Trends in Chinese Education:
Report on a Faculty Exchange To China

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During the Fall semester of 1996, I traveled to Beijing, People’s Republic of China with the support of the East Asia and Pacific Studies Center at the University of Illinois, the Freeman Foundation, and Peking University, especially the Institute of Higher Education and the Office of Foreign Affairs. Because this travel was part of a sabbatical year, I was able to stay for nearly three months. I traveled with my family, Susan Bruce, who was also part of the UI/Peking University exchange, and my two children. This report summarizes the experiences of that trip.

What I Expected to Accomplish

I had several interrelated interests or goals for this trip. First, to be frank, was simply to expand my understanding of Chinese culture, language, history, politics, economics, and education, independent of any more narrowly-defined professional goals. Like many others, I had been hooked by a first visit in 1993, and will always feel drawn to that fascinating country and culture.

A more specific goal for me was to interact with education researchers at several different universities and institutes. I had met some of these on a previous visit or through their time in the U.S. I hoped to learn more about how education was constructed and conceived in a very different sociocultural context.

Another important goal was to see more of Chinese schools. I was fortunate to get to visit a few schools, each time for several hours, and learned a lot from my visits. The teachers allowed me to document lessons using both notes and a digital camera, which has provided me with an invaluable record, particularly with respect to hands-on learning activities in areas such as science.

Finally, I have a special interest in the use of new information and communication technologies. I wanted to know how these were being employed in China in general, but especially in the realms of university research and in teaching through primary, secondary, and tertiary schools.

Interactions with Researchers

My three months in China were filled with discussions with faculty and students at Peking University. I made a few presentations, and attended others, but mostly interacted in informal ways, learning what it means to be a student or professor in a top Chinese university today. I also made a number of visits to other universities and research
institutes in Beijing, including Beijing University for Aeronautics and Astronautics, Beijing Normal University (and the Research Center on Future Education there), and the Beijing Institute for Educational Research. During a short trip to Shanxi Province, I also spoke at Taiyuan Industrial University.

I was impressed with the level of scholarship I encountered. Despite many limitations in terms of access to library materials, conferences, and the world wide web, the faculty and students I met were knowledgeable about both Chinese and Western educational research, something that could not be said of most of their counterparts in the West. This was most evident when I spoke with faculty at the Institute of Higher Education at Peking University and in several seminars at Beijing Normal University. Some of what we learned through these interactions and through school visits is summarized in the article, “Learning from China,” published in the Peking University Office of Foreign Affairs Newsletter.

Visits to Chinese Schools

School visits were one highlight of the trip for me. It was fascinating to see the many obvious and not so obvious differences in educational practices, but perhaps more striking was how similar were the concerns of Chinese and American teachers. Both are struggling with the great dichotomy between highly-structured, teacher-focused, exam-based learning versus more open, inquiry-based, and project-centered learning.

Following a presentation I gave on twenty-first century literacy, one professor made a telling comment. He said in essence, “We are pleased with the ideas you present about critical thinking, collaboration, and integration of learning. These ideas are ones that we have promoted as well. Many educators in China would like to move beyond the more narrow, exam-based model of the past. But why do you Americans promote this, when you are the ones who create the multiple-choice exams (TOEFL, GRE, SAT) that are used to measure our students?”

I had hoped to spend more time in the more ordinary schools, but as on my previous trip to China, each school I saw presented itself, rightly, as a special demonstration school. I also asked to see Project Hope schools, but that never seemed to work out. Nevertheless, I feel that through observations, discussions with educational research faculty, and reading, I have developed a richer picture of Chinese education in general. One confirmation of this was that when I described lessons to university students, they could describe almost identical lessons in their schools, from a variety of provinces. Also, Chinese television presented a children’s show which had science lessons with an organization very much like every lesson I saw in the schools.
List of School Visits

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<th>Location</th>
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China Internet

I spent more time than I had expected in exploring the intricacies of the Internet in China. At first, this was to satisfy the functional need to get my email and world wide web access working. But I was also curious regarding what role if any new technologies were seen to play in Chinese education. My investigation led me to the Computer Science Department and the Institute of Higher Education at Peking University, the China Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Embassy, NewsGuide (a private internet service provider), and the Beijing University for Aeronautics and Astronautics. At one point I may have had a dozen different accounts on at least a half dozen machines. I was impressed by both the difficulties in using advanced communication systems today, and with the friendliness and support given to me by many individuals. One small portion of those experiences are reflected in an article I wrote soon after for the Journal of Literacy Research.

Articles Drawing from the China Experience


Presentations in China


Copy of letter sent to Professor Min Weifang

Professor Min Weifang
Vice President
Peking University
Beijing, 100871
People’s Republic of China

Dear Professor Min:

We are writing this letter to thank you for making possible for us the opportunity to spend this fall at Beijing Daxue. This has been a very special experience for us, affording us the chance to meet with and get to know a number of your excellent faculty and many of your fine students. We have learned a great deal ourselves about Chinese education, and hope that those we have come to know here have had a chance to learn something from us.

We would particularly like to mention the very helpful staff at the Foreign Affairs Office, especially Mr. Guo Hongxing. His English is, of course, excellent, but beyond that he very skillfully provided us with exactly the assistance we needed to learn our way around Peking University and the city. We believe he is a great asset to your program.

A senior student in International Economics, Mr. Wang Dongyi, was also of significant help to us. He tutored us in Chinese—though, we wish, of course we had been better students—taught us a great deal about Chinese culture and history, and offered many other kinds of assistance during our three-month stay.

We also greatly appreciate the assistance offered by Professors Wei Xin, Chen Xiaoyu, Ding Xiaohao, and Ms. Lei Hong in the Institute of Higher Education. They, like many others at Beida, made our stay here very pleasant and productive.

We hope that we can continue to maintain contact with Peking University, that we can visit again sometime and that we might see you at some future time on one of your visits to the United States. Please do call us if your travels take you through the American Midwest at some point.

Again, our thanks for a very enlightening exchange.

Sincerely,

Bertram Bruce
Susan Bruce