three stories, and he opened another door, tentatively. It swung onto a hallway cluttered with boxes, a few broken chairs, a bicycle, and the undeniable stench of toilets.

“Li Wei,” he called. It echoed down the hall. Two heads poked out of doors; Li Wei appeared from a third.

“*Ni hao, ni hao*. Hello!” he said, ushering us into his room. A warm intensity lay underneath his studious demeanor. He seemed on edge at all times, though. He qualified for a lecturer’s salary of 76 yuan (\$14) a month and free beginning faculty government housing that we were seeing for the first time. He and his two roommates lived in a space that barely held three small desks and three metal bunk beds, each with a screen of netting around it for warmth in winter. That was it. Each bunk seemed a person’s nest—with light, pillows, quilts, and a few pictures on the walls. And it was cold. The door let in gales of wind. We were beginning to see the realities of university life. I wondered what undergraduate dorms were like.

His roommates had gone out, a common practice when someone was having company. Li Wei introduced us to two

friends—a young woman dressed in white stretch pants and jacket who had just completed an English degree in Beijing and whose name I never learned, and Xie Jian, who had finished his masters in physical education and was a life-long student of Wushu, one of China's stylized martial arts. I wondered whether the woman had been in Tian’an-men Square in June. Had she known students who disappeared? It was not appropriate to ask, but one could wonder. The other night in our room Li Wei had talked about his role in Nanjing. He had ridden his bicycle from campus to campus to share news and communicate plans about demonstrations. He was not arrested, but he had to confess to his participation.

Li Wei came right to the point. Xie Jian wanted help with a paper he hoped to have accepted for a conference. It demonstrated how Wushu movements transmit Chinese culture visually and communicate more directly than speech.

“This can’t be what we’re going to do right now,” I thought. “We just walked in the door.” John studied how non-verbal communication influenced people's reactions more than words, but what with the maotai and a sensory overload from the packed day, I could not believe any of us would be able to focus on such a topic.

Joe and I exchanged glances, tried to ignore the stench coming from the toilets across the hall, and sat upright on the edge of a bed.

Li Wei began reading an imperfect, hard to follow English summary. In my childhood I had heard Chinese described as “inscrutable.” I wondered if the opaqueness of this paper qualified for that. When he finished silence filled the room. I asked an inane question to break the tension, and Xie Jian, through Li Wei's interpreting, expanded on the power of Wushu as a communication tool. While talking, he stood up and sliced the air to demonstrate a Wushu

move. He did it a second time. I instantly became alert. Xie's twenty years of training seemed concentrated into those few movements. In one fluid, centered motion he had communicated more than all our words. I had never seen anything like it. I had heard of Chinese calligraphers who stood before their paper, brush in hand, for hours until they had centered their energy, and with one swift motion made a single character. Was that artform somehow connected to this? It transported me to a China I had read about and would probably never comprehend.

We bid goodbye and headed down the dim stairwell. A young faculty member living next to Li Wei followed us and wanted to talk to John about getting a US visa. The string of requests and constant talk never seemed to stop. I found it exhausting.

I slowed my pace to walk behind them and think. I had never seen anything like Xie's ability. Obviously it grew from long years of practice. But was it related to the graceful movement the preschool children had used in their dancing and singing in the morning? Children in the United States did not move like that. Had the Chinese children been taught the hand motions or did they just absorb them from people around them? And if this were true, then what did our children learn from us that we were not aware of? I almost giggled as I wondered, with a little dread, what idiosyncratic habits my own children might have picked up from my husband and me.

The next morning, hoping I had not forgotten anything, I clutched my briefcase of research materials, and headed back to Tiger Bridge Preschool with Li Wei to begin my first day of testing young Chinese children. This time we went on foot. Dodging between trucks and buses on the wide boulevard near the campus and threading our way down narrow lanes, I discussed with Li Wei what the testing

procedures should be. Getting three-year-olds to do anything was a challenge, but Li Wei caught on quickly. He seemed to understand that we wanted to learn from the children themselves, not from their teachers.

Stepping through the round school entranceway, we nodded to the attendant. Pint-sized concrete ping-pong tables, just high enough for small children, caught my eye as we crossed the playground.

The directors were ready for us. Li Wei and I were escorted to a class of three-year-olds. After the director took photos, the teacher began warm-up activities with the class. First they did ten minutes of singing, and then several games, including a long hide-and-seek in which the teacher pretended to be a mother cat hunting for her kittens. It seemed endless.

When I had given up hope of meeting with the children one at a time, the assistant principal led us back to the office where we set up our testing materials and the first group filed in. One child stood near our desk, while the other five or six seated themselves on small chairs in the back of the office. I eyed the waiting three-year-olds. How distracting would that be?

"Nancy, think about the kid in front of you, for God's sake," I thought. I panicked. I had come 7000 miles to do some research, and I was going to screw it up. "This is what you've been waiting for, you clunk. You're trying to learn whether these children can teach you something." My mind would not lie still.

Are the writing papers out? Yes. The three prompts and the papers I had torn to the correct size the night before were there. Where are the pencils? I fished in my briefcase. Things were moving too fast.

The classroom aide was going to be the one to work with the children since they knew her. Li Wei explained the procedures to her. They were complicated and a bit strange. Would she understand at all? I had three

pages of handwriting for the children to look at—Chinese, English, Korean. The first child scooted onto the adult chair, his chin almost resting on the desk. He seemed bewildered, but eager. The aide showed him the pages and encouraged him to talk, then asked him which of those three papers looked like what his parents wrote. He stared, puzzled. She rephrased the question and he relaxed. He pointed to Korean. I wrote down his response, and gave the aide paper for him to write on. She had him select a pencil and try to write a letter to an auntie or his parents.

“I don’t know any characters,” he said. (Li Wei was translating.) “Just pretend to write something,” the aide continued. I was amazed at her understanding of what we wanted to accomplish. She was not forcing him. I wanted whatever went onto that paper to be his idea of what writing was. He moved forward on the big chair so he was more able to write, his thickly padded jacket pressing against the desk. He looked up at the aide. She encouraged him to pretend to write something. Looking back at the paper, his hand gripping the little pencil, he inched forward and made one small line. I could barely see it. The aide bent close to him and said something encouraging. He made another small line and looked up. She encouraged him once more, and this time he made several interconnected lines, paused and then inched forward on the chair. He began to ‘write’. Time stood still. We were all mesmerized at what we were watching. Even the director moved closer to look at the networks of tiny lines he was making.

After two minutes, he put his pencil down and looked up at the aide. She spoke softly to him, and he slid off the chair. Someone brought the next child and took our first writer back to his classroom. I watched him trundle across the yard and wondered what he was thinking. I forced myself to return to the next child, seated and waiting for

instructions. We continued for over an hour. Some children wrote longer, some almost not at all. But a certain consistency seemed to be in their marks. No big loops filling the page with a flourish. Almost all had made short angular lines on a small part of their paper.

When we returned to our rooms, John was waiting to see what the children had done. The three of us pored over their ‘writing.’ It was decidedly different from three-year-old ‘scribble’ in the United States.

“You’ve got to try other things to find out what these little children know,” he said, pacing the room. “You only have tomorrow and next week. Then school vacation, and your chance is gone.” He sat down and pulled the top off his pen. “Nancy, take those papers to the photocopy shop right away and mail the copies home. You’ve come too far to take a chance of losing them.” I saw his reasoning, but wondered when on earth there would be time.

“Joe, do you have the characters I used in June to have the little children try to remember?”

“Here,” Joe answered pointing to index cards spread on his unmade bed. “I’ve been looking at them for the primary school Weibo has organized.”

“What grades?” John asked.

“Maybe first,” Joe continued. “What if I make ersatz character cards too, to make sure we’re asking them to do something they’ve never seen before?”

“Excellent. You’re marvelous,” John said and headed out the door for a meeting.

Joe and I zipped up our down jackets to hunker down for the hours of work ahead, the curtains drawn tight in the vain hope they would keep out the cold. The new heater at our feet was not doing much for us.

We needed to complete notes from the morning and prepare for tomorrow’s schools. Joe refilled our hot water thermos.

While we made tea we discussed our separate reactions to the children. We were curious about what stood out to us as foreigners. The children's graceful control of movement during songs and dances was definitely one. How did they do that? Another was that these toddlers were willing to stay in line for long periods of time without bolting and sit in a circle for ten minutes or so without protesting. Yes, the

teachers had them singing or clapping or some such, but even considering that, the three- and four-year olds we saw stayed put for an astounding length of time compared to any of that age we had seen in the United States. The Chinese children seemed to focus for a longer span than our children. But was that really true? And if so, how was it learned?

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