

# I Am a Chinese English Teacher

By Wang Ping



Wang Ping in her office. Working conditions in her school reflect a huge improvement compared with her previous school. All the photos are courtesy of author.

China is catching the attention of the world for its economic development, and many people are exploring the reasons behind the country's fast growth. A related area of interest is how China prepares its children in schools. In this essay, I will tell my own story: my early life, my studies in schools, my experience of incidentally becoming a teacher, and my work as an educator. I hope this article can help readers understand Chinese teachers and generate more interest in China and Chinese education.

In Northeast Asia, family name appears first, and my given name is Ping. I was born in a small village in Shandong Province in North China, and my immediate family included my father and mother and two younger sisters. My dad was a military officer and my mom was a farmer. In the 1970s, most rural areas in China were poor and underdeveloped. My mom had many difficulties bringing up three children while working in the fields.

When my dad reached a certain rank in the army, my mom took the three of us and moved to the army compound to join my dad. She then became a worker in an army factory, and I could attend kindergarten with my sisters. We would not have access to kindergarten if we continued to live in the village. Compared with rural children running around in the streets, playing with mud and stones and fighting in the fields, I was lucky that I could learn singing, dancing, reading, and writing in kindergarten.

In 1980, I began elementary school. The school was in a mountain village. To get to the school, I could either spend over an hour walking around the hill or use about half an hour by climbing directly to the top of the hill. My choice was usually climbing four times a day because there was no cafeteria in my school and all students had to go home for lunch despite the weather. I remember one day I fell down and rolled to the foot of the hill from the top after heavy snowfalls. I had no strength to climb up the hill again, and I just sat on a rock for nearly two hours in cold wind.

The way to school was long, yet I was happy when I arrived. For my first two years there, students only had a half-day for class, and for the

other half-day we worked on school farmland. In class, we studied Chinese, mathematics, fine arts, and physical education. Teachers were kind and patient, not stern and harsh. We did not have much pressure from parents or other adults. We were cheerful every day, wearing clothes hand-sewn by moms with worn-out shoes on our feet. Maybe our parents worried about food for the next meal and clothes for the next day, but my classmates and I enjoyed a happy, carefree, and unforgettable childhood.

Before 1977, China did not implement the family planning policy that allows only one child per family.<sup>1</sup> Almost every family had several children, and parents usually asked the oldest child or daughters to get jobs to procure income and food. My classmates enjoyed the school because they treasured the opportunity to study. Now and then certain friends of mine quit school because their parents could not afford the then-tuition of 1.5 *Yuan*, or a quarter of a US dollar, for a semester.

When I was in the third grade, my family moved to another town because my dad left the army for civilian work. Reflecting upon the time of my early schooling, in my opinion parents probably began to pay more and more attention to their children's studies. It seems that the entire society began emphasizing economic and talent development. Life was becoming better and better. Chinese people, workers or farmers, old or young, began to have enough food. We were able to buy our favorite toys and snacks. Meanwhile, a succession of vigorous education reforms impacted all of China; students had more and more subjects to study, e.g., English and science.

I entered high school in 1988 and lived in the school dormitory because my family had to move to another city. The dormitories had quite modest accommodations with no heat in the winter, no air conditioner in the summer, no water in the rooms, and no access to a shower. We got up at 5:00 a.m., left our rooms shortly afterward, and returned to the dormitory rooms at 10:15 p.m. From early morning until late in the evening, we focused on classes and studies. I only had one Saturday night off each month, as we concentrated on studying academic subjects for the college entrance examinations. Our teachers were strict but enthusiastic and dedicated educators who worked with us both day and night.



The campus of Wang Ping's school. Students do morning exercises with music after the second period every day.

Chinese, mathematics, and English were required of all students. In addition, those of us interested in liberal arts studied history, geography, and political education. Students who liked science studied chemistry, physics, and biology. I was not good at science and planned to apply for a college liberal arts program. I did not have ambitious dreams about my future, as was the case with many of my friends, but my parents respected my ideas, so I could study according to my interest.

As I stayed in school dorms, I ate in the school cafeteria, and the food was tasteless and the quantity of servings barely sustained me. Three times a week, despite windy, rainy, hot, or cold weather, throughout my high school years, in order that I could have enough nutrition, my mom would ride her bicycle for thirty minutes to my school with homemade food, wait at the school gate for me to pick up the packages, and turn around for home immediately. I appreciate my mom greatly.

Before Chinese higher education expanded its enrollment in 1999, it was difficult for any student to enter college because of the small number of colleges and the limited space in them. The record of my high school indicated that out of the 200 students studying liberal arts in previous years, colleges and universities would admit only five students per year. I was not among the top five in my class and frankly had no ambition for success in the entrance examinations and felt no stress as a result. I enjoyed myself during those years without pressure from my parents and teachers, although the time in class was simply too long. However, two months before the entrance examinations, I finally realized that I should value an opportunity for higher education and try to go to college even though I was not one of the top students! I worked exceptionally hard, getting up at 4:00 a.m. and going to bed after midnight. Making full use of every minute, I improved my grades immediately.

God helps those who help themselves. My scores in the entrance examination to colleges and universities made the admission cutoff score, and in 1991, I was lucky to be admitted to the Chang Wei Teacher's College in my hometown. Although my performance in the entrance examinations barely allowed me to attend this small teacher's college, I could choose my major. I selected Chinese language and literature as my major, yet when I registered, I was told I was enrolled in the English Department! I did not know if I wanted to become a teacher, but from the bottom of my heart, I knew I did not like English. I did not find out until later that my aunt who was a professor in the college's English Department thought I should study English and initiated the transfer of my file from Chinese to English! My aunt informed me that I would have more opportunities with proficiency in English. Fine—with English at least I needn't worry about a job after college.

College life was full of colors and enjoyment. Study was not a burden. We had two or four classes of English each day, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. I par-

ticipated in various activities such as traveling, dancing, seeing movies, singing English songs, and reading novels. I could get enough sleep and we had regular weekends and vacations.

My college was too small, ill-equipped, ill-staffed, and without any native English speaker on the faculty. We took any chance to visit a neighboring college, because two British nationals were teaching there. I remember the first time I spoke with one of them. Hanging out with friends on our campus, I saw one of the British teachers coming our way. How excited I was! I collected all my courage and asked him, "How do you do?" He just smiled and did not say anything. My friends laughed until tears appeared in their eyes, saying my pronunciation was too bad for a foreigner to understand! Excitement turned into embarrassment instantly.

Later I realized many international visitors were tired of responding to that particular greeting after they stayed in China for a while. They knew most Chinese could not speak English except for that question. To them, that was such a joke.

In 1993, I was assigned to Sunji Middle School in my hometown upon college graduation. It was a small public school with grades six to nine. The first year, I taught two seventh-grade classes and was responsible for twenty-four separate forty-five minute class periods. Each class had about fifty students who had learned English for a year. As was the case with all teachers, I followed the student daily schedule from 5:00 a.m. until 9:45 p.m. In addition to classes, lesson planning and correction of student homework took much of my time, as I had almost 100 students.

When I began my career, teachers, unless they committed crimes, did not worry about losing their jobs, regardless of the quality of their work performance. Many teachers worked hard and dedicated themselves to their students without considering personal gains. Certain other teachers worked carelessly and were impatient with students. In my opinion, the teachers that provided wrong information to students due to their own lack of professional dedication were the most incompetent educators in the school. This kind of pedagogical malpractice was a particular problem for several English teachers whose pronunciations and intonations were not correct and yet taught students to speak Chinese-English. Ironically, some English teachers could write down the words and passages from their textbooks when others read to them, but when reading the words and passages aloud, they pronounced the words with Chinese rather than English phonetics. We called this style "dumb English."

Most students came from farmers' families, and their parents had not received much education. They were honest and obedient, believing whatever their teachers said, and never disagreed with teachers and parents. None of the students had opportunities to travel outside their hometowns. Most had a strong thirst for knowledge, worked hard, and hoped that successful admission to college would give them a way to leave their villages. However, only 10 to 20 percent of them could fulfill their dreams of college. The others would all become farmers, as was the case with their parents.

Although I did not like English when I was a student, I tried to help my students develop an interest in the language. I studied teaching theories and English teaching strategies to improve myself. I spared no effort on the job and received awards and titles such as Excellent New Teacher, Model Teacher, and Excellent English Teacher. By then, I began to appreciate my aunt's prediction: I would enjoy being an English teacher. Yet even I myself did not know this when I began my career!

I got married and had my son. Education for my son became my major concern, as we lived in a tiny rural town. I knew the limited conditions in rural schools, but I expected my son to receive a quality education beginning with the first grade. In 2004, an opportunity presented itself. Shouguang Century School, a newly established K-9 private school in the



Wang Ping teaching her English class. Note the class size, classroom arrangement, and student uniform.



county town, which later would become the best school in the region, began to recruit teachers, and I applied without hesitation. This has proven to be the most important career decision I have ever made, since it not only determined the kind of education my son has received but also changed my professional life.

More than 1,000 teachers from throughout the province applied for positions in the school. Pleased with my performance, the school selected me as the most qualified English teacher applicant, and my son could now receive a good education since children of teachers in the school enjoyed automatic admission.

Since Shouguang Century School is a boarding school for students from different places, many far away from the campus, students and teachers must work continuously for ten days for two-week intervals. Those intervals include Saturdays and Sundays, and all teachers and students teach and learn during the ten-day stretches before receiving four days of holiday. We call those days off “the big weekend.” Instead of five-day weeks, we have ten-day weeks with a four-day break at the end of each. This schedule allows travel time for those students whose homes are hours away by bus. I’ve heard there are other schools throughout China that operate with this kind of schedule.

Students have eleven periods every day, five in the morning, four in the afternoon, and two in the evening, and each period of instruction lasts forty minutes. The first period starts at 7:00 a.m., and the last ends at 9:00 p.m. Students in every grade are divided into classes of approximately forty students. They study the same subjects in one classroom, and teachers move from classroom to classroom.

Among all subjects in the curriculum, English is the most important for students, because no matter what a student chooses as a college major, he or she must pass the English admissions test or not be admitted to college, and he or she must reach a certain level of the College English Test or a diploma won’t be awarded. Beginning with elementary school, students, parents, and teachers pay intense attention to English.

As in every school now, English teachers have the most work. During the ten workdays, my workload once reached sixty-two periods with six or seven classes daily. It was exhausting and boring, and teaching English is hard. Teachers must teach students to remember grammar and to memorize as many words as possible. All this work is entirely for better entrance examination scores. We scarcely give students time to speak English, and they have no opportunity to communicate with native English speakers. Many students lose interest in the subject.

To meet the demand for effective English instruction, my school has sent many teachers abroad for professional development to learn new educational concepts and successful approaches for instruction. I

participated in a training program of English teaching strategies designed for Chinese English teachers at the Union Institute of Languages in Australia for twenty-eight days in 2008. In 2009, I traveled to the US as a visiting teacher, taught Chinese culture in schools for five months, and improved my English skills. Following that, my school administration supported me to teach Chinese to college-age students at the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont for three years. During that time, I learned more about US society and the American people. Those experiences have expanded my horizons and upgraded my professional skills.

My two visits to the US have helped me notice differences in education between China and America. American students are generally interested in the languages they select to learn and active in class. Chinese students learn the languages selected for them, English being the most popular, and many are bored with learning. American students focus on communication with foreign languages in flexible and relaxing environments. Chinese students are pushed to learn rigid and inflexible grammar without chances to use foreign languages in real settings.

I have found that American teachers usually serve as facilitators of learning by helping students process the information they learn, and answers to questions are diverse, open, and inclusive. Chinese teachers are usually knowledge dispensers with standard answers to different questions, particularly those questions that can determine student success in examinations. Realizing those differences, I have made efforts to teach my students real knowledge and practical skills and help develop their talents in appropriate ways.

As an English teacher, I have many responsibilities beyond teaching. I must attend meetings for faculty, instruction, research, and lesson planning. Most meetings occur in the evenings. During the ten successive workdays, I stay at school until 9:00 p.m. for six evenings. The school provides students with bus services when they go home on weekends. A teacher is on board for supervision of students on each bus, and faculty rotate this duty. When my turn comes, I ride the bus with students to their homes, then go back to school and return to student homes on the last day of the holiday segment to pick them up for school, all using part of my “big weekend” time. Supervision of students in dormitories is another responsibility. I stay overnight in the student dorms once about every twenty days to help the staff with residential life, ensuring that students do not get sick and all follow dormitory rules.

In addition to working with more highly qualified teachers, students in my school are different from most young people their age who are enrolled in lower-ranked schools. Because of the high tuition, most students in my



Wang Ping and her son, Ma Jingyuan, a student of the eleventh grade, reading an English book during his short time off from school.

school are from rich families, and some have well-educated parents. Our students certainly differ from those in rural schools. They are confident to do whatever they want, and they have courage and attitudes questioning everything. Many have traveled domestically or internationally. My students began learning English in kindergarten. Students in my school have learned skills in music, fine arts, and sports, and generally have open and active minds.

In my opinion, our students have problems as well; many seem to be selfish and overbearing, and they obsessively compete to acquire high

status goods, e.g., they always buy brand-name clothes and don't show much interest in wearing their school uniforms. To cope with these kinds of problems, we put particular emphasis on healthy lifestyles and positive attitudes toward learning. We teach students to help each other, be friendly with other people, and try to avoid the obsessions for luxurious goods. We attempt to advocate frugal living styles, and respect for parents and teachers. In general, though, our students are cute and lovely, and I like them very much.

Throughout China, whether students are enrolled in private or public schools, they apply for high schools after the ninth grade. There are two kinds of high schools: vocational and academic schools. If students attend a regular academic high school, they will experience the hardest time in their lives due to the exhausting preparation for college entrance examinations. Even compared with my time as a high school student, young people today have heavier workloads and higher pressure because there are more students, and large numbers of them either expect or are expected to enter college.

My son is in the eleventh grade now and is a year away from the entrance examinations. A top student in his school, he is expected to participate in various competitive activities. He has never had a normal vacation, not even a weekend, as he must attend tutorial classes to study challenging college-level mathematics. To me, he and his friends are too young to endure this kind of pressure. I wish all students could be nurtured to study willingly and spontaneously, and that what they learn is helpful for their growth and for their lives to be happy, without the excessive focus upon education just for "success."

I have taught English for twenty-two years. I have seen the changes in my country, felt differences between the past and the present, experienced private and public schools, and worked with many teachers and students. As China is developing, everything is ever-changing, including education. I understand that Chinese education has defects, such as the examination-oriented instruction and the lack of humanistic education, but I also believe that China's schools are improving constantly and the future of education in China is bright. This is a heartfelt belief of mine and I am proud to be an English teacher, although I never dreamed of becoming one—and owe my career in part to my aunt's vision! ■

## NOTE

1. The Family Planning Policy in China was adopted in the early 1980s due to the nation's large population. Beyond calling for having one child per family, the comprehensive policy includes many details, such as allowing rural families to have two children if the first child is a girl, allowing two children per family in rural areas in minority regions, exercising no restriction on the number of children per family to certain minority groups, and providing certain privileges to those who choose to have one child. Implementation of the policy for more than thirty years has created an "Only Child" Generation and caused many educational, social, and economic consequences. In recent years, several regions in China have loosened the policy to allow a second child if the parents are the only children in their respective families.


**WANG PING** is a First-Class English teacher in the Chinese ranking system for professional educators. She teaches in the Century School, Shandong Province, China, and has been engaged in teaching and research of English education at the middle school level for twenty-three years. Awards and recognitions for her work include titles such as Leader Teacher of English of Shouguang City, Outstanding Teacher of Shouguang City, Core Teacher of Weifang City, and Advanced Performance in Instruction for "Reduced Burden (for Study) and Increased Quality (of Instruction)" in Weifang City. Wang Ping has published many research papers and articles in various Chinese journals. Titles include "What Americans Emphasize in Family Education" and "The Methods of Applying the Four Instructional Principles in Junior High School English."

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