U.S. SCHOOLING THROUGH CHINESE EYES

by Cornelius Lee Grove

A dozen teachers from the People's Republic of China spent seven months working in U.S. schools. Their observations about the differences between U.S. and Chinese schooling are both disturbing and enlightening.

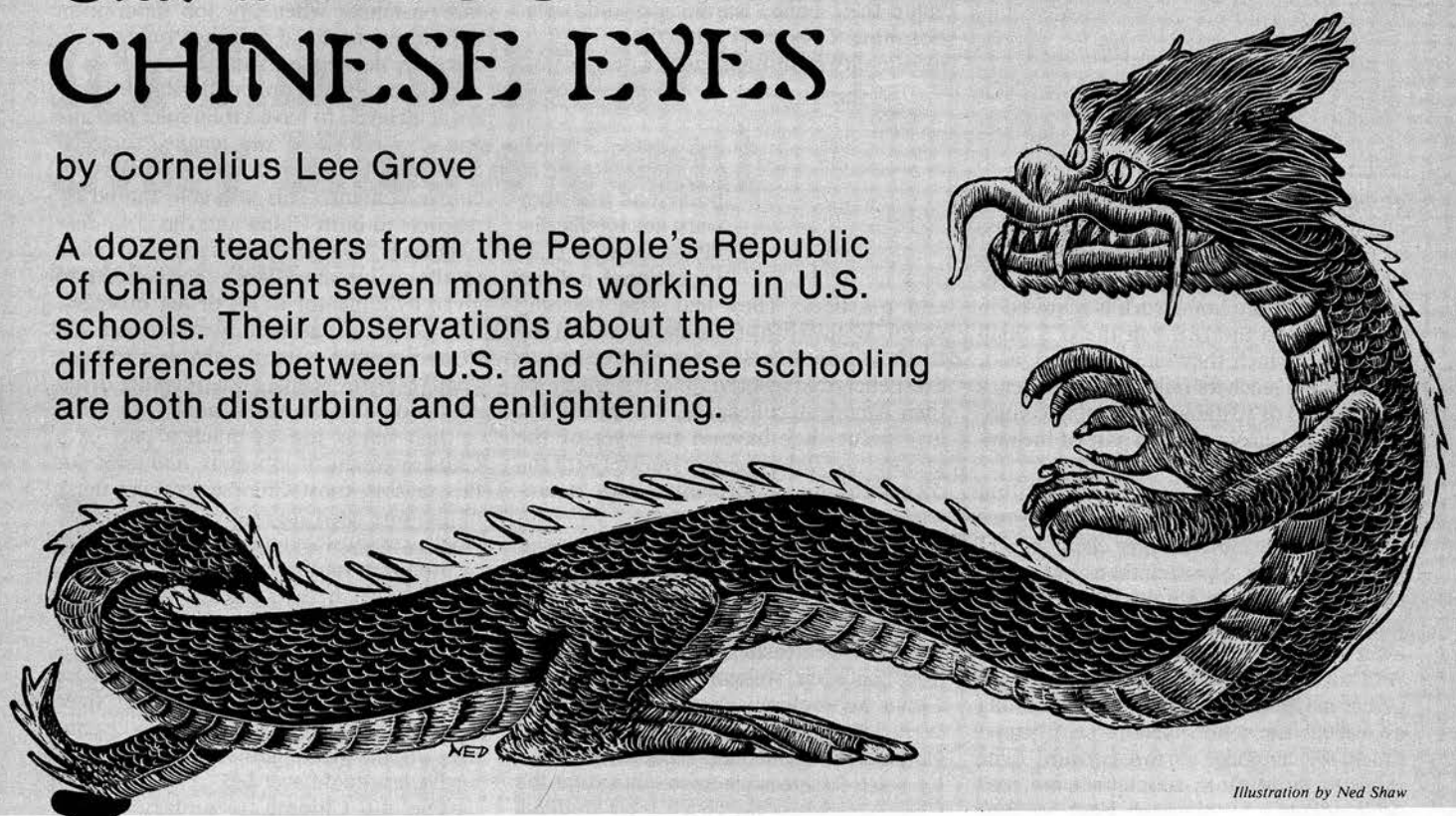

Illustration by Ned Shaw

"I WAS AMAZED," said the Chinese secondary school teacher. "American teachers actually seem to teach *less* than our teachers in the People's Republic."

The Chinese educator was preparing to return home after spending seven months as a teacher/intern in a U.S. public high school. He was one of 12 English instructors (six females and six males, ranging in age from 23 to 29) from the People's Republic of China who, under the auspices of AFS International/Intercultural Programs and the Chinese Ministry of Education, had participated in a unique project designed to enable promising young English teachers in the People's Republic to come to the U.S.[1]

The purposes of the program were to strengthen the teachers' command of English and their skills in teaching it, as well as to give them firsthand experiences with family and community life in the U.S. Their American hosts hoped in return that their guests would help them learn to know and appreciate the culture of the People's Republic. The 12 teachers were placed in communities across the continental U.S., where they lived with American families while participating in the daily life and work of the local high schools.

"I noticed that American teachers often tell jokes in class," continued the Chinese teacher. "They allow their students to talk about matters not related to the lesson and give them time to do their homework in class — even though some won't do it even then. Your teachers tolerate students' hanging around the classroom door until the bell rings to begin the lesson, leaving the classroom during the lesson for all sorts of trivial reasons, and jumping up to go when the final bell rings — even though the lesson isn't quite finished. It's not surprising, I suppose, that American students seem not to take education very seriously. Why, even in *bad* schools in the People's Republic, these things wouldn't happen!"

Other Chinese teachers in the group agreed. Their observations can be summed up succinctly: in the U.S., relationships between students and teachers tend to be friendly, informal, and characterized by a certain absence of serious educational purpose. In China, by contrast, student/teacher interactions emphasize formality, mutual respect, and attention to the business of learning.

I asked the Chinese teachers to leave aside the practices of U.S. schools that interrupt or detract from lessons and to focus their discussion instead on the procedures whereby Chinese and American students actually learn certain information. The Chinese teachers responded that rote memorization plays a far greater role in learning in the People's Republic than it does in the U.S. But they did not seem inclined to return home singing the praises of the discovery approach or the Socratic method.[2] Their seven months in U.S. public high schools had not substantially shaken their view that the principal function of a teacher is to *teach* — through lectures, demonstrations, textbooks, and focused, teacher-directed discussions. Nor had their experiences in the U.S. dislodged their conviction that the principal obligation of students is to *learn* the new information thus presented — by rote memory, if necessary.

"But don't you risk the possibility," I wondered aloud, "that the students won't really understand what they've merely committed to memory?"

The Chinese teachers admitted that this outcome is possible in theory, but they did not agree that their instructional approach yields sterile results in most cases. In the first place, they said, small

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Most Chinese teachers see their class as a unified community or family.

groups of Chinese students gather frequently (sometimes daily) outside of class to discuss course content and to work on homework assignments. (The teachers observed that more homework is required in China than in the U.S.) In the U.S. high schools to which they had been assigned, the Chinese teachers failed to see evidence of this kind of sustained interest and commitment to learning on the part of the majority of students.

Second, the Chinese teachers said that they and their colleagues usually do not encourage questions during class but expect students to approach them with questions about lessons at times when they are not teaching. Moreover, Chinese students avail themselves of this opportunity.

Third, classes of students remain together in China throughout the school day as well as the school year — and sometimes for as long as three years. (The teachers move from room to room, not the students.) Within each class, student officials assist the teachers, plan events, decorate the room, and maintain decorum — responsibilities that exceed those usually given to student leaders in the U.S. Some of these student officials are "study commissars," i.e., especially able students in each of the major subjects whose duty it is to help classmates understand the lessons. Many classes even have a study commissar appointed to oversee fellow students' learning during the summer holiday.

The teachers also noted that, at their schools in China, extracurricular activities are available, and many students participate. Student service clubs do not exist, nor are they necessary; the ideal of "serving the people" pervades school life and is exemplified in numerous projects of cooperative assistance and mutual benefit, both institutionalized and spontaneous. Various kinds of musical groups, ballet clubs, special interest groups, and athletic teams are available to students.[3] However, when athletic teams play, there are few spectators and no cheerleaders. Pep rallies, commonplace events in many U.S. high schools, are unknown in China. As one of the Chinese teachers put it, "Our best athletes do gain some popularity. But the best students in the school gain even more popularity."

"Well, this is all very well," I responded. "But I think that many American teachers would find the kind of school atmosphere you're describing quite cold. Students and teachers in the U.S. really value their open, warm, easygoing relationships. They don't think that American informality is antithetical to learning."

THE CHINESE teachers hastened to point out that they were not totally disillusioned with U.S. educational policies and practices. They had seen teaching methods in U.S. classrooms that they could admire. They had marveled at the excellence and perseverance of many of their American colleagues, "in spite of the low status they have in the eyes of the public." And they had no quarrel with the contention that informality is not incompatible with learning.

But they also wanted U.S. educators to recognize that formality and respect are not incompatible with positive and mutually satisfying student/teacher relationships. These teachers did not view relations between students and teachers in China as cool or distant. In fact, they argued that, when one compares average Chinese and American secondary school teachers, it is possible to conclude that the Chinese teachers approach their students with a broader feeling of personal responsibility and more genuine caring and concern than do American educators. Chinese teachers tend to feel an *overall* accountability for the welfare of their students. They see themselves — and are seen by others — as mentors, concerned about not only their protégés' academic progress but also their moral, social, political, and physical development.

"That's not uncommon in the U.S.," I replied. "Surely in your seven months here you became acquainted with our guidance counselors, our career development programs, our civics and health education classes, our special courses in values. . . ."

But they politely refused to concede their point, noting that U.S. educators have institutionalized the attention that they pay to the nonacademic aspects of their students' development. The result, these Chinese teachers claim, is that most school staff members feel little or no direct, sustained accountability for their students' all-around development as human beings.

I couldn't help but think, at this point, of that great American principle, the separation of church and state — and of the countless parents and local pressure groups who argue vociferously that public schools ought *not* to concern themselves with the teaching of values. I thought, too, of my own years as a teacher and guidance counselor, remembering that I seldom concerned myself with my students' overall welfare — except in those rare instances when my job description obliged me to do so and then only within carefully defined limits.

The Chinese people understand teachers at all levels to have a dual role: *jiao xue* and *jiao ren*. *Jiao xue* means "to teach academics" and refers to the delivery of course content. This is a role shared by teachers in both China and the U.S. *Jiao ren* means "to teach the person" and refers to the active moral and social direction given by a mentor to his or her protégés. "To teach the person" refers to education in its broadest sense — learning to be a good human being — as distinct from education as mere instruction.

Jiao ren is just as much a part of a Chinese teacher's job as is *jiao xue*; for this reason, most Chinese teachers think of the one class for which they are principally responsible as a unified community or even as a family. They take a more active interest in the students in this class than any American homeroom teacher does — more, indeed, than most American guidance counselors do. And Chinese students are far more dependent on their teachers than youngsters raised in the context of American individualism and assertiveness could ever be.

The 12 Chinese secondary school teachers, the first to work in U.S. public schools under a program arranged by their government, returned to the People's Republic during the summer of 1983. They assured us that they were taking with them a number of practical ideas about the teaching of English that would help them to teach more effectively. It was clear to all of us that their use and comprehension of the English language had improved dramatically since December 1982, when they arrived in the U.S.

But they also left behind some ideas, questions, and impressions for U.S. educators to ponder. Whenever people from two markedly different cultures come together for an extended period, each learns something about the other's culture. But each also learns something about his or her *own* culture by seeing it through the eyes of someone who brings different values and assumptions to bear on the interpretation of experience.

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1. The 12 Chinese visitors are English instructors in the sense that they teach English as a foreign language.
2. The Chinese teachers did say that they would try more often in the future to involve their students in oral/aural drills and other active learning practices typical of foreign language and English-as-a-second-language instruction in the U.S.
3. The 12 teachers were instructors at some of the best schools (usually designated "key schools") in three major metropolitan centers: Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. Not all secondary schools in China have comparable extracurricular programs. □