

China Images

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Understanding or Misunderstanding

I climbed the seven flights of steps up the hill to the faculty apartments with anticipation, stopping part way to take in the Nanjing Normal University campus. Early afternoon volleyball players batted a ball around the athletic field below me as the sun glinted from the new polished-granite education building rising five proud stories. Already the early summer foliage hid the large lily pond where students memorize texts and Huang Ren-Song, my 83-year-old colleague, and I have often met. I was climbing to her apartment since her legs no longer serve her as well as she'd like, an admission I was quite sure was difficult for such a proud woman.

I turned back to the final double flight and was surprised and pleased to see her waiting under the tree at the top. We waved, and I smiled across the distance, quickening my climb. Her wave was muted from my Western perspective, but the way her body leaned into events told me her feelings. During our twelve-year collaboration her enthusiasm—and sometimes disapproval—have always shown from the inside out. My feelings, in somewhat typical European-American style, seem to show on the outside first letting the rest of the world know them long before I recognize them.

We've been meeting regularly ever since a colleague introduced us in 1994. We have both studied young children's learning for many years and have spent hours together in preschools and working on collaborative research projects, our friendship full of good

humor even though we are both stubborn. Her two years spent in the United States have made it possible for us to compare children's learning and educational expectations in both cultures.

"Good to meet you, good to meet you," she said bowing ever so slightly and chuckling. "Welcome to Nanjing. Welcome to my home." She took my arm and we strolled the curved road toward her apartment in an old concrete building. A hilltop breeze ruffled our hair as we chatted. We always delighted in these visits, but this time I was especially enthusiastic because I was carrying such good news for her. On my last visit she had offered to give me her research videotapes, as she didn't think she'd use them any more. It was a generous offer, but I was reluctant to accept them because I think her videos of Chinese children in preschool settings should be accessible to others, and I couldn't provide that venue. They would likely sit unused in my office. However, I had had the opportunity a few months before to meet with Tina Bruce, a colleague in London associated with the Froebel Institute for the study of young children. Huang Ren-Song knew Tina's research. I was pleased to learn that the Froebel has a video archive and would be able and willing to preserve Huang Ren-Song's tapes and make them accessible to graduate students. It seemed an excellent arrangement for both her and the Froebel students. I had written Huang Ren-Song this good news and now I needed to explain the

details of the proposed arrangements and she needed to write a letter of transfer permission. It seemed an outstanding fit, the coming together of two mutually respectful early childhood professionals from opposite sides of the earth. I was pleased to be the conduit for this connection, and I was delighted I'd found a public venue for Huang Ren-Song's videotapes.

"Careful of steps," she warned as we approached the dark entranceway to her first floor apartment. The happiness character picture was still on the door from last year—cheerfully tattered. Her husband greeted me with a smile and small bow and offered tea as I settled into the sitting area by her spacious desk. We chatted about this and that, and I gave her the two bottles of Omega-3 fish oil capsules she'd asked me to buy in the United States.

The large iron-framed windows threw afternoon light across her organized papers as we began discussing my research. Her movements were deliberate, the edge of Parkinson's barely showing through her determination as she occasionally bent over her worn notebook to jot down ideas. I asked if she'd gotten my letter about the Froebel Institute and her videos. She nodded and I explained the possibility in more detail. She knew of the small but internationally recognized center and had referenced Tina Bruce's work in her own articles.

As I finished she asked, "What will they give me?" A strange question I thought since I knew she didn't expect a monetary reimbursement for her videos. To my puzzled expression she added, "Will Tina Bruce send me articles about preschool studies? When I have questions and need information about early childhood education will they provide it to me?" My face must have shown my concern as I thought about Tina's impossibly busy schedule. As one of the best known and respected early

childhood education experts in the United Kingdom, she wears numerous hats, including serving on government commissions and negotiating good practice into government prepared curricula. She had provided me with generous time for our meeting in London, but my emails to her usually go unanswered unless I send a critically important question. "I don't think that's very likely," I hedged. "I discussed your videotapes with Tina, who's the archive director, because you asked if I knew a place that would like your materials. They would like them, but it's a small institute with very few staff." "Being archive director isn't a paid position," I added.

She edged forward in her chair, her worn hands clasping the arms. "If I give them my videotapes, then when I want articles or want to learn more about young children in England, they should help me." I ran my index finger back and forth across the cracked plastic edge of the sofa cushion, wondering where this was going. I had thought I was offering her a gift; her curt questions and near demands suggested something else.

She interjected a new slant to the topic. She had had talks with a Chinese man who was starting an archive and was interested in her work. He would honor her requests, she said in an accusatory tone. Although I struggled to understand her description of this potential arrangement, I only succeeded in deducing that he was going to construct a center and that he was a committed businessman who wanted to do something useful with his money. This appeared an interesting possibility I thought. If she could keep her materials in China they would contribute to Chinese learners. That would certainly be better than having them leave China. Yet I sensed she was telling me about this offer as a challenge to what I was saying the Froebel Institute was unable to offer. She

made it clear that he would be willing to help her find materials she wanted.

As the tension built between us and she grew more demanding and rigid, I tried to defuse it by asking, what I began to realize, were inconsequential questions. Where were his archives being built? What else would be in them? She explained, but kept coming back to the Froebel Institute, what she wanted from the staff, and that they should be willing to have conversations with her. “Why won’t they provide me services?” It was more an accusation than a question. Our positions were rigidifying. I could hear my stuck-record responses to her repeated demands. “The Institute just doesn’t have the ability to do that.” “It just isn’t possible.” “That’s not how small archives work in the West.” As an example I told her about the small archive I work on a few days a month. Those of us associated with it could never respond to this type of request from donors. I reiterated that Tina is very interested in Huang Ren-Song’s block play research. But in spite of attempts to sidestep anger, it permeated the room. A concrete barrier had risen between us.

My responses felt off center, and I sensed I was not addressing her core frustration that I did not comprehend. I was angry, and surprised at the strength of my reaction. In fact I was fighting tears of fury and frustration. I had never seen this hard edge in her. To me, it was ugly. Her body had stiffened with determination. Her usual congenial expression and ready chuckle were gone, replaced by what? I wasn’t sure. She showed a steely resolve to get what she wanted no matter how impossible it was. She seemed to have become an impermeable wall, and I seemed to have become an insensitive foreigner. It was as if all of the British humiliation of China, from the Opium War to the holding of Hong Kong, had moved into her apartment. That may have been it, a deep distrust seeded from years of cultural

humiliation. But that seems too simple, and I’ll probably never comprehend what was sitting in the room between us.

As I edged forward on the sofa in an effort to end this visit, she offered, “I’m sorry I disappoint you,” without the slightest trace of remorse showing. I handed her the permission transfer letter I had drafted for her, saying that I’d leave it with her for her information. She put it to one side, saying she’d think about it, and we both knew that we would not broach the topic again. We moved on to neutral talk. How was Joe Stephenson, who’d introduced us? What was the name of my new research associate? How was her granddaughter in Arizona? We ate a few morsels of food in their dining nook, her husband joining us, and parted awkwardly. I’m sure we were both relieved to bring the afternoon to a close.

My emotions raced at me as I slowly retraced my steps down the seven flights of stairs to the lower campus and the main gate of the university. I was angry and puzzled, and also, I had to admit humiliated that what I thought was an exciting arrangement that I had brokered was not at all that to Huang Ren-Song. And once more I had that nagging feeling that I get in this culture not my own—that I’d crossed an unseen line, the demarcation between acceptable and not acceptable behavior. I was sure I hadn’t, but sureness in those circumstances is tainted with uncertainty.

I thought about how her presence weaves through the years. During my semi-annual visits to Nanjing we had always spent several hours together. We had observed in myriad preschool classes together and asked teachers endless questions. I can see her sitting at my small desk in the student hostel where I stayed, poring over prompts for our research collaborations about children’s learning, and I can recall many good-natured images of session after session with children

in her apartment trying out preliminary test materials, her husband keeping parents at bay so they wouldn't be tempted to aid their child's writing. Inquisitive, with a hard edge for research precision, she astutely critiqued our plans and project developments again and again. This character was too confusing, that one was poorly written on the test card. We should get more information from the teachers. Although my impatience sometimes surfaced at explaining once again my reasoning behind decisions, I have always admired her grit and her drive for intellectual rigor.

We've shared meal after meal in her apartment, invariably with special treats for me to taste—delicious lotus root soup and not so delicious healthy tofu chunks. "It's good for you," she laughed. "But it smells bad." Her husband went to special markets to find new foods for our meals. Sometimes sitting on small stools at their card-table sized dining room table in the apartment entranceway we shared a little Chinese wine from an old bottle. At my home in California, her photo sits on my filing cabinet, with her daughter and husband in the natural-feeling garden behind their apartment. Another one of her and her husband at a celebratory meal in their apartment is stuck to the wall beside my computer, and a large red-tassled plaque she gave me with a running horse and the characters that read, "May your life run a million *li* with good fortune," hangs in my office.

We have had our ups and downs too. One time an over-opinionated interpreter I had brought to test young children kept interrupting their responses. Huang Ren-Song salvaged the situation, but thoroughly berated me later. Another time during a two-year effort of having her autobiographical vignettes translated to English, I had a young faculty member living in Nanjing go to her apartment to check numerous details

of the first translation and of parts of her history that we did not understand. She spent two long periods with Huang Ren-Song who, when she saw the results, had nothing but negative comments to make about the young woman's lack of understanding of her literary references. "We should just give it up," she said in disgust. She eventually relented, but she did not give in easily. We had also had heated discussions and disagreements about research philosophies and techniques, but they were always resolved. And then there was the time, at my request, that she had collected pounds of data from preschool classes for my colleague in the United States who never used them.

But today's impasse was different. It was a rigidifying of positions that would be hard to revisit. Was it purely a misunderstanding? A cultural mismatch? I'll never know, though I have studied cultural mismatches with Chinese colleagues and given papers at international conferences about how to recognize and overcome them. Somehow this situation did not lend itself to analysis. Later a Chinese colleague and I tried to deconstruct it (admittedly using only my description of the scene). He suggested I write her a letter explaining that the West handled archival contributions differently than China, but somehow that seemed too simplistic, a dishonest cover-up of what had actually transpired. I drafted the letter, but never mailed it. It felt disingenuous and besides, I was still angry. In some way, I had hit a wall, and I had to let it be.

Goodwill and our long-term friendship have moved us back from the pit of discord. We've met several times since that day. The videos have never again been mentioned. We have gone on to other topics and, sadly, her Parkinson's is bringing her active life to an end. Research projects and school visits have slipped beyond her, but our

conversations continue, peppered with her questions and commentary about early childhood education trends, sociological theory and more.

During my most recent visit, her daughter and her husband brought her to my room in the newly renovated university foreign visitors hotel. As the four of us squished onto the bed and desk chair for a good chat, I was conscious of her son-in-law taking photos of us talking intently. Yes, I thought. These will soon be memories. I watched as Huang Ren-Song sat there, frustrated that her talk is slurring. But her pride is intact. She was dressed for an outing, her white hair combed neatly, her back ramrod straight, her hands resting on the cane that no longer gets forgotten in whatever corner she propped it. I couldn't help thinking that this strong and determined woman had survived the horrific upheavals of modern China and, with the coming of Deng Xiaoping, taught herself English, carried out new research, and compiled the first early-childhood college textbook in China—an enormous compendium of resources, finally published in 1991. And she had enjoyed, and also bent to, our research collaboration which had given us both so much. My memories are good. Her sense of humor—and her determination and a certain

arrogance continue. “Do you know a good scientist in Arizona?” she asked as our conversation moved toward closure. I was puzzled. What did this have to do with anything? “Fan Yi's divorced. She needs someone,” she responded to my frown. I got it. This is a woman who never gives up. Her granddaughter was single in Arizona and Huang Ren-Song wanted me to introduce her to a good potential husband. “You're matchmaking from this distance?” I asked incredulous. She laughed her hearty laugh and we all moved toward the door. I walked them to the elevator in proper Chinese style, and then went down the 20 floors with them. They tucked themselves into the new looking Chinese car and we all waved too many times as they left. I returned to my room, tears of sadness stinging my eyes. Whatever misunderstanding we had had earlier was not important. It had infuriated me because I thought I had found for her exactly what she wanted. But how ignorant and probably arrogant I'd been, though I'd still like to unlock its mystery. What is important for me—and her—I believe, was a serendipitous meeting many years ago, and a long friendship of respect and learning that has united us across the chasm of our different life experiences.

Resources

Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States by Joseph J. Tobin, David Y.H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson, published in 1989 by Yale University Press. A paperback edition came out in 1991, and both editions are available through Amazon.com. Using videos taken in one preschool in each country, the authors showed the parents and teachers of each school the videos from the other two countries and had them comment about the teaching and learning styles. The results are fascinating since the adults of each culture found some practices from the other countries impressive, while they viewed other practices as strange or inappropriate. Joseph Tobin and a new collaborator are now completing a second round of video data and responses that should be completed within a year. Although the Chinese preschool information in the 1989/1991 book is now very out of date, the comparisons of learning expectations are very interesting.

An article I have written with Huang Ren-Song and another Chinese colleague, *Decoding strategies used by Chinese primary school children*. It is about how Chinese children learn to recognize and remember Chinese characters. All of the preliminary projects and development of materials were done with Huang Ren-Song and included many sessions in her apartment trying to figure out how to get children to talk freely about their learning process. I would be glad to mail you a copy if you are interested. It is not yet on line.

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