

China Learns English

Language Teaching
and Social Change
in the People's
Republic

Heidi A. Ross

Yale University Press

New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the
Mary Cady Tew Memorial Fund.

Copyright © 1993 by Yale University.
All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in
whole or in part, including
illustrations, in any form (beyond that
copying permitted by Sections 107
and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law
and except by reviewers for the
public press), without written
permission from the publishers.

Designed by Sonia L. Scanlon.

Set in Sabon type by Rainsford
Type, Danbury, Connecticut.

Printed in the United States of
America by BookCrafters, Inc.,
Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-
Publication Data

Ross, Heidi A., 1954—

China learns English :
language teaching and
social change in the
People's Republic/Heidi A. Ross.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical
references and index.

ISBN 0-300-05562-5
(hard : alk. paper)

1. English language—Study
and teaching—Chinese
speakers—Social aspects—China.
 2. English philology—Study
and teaching—China—
History—20th century.
 3. China—Social conditions—1949—
 4. Educational sociology—China.
- I. Title.

PE1130.C4R67 1993
428'.007051—dc20 93-7876
CIP

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the
guidelines for permanence and
durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book
Longevity of the Council on Library
Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

This book celebrates two distinct cultural conversations about the purposes of education and schooling. It reflects foremost the multivocal world of the American university, which could have no finer orators than the educators acknowledged in these pages.

William Cave has offered invaluable assistance in conceptualizing the school as a locus for cultural continuity and change and has shared his rich experience in portraying distant views with honesty and sympathy. Frederick Goodman has infused this undertaking from its inception with an unfailing wit, as well as a continuous generation of moral and financial support. Harriet Mills has turned her involvement in the major dialogues of contemporary Chinese society to the delineation of the traditional values that continue to inform China's commitment to training young linguists. I am most indebted to Cho-yee To, who has not only facilitated with consummate finesse access to the field setting but also has applied a pragmatic turn of mind to the problematic minutiae that plague ethnographic studies.

I am also grateful to the many scholars who have shared their comments and suggestions on various portions of this book. I wish to thank Valerie Suransky for her direction in pointing ethnographic detail toward its larger social meaning and referent. Martin Whyte has generously applied his sociological understanding to the singular and collective lives of the students and teachers portrayed in this study. Chu-yuan Cheng and Chow Hon Kwong have provided beneficial insights on the concept of modernization in China and the role that nineteenth-century self-strengtheners played in its definition. I am especially grateful to Irving Epstein, Ruth Hayhoe, Stanley Rosen, and Lynn Paine for their careful reading of earlier versions of this book.

The American educational conversation in which all these individuals participate is confronted in this book by a very different dialogue, articulated a hemisphere away in the particular voices of teachers at the Lu Xun Language School. I wish to express my gratitude to these colleagues for their tenacity and patience while upholding the promise of learning, through good times and bad. Their lives and work speak powerfully to the crucial importance and fragility of global communication. Only out of respect for their privacy do they remain anonymous in these pages—for which they share no small authorship. This study would have been impossible without their visions of schooling, as it would have been without their friendship, tolerance, and collegiality.

Acknowledgments

In addition, I thank my students—bright, impatient, and idealistic—for their committed engagement in communication and their hopes to use it for the betterment of others' lives. The ideals sustained by their persistence and dreams are ones for which any nation would feel proud. I only hope I have done justice in the following pages to their sense of future possibility.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to my family, whose concern and curiosity have sustained this project's dual conversation more than they can know. As always, I owe my greatest debt to my husband, Bill, whose understanding bridged the distance of miles and months that writing this book entailed.

Abbreviations

Achievement:

Zhongguo jiaoyu chengjiu 1949–1983
(Achievement of Education in
China Statistics)

Almanac:

Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, 1949–1981
(China Education Almanac)

Chronology:

*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu
dashiji 1949–1983* (A Chronology
of Education)

FBIS:

Foreign Broadcast Information
Service, Daily Report, China

JYB:

Zhongguo jiaoyu bao (China
Education News)

JYYJ:

Jiaoyu yanjiu (Education Research)

GMRB:

Guangming ribao (Guangming Daily)

Recorder:

*The Chinese Recorder and
Missionary Journal*

Records:

Records, China Centenary
Missionary Conference

Repository:

The Chinese Repository

Abbreviations

RMJY:

Renmin jiaoyu (People's Education)

RMRB:

Renmin ribao (People's Daily)

SCMP:

Survey of the China Mainland Press

SHJY:

Shanghai jiaoyu

(Shanghai Education)

WHRB:

Wenhui ribao (Wenhui Daily)

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

List of Abbreviations ix

Chapter 1

Introduction 1

Chapter 2

The *Ti-yong* Dilemma 16

Chapter 3

The Development of
Secondary Schools 42

Chapter 4

Teachers in the School 71

Chapter 5

A Quest for Perfect
Performance 100

Chapter 6

Students in the School 131

Chapter 7

The Three-Merit Ideal 160

Chapter 8

Conclusion 194

Appendix A

"Suggestions by the Ministry of
Education for Running Foreign-
Language Schools Well"
(1963) 217

Contents

Appendix B

"Suggestions by the Ministry of
Education for Running Foreign-
Language Schools Well"
(1979) 221

Appendix C

"Full-time Six-year Key Secondary
School English Teaching Outline"
(1982) 227

Appendix D

English-Language Lessons
Published in China 241

Appendix E

English-Language Lessons
Published Abroad: *New Concept
English* 244

Appendix F

1982 National College Entrance-
Examination: English Language
Questions 247

Bibliography 253

Index 277

Chapter 1

Introduction

What secondary schooling means to Chinese students and their teachers was my chief concern when I traveled to Shanghai as an English teacher and graduate student more than a decade ago. The ensuing years have brought changes to Chinese schools that were scarcely dreamed of by the teachers and students with whom I studied and taught between 1981 and 1983. Likewise, they have prompted a significant reappraisal of Chinese education, which throughout most of the 1980s was portrayed by and to educators in North America as flat, bleak, and relentlessly reproducing the patterns of a monolithic party-state. We now appreciate a multidimensional portrait of China's 90,000 secondary schools, visible to us as spaces for "competing interest groups" that not only embody state directives but also lead to their deflection or erosion (Samoff, 1991, 4–5).

Although the experiences of 50 million Chinese secondary school pupils and their 3 million teachers are no longer equated with the stylized catechism of Chinese national policy, what students and teachers actually do in their classrooms remains unfocused in our imagination. This book, based upon intensive fieldwork between 1981 and 1983 and 18 weeks of additional research conducted in Shanghai in 1988, 1989, and 1991, attempts to capture some of the richness and unpredictability of Chinese school life for a small number of teachers and students at one privileged urban school.

China, like the United States, has its wags who delight the public with acerbic accounts of the regional variations among Chinese dialects, physical statures, and culinary arts. Shanghai inspires bon mots deriding the cultural authenticity of a city that sprang from mud flats and foreign imperialism. In fact, Shanghai has provided a strategic commercial center linking inland and maritime trade for 800 years. With 12 million inhabitants and as many as 100,000 people per square mile in its central districts, Shanghai is a maze of back alleys and boulevards, looming high rises and universities. Still, the municipality claims few venerable landmarks and lacks imperial scale. Shanghai is instead a "crucible of modern China," joining sojourners together on its shores "above the sea" (Wei, 1987).

The heart of Shanghai is bounded to the north by Suzhou Creek, a barge-clogged thoroughfare that winds through business and shopping districts to

drain into the Huangpu River, an estuary of the Yangtze.¹ Suzhou Creek arches downward, like a rainbow, where it flows into the harbor. The municipal district that stretches northward from the point where creek and river conjoin is called Hongkou, the rainbow's mouth.

A major bus and trolley exchange fans out from the district's core, Hongkou Park, the site of the tomb of Lu Xun (1881–1936), China's most celebrated twentieth-century writer. Stark walls skirt roads that radiate out from the park into residential neighborhoods and factory compounds. Such walls surround all 4,300 of Shanghai's primary and secondary schools. They define for students and teachers a sense of space and refuge even as they conceal the daily clutter of school life. In the morning their double gates swing back to reveal a jumble of bicycles, dusty playgrounds, and classrooms humming with students. In the evening, gates firmly locked, schools recede behind walls that stretch endlessly down city streets.

One set of these gates is identified by a vertical sign written in Lu Xun's calligraphic style: “The Lu Xun Language School.”² Beyond the gatehouse a cluster of four-story buildings emerges from vibrant gardens that most students and teachers in China would eye with envy. The main school entrance is flanked by flowers chosen to complement central China's ever-changing seasons. Immediately inside, a lobby wall greets visitors with a hearty HOW ARE YOU? in five languages. Determined rosy-cheeked youths gaze from a mural. They are China on the move. Rockets and jets ignite behind them in an explosion of technological exuberance that sweeps their hair up and away from their faces. A full-length mirror hangs on the wall adjacent to this picture. Every student who rushes to class past it must ask, “Am I like these model children?”

With impish grins, students respond, “Sure!” Then they shout above the noise from surrounding factories and workers' residences, “But we will try harder!” Glancing up from a textbook, two pupils acknowledge, “No one's like that picture, but it's symbolic—to encourage us, to push us forward. We make fun, but in our hearts we know what it *really* means.”

1 Consistent with current practice in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the pinyin romanization system is used throughout this text. Exceptions are made for widely recognized forms, such as Chiang Kai-shek and Yangtze River.

2 Shanghai's secondary schools form a close-knit community, and its educators would immediately realize that this name is fictitious. In the interests of confidentiality, the names of the individuals and institutions under direct examination in this study have been fabricated. National, municipal, and local events, activities, and policies, on the other hand, are reported as accurately as possible.



“Am I like these model children?”

A Place of Privilege

Those who hold that global power and influence emanate from largely “First” World centers to largely “Third” World peripheries frequently identify cities and the elites who dwell within them as the crux of modernity. Such urban settings are pivotal in forging the relative balance between modernity and tradition that secures all the more firmly a nation’s peripheral status or supplies it with positive alternatives that offset alienation and dependency.

The city of Shanghai is, in this sense, both global periphery and Chinese center. As a “mediator of the educational open door” (Hayhoe, 1988), the city has highly educated academicians, scientists, and business managers who are influenced by their proximity to global networks and benefit from it. In turn, through their facility with foreign languages, international law, and technology, they help shape the content and exchange of knowledge within China. Shanghai’s schools are most certainly judged by the criteria of this urban reality—and they make sense only in its context.

Access to the means of the metropole, however, was limited for the nearly half-million pupils who attended Shanghai’s 939 junior and senior secondary schools in 1981. Typically, 11- and 12-year-old students entered junior secondary schools for three years of general academic training. Their placement into a particular school was based largely upon academic success

in five or six years of primary schooling and their results in secondary school entrance examinations. The majority of junior secondary school graduates in urban Shanghai enrolled in senior secondary schools that offered full-time academic or technical vocational and teacher training courses in three- or four-year programs. For most of these students formal schooling came to an end upon graduation from high school. Only a small minority have been able to receive the tertiary training that leads to positions of influence in Chinese society. Most of these pupils attended Shanghai's key (*zhongdian*) secondary schools.³

The Lu Xun Language School (LXLS) is one of Shanghai's 23 municipal key schools and a prime example of what Chinese leaders and educators believe can be accomplished when optimum conditions of funding and effective teaching are realized. Its teaching staff numbered over 100 during the first half of the 1980s; its student body of 500 adolescents, carefully selected from throughout Shanghai's central municipal districts, boarded at the school.⁴ Administered jointly by the State Education Commission, the Shanghai Education Bureau, and the university with which it is affiliated,⁵ the LXLS is one of seven foreign language schools nationwide offering specialized training in foreign languages to secondary school pupils.

Despite its privileged status, the LXLS lacks the "comforts of abundance" that characterize elite schooling in North America (Lightfoot, 1983, 221). Its architectural lines and decor are uncompromisingly Spartan, a reminder that the LXLS's considerable reputation rests upon a hard-nosed assessment

3 Between 10 and 15 percent of senior secondary school graduates attended tertiary institutions in 1983, compared to approximately 90 percent of LXLS graduates. Four percent of Chinese secondary schools were key schools. For a detailed discussion of key schools during this period see Rosen, 1983.

4 The LXLS's student population increased from 432 students in 1981 to 543 students in 1982. Sixty percent of these students studied English. There were no English language graduates at the LXLS from 1981–1984, due to a student enrollment pattern that was still adjusting to China's post-Cultural Revolution reestablishment of a six-year secondary school curriculum and the discontinuation of the LXLS's primary school sections. Consequently, the LXLS's enrollment in the early 1980s was significantly smaller than it had been in 1966, when over 1,000 students attended the school.

5 The university to which the LXLS is connected was divided in the early 1980s into three major divisions—adult education (*chengren yeyu jiaoyu*), continuing professional education (*houxiu jiaoyu*), and full-time education (*quanrizhi jiaoyu*). The LXLS was administered under the third division and was structurally equivalent to a department.

of the foreign-language proficiency of its graduates. Prescribed requirements for foreign-language teaching and learning are the school's principal criteria for the selection and evaluation of administrators, teachers, and prospective students. Foreign languages are, in fact, described by school leaders as the "primary channel through which students make their contributions to China's modernization efforts."⁶

The LXLs is an extraordinary school. Far from depicting Chinese education writ small, its portrait is a case study with all of the limitations of research that engages in "procedures for counting to one" (Punch, 1986, 5). Yet, even as the school enjoys enviable material and human resources, it also embodies challenges faced by all Chinese secondary school educators as they approach the twenty-first century. Readers are therefore enjoined to question the generalizations about Chinese schooling contained in this study while considering what might be learned about secondary education in general from one exceptional Chinese school.

Culture and the Contested Terrain of Secondary Schooling

Scholars who envision culture as a continuing conversation about what matters most to members of a particular society frequently use "dialogue" as a metaphor for the process of cultural analysis (Bellah, 1985; Spindler, 1987; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). This dialogical conception of cultural studies influences my understanding of the LXLs in three ways.

First, culture as dialogue highlights the central theme of this interpretation of Chinese schooling: the power of language to shape what is most worth knowing and to signal who will benefit from that decision. The LXLs illustrates both how language has been used in China as a tool for social control and stratification, and how fluency in foreign languages has been perceived as both a political liability and a valued economic commodity. This ambiguous legacy of the power of language, more than any other factor, defines and complicates the educational aims of the LXLs, and it places the school's students and teachers in precarious, as well as privileged situations.

6 A large amount of taped or directly transcribed interview material appears in this book. Unless otherwise noted, the materials were collected on a daily, informal basis in staff offices and classrooms at the LXLs.

Next, identifying culture and cultural studies as communicative processes reminds us of how problematic human understanding has become in a post-modern world increasingly experienced as decentered and fragmented. This “predicament of culture” is associated across many disciplines with a “profound uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate depiction of social reality” (Lather, 1991, 21). Such uncertainty, as I note later, is an inevitable consequence of accepting cross-cultural research as “intrinsically shaped by power and the struggle against it” (Clifford, 1988, xvi).

Finally, conceptualizing culture as a dialogue in which meanings are won, lost, and reformulated underscores this book’s key assumption about schooling worldwide. As primary social agencies for transmitting and reconstructing values, schools are exceptional places for viewing the inconsistencies and struggles that shape a society’s pivotal cultural conversations. Schools rarely realize their potentially subversive position since “education falls low in the hierarchy of academic discourses, and can perform the cultural function of obliquely and harmlessly underlining social truths” (Wexler, 1987, 17). Nevertheless, as a locus for arguments about a culture’s past, present, and future, schools are “arenas of conflict over the production of knowledge, ideology, and employment, a place where social movements try to meet their needs and fight for the expansion of the access to resources and citizenship rights” (Carnoy, 1989, 9–10).

Because this is true for schools in China as well as in North America, readers may wonder whether the pedagogical imagination of LXLS educators can be put at the service of their own pedagogical lives. My personal response is cautiously in the affirmative. Good schooling in both countries is equated with the cultivation of literate and numerate students who have the capacity for independent and judicious thinking. Critical indictments of “dead” pedagogy, though aimed at different reference points, are prevalent in both China and the United States, the repugnant *modus operandi* of “stuffing the Peking duck” in China, of “didactics, practice, and little else” in the United States (Sirotnik, 1983).

Educators, leaders, and parents in neither society are especially able to differentiate school’s responsibilities from those of other social institutions or are especially clear about how to establish incentives for its self-examination and renewal (Husen, 1979). So we share the troubling question of whether our definitions of educational goodness, be they shaped by visions of unity in China or caught up in the quest for pluralism in the United States, are attainable if the tandem purpose of public schooling is to serve all pupils well.

Despite our doubts, in both countries we persist in making schools represent a quest for meaning and goodness. Schools become our nations symbolically, epitomizing our achievements as well as our failures. We write about schools in extraordinary ways. “Every morning at 8 A.M. the doors of America’s high school are opened,” we note, and advise, “Walk inside and look into the future of the nation” (Boyer, 1983, 297). We could say the same about entering our markets, or watching our television screens, or patrolling our streets, but somehow in such locations we do not savor the same rhetorical punch. We pick schools as our “safe bit of transference” when we are disillusioned (Sizer, 1984, 1). Schools can make us feel we are doing right by our children, or they can be the first institution we blame when public and private values no longer seem to correspond.

Confusion and anxiety about schooling are inevitable consequences of the inability of schools to resolve the competing, sometimes mutually exclusive, demands we thrust upon them. Just as schools in the United States seek to balance the interests of participatory democracy with the inequalities upon which capitalism is based, Chinese schools must mediate the demands for socialist equality with the requirements of rapid but efficient modernization through the certification of expertise. As American educators grapple with creating schools that can simultaneously advance individual mobility, construct or renovate community, and respect diversity, Chinese educators struggle to align their curricula and teaching methods with state ideological interests *and* the values of a public whose standards of living and social expectations have become remarkably divergent as a result of market socialism and the open door. Schools in the United States and China must above all else accommodate—political movements, student values, the economy. The language of the market (free or controlled) clashes with the language of morality in schools.

With public institutions in both countries embattled, we share the suspicion and myth that schooling might somehow be the last refuge and defense, and from it we demand nothing other than “it all.” Not surprisingly, declining standards provide still more common ground, the commiseration of two nations at risk. In fact, Chinese educators have adapted to their own needs the vocabulary of crisis that has dominated international discourse on secondary schooling. They see themselves tied into a world knowledge network and gauge their success increasingly in international terms. In an ironically international use of nationalist fervor, principals and deans of Chinese secondary schools quote from *A Nation at Risk* to justify their own sense of

uncertainty and loss of mission (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Throughout the 1980s Lxls educators were engaged in three dialogues on the question of how to define and then achieve educational goodness. These conversations, introduced below, not only suggest the context in which the school's administrative and pedagogical practices were continually being re-shaped, but also reveal the seriously unresolved conflicts underlying Deng Xiaoping's admonition to move Chinese education in "three directions" (*sange mianxiang*): toward modernization, the world, and the future. They illustrate how schools in China, like their U.S. counterparts, have become the socially and politically convenient arena for mediating the nation's most deeply rooted social contradictions.

**Foreign-Language
Study for Cultural
Access, Educational
Excellence, and
Creativity**

The socio-cultural implications of foreign languages and knowledge in China provide the point of departure for analysis of teaching and learning at the Lxls. Foreign-language education in China has been linked for well over a century to the quest for modernization, as well as the establishment of an effective system of schooling to facilitate its realization. The persistence of this historical conversation bespeaks the resilience of perceptions about the proper role of foreign knowledge in the Chinese episteme, the appropriate training through which that knowledge is procured, and the political and social reliability of Chinese who have become proficient in foreign studies.

Foreign Languages:
Tools or Frames of
Mind?

Whenever China has opened her doors to foreign influence, foreign languages have been a prerequisite for the smooth passage of technology and diplomacy. Variant political and social values have soon followed, giving rise to a vexing set of questions. If not values, what then makes Chinese culture distinctly Chinese? Is foreign language proficiency to be sought solely for its utility, leaving intact one's axiological landscape? Or is it learned for authentic cultural access and alteration of one's identity?

Administrators and teachers at the Lxls cast these questions in terms of