

Town Crier Article

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Why study China? First, China boasts an extraordinarily rich culture and history, going back to ancient times. Second, it is the world's most populated country, constituting almost 20% of the total world population. Third, it is a true economic powerhouse that has made great advances on many fronts, including in the areas of business, finance, science, and technology. It is perhaps the fastest growing economy in the world and potentially the largest global marketplace. Whether because of its culture, its past, its role in the global economy, or its promising future, China is an important course of study. Next year, we hope to begin to expand the opportunities for Wayland students to study Chinese language and culture. The FY13 budget, if passed, will add a new world language offering at the Middle School. Students now may choose to study Spanish, French, or Latin. Next year, they will also have Chinese as an option. The idea is to begin the program in the 2012 – 2013 School Year, and to subsequently add a section at the next grade level each succeeding year.

In conjunction with offering Chinese, we hope to begin an exchange program with a school in Beijing. Exchange programs influence the lives of all their participants by heightening cultural sensitivity and increasing mutual understanding and appreciation of each other as people. A group of high school students and a teacher from Wayland will have the opportunity to go on an extended visit to a school in Beijing. Students will stay with host families while in China. In an intensive way, it opens a window to the lives of Chinese students and their families. Similarly, students and a teacher from China will spend time here in Wayland living with local host families. This will provide a wonderful learning opportunity for the exchange students, while generally enhancing the teaching of Chinese culture throughout the district.

In September 2003, I was fortunate to travel to China, visiting three very different schools while I was there. The remainder of this article is taken from my reflections of this experience, written at that time. I hope you can get a sense of how I personally became fascinated by this country and why I want to extend such experiences to our students.

As soon as my plane landed in Beijing, I wanted to capture and hold on to every moment. Each sight and each event was more spectacular than the next. China is an inspiring country, full of contradictions and rich in culture. It was hard not to be humbled by its vast size, population, and history. I saw poverty and deprivation alongside great riches and modernization. There appeared to be progress – political, social, and economic – at every turn, along with the growing pains that accompany such rapid progress (pollution, for example). The great “tourist” sights surpassed my expectations, especially the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and Huangshan (Yellow) Mountain. There was something especially symbolic, for me, in the Great Wall. Here was an ancient structure, built at great human cost out of harsh stone surfaces in defense of the country. Yet, its meandering path through a beautiful countryside, and its attraction to peoples world over, made its harshness disappear and gave it a peaceful, almost meditative, presence. The most lasting impression, however, will likely be the personal connections our group made with the staff and students at the schools we visited.

The first school we visited was the Beijing Jingshan School. Upon arriving at the Jingshan School, we were greeted by a red carpet and a marching band. The school had invited us to an international conference, which commemorated (China's paramount leader) Deng Xiaoping's inscription at the entrance of the school. This inscription was referred to as the "Three Fors", or education for modernization, for the world, and for the future. Speakers from Russia, Canada, the United States, Japan, Australia, and China all spoke to this theme. We listened through interpreters. It was fascinating to hear how educators world-over struggle with issues relating to equity, technology, standardized tests, the distribution of resources, multicultural education, and more.

We were later able to visit the Jingshan School in action. First thing in the morning, we saw hundreds of students outside in the courtyard conducting their morning exercises. At this school, the resources were plentiful, more abundant than an "average" school in China. Each room had a computer and an LCD projector. There were impressive athletic facilities (including an Olympic size swimming pool), computer and video labs. There were art classrooms, but no student work was displayed. Students all had uniforms, as did staff, although they were not always worn. I peered into mathematics classes and noted that middle school students were learning absolute value, high school students were studying quadratic equations and measurement, and elementary students were learning multiplication. As in other parts of Chinese life, much looked familiar, although on closer inspection there were striking differences. Class size was often around 50 students – a marked contrast to our own classrooms. Lessons were goal driven. Students, as a result, were very clear on what they were expected to learn, partly because their performance on examinations significantly impacts where they can go to school in the future. I was not likely to see students working collaboratively in small group projects or investigations. I hesitate to generalize, however, because my trip was so short. One thing I can say is that the teachers were hard working, and the staff at this school extended themselves to our group and made us feel very welcomed.

We next visited the Xuining County Middle School near Huangshan Shi – a city southwest of Shanghai. The motto of this school is "honesty and persistence." It had 110 teachers and over 2,500 students and had just celebrated its 90th anniversary. This school bordered on a more rural area than the one in Beijing. The principal and teachers greeted us with great enthusiasm. We spoke to a class of students. Like teenagers here, they expressed great interest in sports (particularly the NBA), computer games, and comparisons between our two countries. Upon walking out of the classroom, we were surprised to find the entire student body leaning out of the classroom balconies cheering our delegation. It was an emotional, unexpected rush of attention that, more than any moment, exhibited the warm welcome we felt throughout our trip. The principal, teachers and administrators, a county education officer, and a local magistrate all took time out of their schedules to tour their city and countryside with us – an area renowned for its classic architecture, spectacular Huangshan Mountain, and surrounding fields of rice and tea. The food, by the way, was extraordinary – a treat throughout the trip!

Huang Cun, a local village nearby, was a highlight of the trip. This is where the (over 200 year old) Yin Yu Tang House originated, now relocated and reassembled at the

Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. (Visit the museum or check out the website: www.pem.org.) We saw a newly restored meeting house, and walked to the local K-2 schoolhouse, which was surrounded by a gorgeous pastoral landscape. A portrait of Chairman Mao greets students upon their arrival. There were 31 students, a teacher, and a principal. It is from small schools like this one that students who perform well enough eventually enter schools like the Xuining County Middle School. The principal was proud to report the success of past students, including a foreign ambassador. I was struck by the humble surroundings, and by the relative lack of resources (compared to our elementary schools). I wished I could stay longer to understand how student performance, and the resulting types of schools they attended, impacted students as they made their way through the school system. As far as I could tell, there were no special education services for students with moderate special needs in the schools I visited. Students with severe special needs, I was told, attend special schools.

At times during this trip, I was very aware of the privilege enjoyed by the citizens of Massachusetts compared to those in China. At other times, I was awed by the expansive scope of progress and modernization throughout China. Nowhere was this more evident than in Shanghai, a metropolitan center that rivals any city in the world. The skyscrapers, the stores, the neon lights, the museum, and the Old City were impressive sights. (Shopping anywhere in China, which required a type of bargaining that I was not used to, was an experience in and of itself. This, however, is another topic altogether.) When our trip ended, I felt as an educator both an excitement and responsibility for teaching students about China's rich history, its complex and disconcerting political system, and its emerging role as an economic powerhouse.

In just eleven days, I could not help but to become engaged in deep reflection – awed by my surroundings, puzzled and perhaps amazed by the contradictions I witnessed, fascinated by the similarities and differences in our educational systems, and honored by the expressions of friendship and good will. The trip deepened my understanding of China and its people. Exchange students describe similar reactions, and given their extended time away from home, their reactions are felt much more intensely. My hope is that Wayland will build a program over the years that will foster the kind of intercultural understanding, cooperation, and collaboration that, when done well, can only serve to make the world a better place.

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