# FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN CHINA

by Don Ford

"I hear that the students really like you," the director of Beijing Foreign Language Institute's branch school told me in our first meeting. "That's very good, but let me give you a piece of advice." His 65 year old face, ravaged by years of guerilla struggle and political infighting, furrowed in a deep frown. "The stricter you are, the better the education will be."

"Well, I haven't had any discipline problems thus far."

"Don't be too nice. In China, discipline is the most important facet of education."

After a year of teaching in the People's Republic, his words have rung true. This philosophy is implemented in every sphere of education. Chinese teachers are told what, where and when to teach. Students are taught to memorize and regurgitate. Thinking for oneself is discouraged. Campuses are enclosed in brick walls and entrance is strictly monitored by guards at each gate. At 9 p.m., students must be in their rooms. At 10, lights go off.

Things have not always been so orderly. For the past fifteen years, education in China has been rocked by political turmoil. Universities became the testing ground for a succession of political theories. Before the Cultural Revolution swept China in 1965, educational policy was designed to provide a broad general education to the young, with emphasis on literacy, political thought, Chinese history, health, general science and math. The government aimed to give everyone a minimum of six years of education. The ultimate goal was a middle school education for all young people.

Between 1949 and 1964, literacy in China increased dramatically, from less than 10 percent to over sixty. Thousands of new schools were built in rural areas. Institutions of higher education still accommodated only a handful–less than one percent–and consisted of specialized study in science, health care, engineering, humanities or social science.

The Cultural Revolution began in Beijing's leading universities and quickly spread throughout higher education, eventually seeping into middle schools as well. It was sparked by deep dissatisfaction with educational content and methodology. Students questioned the relevancy of their studies and complained about the diffident and antiquated style of teaching which most educators practiced. They demanded a greater role in formulating educational policy, including the right to select curriculum, teachers and administrators.

As this movement broadened in scope to a total reassessment of China's development since 1949, the original complaints about education were forgotten. Between 1966 and 1969, many students left school to travel around the country, inciting workers and peasants to rebel. Some universities and middle schools were completely shut down, while others became embroiled in bitter conflict, leading to violence and bloodshed. In such an environment, very little formal education took place.

When schools reopened after 1969, an entirely new educational policy was in force. Students were no longer chosen for university study on the basis of examination, but on more political criteria, including class background, party affiliation and official recommendation. The curriculum stressed vocational education, including work-study programs in factories and rural areas, and political study, especially of Mao Ze Dong's writings.

Most older teachers were removed from their positions and sent to the countryside to do manual labor. They were replaced by workers, peasants or army officials who had no formal training in education. The study of foreign languages and technology was discouraged. As a result, the level of education throughout China declined sharply.

During 1976, China's educational policy made another dramatic shift. Zhou En Lai and Mao Ze Dong both died and the Gang of Four were arrested shortly thereafter. The new leadership, headed by Deng Xiao Ping and Hua Guo Feng, began to revive many of the educational policies pursued before 1965, including college entrance examinations, emphasis on specialized study of science, engineering and medicine, and the return of educational control to career administrators. Older teachers were reinstated in their jobs and work-study programs were curtailed. Additionally, these leaders have embarked China on a modernization drive which includes importation of foreign technology and expertise, use of material incentives to increase productivity and greater freedom of cultural expression.

The effects of these changes on education have been profound. Since 1977, all students of higher education have been selected by a comprehensive examination in science, mathematics, literature, composition and political history. While all middle school graduates are eligible to take the examination, only slightly over four percent are selected, since the number of colleges and universities is still inadequate. As a result, the students of higher learning tend to form an elite. The vast majority are from urban areas, where educational quality has always been superior, and most are sons and daughters of intellectuals or officials.

Political criteria are still considered in the selection process, but they have been subordinated to examination scores. The ratio of male to female students is roughly two to one, though officials claim that both sexes are given equal consideration.

At first, successful candidates had no choice of university or field of study, but in 1979, the government provided metriculated middle school graduates with three colleges from which to choose. Students still have no choice of major nor of the classes they take.

In July of 1979, I was hired, along with about 200 other Americans, to teach English in China as part of the government's effort to modernize its institutions of higher learning and train a corps of fluent interpreters, translators and teachers of foreign languages. Until then, the foreign language competency of university graduates had fallen short of fluency, especially in speech. Only a handful of translators and interpreters possess true fluency in a foreign language, while most teachers of foreign languages. particularly recent graduates, are in need of further study themselves. Many of last year's university graduates could not pass the TOEFL exam. Thus, the need for teachers who are native speakers of foreign languages is obvious.

I taught first and third year university students who were majoring in English. First year English majors typically spend 12 hours per six day week in English classes. This time is divided among three classes-conversation (1 hour), extensive reading (5 hours) and intensive reading (6 hours). The last 'reading' class is really a misnomer. In fact, it consists of detailed grammar and translation study, which still forms the core of foreign language pedagogy in China. In addition, my students listened to a two hour lecture every week on some aspect of Western culture or history.

Third and fourth year students typically take courses in English or American literature, social sciences, linguistics and translation techniques. For most, I was the first foreign teacher they had ever had. Without question, they were the most eager and cooperative students I have ever taught. When I walked into class each morning, they all rose in unison to greet me. One of them always got me a cup of hot tea, while another erased the blackboard and made certain I had chalk and any other necessary materials. Homework assignments were completed on time and with diligent attention to each detail. I rarely needed to reprimand a student and never had to lecture them on the importance of study. After class, I was always surrounded by students who asked a barrage of questions for as long as I was willing to answer them.

Why are Chinese students such avid learners of foreign languages? First, teachers in China have long been accorded greater respect by students and the society at large than their Western counterparts. Also, education itself has traditionally been held in higher esteem.

But these explanations alone do not suffice. During the Cultural Revolution, most teachers were not respected; many were even physically abused. Students at that time branded their education irrelevant and refused to study or even listen to their instructors.

Today's students are not so critical. Competition for university admission is more intense than at any time during the People's Republic and students who fail to keep up are threatened with expulsion. The government has also promised that future graduates who perfrom best during their university education will receive the best jobs.

More importantly, though, Chinese students are starving for knowledge about the rest of the world. Many of them grumble about their physical training and politics classes, but they are totally enthusiastic about foreign languages, Western literature and history.

This reflects an entirely new perspective which is sweeping China today. For years, the Chinese government and most of its people were content to live in isolation from the outside world. Self-reliance was the watchword of their development. But now, they realize that such isolation has left them materially poor and backward. They are determined to learn all they can about the industrialized nations in order to transform China.

Their ignorance about the West is sometimes shocking. When I showed my students a film about the Apollo 11 mission, several came up to me afterwards to inquire if it were fictional. They did not know that men had walked on the moon.

Not all the students are so uninformed. Some listen to the Voice of America or BBC broadcasts over short wave radio and a few have read Western books and magazines, though these are not officially available in China unless purchased with foreign currency. The Chinese press covers world news in more detail now, but it is still carefully filtered to coincide with the government's ideology. Nevertheless, students have asked me questions about an amazing array of current events, including the mafia, People's Temple, heroin use, muggings, parliamentary procedure, Jane Fonda and the Rolling Stones.

The biggest barrier to further language progress is the lack of contact with native speakers. A few Chinese have travelled abroad, usually older party members. More are being sent now, but still a tiny handful in comparison to the numbers studying foreign languages. Though more foreigners are in China than at any time since the Russians were there in the fifties, they are still a miniscule force.

To compound matters further, foreigners are required to live in segregated housing facilities, Separate stores and eating facilities are also provided for foreigners, under the guise of offering them the best available. Foreign teachers are accorded official respect, but kept at a distance. Chinese students and teachers are warned to avoid personal contacts with foreigners. They cannot visit foreigners without a school pass and must register with PLA (People's Liberation Army) guards stationed at the entrance of the foreign guesthouse. Chinese teachers are discouraged from entertaining foreigners in their homes.

While school officials concede that foreign expertise is necessary to modernize language programs, they try to prevent foreign cultural ideas from filtering through the membrane of segregation which divides foreigners and Chinese. Recently, the leadership forbade the showing of foreign films on university campuses. Disco music and dancing have been outlawed and young people have been arrested for attending such parties. In reality, the government considers its foreign guests to be a necessary evil from which the Chinese people must be sheltered. Accordingly, students of foreign languages have few opportunities to practice outside class.

The Chinese teachers of foreign languages, who do the vast majority of instructing, are generally hard-working and dedicated to doing the best job possible. But too few of them have sufficient mastery of the language or the art of teaching. Younger teachers who have graduated in the past ten years received no formal pedagogical training. Older teachers are usually better trained, but too often, in antiquated methods of instruction. Many insist on translating everything into Chinese and spend most of the class time speaking their native tongue. Teachers drill students on the fine points of traditional grammar without enough attention to lexical meaning or functional use. They encourage rote memorization of such stock phrases as "the grass is always greener on the other side", which they are convinced represent the zenith of English language use. In some cases, students have a better mastery of the foreign language than their teacher.

A televised English language program in Beijing illustrates these problems. Entitled English Foundations, the daily half hour program is supposed to give Chinese viewers a basic grasp of English grammar as a prelude to further study of the language. The instructor, an elderly gentleman with a highly tenuous grasp of English himself and all the charm and charisma of a detergent commercial, speaks Chinese 98 percent of the time and mispronounces most of the English. He jumps randomly from formation of the plural of nouns, to passive voice constructions to adverbial phrases in a single session. One could view this program faithfully for the next twenty years and never learn English.

The lack of good teaching materials further hampers progress. Among the few language texts available, most are of poor quality and written in antiquated language. They have been prepared without any linguistic analysis of the proper sequencing of learning a foreign language and stress the grammar-translation method. Modern literature is virtually non-existent. At the school where I worked, students read horrendously simplified versions of Dickens, George Elliot and Jules Verne. Few foreign language magazines or newspapers are available and these are reserved for teachers only. The foreign embassies provide some books and teaching materials, but not enough to meet the vast need. Foreign teachers must largely rely on their own wits and materials.

The Chinese teachers possess even less maneuverability. They have no say in the choice of books or classes they teach, their salaries, working conditions or even housing arrangements. In fact, there is no job choice in China. All teachers are assigned to their careers after university graduation without any prior consultation. Husbands and wives are sometimes assigned to different provinces and see each other only twice a year during vacation.

Chinese teachers work about 15 to 20 hours per week. They have virtually absolute job security and receive two months' paid vacation each year. But they only earn about 800 baht per month, less than most factory workers in China.

So, it is not surprising that many teachers do not enjoy their jobs. They feel underpaid, overworked and unrepresented. Many privately resent school administrators because their salaries are three to four times higher and their decisions are made without consultation or consideration of teachers. They also complain about the lack of organization and materials, the poor physical condition of the schools and a waning respect for their profession. Most wish they had been assigned to jobs in translation or interpreting, where salaries are higher and opportunities exist for travel abroad.

As a result, the effectiveness of many teachers is blunted. A few take their frustrations out on students. They refuse to answer questions or hold office hours, leave school as soon as class is over and even cancel classes altogether. Yet, the majority would probably agree with one of my colleagues, who told me, "I never wanted to be a teacher. I feel totally unqualified to do this kind of work. But I'm stuck with it the rest of my life, so I try to do the best I can."

The administration of Chinese schools is highly bureaucratized. The Ministry of Education in Beijing sets general policy for all schools in the country, but daily operation is entrusted to school directors at each location. These are usually veterans of the Chinese revolution chosen more for their political fidelity than their expertise in education. The directors of the two leading language universities in Beijing have never studied a foreign language or educational administration. They are uninformed about actual instruction, since they rarely visit classes, and can't understand their content anyway. At one school, the director rarely even makes an appearance on campus.

Instead of overseeing education, directors often isolate themselves behind layers of bureaucracy. They surround themselves with yes-men who don't provide them with a true picture of what is going on. During numerous meetings, the directors' long rambling discourses are replete with current slogans, but reveal very little knowledge of actual conditions. Nevertheless, these men have the final say on everything which transpires at their schools.

Perpetuation of the status quo is a common denominator of these bureaucrats. Requests for changes, however minimal, take months to process and are often refused. A simple request I made to change apartments took nearly three months to approve, though it involved a move of less than 100 meters.

Such bureaucracy discourages individual initiative. Teachers are reluctant to try innovations, since they fear reprisal from their superiors. As a result, conformity and complacency are rampant. Most teachers simply throw up their hands and curse fate, a clear hallmark of all feudal societies. The Chinese press constantly condemns various vestiges of feudalism, but never discusses its source, stamped indelibly in the fabric of contemporary political life.

The only exceptions I encountered to this syndrome were a few department heads. They were quite open to new teaching methods and materials, and supportive as far as the limits of their positions allowed. Since they are often foreign-trained teachers with extensive experience, they more readily grasp the problems of their foreign language programs. At times, they were able to circumvent the bureaucracy and implement needed changes themselves. For example, several suggestions I made to update teaching methods and introduce modern American literature were adopted on the spot. But progress is often slow and frustrating.

The quality of educational facilities reinforces this sense of frustration. Nowhere is the contrast between Western and Chinese education greater than in their facilities. Of course, China is a poor country, but it is difficult to prepare oneself for the extent of its poverty. Classrooms are housed in sterile brick or concrete structures with bare floors and white-washed walls. They are poorly-lit and regularly without electricity altogether. There is no insulation or air-conditioning and little heat in winter. Teachers and students must wear their jackets indoors on the coldest days. I taught classes with gloves on when the Siberian wind swept through Beijing in January.

Student housing is also inadequate. At some schools, students must live eight to a small room. They have no desks, poor heat and light and one shower per week. Unmarried Chinese teachers live three or four to a room in conditions similar to their students. At my university, several hundred students must commute to school because dormitories are so overcrowded. They all live at home with their parents, since a severe housing shortage prevents single people from acquiring their own apartments.

School libraries are in cramped quarters and possess inadequate collections of foreign language books. A few modern books have been purchased, but these do not circulate. The collections of Chinese books are better, but still fall short of the demand. Extensive research materials are reserved for the few scholars assigned to writing books.

Even more glaring is the paucity of audio-visual and duplicating equipment. There is a complete lack of ditto, mimeo and xerox machines. All teaching materials must be duplicated by hand, using the ancient silk screen technique. There are no opaque projectors or electric typewriters.

Recently, the Chinese government has purchased some new equipment, largely from Japan. This includes overhead and slide projectors, 16mm film projectors, cassette recorders and sound labs. One school even has a closed-circuit television system, complete with a small studio and video recorders. Unfortunately, they forgot to buy video tape. That will have to wait until next year's budget.

These new purchases have helped enormously, but still fall for short of the need and are often misused, since few people thoroughly understand their operation or potential. School officials are attracted by the most sophisticated and expensive equipment available, even though simpler aids would fulfill the need and their lower cost would allow purchases in greater volume.

China's current leadership clearly recognizes the need to modernize its educational facilities. They have set ambitions goals for the next twenty years, and are importing modern equipment and books at an unprecedented pace. But those who go to China from the industrialized nations realize that technology alone does not an excellent educational system make. Without efficient administration and innovative instruction, China's educational quality will continue to fall short of its lofty ambitions.