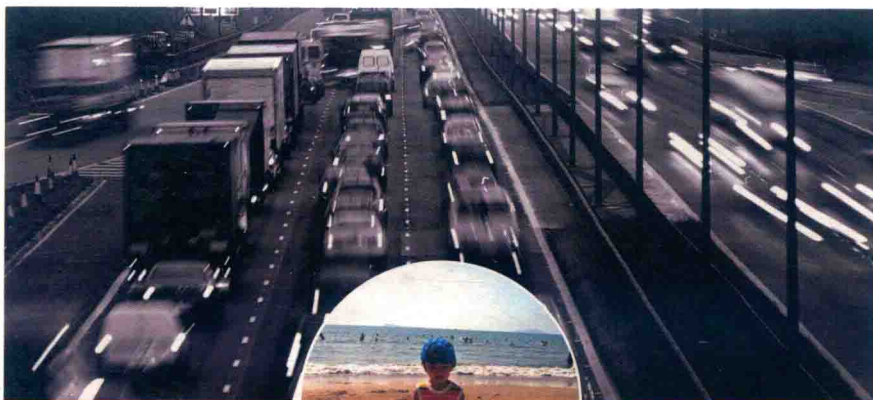


China in the Eyes of Foreigners



WORK IN PROGRESS

Chinese Education from a Foreign
Expert's Perspective

Lisa Carducci



China Intercontinental Press

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Foreword

When I came to China in 1991 for a long-term stay, it was as a teacher of French and Italian, after 28 years of teaching high school in Montreal, Canada.

Two years later, I was confronted with a choice: continue to teach in one of the five positions offered to me across the country or remain in Beijing and change careers. I loved teaching and hesitated a long time before accepting, finally, CCTV Overseas Programs' (French) offer.

Though I don't regret that turnover in my life, I never really "quit" teaching. I have traveled the whole country several times. Education remains my major interest anywhere I go in China, and I always interview parents, students and teachers about the local situations. When reading newspapers, I never skip an article about education.

This work aims at introducing the situation of Chinese education to readers. The information comes from three major sources: the media; the individuals or communities that I have visited and interviewed; and my own views and experience.

Quotations and statistics originate mostly from *China Daily*, a media that I have followed regularly during the last twenty years. Though this work is based on reliable media information, aside from facts that arose from my own observation, enquiries, and teaching experience, it is my choice to place in your hands a non-academic document – pages that I would like you to turn with pleasure instead of effort.

Readers will allow me this warning:

I may appear as having a prejudice against China; not at all. The situation of education in China – in my eyes – lacks far behind other aspects of the Chinese development.

In any field of life, what strikes us is what is abnormal. Would a student stab a teacher, the event would make the front page. But a thousand other students in the same school will never be mentioned because they just behave normally. Being marginal, a genial idea, an unexpected discovery, or a superb beauty also strike and make the news. But unfortunately, China is not at the avant-garde in education.

However, I acknowledge that the country is willing to improve education, and its steady steps towards this accomplishment deserve our respect and praise.

The readers must understand that, behind the negative aspects I examine in these pages, I am aware that not all schools, not all teachers, students, and parents, are “like that”. What is normal only remains unsaid.

The situation is not all roses, but far from desperate: China is large, has a huge population, and enormous problems. The modernization drive is going on steadily; it just takes time.

Finally, it is my duty and pleasure to thank especially Wikipedia, which – through over ten years of efforts – is growing into a reliable and complete Encyclopedia in multiple languages.

The author

Chapter 1

The teaching system

The way I was educated in Canadian schools and the way I educated youths myself later were very different. In Quebec Province, the Ministry of Education was created only on May 13, 1964. Before the "Révolution tranquille" reform, education was under a department (council, committee) of public instruction only.

I will never forget my first day in primary school, in 1949. My father advised me: "The teacher speaks, and you listen. During the lesson you must keep silent." So did I, and my questioning about history or religion always remained at the bottom of my heart, poisoning me and fuelling my rebellion against the system till many years later.

This could be right more than half a century ago, but things have changed rapidly and education became innovative. I mean in the West. Chinese children are still taught by their parents not to ask questions and just do as they are told by the teachers. What is important for them is to give "the right" answer to a question, not to explore their imagination and suggest a solution from their own brains.

How can a child develop a strong ability of independent thinking if he or she is never asked to use that thing called a brain? To most parents, remaining silent during the lesson means to be polite. Never challenge the teacher. When a child asks a question, out of his or her own will the child embarrasses the teacher, and this is called disrespect. To most teachers, students who ask questions simply lack discipline. If a student's score is low, it is because he or she doesn't know "the right" answers, and the reason is only that the student has not studied enough. In the West, answers to a question may vary; they are comparable and questionable. Truth is not taught; it is discovered. Classmates don't laugh at peers who give different answers from theirs, as everyone's own brain produces a personal answer.

Education in China now follows what I faced 60 years ago. When I started teaching here, in 1991, I felt as though I were standing in front of an aquarium where I could see the fish and they could see me, but there was no contact, no sound, no reaction. Absolutely no kind of interaction.

I never sat while teaching. I used to stand and walk along the rows between the desks to keep the students awake. In Canada, students would naturally turn their heads or their bodies and follow me. In China, no one moved. Everyone looked straight ahead, even when I was talking behind them, at the back of the classroom.

I often made striking “mistakes” on the blackboard, sometimes writing ridiculous things to provoke a reaction, but did not succeed in getting a laugh. Pointing out the teacher’s misstep would have been impolite – inadmissible then.

When teaching literature, I would relate biographical notes about an author – say, Victor Hugo – such points touching on society and history, and students would transcribe word for word what I had said. Before my lesson, I checked to see whether there were enough of Hugo’s works in the library, so that I could suggest to the students to choose one book and, two weeks later, hand me a one-page impression. At that moment, I was not expecting a reaction, but I got two! The first was: “Teacher, you didn’t give us any ‘impressions’; how can we write about Hugo?” The second was: “The library is not opened to students.”

Students are used to memorizing the teachers’ impressions and then repeating them by rote in exams. They don’t read authors’ texts, but only learn about them. Consequently, they certainly don’t have a personal opinion to express.

That year, a part of my task consisted in guiding three master’s degree candidates, who were going to earn their degrees at the end of the year. I invited them to meet me and introduce their theses, which, I thought, were close to being finished. To my astonishment, none of the three had chosen a topic yet! They had only been playing around for two years.

I tried to help them find a subject according to their interests, but they objected strongly: “No one has ever written about that.” The real meaning of this answer was: there are no existing documents that we can copy. I was not sure I was in the real world...

Why do you think so many Chinese MA candidates in French Literature write about Paul Claudel? Because their teachers had, and their teachers’ teachers had. It is normal for them (and respectful) that the “student-researchers” – as the candidates pursuing a master’s degree are called in China – copy what their predecessors have written. But the real reason is that there is a lot of material on the topic from which to copy. In this situation, there will be no ideological conflicts and no situation where a student discovers something that the teacher ignores.

Chinese teachers, from primary school to university, are judged on the number of their students who succeed. Here, I can remember the time when our teachers prepared the visit of Mister Inspector. Students were designated in

advance to answer mathematic, French, or geography questions, according to their performance in the matter; weaker students were even invited to ask for leave the day of the inspector's visit.

At the end of my first teaching year in Beijing, a student got a mark of 55 per cent in an oral exam. My Chinese colleague in this course asked me whether I could give her a higher grade. I really couldn't. So the girl was scheduled for a second chance. She did worse: 35. Obviously, she "had to" succeed to uphold her Chinese teacher's reputation, but the day we were going to interrogate her again, I unexpectedly "fell ill" and let my colleague alone to deal with the case.

What does "study" mean?

In China, to a large extent, to study means "preparing to take exams". Almost twenty years have passed since I quit teaching in China. But every time I compare my own experience with that of foreign teachers presently in this country, I don't see any change. Students are constantly bombarded with tests and exams, which creates a stressful environment in which they must study. Throughout the semester, students must complete assignments, but the majority of their marks will be accounted for on the final exam.

All teachers will have been asked several times: "Will this be in the exam?" "This" stands for the knowledge the teachers have carefully documented with examples and facts, and that they are trying to teach them. If "that" will not be in the exam, where is the need to listen, to understand, to assimilate, and to remember?

Studying for the pleasure of discovering something new or exercising one's creative learning faculty doesn't seem to have gained a foothold in the Chinese students' range of values yet. Their whole life evolves under E-pressure, "E" standing for exam. Nowadays, even to be admitted to a "good" kindergarten, children face a type of examination. Kids who have already mastered some English words stand a better chance of being accepted. Those who can sing, dance and draw, or have skills in calligraphy or piano, are at an advantage too. But what happens when all the children have developed the same pre-school skills?

Later they will encounter exams to enter a good primary school, a good

middle school, a good high school, and, of course, a good university. But this is not all: They will then have to compete for a good position, facing a new battery of tests and interviews every time they apply.

It would not be so bad if exams were designed to test students' basic knowledge through skills application and creative thinking in solving practical problems. Unfortunately, exams mostly test their ability to recite long stances that they have memorized. As the *gaokao* (meaning high exam), "the" National College Entrance Exam, can't test the whole content of a student's memory, it means that 98 per cent of what they have learnt (or memorized) all their lives is of no use. What a pity!

Quality education

It is hard for the Chinese to admit that their education system lacks quality. They know it, but they don't want to show they know. On the one hand, Chinese parents send their children to study abroad at an increasingly younger age but, on the other hand, they blame the Western system that allows children to enjoy too much free time out of school and too many hours to watch TV, to read their own choice of books, to collect stamps or insects, or to play outside with their peers. They praise Chinese students abroad for having high marks in mathematics and physics, but they never ask themselves why their children are not as good as their Western classmates in subjects that require analysis, creative thinking, and personal expression of thoughts and feelings. Chinese students in Western schools are described as quiet and submissive, good at assimilating knowledge, and enjoying study. But they miss the mental maturity of the Western children when it comes to discussing ideas and to questioning what they have learnt.

It was during my two decades in China that I saw the official position change on education. The government finally stated openly that education in China lacked quality and that a reform was needed. But what type of reform and where to start are other matters.

– The teachers' quality

I don't remember who said that "teachers are unnecessary. If the students are

stupid, there is no hope. If they are intelligent, they can learn by themselves." Such assertion may bring a smile to our lips but it contains truth, if we think about it...

During the two years I taught languages in a Beijing university, part of my task consisted in helping my Chinese colleagues improve their teaching. They were all full of good intentions, but not all of them had learnt how to teach. I had scheduled a two-hour period once a week when I remained in what I dared to call my "office" to answer their questions. None – I repeat, none – of my Chinese colleagues ever came to see me. But they would knock on my door in the dark after 21:30, or discreetly ask me when they could see me. Their major concern was not letting their peers know that they had asked for help. Consulting about teaching meant, in their minds, that they were not qualified. They would rather ignore a grammar rule or teach it incorrectly than "lose face."

Several times I organized workshops for my colleagues, not only those at my university but also those coming from other institutions where French was taught. These seminars were organized as a part of an annual pedagogical conference in Beijing. In a two-hour period, I would explore to the deepest level a one-page text of Maupassant or Mauriac. Philosophy, literature and history contained in that one page would be discovered and discussed. Then would follow etymology, morphology, semantics, stylistics and grammar with questions such as, "How to say that in another way?", "What if we add a comma here?", "How can the reader know that it is the man, not the woman, who says that?", "How does the author show that he doesn't believe in the protagonist's sincerity?" Sometimes, I would not provide the last paragraph but ask the participants to complete the story themselves. My colleagues were as insecure in inventing an end as my students had been. They preferred that I tell them the "right" answer, which they would only have to reiterate. Anything coming from their minds was such a risky adventure, a compromise, a sacrifice, in fact. The first hour of such workshops was the hardest, as no one would open his or her mouth. But, upon seeing that I would not relent, some would start to timidly answer during the second hour. Ultimately, when asked whether they had liked the workshop, they would all agree that they had, though they would confess they could not apply my method in their teaching.

I believe that. There are two reasons. The first is that they can't change a lifetime of teaching after experiencing a new methodology for two hours. The

second is that they have a program to teach – which is the content of the final exams (at any level), and the results of their students in these exams determine their own quality level as teachers.

– The over-restrictive programs

In March 2005, I gave a lecture in Honghe University in Mengzi of Yunnan Province. The topic was “Learning a language without learning the culture which it comes from and which it serves is an aberration.” Five hundred students filled the auditorium, and 30 teachers came from different institutions three hours away to hear me. The lecture being over, some teachers came to ask me how they could “add” cultural elements to the texts that made the program or “change” the texts for others that they found more educational. They objected that “program=exam” and that the time requested for teaching all the content of the textbook was strict and they could not deviate from the outline. If they changed one text in the book and the exam contained a question on that one text, their position and reputation would be at risk. They were tied by the system, and I had no solution to offer.

A Chinese father of a middle-school student was asked his views on education. He said that “every school now wants to achieve just one goal: get as many of their students as possible admitted to high schools” with the obvious result that teachers “care about contents required for the entrance exam, and simply forget issues that have little or no relation to the exams, such as handwriting, extensive reading of classics, group presentation skills, interpersonal skills and physical exercises.” This reflects exactly what I think.

In 2004, my daughter who lives in Canada had an opportunity to come to China in October. But to do so, her twin daughters who were in middle school would miss three weeks of classes. She saw each one of their teachers separately and asked their views about a possible long absence. All the teachers said that the girls were brilliant and could study independently for three weeks. They detailed the part of the program that would be covered during those three weeks, so that she could be able to monitor her daughters. The teachers instructed the 13-year-olds before going to China, then, to prepare a presentation on a topic of their choice, do research in books and the internet, write a report and, upon their return, present a 30-minute lecture to their classmates, so that the whole class could benefit from their trip to China. One of the girls chose “The

status of animals (pets, zoo) in China”, and the other one, “The elderly in the Chinese society.” Could such an absence be authorized in the Chinese school system?

In the old China, there was only one way out of misery: becoming an official at the court. To become an official, one had to pass the terrible imperial exams. And to pass the imperial exams, one had to read and repeat all the available books that others before them had memorized by rote. The blind worship of diplomas is nothing new; it is rooted in history.

Another aspect of quality education is linked to the expanse of China and the huge number of its population.

– The substitute teachers

As China territory and population are huge, and as the real effort of education started only with the reform and opening policy 30 years ago, a great deal must be done before the country reaches an acceptable level of quality.

Following the shortage of qualified teachers, substitutes are employed to teach in primary or middle school, but their names don't figure on the payroll. They actually number 330,000 nationwide “Underpaid, overworked and ignored” was the title of a cover story published in March 2010 by *China Daily*; they are paid even under the minimum wage level established by the state for workers.

In the summer of 2008, I traveled in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, equivalent to a Chinese province, interviewing here and there with the aim of writing *These Wonderful People of Guangxi*. In Dalian, in the far south and a remote corner where Miao ethnic people live, I met a young woman who had been nicknamed Amélie (Poulin) by a French tourist. At 27, she was still single, and she said that other people's children were her family. For 10 years, Wei Xiaohong had been teaching Chinese to 1st-grade pupils and mathematics to 3rd-graders. She loved teaching and found her task easy. But as these children spoke their ethnic language at home, Amélie had to teach in Chinese and repeat the lessons in the Miao language. In 3rd grade, students mastered Chinese. “Parents often call on their children for translating what is said on television”, recounted Amélie, adding that it was “a valuable practical exercise for them.”

When Wei Xiaohong became a teacher, she had only graduated from middle school. With the help of an NGO, she was able to pursue a three-year

pedagogical training while continuing to teach. She went to class in Rongshui County during her holidays and also studied by herself. Though she got her diploma, her salary is still very low, as she is hired as a substitute teacher.

In Qinghai Province, a Tibetan ethnic young man who graduated from Qinghai Minzu (Nationalities) University in 2005 finally found work, two years later, in Repkong (known as Tongren in Chinese) County where he was born. As a substitute teacher, Rinchen Shaggya earned 400-600 yuan a month for teaching 51 primary school students Chinese, Tibetan, mathematics and computer skills. The pupils were six to 19 years old, "as several started attending school late", said the teacher. Although the administration was satisfied with his work and dedication, they had no authority to raise his salary. "Substitute teachers do the same job as qualified teachers, but are paid only a quarter, even less, of the wages", said the headmaster. This is how it is. At 30 years of age and still single, Rinchen Shaggya laughed at his condition saying: "How can I have a girlfriend with such a low income?" The school was located at an altitude of 3,500 meters above sea level, and could be reached only by motorcycle from Repkong County. Half of the students, who lived 20 to 60 km away, boarded at school, and the school had established its own schedule: each teacher worked ten hours a day for ten consecutive days, followed by four days off.

Among Guangdong Province's 756,000 primary- and middle-school teachers, 52,000 are substitutes. Though the minimum monthly salary was supposed to be 580 yuan, Xiao Chu earned only 400. In September 2008, the provincial Party secretary, Wang Yang, gave education authorities three options: one, promote substitute teachers to full teaching posts and provide them with proper training and decent salaries; two, offer substitutes non-teaching positions; and, three, fire them.

In Ningxian County of Gansu Province, Hui Zhimin was dismissed in 2006 after being a substitute teacher for 21 years. He was 42 and one of the 448,000 substitute teachers that the Ministry of Education had planned to disqualify across the country. In Gansu Weiyuan County, 70 per cent of the substitute teachers were paid less than 40 yuan a month, and most of the others less than 80. They may not be officially qualified, but they are no less experienced. Devoted in imparting knowledge to children, they teach them to be good citizens and achieve what is not included under official tasks but which nevertheless must be done.

Yuan Zichao has been the only teacher in his school for 14 years. By

November 2010, he was teaching eight students in three different grades. At more than 1,600 meters above sea level, in Shanxi Province, Yuan teaches Chinese, mathematics, moral education and physical education. Moreover, he regularly pays visits to the families and even accompanies some pre-school students to and from their homes. Yuan lives in the mountain and goes back home once a month or every other month. Xijinshan Village's population of 250 is scattered over 13 settlements due to the high mountains. Thanks to Yuan's efforts, not a single school-age child in the village has dropped out. Previously, Yuan used to teach in another village, which is closer to his home and offers better conditions, but he didn't hesitate to accept the post when he heard that several teachers had left Xijinshan School because of the harsh life on the mountain.

In Yuexi County of Anhui Province, Xiang Zhixiang, who is disabled and walks on crutches, has "filled the gap" for decades and enjoys none of the welfare benefits that the regular teachers have. "He lives in constant fear of losing his livelihood after the Ministry of Education announced plans in 2005 to sack all substitute teachers as soon as possible", reported *China Daily* in March 2010. He has no other means of earning money. If he is fired, he only hopes he can become a qualified teacher as the ministry said "outstanding substitutes with at least 10 years of experience can sit a test to earn a certificate." But presently earning only 480 yuan a month, Xiang has little hope of taking the compulsory Chinese test which costs 500 yuan.

According to the Ministry of Education, a substitute teacher can be "certified" by passing the employment tests organized by the local education authorities according to the needs. However, the prerequisite for taking these exams is that the teacher has "eligible education background, [skills,] and has acquired the qualifications for teaching." This is reasonable in improving the quality of national education. However, some of the most dedicate and experienced unqualified teachers don't meet the requirements for taking the tests. This is unfair.

They have no savings and no time to prepare for the exams. They are too old to take another job. They have never been on a payroll, so they are not allowed to a pension if they retire. These teachers have made significant contributions over three decades in developing education in the country's most remote and impoverished places. They have played a crucial role in the lives of thousands of students.