



MID-YEAR CONFERENCE FOR AMERICAN TEACHERS RETURNED CHINESE TEACHERS' CONFERENCE Suzhou, Jiangsu 2007

In February 2007 we convened a conference in Suzhou to mark ten years of the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program (1996-2006). Approximately 90 Chinese teachers from many parts of the country representing every year of the program gathered for two days of discussion. They were joined by the nine Americans in China this year through the exchange, as well as two program “alumni” who have returned to schools in Jiangsu Province on their own.

The conference opened with a formal welcome session. Mr. Hou Dakang, deputy director general of the Suzhou Education Bureau, welcomed the teachers to Suzhou and thanked them for the contributions they had made, and continue to make, to “creating talent and globalizing understanding.”

The next speaker was National Committee senior director for education programs Ms. Margot Landman, who read a statement from National Committee President Steve Orlins who was unable to attend the conference in person. Steve, too, thanked the teachers, and congratulated them on their achievements, including “the advancement of real education, understanding, and communication among and between the people of China and the United States.” He estimated the statistical impact of the program: The more than 200 Chinese teachers who participated in the program between fall 1996 and spring 2006 directly affected more than 3,000 American students and 2,000 Chinese students each year. Over the course of ten years, as a group the teachers have touched about 30,000 American students and hundreds of thousands of Chinese students. The impact reaches far beyond children; every teacher also worked with American colleagues and people in the community, and socialized with host families and their friends and families. Back in China they also work with Chinese colleagues, friends, family members, and others. They have thus helped numerous Americans learn about China and Chinese learn about America. He encouraged the teachers to look back at what they have accomplished and to think about what remains to be done, and how each of them can do their part to continue and improve the education, dialogue, and understanding between the peoples of China and the United States.

Margot continued by thanking the many people who made the conference possible, including the staff of the Suzhou Education Bureau and colleagues at the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE). She then turned to the teachers, thanking them for leaving family and friends to go to the United States, and for all they have done to further mutual – and self- -- understanding since their return to China. They have been changed by their experiences, as they themselves say, teaching differently and thinking differently.

The opening ceremony ended with Ms. Fu Bo, executive director of the department of American and African programs at the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE), our counterpart organization for the Teachers Exchange Program. She, too, thanked the Suzhou Education Bureau and the teachers. She described their year in the United States as 酸甜苦辣 [a mix of sourness, sweetness, bitterness, and spiciness]. They gave Americans a chance to learn Chinese and about China, and since their return they have helped their Chinese students to have a deeper understanding of the English language and of American culture. She expressed the hope that more and more students and teachers will benefit from the program.

We experimented with several different formats during the conference in an effort to keep discussion flowing. The first session featured two returned teachers who have assumed administrative roles since their return to China. Mr. Xu Jiandong, a veteran of the first year of the exchange program (1996-97), which he spent in Milwaukee, has been seconded from his school to the municipal education bureau where he works as a program manager in the foreign affairs office. He outlined the impact of the program on education in Changzhou, and described the increasing volume of international exchange. Mr. Bai Fan, now principal of the Luoyang No. 2 Foreign Language School, spent the 1998-99 school year in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Mr. Bai attributed the success of his five-year-old school to the Teachers Exchange Program, combining traditional Chinese characteristics with western approaches. During his stay in the United States, Mr. Bai kept a diary of observations about teaching and school administration in La



Crosse. He came away with two ideas: the importance of “caring” and of “learning.” At first he didn’t know what “caring” meant in the academic context, but over time he came to believe that it is critical to put teachers and students first, to respect them, and to promote individual personalities. When it came to defining “learning,” Mr. Bai said that American students think for themselves and think critically. He wants his Chinese students to become productive members of society, polite, civilized, and thoughtful.

Mr. Bai also noticed a considerable amount of volunteer activity when he was in La Crosse. He returned to China committed to promoting volunteerism in his community. He acknowledged that some people have called him a fool for spending financial and human resources on poor schools in rural counties near Luoyang, instead of on his own school, but he thinks that wealthier institutions and people in China have an obligation to assist poorer people and schools. He attributes his thinking to the exchange program, without which he would not have created the Luoyang No. 2 Foreign Language School or its ways of teaching and functioning in the community.

A session was devoted to a theme important to CEAIE: how to extend the impact of the program beyond the participating teachers and schools. They came up with the idea of inviting returned Chinese teachers to offer training courses to teachers of English in poor areas of central and western China during the summer holiday. Many of our returned teachers are very excited by the prospect. A pilot project will be run in summer 2007 with four sites - two in Henan, one in Anhui, and one in Inner Mongolia. Approximately ten TEP teachers will go to each site for about three weeks to work with eight or nine classes with a maximum enrollment of 20 teachers each. The local teachers would be asked in advance what they feel are their greatest needs, and the program alumni would then develop curriculum according to the stated needs.

Next on the agenda was a panel discussion moderated by Mr. Liu Yan of CEAIE. He asked five returned teachers from different cities (Suzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing, Hefei, and Dalian) and different years (1997-98, 1998-99, 2001-02, 2003-04, and 2005-06) a series of questions about the program. On first hearing, it seemed as though his questions were “softball” tosses, but they elicited wide-ranging and very different responses from the five panelists. The questions were: Was the program worthwhile? What was your most unforgettable experience? If you could make a suggestion to future participants in the program, what would it be? After every question, Liu Yan turned to the audience for questions. They, too, were varied and sharp.

According to Ms. Deng Xiaojin of Suzhou Middle School, the worthiness of the program depends on one’s reasons for participating. She wanted to learn about America, and about American education, which she did. She pointed out a fundamental difference between American and Chinese education: in China, she said, students learn facts, and are taught to obey. In the United States, students learn independent thinking and schools focus on developing individual ability. For Xia Haibo of the Hefei No. 1 Middle School, the most important aspect of the exchange was not the willingness to study and to experience new things, both of which are important, but a willingness to experience a shift in attitude, to gain a new outlook on life. His fundamental change came with the realization that if students are to accept other cultures and people, and to learn to be creative, their teachers have to model these attributes in their teaching and in their lives.

After the panel presentation, the teachers divided into groups for further discussion. Conversation was lively and wide-ranging. For example, one group wondered by Americans were “so civilized.” They speculated that perhaps American civility stems from religion; ministers talk about real issues, and about how to solve contradictions among people. Churches and schools both focus on teaching people how to be decent human beings. By contrast, the goal of Chinese education is very lofty: how to be a star, go to a famous college, be outstanding.

Teachers commented on their new views of teaching after their year in the United States. Teaching should be a two-way street, noted the people in another group. In China if a teacher cannot answer a question, it is a loss of face. In the United States, it’s an opportunity to learn together. Teachers have to acknowledge differences; they cannot expect all students to be the same. Chinese teachers return from the United States more tolerant, and more willing to treat students with respect.



The session concluded with a comment on the attacks on the World Trade Center. One teacher said that thirty years earlier her father told her about the tallest building in the world. She never thought she would see it, but when she went to New York, she visited it - several times. When she had a chance to return to the United States in February of this year, she wanted to see one thing, and that was Ground Zero. She went to Battery Park to see the globe that had been damaged, but not destroyed. She concluded that if people could have a better and deeper understanding of different cultures and different backgrounds, perhaps we could avoid such attacks and such destruction in the future.

American teachers joined the Chinese teacher for the final session. Again dividing into small groups, the teachers discussed differences between American and Chinese classrooms, and features of Chinese education from which Americans can learn and vice versa. The culminating question for the joint session with Chinese and American teachers was, "What is the most important thing you have learned from your experience teaching in another country/culture." We did not know whether the question would prove too sensitive for discussion, but were greatly relieved and pleased to discover that the teachers were even willing to talk about something so personal. One of the major conclusions expressed by Chinese teachers was that they should take the time, as one group put it, to smell the roses. One teacher said, "Share, enjoy, and experience life." Others concluded that they should learn to encourage students and respect all students, not just the top students. Several teachers observed that during their year abroad they learned to be more independent, helpful, kind, and confident. The American teachers reported that they have learned patience, tolerance, and compassion. A sentiment expressed by one but supported by all was that the most important thing about being an exchange teacher is "we have been building bridges between our two countries and two cultures."

CEAIE suggested that it might be helpful for some provincial level administrators to join the conference so that they could learn from past participants about the program and its importance to their professional and personal development. Representatives came from Heilongjiang, the newest province to join the program, Shaanxi, and Anhui. Ms. Zhao Jie of the Anhui Province Institute of Education Research said at the conclusion of the conference that it was completely different from Chinese meetings. She expressed surprise at how much substance was covered even in a relaxed, unpressured setting.

Immediately following the joint session of the conference the American teachers convened for their mid-year conference. The teachers were extraordinarily positive and enthusiastic about their experiences in China. They had brought curriculum to share, and also had ideas about how to improve teaching about China in their classrooms, and beyond, in the United States. The discussions were particularly interesting because the teachers represent a variety of disciplines (art, English, social studies, science), levels (middle and high school), and parts of the country (Colorado, Florida, New York, Oklahoma, Texas). They were very impressed with each other's creativity and immediately used some of the lesson ideas they had learned during the conference when they returned to their Chinese classrooms.