

*EAA Interview with Steve Levine*Creator of the
China Box

Steven I. Levine is the Mansfield Professor of Asia Pacific Studies at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, University of Montana. He is the author or editor of three books and several dozen articles, chapters, and review essays on Chinese history and East Asian international relations. He is presently working on a history of post-World War II Sino-American relations.



Steve Levine demonstrates the contents of the China Box to John Marks's fifth grade class in Rattlesnake Middle School in Missoula, Montana.

Lucien: *Congratulations on winning the Buchanan Prize. Please tell our readers a little bit about yourself. What is your educational background? What positions have you held? How did you get interested in China?*

STEVE: Thanks very much. Winning the Buchanan Prize was quite unexpected since *The China Box* is my first venture into elementary and middle school education. I've been interested in China since I was a kid, probably because my parents, who were 1930s lefties, always had books on China lying around the house including classics by Edgar Snow, Anna Louise Strong, and Jack Belden, people who were very sympathetic to the Chinese revolution.

As an undergraduate at Brandeis, I took a couple of courses on Asia, including an introduction to China and Japan, from Milton Sacks, whose field was Southeast Asia. Reading Harold Isaacs' *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* was

what really hooked me. Then as a graduate student in political science at Harvard, I plunged into Chinese studies with Ben Schwartz as my mentor.

I've taught at too many places over the years, mostly because I've been in an academic commuting marriage, my wife is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I started out at Columbia and then was at American University in Washington for most of a decade. In 1988 I resigned my tenured professorship at AU in order to be with my family. After that I knocked around for ten years including visiting professorships at UNC, Duke, and the University of Michigan before coming to the University of Montana. I've been something of an academic *ronin*, I suppose.

Lucien: *You have training in Chinese history and have been an academic, yet your prize-winning AAS teaching material, The China Box, is for elementary teachers. It is*

somewhat unusual, given your background, that you have an interest in elementary teachers and students. How did all this come about?

STEVE: You're right. It is "somewhat unusual," but I'll try to explain. I actually came up with the idea for *The China Box* in 1991 while I was in China for six months with the Duke Study in China Program. The idea just came to me out of the blue, but I didn't do anything about it until five years later when I was next in China.

Meanwhile, I had worked "out-of-license" for a couple of years as Director of the Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, and we did a fair amount of cooperative work with teachers in area elementary and middle schools, teaching about Russia. At one teachers' workshop, I concocted a prototype of a *Russia Box* with various artifacts from Russia including dolls, stamps, toy cars, coins,

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etc. The teachers were so enthusiastic that I figured maybe there was a real need and opportunity here.

When I was in China in 1996, I began collecting materials for *The China Box* and thinking of what should go into a handbook. Years earlier I'd invented an American geography board game called *Thunder Bay* that I never put into production because of start-up costs. I never lack for creative, some might say whacko, ideas. The business end of *The China Box* has been the tough part for me. I have about as much aptitude for business as Albert Einstein had for basketball.

Lucien: For the benefit of readers who haven't seen *The China Box*, please describe the materials in the box and what your objectives were in designing it.

STEVE: First, I should describe the box itself, a ten-gallon purple plastic tote I discovered while doing archival research in the housewares section of Wal-Mart. The core idea of the box is to present contemporary Chinese culture to North American kids through the medium of common items that Chinese kids have in their daily lives. So *The China Box* con-

tains children's books, maps, puzzles, board games, toys, chopsticks, masks, puppets, stamps, an exercise eye chart, a McDonald's menu in Chinese, a plastic clothes dryer, a stuffed panda, etc. After I selected all these materials, I arranged with a Chinese agent in Beijing to ship me everything in commercial quantities. The real challenge was to create a useful handbook so that teachers with little or no knowledge about China could open the box and the handbook and start using them right away. The handbook grew incrementally as I thought of new topics to include and classroom activities and projects. I consulted with Ray Hall, a seventh-grade social studies teacher in Chapel Hill, but most of the ideas are my own, for better or worse.

My objectives in creating *The China Box* were twofold. The first was to make learning about China fun for young kids who are so much more open to new experiences and ideas than most of our college students. At the same time, I wanted to make it easy for teachers to teach about China even though they may not know a whole lot about Chinese culture or society. Elementary and middle

school teachers are very busy people, and I have enormous respect for them as colleagues who are engaged in the same educational enterprise that college professors are. In fact, we depend upon them much more than they do on us.

Second, and here is where fantasy enters in, I wanted to get fabulously rich without having to invest in lottery tickets or become a day trader. I believed, and still do, that every school in the country should have a *China Box* and, furthermore, that I could sell one to every school. This is my personal version of the myth of the China market. With a small bequest from my favorite aunt, I began a start-up business modestly called Boulder Run Enterprises. It's basically a one-person operation. Occasionally, my dogs Maggie and Bunker help out. At great expense I secured federal trademarks for *The China Box* and for *Country Starter Kits*. Lawyers charge by the breath, it seems. *Country Starter Kits* is the generic term for what I conceived as a line of teacher kits modeled on *The China Box*. Incidentally, I also have a trademark for *The Russia Box* which is in limited production. I learned

中国 the China box®

The China Box is a new, easy-to-use enrichment resource, using a hands-on learning approach to social studies and Chinese culture for elementary and middle school students. It contains thirty different authentic items from China used by Chinese children at school and at home, including; maps, books, puzzles, board games, toys, stamps, etc.

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Dimensions:
20 x 15 x 12"

ESSAYS



Steve Levine explains the significance of the China Box.

about U.S. Customs regulations the hard way when Customs destroyed 100 Chinese children's military caps I was trying to bring in because I lacked an import license under the U.S.-China textile agreement.

Finally, I discovered the expensive world of advertising which is the rock upon which my dreams of getting rich have been dashed. I simply can't afford enough advertising dollars to promote *The China Box* properly. I do advertise in *EAA* which has reasonable rates. There have been lots of comic moments along the way. So many I'm thinking about writing a book called, *Company Commander: How a Failed Academic Became a Failed Entrepreneur*, but I'm too busy to get to it.

Lucien: *You are in the somewhat unique position of being both a China scholar and a successful developer of elementary-level China teaching materials. One theme that resurfaces in EAA from time to time is how to better make connections between Asia scholars interested in school reforms and teachers interested in Asia. Any thoughts on how these two groups might more effectively work together to enhance youngsters' understanding of Asia?*

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STEVE: The first thing is some attitude adjustment on both sides. Asia scholars are teachers, too. We may not be in the same boat with elementary, middle, and high school teachers, but we're sailing the same seas. I find that too many professors, particularly at elite institutions, are condescending to teachers. It's part of a larger problem in which our society pays lip service to teaching, but underpays and overburdens teachers. Second, the colleges and universities where we work are situated in communities which we can often connect with simply by taking a little bit of initiative as individuals or as Asian Studies programs or departments.

For example, the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana, under Philip West's leadership, has forged an excellent working relationship with the Missoula County Public School system in the areas of curriculum and arts education. We are participating in the national effort funded by the Freeman Foundation to increase the visibility of East Asia in the high school curriculum. Last Chinese New Year, I helped a class of fifth graders make *jiaozi* for 150 schoolmates, all of whom had learned to eat with chopsticks, thanks to *The China Box*. Academic departments should recognize the value of such initiatives which help awaken interest in Asia among young children. These kids, one hopes, will eventually wind up in our college and university classes. It's really a matter of self-interest. Third, we need to focus on fundamentals rather than tote our specialized knowledge into K-12 classrooms. I recall a Slavistic colleague at UNC who lectured junior high school kids on irregular Russian verb endings. Boring. Loosen up a little. Hard as it is to believe, most of us in universities actually know things that may be of interest to kids.

Lucien: *You have been involved at a couple of levels in teaching about Asia either*

through direct classroom work or through curriculum materials development. Nationally, are we making progress in helping young people understand more about Asia relative to when you first began work in this field? What are some major obstacles to developing an Asia-literate American population that frustrate you?

STEVE: My work in curriculum development is really too recent for me to answer that question, but I'll try anyway. I think we're probably doing a little better than when I entered the field more than thirty years ago. We're a little less parochial, a little less Eurocentric. There's more information, more travel, more Asians in our own population. Title VI area studies programs at the postsecondary level that reward so-called "outreach" activities—a term I detest, incidentally, because it smacks of condescension—are a real help. Awards like the Buchanan Prize are important because they provide professional recognition and legitimacy to odd ducks like me. In general, however, social studies and foreign cultures are still given short shrift in K-12 education. Not enough resources are put into it, and this affects education about Asia.

Our national illiteracy in foreign languages is a big piece of it, too. Whenever I'm in a classroom, I teach kids how to say a few simple phrases in Chinese. I never explain that Chinese is a tonal language, yet the kids always mimic the sounds perfectly. Too many teachers still believe, if not in the inscrutability of Asia, then, in the difficulty of learning and teaching about Asia. Our national cult of the expert is part of the problem. In my primary field, Chinese politics, the experts have almost always been wrong on the big questions. Impressive, isn't it? I like to point this out. Puncture a few balloons. At heart, I'm a cynical optimist, I suppose. ■