

China Reflections

by Nancy Pine

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Many of you have asked questions over the years about what I am learning in China, what changes I have seen, and what my impressions are. This modest set of monthly (or, possibly bi-weekly) notes, will fill the void that my "it's very interesting" comments have left. If you do not want to receive this publication, please do not hesitate to ask me to remove you from the list at npine111@aol.com. I will not be offended! Nancy Pine

First and Continuing Impressions

I have wondered where and how to begin these notes. China's physical and historical vastness seems to devour my ideas and impressions; its lightning-speed changes render words insipid. My first trip to China began the day after Christmas 1989. As another graduate student and I flew on a China Eastern 747, the stream of anticipation flowed over us. Our exuberant doctoral advisor greeted us in winter-cold Shanghai, the first students he had introduced to China. Those first days swirled by as we were shuttled from here to there, meeting as many people and seeing as many sites as possible. By the end of three weeks, we returned to Los Angeles, clutching precious data suggesting the unique learning traits of young children which are embedded in Chinese culture and jumbled impressions of cultural ways that left us breathless.

Two years later I returned alone to collect half of my dissertation data. That 1991 trip was an intense, invigorating experience, continuing to open up an unimagined world to me. At the end of that trip--four cities, 1500 miles and 147 preschoolers later--I sat in a Western hotel 'pub' gathering the threads of those weeks. What I wrote then bears a striking similarity to my continuing drive to be associated with China and the questions I still feel. I begin my Nancy's Notes with what I wrote then, to give you a flavor of my odysseys in China.

March 23, 1991. Shanghai.

"Strange--here I sit in the same chair I sat in one month ago--the same strange 'pub' in the Mandarin Hotel--congenial and out of place. Three floors below the streets of Shanghai quiet themselves into the darkness of midnight. This is the end of a month of intense involvement in China--with friends, graduate students, pre-school directors, and the friendly, focused little two- and three-year olds who have 'written' for me, bending into their task of producing their idea of writing, which is tiny, often minutely detailed marks. But what I have absorbed, I'm not sure. I can hear tones of the language in my head, but cannot really produce them. I now look at the streets of Shanghai and think they are normal; I can't quite figure out what I once thought was foreign. The exhilaration of a new and somewhat exotic-seeming country has faded, replaced perhaps by scores of conversations about things important to people everywhere--politics and dreams, economic development and career hopes, childhood experiences and how to improve education, concern for children, academic ideas in the process of development--discourse

analysis and translation concepts, text books for college and high school classes and underlying educational theories, literacy learning and preliterate knowledge. I look at the people around me on the streets and wonder. It's a bit of a mystery what might be considered different about the people who populate this country, riding their bikes to and from work, carrying their briefcases, shopping for their meals and their children's shoes.

"I come away from China with the desire to write articles or find means to develop more interchange between Chinese and U.S. preschools and primary schools. Teachers here want to know more about developing creativity, imagination, and independence. U.S. teachers would benefit enormously from seeing the concentrated focusing that Chinese children learn, their visual processing skills, their mathematical conceptualizations, their organizational skills. My desire to hunt for ways to open up communication was aroused again during this morning's enthusiastic interchanges at the Fudan Preschool. -- I also come away with the desire to finish my dissertation and to put into precise, effective language the things I see among the U.S. and Chinese children, and with the hope to proceed past that to the next discoveries, to probe more deeply the amazing differences of development in Chinese children with their visual capacities unimagined in the U.S.. We don't know what untapped potential our children have that lies undetected until we see what other cultures have produced.

"It's time to go home. A month is enough right now for traveling alone from city to city; maintaining a packed schedule; disciplining myself to hug a hot cup of tea, do a few feet-warming jumping jacks, and keep focused on data-collecting situations and checking my notes for accuracy. But I do wonder where this will all lead me--and there's no way of knowing right now. I must let the month of experience, research, and enrichment extend itself as it will."

That's the way I saw my experiences that last night in Shanghai. And I am amazed at how my impressions, questions and ideas have held steady. After 14 years my exhilaration at being in China continues, my lens for noticing cultural innuendoes and defining differences is more focused, and both of these lead me to realize how similar the Chinese communication styles seem on the surface and how enormously different they are beyond that. That's what keeps me going back, and that is what compels me to communicate what I see. Continued in February.

Resources

* In case you are interested and haven't read it yet, a very readable book that encapsulates China's tumultuous 20th century history, is *Wild Swans: Three daughters of China* by Jung Chang. Anchor Books. Jung Chang is the 3rd daughter.

* A website you might like to check is <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn> It gets you to the Chinese government English language newspapers such as *China Daily*, *Shanghai Star* and *Business Weekly*.