

China Reflections

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Urban Elementary Schools

Colleague and interpreter Xu and I stood with the school director in the doorway of the first grade classroom. Light poured through the solid bank of windows filling one side of the room. Brightly clad children in winter jackets of yellow, reds, greens, and the girls' jet-black hair festooned with orange and red ribbons were an antidote to the unheated concrete building. It was March 1994 and decidedly wintry. Sixty children sang and clapped in rhythm, accompanied by a classmate on an electronic keyboard. "They take a break every 20 minutes," the director whispered. The song ended and within a minute the director had introduced us to the Chinese teacher and pointed us to the back of the room. We squeezed into chairs donated by two students, who immediately slipped into their neighbors' chairs and reopened their small textbooks. The Chinese teacher pointed to one of six characters carefully written on the blackboard. "*Jin*," she said, pointing to the first. "*Jin*," responded the 60 first graders. "*Sheng*," she said, pointing to the second. "*Sheng*," they repeated, strengthening their volume. "Notice the strokes of this character; what do you know about it?" Hands shot up straight. "Zhang Qian [jong chien]¹, you tell us." A rhythm built. Teacher, one student, teacher, 60 students, teacher, 60 students, teacher, one student, teacher, one student. On they went deconstructing and rebuilding the characters, looking for familiar parts, noting new stroke combinations.

The move from preschool to first grade is hard, Xu [shu] had explained to me. Children must change from playful children to serious students. "It's hard for the children and for us parents. They have to sit up tall and pay attention all day. They have to do about two hours of Chinese homework a night in first grade." I had witnessed this in Xu's home. His son and his friend had to complete their homework before we could celebrate Zheng-zheng's [jeng-jeng's] 6th birthday--writing the new characters of the day, reading all the passages in the lesson six times each, then rereading the new characters again, and writing them until they knew them. In 1994 there were places in higher education institutions for only about 5% of senior high school graduates. In 2004 pressure for success remains keen even though the state has significantly increased the number and size of colleges.

At least two thousand years of history drive the competition. From the beginning of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century B.C. through the end of the Qing [ching] dynasty in 1911, China was governed by a civil service system based on rigorous imperial exams. In 124 B.C. Emperor Wu Di established an imperial academy devoted to studying the works of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) which turned out thousands of administrators selected by exam. As literacy spread during the centuries, more and more people were able to take the civil service exam, including those of humble means. By 1600 A.D. it was not

¹ I have included English equivalent spellings when they differ. Some, like Wu Di, are similar.

uncommon for men (women were not allowed) to study years and years for the imperial exams, beginning with classical Chinese at age six and continuing daily drill, translating and memorizing through their twenties or thirties or even longer, until they were ready to tackle the exams. Families often sacrificed to allow one of their own to do this, and a man who failed could disgrace his relatives as well as himself. Only about one percent passed. Today, school topics are modern, but the fierce competition continues, and as in past centuries, failure translates into dishonoring your family. As one colleague observed, "There are 2000 years of pressure to do well in school."

"Now practice them," directed the teacher, pointing to the new characters. The children shifted a little in their chairs, and Xu and I watched as the 60 first graders engraved the new characters in the air with their fingers, calling out the name of each stroke as they made bold marks--*shù, héngzhé, héng, héng, shùwangou*. Their loud commentaries accompanied emphatic finger movements, in the right order and the right direction--top to bottom, left to right, inside to outside.

The teacher curbed the cacophony of recitation and refocused the six year olds--this time on the radicals, somewhat like the root of a word. Several characters, for example, contain the water radical; several characters for different insects contain the insect radical. She had traced over the radical for three of the new characters with fuchsia chalk, and she exhorted the children to study them with their eyes, trace over them with their pencils in their small textbooks, and learn them. The teacher reminded them of characters that differ from each other by only one or two small strokes, writing the similar characters on the board and again carving over the confusing strokes with fuchsia chalk. Instruction refocused on reading aloud the four sentence story in their books, with the teacher exhorting them to pay attention to the characters. They read with gusto.

As the reading ended, loud-speaker music poured into the classroom from the playground. The students placed their pencils on their desks and massaged the acupuncture points around their eyes--a means for relaxing and breaking the intense focus on characters. Xu leaned over to me, amazed, "I used to do those exercises when I was in school 25 years ago."

School directors and teachers are aware of the pressure on children. The younger children's school days are broken into 20-minute segments, and the government continuously focuses on developing student-friendly curriculum and more effective ways to teach concepts and memorize characters. To relieve pressure on children two years ago, the government tried to do away with Saturday tutoring sessions. Some parents breathed a sigh of relief. Huang Ping'an and his wife, for instance, began to go on excursions with their 3rd grade son. But within one month parents and tutors, afraid their children would "get behind others," were urging Saturday tutoring sessions, and within three months, Huang and his wife gave in and sent their son back to Saturday school. He was the only one in his school class who was no longer attending.

To enhance children's learning, teachers specialize in subject areas. Chinese, mathematics, and drawing (an important elementary school subject) are taught by different teachers who have free periods to plan lessons, check student papers, and work with children having difficulty. Teachers are schooled in the precise visual representation of concepts, and they critique each others' teaching methods as a means to improved instruction. Aware of the high stakes of learning, teachers energetically exhort their students to produce, to think, to analyze their own and their classmates' characters,

drawings and mathematical computations. And throughout instructional periods the teachers are always, always teaching the children to focus--on the next character, on the strokes within the characters, on the next math problem, on the arrangement of the numbers compared to the last problem, and so on.

1996. A different year, a different city, but the pace and rhythm were the same. Qiu Wei [chu way], a graduate student interpreter, and I watched from two chairs tucked in the back of the second-grade classroom, the Chinese teacher instructing from the usual raised platform at the front. "Please read the new word and the phrase. Lu Bin [loo been]." "*Sheng, sheng, anhuisheng, anhuisheng.*" "She pronounces quite well," commented the teacher to the class. "You, please," she pointed to another. "*Sheng, sheng, anhuisheng, anhuisheng.*" The teacher directed the 55 students to repeat. The rhythm accelerated. "*Sheng, sheng, anhuisheng, anhuisheng.*" "Which province are we in?" she asked. Fifty-five students called out, "Jiangsu Province." On they went for 15 minutes, probing the text, pronouncing new words, the teacher referring to the posters of the texts' pictures taped to the board. Precision, focus. Precision, focus. Continuing to the mountain scenery, she persisted, "Why is Yellow Mountain famous?" The students raised their hands. "Li [lee] Ming, you tell us." "Hot springs, special rocks, pine trees, and eh. . . ." The teacher directed her to sit down. "You'd better give a complete answer. And your voice is too low. Who would like to answer more loudly?" The students raised their hands. "Hong Li, please." Hong Li stood and responded.

As a Western primary grade teacher imbued in providing a demanding, but always positive atmosphere, I was uncomfortable with such direct criticism and asked Qui Wei how the children felt about such directness. She assured me as many other caring, thoughtful adults have since, "It 's not a problem. This type of exercise is very important to get them to write well. Later their Chinese must be perfect."

The class took a three-minute song break and then shifted to character learning, beginning with a Chinese rhyme that many adults know, "The body is one fist's length from the table. The eyes are 0.3 meters from the paper. The fingers are 0.03 meters from the tip of the pencil. Good eyesight is important to us all." Precision and focus.

The children traced over new characters in their books, while the teacher drew green chalk squares on the board. Students volunteered and went to the front to write a character very carefully in a square, striving for balance and accuracy. The class then compared the characters to those in the book.

Teacher: Now let's look at the first character zhui [joo-ee]. Is it good or not? Ting Ping.

Ting Ping: This character is not good.

Teacher: Why not good?

Ting Ping: Because this character should be in the shape of a square, but it is rectangular now.

Teacher: All right. Look. This stroke of Song Zhe-wen's [jay-wen's] is quite good, but that stroke is not so good and it should be written like this. [She corrected the improper stroke with red chalk.] Right? The two parts are too close [correcting again], so now this character looks like a square. This stroke should be in the center of the square. Song Zhe-wen, next time you write this character, please pay attention to these places.

As the teachers narrow the children's focus to the minute details of the characters, or

to the ways that math manipulations of simple numbers transfer to large numbers, the children learn the concentration, the precision and focus that they need in order to succeed.

Qiu Wei and I left the classroom and headed for the director's office. My impressions of Chinese elementary schools and teaching crowded in. Colorful, energetic, noisy, focused. Fast-paced. No time for misbehavior. Walking down the hall I noticed colorful writing on black slate boards imparting messages of welcome, of encouragement, of good citizenship. Colored-chalk pictures of children, birds, and flowers enlivened them. As we crossed the schoolyard, whole class recitation punctuated by exhorting teachers poured through the open doors and windows as if egging the classes across the courtyard to add even more acceleration to the recitation. Then lulls in the sound as teachers focused the children on written work with careful explanations.

The recess bell rang, and children poured from the buildings. Chinese jump ropes leapt from pockets, ping-pong balls zipped back and forth across small concrete tables. Hopping and skipping children whirled around us. Familiar sights in the U.S. and China. Though instructional styles differ enormously between the two countries, the exuberance and vitality of recess and of playful young children are very similar.

Resources

Two movies give a sound impression of the elementary school environment, although they do not show modern urban schools. Both are directed by Zhang Yimou and are available at Blockbusters and other video stores.

Not One Less, produced in 1999. The story of a young woman with no teaching experience who is sent to a village as a substitute teacher. The cast includes many local children. It's a charming movie and the scenes in the village and nearby town are modern.

The Road Home. Set at an earlier time. It is the story of a son who returns to his village to arrange the funeral of his father, a revered school teacher. A love story with beautiful cinematography, centered around the village school.

One website that gives very accessible information on Chinese education is CERNET, the China Education and Research Network <http://www.edu.cn>. It covers preschool through adult education, distance learning, university R & D, and much more. If you get a bunch of ???, click on "English."

Other China Images

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