

Teaching in China: An Outside Look In

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As part of a Canadian International Development Agency funded project working with rural teachers in central China, recent graduates Lebens and Radigan spent a month teaching in Chinese schools. The primary purpose of the project is to work with members of the Sichuan Provincial Teacher Training Centre and rural teachers from Wenchuan County develop a professional development plan in response to China's current focus on education reform. This article is a synthesis of Lebens' and Radigan's experiences.

As recent graduates of a teacher-training program at Malaspina University-College in British Columbia, Canada, we had the opportunity to spend a month observing and teaching in Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China. This article describes what it is like to teach, for a short period of time, in a rural school in the interior of China.

To put the experience in context, it is important to provide a brief description of the Chinese Education System. In China, education is a centralized system with the National government in Beijing setting the curriculum, selecting textbooks, and evaluating students' learning at the end of grade 12. In fact, the whole system can well be described as one leading to the final national exams - with results having lifetime consequences for students. The system is administered, however, at the provincial level, with each province having a Department of Education, and an appointed Minister of Education. The Education Department in each province is also responsible for teacher in-service through local in-service centers. This form of in-service has traditionally been from the top down, with information dissemination flowing outwards to the teachers.

Current reform is focusing on in-service from the other direction, from the grass roots, with teachers involved in the direction of their in-service. Teaching resources, textbooks, and exams are still controlled centrally at the national level. The goal of education reform appears to be to shift from teacher-centered instruction towards student-centered instruction. Teachers are asking to learn more about using group work and experiential learning in the classroom. Evidence of children's work is now apparent in the urban schools, which we were told is a recent development.

The following provides a synthesis of our teaching in a rural school on the outskirts of Wenchuan in Aba Prefecture. In addition, we also taught and visited schools in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province; thus we occasionally use our observations from the urban schools to contrast that of the school in Wenchuan.

Wenchuan itself is a half-day's drive into and through the mountains north of Chengdu. A rural agricultural service centre, it serves a number of smaller villages in the region. We also reference a few of the smaller community

elementary schools visited while in Aba Prefecture. Wenchuan, its surrounding villages and the capital Chengdu are all part of Sichuan Province's Education system, one that is home to 800,000 teachers who serve 25,000,000 children in a combined private and public system of kindergarten (pre-school), primary, middle, and secondary schools.

Our involvement with the Chinese education system began as student representatives for Malaspina University-College's role in a project involved in China's recent education reform movement. The project, Enhancing Rural Teacher Training (ERTT), is finishing its second of five years as a Category 1 Association of Canadian Community College project in Sichuan Province in China. Funding is provided by the Canadian International Development Agency. As a pilot project with 160 Chinese kindergarten and primary teachers, we are partners with the Sichuan Department of Education, the Chengdu Electromechanical College (CEC), and Prince Edward Island's Holland College. In addition to senior staff members, the Sichuan Department of Education is actively represented in the project by the Chengdu Pre-School Normal School, the Chengdu Teacher Training Centre, and the Wenchuan Teacher Training Centre. The Chengdu Teacher Training Centre provides in-service and educational leadership provincially, the Wenchuan Teacher Training Centre for the very rural Wenchuan County and the Chengdu Pre-School Normal School is the provincial centre for training pre-school teachers. Chengdu Electromechanical College coordinates the Chinese half of the project; as does lead partner Holland College for the Canadians.

The purpose of the project is to help develop a sustainable in-service model to meet the needs of rural teachers grappling with the nuances involved in their country's current education reform. China wants to change its classrooms from teacher-centered to student-centered along the lines of "Western" education. The process of change began with workshops bridging teaching practices with theory and with samples of Canadian teaching practices for Chinese teachers to consider. Examples of workshop themes include working in groups, student-centered

teaching approaches, early literacy teaching, and integration across the curriculum. As well, a delegation of teachers and administrators from Sichuan visits us annually in Nanaimo, British Columbia, and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Our role as student representatives was to spend time in Chinese schools, observing, talking with teachers, and teaching Chinese children. As teachers in the schools, we seemed to be ideally positioned to collect realistic input about the project; unlike our supervisors, who presented workshops, visited schools, and returned almost immediately to Canada. In many ways, we were able to see “behind the scenes.”

Because our role was to observe and be peer-to-peer teaching colleagues, the only role we could adopt given our language barriers, we chose to write this article as a description of a “typical” day to best summarize what we learned. This also ensures we focus only on what we saw so as not to make any false presumptions.

A Typical Day in a Rural Middle School – Wenchuan, China

Like a rural setting in Canada, the mornings are incredibly peaceful. The only sound is the powerful roar of the Min River as it runs the length of Wenchuan. The Min River both shapes and dominates the rugged but tranquil setting. The craggy mountains cut steeply down to its banks, standing tall enough to hold the pink of the sunrise on their peaks, only letting the sun touch the school grounds well into the students’ morning.

Wenchuan itself is a community of about 90,000 people. Through the untrained Canadian eye, it looks like a small market centre. One main road transects the community, while a fork in the Min River creates another divide in the community. Stores and restaurants line the roads on either side. People live above the stores in what appear to be small apartments. They also live up the steep mountainsides in rectangular, stone dwellings with holes for windows without glass, a barn on the ground floor and family quarters above. Subsistence farms are carved out of the shale hill.

Traveling to School

Some of the teachers live on campus in an apartment-style building looking out into the school courtyard. Their families appeared to live with them in these school residences. Others lived off campus in apartments with their families. A bridge from the downtown area of Wenchuan used to be the main access to Sang Ping Middle School. It was demolished for reasons unknown to us, making navigating the two sides of Wenchuan more challenging. The only access now is further away from the centre of town. So teachers and students are relegated to overcrowded city buses, bikes or a long walk. The new bridge appeared to be under-construction like most every piece of infrastructure

we saw en route to Wenchuan – roads, bridges, hydroelectric dams and causeways.

As we make our way across the river to the Sang Ping Middle School, the streets begin to fill with bell-ringing bicycles, taxis, rickshaws, tractors and buses, relegating the ever-present river’s roar to the background. Children fill the buses beyond capacity, their faces pressed to the windows as they make their way to Wenchuan Middle School and Primary School, each on different sides of the river from Sang Ping.

The entrance to the schoolyard sits at the end of a side street market. At the start of the school day, which is 7:15 A.M., the market stalls are just opening. Parents are focused on the business of the day, having just sent their children off to school. This is a marked contrast to the urban experience where most students arrive with parents or grandparents. Only a few come to school unaccompanied. If a Sang Ping student lives off campus, they travel to school with friends.

This market street, which was once the access road to the second bridge, is now the entrance point for the bridge reconstruction, complete with gravel trucks. Stores and restaurants are also opening. Smaller stores open right onto the street, the door opening the entire front face of the store to the sidewalk. The larger multi-purpose store stocks all packaged foods and prepared drinks. Its doors are regular sized, but they are currently blocked by the workers and managers completing what appear to be morning exercises. Walking down the street it is impossible to pick out the entrance to the school. In urban centres, schools have elaborate exteriors with ornate gates, signs and foyers highlighting school achievements, former leaders and other community dignitaries. Uniformed students greet their peers in the city; here Sang Ping students disappear into what looks like an alley opening into the now quiet school courtyard.

Only a few students enter the gate to Sang Ping with us since the vast majority of the 800 students live on campus – some for a week at a time while others only go home for summer and winter school breaks. Their homes are a one to two-day mountain drive from Wenchuan. They live in villages as far north as Songpan and Huanglong. The students, like the villagers of Wenchuan, include Tibetan or Zung people and the Qiang people – two of China’s 56 minority groups. A number of teachers and students are also Han people, the ruling majority in China. Some come from small villages along the river and in the mountains around Wenchuan. Most are children of subsistence farmers, their existence focused on the tasks of the land. Many of the children from outlying areas attend school on a subsidy from the government.¹

¹ China requires all students attend school from Grades 1 to 9. Some families are reluctant to allow their children to attend beyond that compulsory period. They believed assistance on the family farm warrants their focus.

Sang Ping Middle School

The concrete school sits in an L shape around a large two-level rectangular courtyard. The residence on the opposite side of the school backs onto the river. The remaining “wall” of the courtyard consists of a staff residence and another student residence and cafeteria. A flagpole sits at the center with a concrete mural that colorfully reflects the towering mountains around the school. Like urban Chinese schools, there is no gymnasium; the courtyard serves as the multipurpose room, gymnasium and recess playground. Large speakers sit on the corner of each building, and we only hear them used during mandatory callisthenics. Initially we are struck by the silence of the school grounds, interrupted only by the faint market sounds coming from beyond the school walls. The only competition for the ever-present roar of the Min River is the growl of work vehicles building the bridge. Concrete stairwells empty into external hallways leading to the many classrooms. Windows in the classrooms face out into the halls and marketplace. Teachers and classroom managers can be seen looking over student activity through these windows.

The first person we meet in the morning is the school gatekeeper. His small room beyond the gate serves as the place where students check in and out of the campus. Students collect their letters from home from the gatekeeper. Teachers gather around a small electric heater to drink tea in his gate room when they are not using their workrooms.

The Teaching Routine

Today our teaching partners teach three English classes each. This is a normal day for them. In between lessons, we gather in their workroom to discuss our work for the week over a cup of tea. We learn that the other English teachers want us to teach their classes while we are in Wenchuan. For today, this means an extra three classes for a total of seven. Our teaching partners tell us that when they do not teach in the afternoon, they have permission to go home. We discuss whether this is considered full-time work. Apparently it is; however, our partners suggest the pay is not high. In both urban and rural China, a full time position includes teaching 10 to 18 hours in the classroom a week. In the city, teachers spend the balance of the day preparing lesson and participating in various professional development activities. This does not appear to be the case in Sang Ping. There are limited local professional development opportunities.

Like the city teachers, Sang Ping has specific workrooms designated for specific disciplines. The English Teachers room has a few desks and no apparent resources. However in the city, the workrooms include computers at some schools. The workrooms at all city schools house

resources and are warm enough and well appointed enough to be a pleasant place to mark and rest between classes. Students in the city come into the rooms to talk to teachers. The students do not appear to connect with the teachers in their workrooms in Sang Ping. The only computers in Sang Ping are tucked away on the top floor behind metal doors, and Internet access is unreliable.

As we walk up three flights of stairs in the six-story school, we observe students washing the cement stairwells and exterior hallways. They also empty garbage, clean the blackboards and sweep or wash the floors of the classroom. In contrast, the urban schools have paid custodians attending to the daily chores of the school. The children are only responsible to clean their classrooms in the big city of Chengdu.

Two different sets of stairwells access the classrooms. Like the urban schools, the students stay in one classroom with the specialist teachers coming to them for each 45-minute lesson. We meet the classroom managers for our Grade 7 classes just as they finish the early morning routines. We learn they are responsible for the organization of the classroom. Class managers stay with the students in the evenings and monitor their daily life including their studies. They specifically wanted us to notice the cloth covers on the desks. They purposefully thank us for our attentions towards the students and ask to be in pictures with us. Our teaching partners tell us that parents who farm disagree with the mandatory English lessons for their students and schooling in general. They are apparently missing the labor their children provide. They also mention that the classroom managers take the opportunity to visit a family if the family plans to keep a student home after the student completes the compulsory school period. The class managers encourage these parents to allow their student to continue his or her studies.

Good Morning, Teacher

Class begins at 7:30 A.M. with a half-hour reading and grammar review. We observe a reading class focused on English. Students in Sang Ping also begin the class by standing and greeting the teacher – in an English class the greeting is “Good Morning Teacher.” This occurs when the teacher enters the room and looks out over the class from the raised dais. Any student who arrives late stands at the doorway and requests permission to enter the room. The teachers honor the same practice when coming to observe our classes. Regardless of the activity occurring, respect by the students toward their teachers is ever-present.

All the bells at Sang Ping and the primary schools we visit in the Wenchuan region sound the same as a Canadian fire alarm. The urge to bolt from the class with emergency backpack, roll call, and students slowly dissipates after our sixth day of teaching. By contrast, classical music signals all transitions in Chengdu. We never learn the emergency procedures in Chinese schools, urban or rural.

Classes range in size from 38 to 52 students at the Grade 7 level. The Grade 8 and 9 classes are in the 50 to 60-student range. Student seating is tight, making movement during class a challenge. There are two Grade 7 classes of 38 students. In both, the students all go home on the weekends. The students from the distant villages are together in two other Grade 7 classes, each with 52. This does not surprise us as urban schools also have large classes.

Bare concrete walls with large windows on both sides constitute the children's classrooms. The windows are often open to let in the warm air. One set of windows opens out to the exterior hallway; the other opens into the neighboring buildings of Wenchuan and mountains beyond. Curtains are used to shield the students from the bright sun. The location of the school means the classrooms are quiet, especially compared to the busy traffic sounds that drown out teachers in Chengdu. Outside of the compulsory exercises done during a class break, we never hear or observe a formal physical education class in the courtyard.

The classroom is cold. The teacher's office is colder. It feels damp and the cement flooring never warms up. When the sun fills the courtyard in the afternoon, the temperature rises in the school. However it is always warmer outside of the classroom, regardless of the weather.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language

By mid-morning we realize that English instruction largely focuses on listening and writing exercises. The teacher injects pictures, various methods of questioning, pair work, choral speech, and simple games using the vocabulary from their textbooks. The students remain in their seats throughout the lesson. Any dialogue is between the teacher and individual students. The one exception is a game of "Hide the Key" and "Telephone". We quickly learn that the entire class, regardless of their comprehension, enthusiastically repeats almost anything said, including out-loud thoughts, such as "Okay, now lets stand up..." was immediately repeated by all students in unison.

The morning lessons include rote reading of a state vocabulary textbook. The material is mandatory with a final test as the core evaluation. Our teaching partners tell us they are evaluated based on their students' success on year-end exams.

Listening to native English speakers is challenging for both teachers and students as they are unaccustomed to our "accent." We help them with pronunciation, especially the *th* sound. The challenge of being understood is similar in the city; however, we perceive that our rural students are more open to taking risks with us.

Class Transitions, Lunch and Physical Education

The students have a 10-minute break between their classes. One break is extended for mandatory exercises in the courtyard. We observe the entire school participating in

these exercises. It appears to be run by the classroom managers with music piped throughout the school P.A. system. The students line up in an orderly fashion with the older students on one side of the courtyard and the younger students on the other.



All physical education classes are held outside in both the urban centres and at this rural middle school in Wenchuan, China. Here the students participate in a 10-minute mandatory exercise class. The students in our classes were asked to wear their uniforms in honor of the Canadian teachers. One of the student dormitories can be seen in the background.

At noon the students begin a two-hour break for lunch and what appears to be free time. We do not observe their meal routines because we are eating off campus. We do know they eat some place other than the classrooms. We also know they have access to a school-run canteen where we saw them buying candy and steamed buns.

When we walk to a local restaurant, we see students checking out with the gatekeeper, boarding city buses, walking purposefully to locations away from the school and generally hanging out together in small groups. Some girls who we just taught meet us in the market to continue the class conversation. They give us pictures of their favorite movie and music stars (which they call their super stars) as a token of friendship. They want us to know about these important idols in their lives.

When we return from lunch, we observe students around the courtyard playing basketball and badminton, hanging out in the open hallways, and looking out from their dormitory balconies. We see laundry hanging outside their dormitory rooms. One door is open, and we see the four bunk beds on each side of the room. This explains the teachers' discussions at lunch about the importance of learning to get along and live together cooperatively.

Can I go to the Bathroom? Do I Want To?

Like the city schools, students and teachers use the same bathrooms. Both male and female bathrooms are at the intersection of the L shaped school. They are located on the first, third and fifth floors. When we use the toilet after lunch, we notice the girls waiting for each other in the bathroom. We remark how similar this is to home even if the facilities are vastly different. Open pits run through the floor between raised cement platforms. The flush tank sits on the back wall, randomly flushing water through the pit to an open sewer drain at the far end. Short (much shorter than Canadian English teacher's anyway) cubicle-like walls cordon off stalls with open doors. Toilet paper must be personally supplied and an open tub-like sink for all students and staff sits outside the facilities. Cold water trickles from the tap to wash your hands.

The Realities of Rural Chinese Classrooms

We have learned a great deal about resources today. To highlight the textbook vocabulary, the teachers add pictures they have drawn. They physically demonstrate the language and have the students respond. We plan to use the chart paper we purchased in a small stationary shop in town for our lesson on Pen Pals. This will allow us to build more student practice into the Pen Pal lesson outlined in the text. Our plans to use sentence puzzles will require hand-written puzzles as we have no access to a photocopier. A game of "Find a Person" will require us to use the blackboard for the questions and the students to make their own charts. Overhead projectors are not present in any classrooms here or in the city. The students have a textbook for each subject, a few workbooks, and pads of papers. Unlike city students, they do not appear to have crayons or markers in their desks, but the teachers explain that these supplies are available to them for homework. The plethora of supplies found in Canadian schools seems luxurious by comparison.

The End of the Day

At 4:00 P.M., as we leave the school to make our way back to our room, we are struck by the lack of school announcements. We are also left wondering how the students' day ends and transitions to their dormitory life. But we don't wonder for long. We have to plan lessons that will prepare the students to write pen pal letters destined for Nanaimo, B.C. We also learn there will be a party to celebrate our time at Sang Ping. In Wenchuan, when there is a party, there is an expectation of singing by the foreign guests. More compelling than even the thought of embarrassing ourselves on stage is our observation of how quickly the students have assimilated us into their daily routine, making us feel very welcome.

Reflections on our Month of Teaching in China

Drawing on our school experiences within various socio-economic settings as well as our experience living in urban and rural communities and interacting with teachers and parents, we feel comfortable making the following generalizations.

The rural communities presented a more traditional lifestyle. Geography, socio-economic structures and community sizes limited the availability of Internet, television, foreign visits, and an international business presence. The remoteness of many rural villages precluded students studying in their hometown beyond Grade Four. Some students spend most of their lives in school residences, with social and family support appearing to come from their classroom manager and peers. Also evident was the degree of connectedness enjoyed by students with their Minority Group cultures. These cultures were highly honored in schools and were highlighted at every special event.

We also saw at least one rural community obtaining a new building through a partnership with a local business. Most rural schools had few resources beyond basic schoolbooks. While our Wenchuan school was entirely subsidized by the provincial government, parents paid varying amounts of tuition to attend public schools in Chengdu.

The majority of urban students live at home and receive support from their immediate and extended family. Students move around in a modern milieu, complete with television, radio, Internet and foreign movies. Students overtly value foreign businesses, such as the ubiquitous McDonalds, KFC, and Carrefour. The potential for exchanges with foreign students was obvious, and exposure to foreign teachers was evident throughout Chengdu.

In keeping with China's national policy of one family – one child, almost every student we met in Chengdu was an only child. In Wenchuan, however, where many families were of minority ethnic groups, who are exempt from this policy, most students had at least one sibling. Important rural/urban differences were demonstrated with the impact of a family's attitude towards education. In Chengdu we heard comments both in the schools and in the homes expressing the need for the kind of academic performance that would earn a student the right to attend a prestigious post-secondary school.

Conversely a number of rural families wanted children to leave school after their mandatory nine years. These agriculturally based families wanted and needed their children to help with the family farm. Class managers encouraged some families to allow their students to continue their education. Our impression was that student achievement, while improving, was still below urban levels. The availability and affordability of post-secondary studies was quite limited in Wenchuan; there was only one college. One of the students we interacted with who lived in

Wenchuan, emailed us to let us know of her progress towards college entrance.

There was also quite a difference in the teachers daily work routine. In urban schools, teachers appeared to have many opportunities to meet professionally either within their teaching discipline or across disciplines. On a few occasions we joined our urban hosts leaving their campus to attend professional development meetings whereas in Wenchuan professional development meetings were only observed during the Partnership seminars and teachers observing classrooms. The more remote teachers were the more irregular was their attendance at these sessions. In some cases remote teachers had to travel for at least a day to reach Wenchuan for a weekend meeting. We met some teachers who had to come down from their “station” school by foot, a journey of at least three hours down a mountainside trail. In the larger, central schools of Wenchuan, teachers were able to meet within their disciplines, but in the smaller rural schools teachers tended to be generalists with limited professional interaction.

We observed what appeared to be incredibly keen professional learners in the rural settings. Teachers followed up the professional development seminars in Wenchuan with invitations for us to visit their schools. When we were teaching in Wenchuan, many other teachers observed from the back of our classroom, a routine practice in Chinese schools. Our partner teachers in Wenchuan shared their professional experiences and thoughts about teaching at our lunch breaks, pumping us constantly for all the ideas and information our language barriers permitted. Teachers in China, be they urban or rural, appear to have an excellent way of ensuring new learning trickles through an entire staff. For example, we visited a rural elementary school outside of Wenchuan. There we heard about and saw

the students’ work from an experiential lesson about their minority culture. This lesson moved the students beyond textbooks. In the same classroom, we saw the teachers using visual representations of the Grade 1 students’ studies on the wall. Strategies taught at previous Canadian workshops were evident in the work on the walls. We were also invited to a school performance in Wenchuan where cultural dance and song were central to the event. At this performance, the students had been encouraged to show their English learning in more dramatic ways versus rote response and workbooks, again concepts some teachers saw first hand at conferences and shared with their colleagues.

Despite the different circumstances in both the urban and rural settings, all the teachers and teacher trainers we worked with demonstrated a strong commitment to educational reform, at least reform related to teacher training and student-centred instruction. We heard and saw the commitment from the Sichuan Teacher Training Center’s leaders to narrow the gap in professional growth opportunities for rural teachers. Upon returning to Chengdu from Wenchuan, we learned that many of the officials from the provincial training center were visiting and sharing ideas with their rural colleagues. When they returned they voiced their desire to increase the number of training sessions in the rural districts, and we suspect they would like to see their Canadian partners share in that endeavor. We could not help but feel giving rural teachers increased opportunities for professional development within their own neighborhoods will enable their passion and dedication as teachers to fuel education reform.