

# Chinese Schools and Students—1985–2015

## MY REFLECTIONS

By Roy E. Bergeson

**M**y first visit to a Chinese high school was in March 1985, during my first trip to Mainland China. Upon arrival, I received a tour starting in the courtyard, where a PE class was in session and students were lined up in rows doing calisthenics. The students at the front of the rows were doing their jumping jacks with full energy. The students at the back were barely going through the motions. “This is totally familiar,” I said to myself. Then, I was shown the computer lab with rows of dark screens featuring blinking C:\ prompts. “Familiar. A typical high school!” I next observed classrooms with rows and rows of double desks jammed into an ill-lit room with a teacher’s lectern at the front. “Not familiar at all!” This juxtaposition, this dramatic contrast, proved to be the reoccurring theme during my thirty years observing and being directly involved in Chinese schools.

Before 1983, I had no interest in Asia. My own studies and the courses at the school where I worked were all focused on countries around the Atlantic—and mostly the north Atlantic. The Webb Schools, two boarding schools on one campus in greater Los Angeles, had students from Asia and many Asian–Americans, but not much interest or curiosity about Asia itself. I was the first school representative to visit Asia when, as Director of Admissions, I went to Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan in 1983 to interview and give our admissions tests. When I was in Hong Kong, I went out to Lok Ma Chau on the Hong Kong–Mainland border to gaze across the fence into “Red China,” only to see rice paddies and young kids riding plastic big-wheel tricycles. I decided that if I returned to Asia, I would visit the Mainland.

That Mainland trip by train from Hong Kong to Guangzhou to Beijing in 1985 changed my life and that of my family. Afterward, I decided to stop teaching AP modern European history and start teaching Chinese history. When my son went to boarding school, I advised him to stop taking French and take Mandarin. I led my first student/faculty trip to China in 1989. In 2000, I retired from Collegiate School in New York City, where I was Head of the Upper School, to start an exchange program with Suzhou High School. I remained directly involved with China and Chinese education for the next fifteen years, until I retired and finally returned to the US to live.

In that 1989 student/faculty trip, Kathy Simon, my colleague at Webb, and I took thirty students and faculty on a two-week trip to Beijing, Xi’an, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. Neither of us knew much about official visits to Chinese schools, so we made our first mistake: we asked government officials at the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles what we should do. We were advised not to bring presents for the students, as they were too poor to have presents for us. “Bring books for the school library.” I laugh as I write this.

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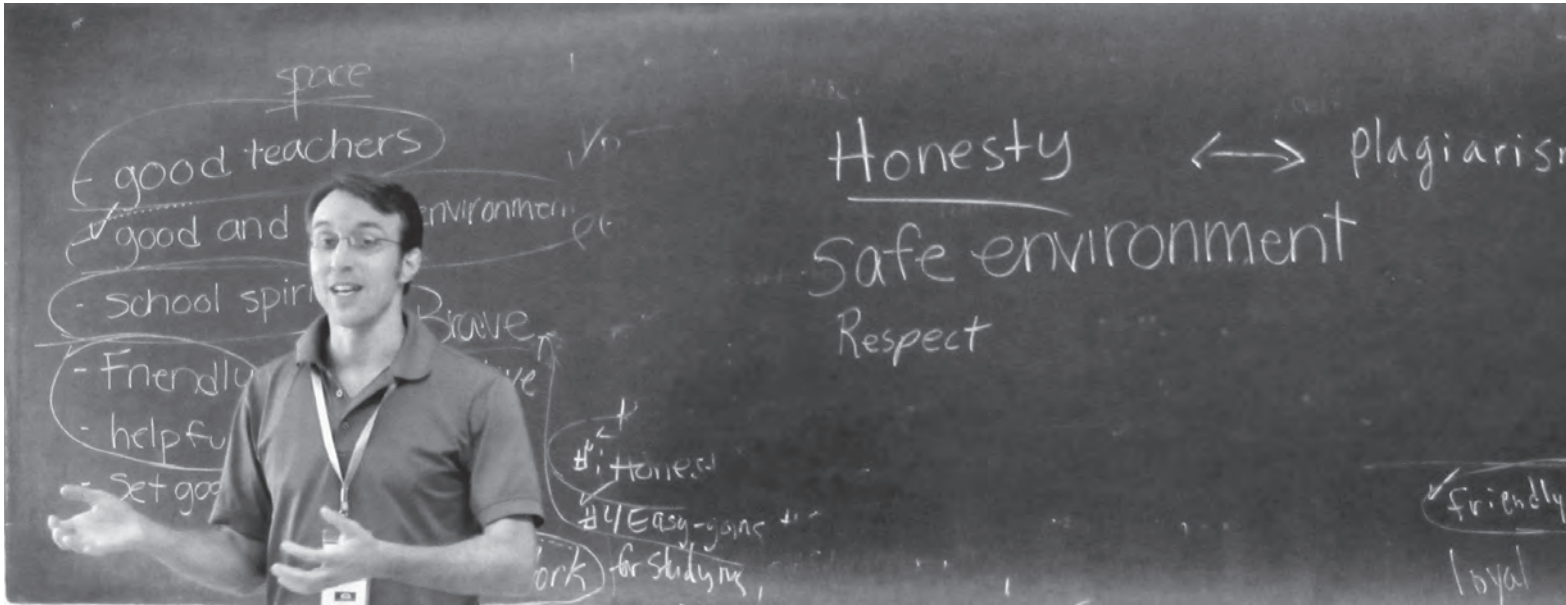
Envisioning visiting a poor, third-world school without any technology, I had the bright idea to take along a Polaroid camera! So after flights from Los Angeles to San Francisco to Narita (overnight stay) and Beijing, we were driven to a brand-new high-rise hotel

with a revolving restaurant on the top that was not yet revolving. The next day, we piled into a bus for a long ride out to the western side of Beijing and our visit to Beijing Number Nine High School. After passing through polluted industrial neighborhoods, we pulled into the school courtyard and I got my Polaroid ready.

Outside my window, I saw a large welcoming group and many, many video cameras and lights all pointed at our bus! The school’s video club was there to film us, and Chinese Central Television (CCTV) had sent their top teen reporter with a film crew to record and broadcast our visit. We had come to look at and examine them, but they were there to look at us, examine us, *and* film the experience. I left my Polaroid on the bus.

Unconsciously assuming that we Westerners would be in control of our Chinese experiences, we found ourselves totally at sea and being directed and guided by the Chinese. Everyone was welcoming and gracious, and fortunately, there was an English teacher who had taught in Australia who served not only as our interpreter but kept whispering to my colleague and me what we should do next. We were clueless.

After the formal welcome and their presentation of official gifts, we were ushered into the gym, where the teacher told me to have our students sit at tables of four, each furnished with fruit and room-temperature orange soda, with already-seated Chinese students.



Our physics teacher leading the student/faculty discussion on the qualities we wanted in our new school. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

What happened first when our students joined the Chinese students? The Chinese students gave our students gifts that they had made! Our students had no gifts to give in return. At the head table where Kathy and I sat with the school principal and the English teacher, the teacher explained that the principal didn't speak or understand English. "What he says is not very interesting, so I will just tell you what's going on and what you should do. Please smile a lot when I am translating to you, as it's very important that the principal be seen as a good host, as this is all being recorded by CCTV." We had a fabulous visit and experienced unexpected hospitality and great warmth. We also got a tour of their video lab.

After moving to New York City in 1993, I took three Collegiate School student/faculty/parent trips to China. With the help of Margot Landman, currently with the National Committee on US-China Relations, who ran a US/China teacher exchange program, we were able to make two-day school visits to Suzhou High School. On our 1999 visit, the Suzhou High School principal asked me to start an exchange relationship between our two schools. With support from both schools and Margot's teacher exchange program, I arrived at the airport in Shanghai in August 2000 to initiate that relationship and spend the next school year living and working at Suzhou High School.

On the noisy van ride from the airport to Suzhou, I was amazed at the warmth of the personal greeting from Principal Ni. Due to the Cultural Revolution, he had not had the opportunity to learn English in school but charmed us by singing the alphabet song. He and Assistant Principal Zhang met with me several times to learn about administrative practices in the US and asked me to conduct a teacher training class for the thirty-five members of the English department so they could learn how to make their classes more "active." Of course I accepted the invitation.

As a history teacher, the idea of running a workshop for trained English teachers was daunting. I discovered that most had studied *Pride and Prejudice* in college, and since I loved the book and had read it several times, I decided to use that as our text. I asked a famous New York author who had just written an introduction to a new edition to autograph thirty-five copies to give to the Suzhou teachers. I prepared and worried about this class more than any I had ever taught.

On the first day of the teacher workshop, I walked into the classroom and found three English teachers. No sign of the other thirty-two! "OK. I'll work with three." We talked about what they wanted to learn, and I gave them an assignment for the next class in two weeks. Surprise! Four teachers showed up for the next class. Their assignment for the following class was to prepare discussion questions on a passage they chose and then lead a small discussion among the other teachers. About five minutes before that next class was to begin, I got a call from a teacher who was not in the class telling me that there was a lot of unexpected work for English teachers that day and no one would be able to attend class.

I didn't hear anything further in the intervening two weeks, so I decided at the next class just to say that my plan wasn't very helpful to them and ask them what would be. I was perfectly happy to cancel the class. As I was walking to that next class, another English teacher who had not been in the class met me on the path and asked if I wanted to wear a tie to class that day. Puzzled, I asked why.

“Because CCTV is here from Beijing to film your class.” I decided that a tie would be a good idea and returned to my apartment to find a tie and think. Outside my classroom, I found Principal Ni, the director of the Suzhou Education Department, and a full CCTV film crew. I walked into my classroom and discovered the whole English department sitting patiently in student desks.

In the first of my two years at Suzhou High School, I taught English to half the sophomore class in sections of perhaps thirty students once a week for forty minutes. Some students paid attention; some did not. They were required to come, but nothing from my class was reported in test scores. Several of my fellow exchange teachers called this arrangement “teaching ‘Jingle Bells.’” Fun and perhaps helpful, but no chance to track individual student needs or progress. I missed “real” teaching. I offered to stay at Suzhou High School for a second year if I could have my own English class. Surprisingly, Principal Ni agreed, and I started the next September with fifty-six Chinese students relying on me as their only English teacher for the academic year.

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The prospect was certainly a challenge considering that I was a history major, had never taught English before, and—having worked and taught only in independent schools—the largest class I’d ever taught had eighteen students. I decided to see how long it would take to change this class from a “teacher teaches/students listen” model to an interactive class where students are given questions rather than answers.

I planned to do a lot of work in small groups where students would think and talk together to come up with answers to the questions I posed. I estimated that it would take one full semester to change the dynamic of the class. Again, as was true during so much of my time in China, I was wrong.

The basic change took only two weeks! The Chinese students could certainly sit passively for hours, but they liked to think and talk and discuss and argue just as much as any American students I had taught. They were just not accustomed to doing those things in class. It turned out that we could cover the necessary grammar in the national textbook in two and a half days, so we could spend the rest of the week studying poetry, prose, and plays. Most importantly, the students had writing assignments due every Monday. One day, students from a local university who were studying to be teachers visited the class. When they saw my students working in groups trying to figure out why Robert Frost had used certain words in a poem, a university student asked me with concern on her face, “But how are they going to learn the right answer?”

The year was extraordinarily rewarding to me, and my students managed to get top marks in all the department English exams. At the end of the year, students from my class put on a production of *Our Town*. They did an extraordinary job. However, the only members of the English department who came to see the production were teachers who had previously taught in the US or Australia.

Two important incidents during those two years in Suzhou helped me understand much more about the culture of my Chinese students.



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English class in the new school in Beijing. Source: Photo by Phil Lisle.

At the beginning, I was invited to banquet after banquet. At first honored, I ended up being tired of the constant performances expected of me. During the Golden Week national holiday, I stayed in my apartment, read, and took long walks. Lovely! The next week, I was walking across campus and met a senior member of the English department. She asked about my Golden Week and was clearly shocked to discover that no one had invited me anywhere. I assured her wholeheartedly that my week had been perfect. When she returned to the department room, she told her fellow teachers that she had talked to me and that no one had invited me anywhere! Someone asked, "What did Roy say?" She replied, "He said he was fine, but I could see in his eyes that he was very sad."

Hearing this reminded me of what a tour guide in Xi'an told me on my first student trip to China back in 1989. She said that during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese learned "talking mouth." You say whatever the authority above you wants to hear, but from your neck down you live your own life as best you can. Over and over again, I had my words disregarded in favor of what someone could project onto my eyes.

The other key insight came when I was doing a two-week workshop for elementary teachers in Suzhou. I, of course, divided the class into groups around tables. I had noticed in my class at Suzhou High School and with these teachers as well that

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students rarely paid attention to what other students said. As part of a writing assignment, I asked these elementary teachers why my high school students didn't listen to other students. One teacher gave a perfectly logical, practical reason: "Why would you waste your time listening to a student? Just wait until you get the right answer from the teacher. That is the answer that you will need for the test."

After my two years in Suzhou, my work was mostly based in Shanghai for the next ten years. I helped develop and supervise a summer program for English-speaking students from around the world to come to Shanghai and learn about China. For that program, I interviewed college professors and hired Chinese teaching assistants from Peking University, Tsinghua, and Fudan. I served as a consultant to Gezhi High School and received many offers to be a principal in new international programs at Chinese high schools. The idea of capitalizing on the student and parent interest in a more Western education was extremely popular in China toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Because I attended a famous American boarding school and university, and worked at Webb and Collegiate, I got many, many employment offers. I took the first offer seriously and had lunch with my prospective employers. But when I asked how much they were planning to pay the American teachers I was expected to hire, the reply was "a bit more than Chinese teachers." I knew these ventures could not result in high-quality education for Chinese students. I ended up asking the



Two of our Beijing students. Source: Photo by Phil Lisle.

teacher pay question on the phone before any meetings and thus didn't need to waste callers' time or mine at lunches. It occurred to me that I was basically a white face with a résumé.

My greatest learning experience came in 2013 after I was offered the job of starting a new dual-diploma high school on the campus of a famous high school in the Haidian District of Beijing. Nick Stoneman, Head of Shattuck–St. Mary's School in Minnesota, had spent two years in intensive negotiations with the Beijing high school in preparation for opening this new school that would bear the names of both schools. Nick kept me apprised of the progress in his negotiations for the new school, but he was not able to find a person to start the school. He surprised me one day by calling and asking if I would do it. Nick told me that I would have complete authority over hiring, firing, scheduling, and curriculum as long as the students qualified for both Chinese and Shattuck–St. Mary's diplomas. I was intrigued and went out to the Haidian District to talk.

The assistant principal in charge of the new school informed me that I would only be supervising the American teachers I hired and have no other responsibilities. Not totally surprised by this different perspective from the Chinese side, I called Nick and reported the conversation. Three days later, Nick called me back and indicated that he subsequently had a very frank Skype talk with the assistant principal and asked if I would go back to the Chinese school for another meeting. In this second discussion, I was told that I would have complete authority over the new school and that the Chinese side definitely wanted me to take the job. Of course, since this was not my first experience in China, I wasn't sure exactly how much to believe, but I very much wanted to get back into schools, and the opportunity to start a whole new school was something I couldn't pass up. I took the job.

The first clue that my relationship with the Chinese school might not be that easy was the marquee on the front of the school auditorium on the first big testing day for our new school. The marquee told families and applicants that they were applying to the international program of the Chinese school. There was no mention of the American school or the agreed-upon formal name of the new international school. I reported the discrepancy to Minnesota, but went ahead with trying to get the best students we could for this brand new school.

We opened in the fall of 2013 with sixty-four Chinese tenth-graders selected on the basis of their Chinese *zhongkao* (high school entrance exams), tests sent from Minnesota, and interviews. I had four teachers from the US and, as my assistant and interpreter, the Chinese woman who worked closely with me the year before. We all spent three days in August talking about our new school. All of us had spent most of our lives in schools, but none of us had ever *started a school*. What did we want the culture of our new school to be?



Free reading period in the library of the new international school. Source: Photo by Phil Lisle.

Students individually and then in groups wrote lists of qualities they wanted in their classmates. Teachers wrote lists of qualities they wanted in their students, fellow faculty members, and the school culture. We narrowed down the lists and further narrowed down the lists. We put the student and faculty lists together and narrowed the combined list down to five key qualities: honesty, safe environment (both physically and emotionally), hard work, respect, and diversity. This was not the same list any of us would have come up with before this group process. We talked about specific examples of each quality and told the students that we were not going to post this list anywhere in the school. We each had to live this list so that when people visited our school they would *feel* these qualities.

This experience made it clear to everyone that we were *all* creating this new school. This was not a school created only by adults. We called the students “pioneers,” and the students took this all to heart. We had no school logo, so in the first year we had a student design contest, and the students and the faculty picked the winning design. (The girl who designed the logo is currently a student at design school in New York City.)

There was always something new to be learned. Our students needed to have a year of US history in eleventh grade and a year of world history in twelfth grade to receive their Shattuck diplomas. I was told by the Chinese assistant principal at the end of October of our first year that no foreign teachers were allowed to teach any history courses. I decided that we would just teach American literature and world literature chronologically instead. Those course titles wouldn’t pose any problems.

I suspect that one of the reasons the outstanding recent PhD from the University of California–Irvine who accepted my job offer for this new school in only its second year was the challenge of creating an American literature course in order to teach American history. However, I was a bit surprised when he asked me if he could teach the course using only primary sources! Could Chinese students, whose command of English was only at a middle level, actually learn American history from only primary sources?

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What resulted was one of the most amazing courses I’ve observed in all my years in education. Visiting class one day, I went up to one of the tables where five Chinese students were peering at a laptop screen, half of which displayed a classic David painting and the other half a Turner landscape. I asked the students what they were doing. One student replied, “We’re making the transition from the classical period to the romantic, and we’re supposed to find five key differences between the two paintings.” These students are now into their junior year in English-speaking colleges and universities. I’ve checked with many of them on their preparation, and they all say that they were well-prepared and this course was one of the most helpful.

Clearly, this kind of experience was not in anyone’s mind when we started the school. The adaptability and openness of the Chinese students, along with the creativity of the American teachers, resulted in an amazing learning experience for both faculty and students.

An American college visitor in the second year expressed surprise that we would have diversity as one of our guiding principles when all the kids had the same color hair and mostly single-syllable family names. “Where’s the diversity?” In our first year, someone had the idea that each student and faculty member should give a short presentation at our daily morning meetings responding to the title “Where I’m From.” Almost everyone developed a PowerPoint, but each student’s presentation was different from the others. We were all fascinated by the stories students chose to tell about them-



The author and two Beijing students in the new school. Source: Photo by Phil Lisle.

selves and their families. To our surprise, most started not with where they were born, but with where their parents or grandparents were born. One boy said that telling where he was from was difficult because his mother was from Jiangsu Province and his father was from Shaanxi. One girl showed a picture of a sperm and an egg; another showed a chimp. An extraordinarily and consciously diverse group of students!

Nick had a contact at Beijing Normal University, an elite teacher-training school, and asked me if we could arrange to have interns come to our new school. My assistant and I visited and were told that they only sent interns to public schools, but they would consider us. We later got a call saying that they would send two interns to us at the beginning of our second year and were sending out five the next week for interviews. We could choose which two we wanted.

The students spent the morning visiting classes, and we interviewed them in the afternoon. All five of them, Chinese college students from various provinces in China, declared that “the students in your school are not Chinese!” Our students seemed so much more talkative, interactive, interested, and interesting than the Chinese high school students they knew. At the end of the afternoon, the supervisor said that all five students wanted to come as interns and that the university would approve. Would we take all five next fall? Of course we said yes, even though the following fall would be only our second year, and we would also have doubled student population and an American faculty that would increase threefold.

Our five interns spent ten full weeks with us. There was tremendous learning on both sides. On graduation day, the head of the teacher program at the university came out for our little ceremony and met with me beforehand in my office. She told me that what her students had observed in our school was exactly what they were teaching at Beijing Normal. But when her graduates went to teach in public schools, they had to forget what they had learned and do things the way they had always been done. She articulated the things her students had learned, and they were exactly the things that our faculty had as goals in their teaching. She said we had changed the lives of these five interns. The university teacher program head also left a presigned agreement from the university to send us from five to fifteen interns in each of the following years!

This discussion reminded me of an earlier meeting I had with the former mayor of Suzhou, who was then the third-ranked officer in the Education Ministry in Beijing. He had in-depth experiences in American top universities and schools, and was proud to tell me that they were including discussion topics, debates, and all sorts of interesting activities in new high school textbooks the ministry was sending out from Beijing. I later asked a good friend and top teacher at Suzhou High School what the teachers thought of these new textbooks from Beijing. “Worthless! We don’t have time for all of



Physics class in the new international school. Source: Photo by Phil Lisle.

those fancy things. We have to prepare the kids for the *gaokao* [college entrance exam]. If we don't make sure they get high scores, we will be in trouble and the parents will be angry. It's all about test preparation for us!"

It was clear throughout the first two years of this new international school in Beijing that the Chinese school administration was not supportive of what we were doing. In the second year, the assistant in charge of our program wanted my dean of students fired and threatened just to stop paying her. The dean was doing a fantastic job by all comments from students, parents, and fellow teachers, so I had a meeting with the top principal of the school to tell him about the problem. I showed him a Chinese copy of the signed implementation agreement between the Minnesota school and his school. He looked at it and told me he had never seen it before. My dean was not fired.

Working with the Chinese school became increasingly difficult. Finally, as our conversations became more frank, I was informed that the Chinese school had never intended to follow through on the agreement that had been signed. "It is impossible for a foreigner to run a program on a Chinese high school campus."

I left the school and China in September of the school's third year. Nick came to Beijing a few weeks later and in discussions with the top principal announced the end of Shattuck's participation in the dual-diploma experiment. After the third year, there were no more American diplomas, and the name became just the "international program" of the Chinese school . . . the same as on that first testing day three years before.

I am still in touch with many of my former students. They were fantastic, creative, responsive, and articulate. In the new school in Beijing, we did not get around to writing a student handbook in the first year. One day, I asked my advisees why, given that we had no book of rules, we had so few discipline problems. One sixteen-year-old boy pointed to his chest and said, "We all know what the rules are." ■

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