The Double Education of My Twins' Chinese School

The President of China compared moral education to buttons on clothes. The girls' buttons were wrong from the start, but they learned the more valuable lessons that two systems can impart.

June 26, 2023

A century earlier, one of my daughters' great-grandfathers pursued schooling in the U.S. to further China, taking a name that meant "many diligent men drafted into service."Photograph by Jamie Chung for The New Yorker / Source photograph courtesy Irene Chow

At 7:01 *A.M.* on September 2, 2019, more than an hour before my twin daughters, Natasha and Ariel, were scheduled to begin third grade at Chengdu Experimental Primary School, the first message appeared on the WeChat group for parents. The group name was Class Six, and every time somebody posted a message, my phone beeped. The initial beep came from somebody called Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:

> Regarding today's weather, is it fine to wear shorts?

It took less than a minute for the next beep. This time, the writer was Number 35 Li Jialing's Mama:

> We are wearing shorts, it's not cold.

Each message appeared in the standard WeChat format: a time stamp, the sender's name, an avatar, and the text within a bubble. The bubbles scrolled down the screen like the dialogue of a play in which characters had been both named and numbered:

> 7:08 *A.M.*
>
> Number 13 Zhao Fan's Mama:
>
> There will be lots of people inside the classroom, it won't be cold.
>
> 7:17 *A.M.*
>
> Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:
>
> Fine, then we will also wear shorts. Thank you, dears @Number 35 Li Jialing's Mama and @Number 13 Zhao Fan's Mama.

For my wife, Leslie, and me, getting our daughters into Chengdu Experimental had been a long and mysterious process. In the spring of 2018, we had travelled from our home in Colorado to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan

Province, in southwestern China, in order to visit schools. We'd come away with a good impression of Chengdu Experimental, which is considered to be perhaps the best public primary school in the city. But administrators were noncommittal about admitting Ariel and Natasha. The school had no recent tradition of educating foreigners, and if the twins were to attend they would be the only Westerners in a student body of about two thousand.

They would also be the only children who didn't speak Mandarin. Leslie is Chinese American, and we met while working as journalists in Beijing, more than twenty years ago. When Ariel and Natasha were born, in southwestern Colorado, in 2010, they were given proper Chinese names. But the twins had never used these names, and Leslie and I hadn't tried to teach them Mandarin. We always had the idea that someday I would return to teach at a Chinese university, and the girls could learn the language through immersion.

This remained our plan when we moved to Chengdu, in August of 2019, three weeks before the fall semester. We stayed in a Sheraton across the street from Chengdu Experimental, and a tutor came every morning to give Ariel and Natasha a crash course in Mandarin. Meanwhile, Leslie and I tried to reach administrators and teachers at the school, mostly without success—it seemed that everybody was out of contact. Finally, with only four days until the start

of the semester, just when we were starting to panic, a teacher informed us that the girls were welcome to attend. It was never clear to us how or why this decision had been made.

As part of the registration process, I was instructed to join the other parents on WeChat. Sometimes WeChat groups develop their own distinct language, and in Class Six the standard pronoun was first-person plural, as if parent and child had merged: *We are wearing shorts; we have the math assignment*. For usernames, parents identified themselves by their children, and often they included the school-assigned student numbers. (For this story, I have changed the names and numbers of the other children.) In exchanges, people politely referred to one another by their full usernames—Number 35 Li Jialing's Mama, Number 42 Zhu Zhentao's Baba—as if these were formal titles.

"I love recording shaky videos I'll never watch or show anybody."

Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers

Along with the Mamas and the Babas, there were a few Nainais and Yeyes: grandmas and grandpas. A user in a WeChat group, in order to prompt a response, can double-tap somebody's avatar, which is called "tickling." Any tickle is documented, like a stage direction that everybody else can see. In addition to being the most popular app in China, WeChat may also be the most passive-aggressive. Chinese

tend to monitor the app obsessively, and they get impatient if a message goes unanswered. I often wondered if anybody else in Class Six found humor in the posts:

> 9:11 *P.M.*
>
> Number 07 Chen Qilan's Grandma tickled Number 26 Liu Peiyu's Mama

If I had followed the standard format, my own title would have been the longest: Number 54 Zhang Xingcai and Number 55 Zhang Xingrou's Baba. Ariel and Natasha were the only twins, and as latecomers they had been assigned the highest numbers. We hadn't had time to buy uniforms, so on the first day we borrowed two sets from the school: dark plaid skirts and white button-up shirts embroidered with the school insignia. All the other students were also wearing red scarves, the mark of the Young Pioneers, the Communist Party's organization for schoolchildren. Ariel and Natasha seemed nervous but composed when we said goodbye. A large sign hung on the classroom wall:

> The Entire Nation Celebrates the 70th Glorious Birthday of the People's Republic

That day, Leslie and I were moving into an apartment. We hired a van to transport luggage from the Sheraton, and then Leslie took a cab across town to *Ikea*, in order to buy some

furnishings. While I was unpacking, my phone beeped periodically, and I checked in on the Class Six dialogue. I noticed that parents also referred to their spouses by the children's names, which created even more opportunities for passive aggression:

> 11:58 *A.M.*
>
> Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:
>
> May I ask what time in the afternoon we are supposed to pick up the children?
>
> Chen Qilan's Mama:
>
> Yesterday at the parents' meeting Teacher Zhang said that they should pick up their children at the main gate at 3:40.
>
> Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:
>
> @Chen Qilan's Mama—Oh, thank you. Zhou Liming's Baba went to the meeting but he didn't tell me. [weeping-and-laughing-while-covering-eyes emoji]

Shortly before three o'clock, Number 54 Zhang Xingcai and Number 55 Zhang Xingrou's Mama called to explain that, because of various *Ikea*-related delays, she would be unable to make it to school for pickup. [weeping-and-laughing-

while-covering-eyes emoji] I waited alone in front of the gate. When Class Six marched out of the schoolyard, Teacher Zhang walked at the front of a neat line of children, and Ariel and Natasha were at the end. The twins held it together until they reached me.

“I feel so stupid!” Ariel said. She burst into tears, pressing against my side. “We didn’t understand anything!” Her sister was also sobbing: “I don’t want to go back!”

A few parents looked sympathetically in my direction, and Teacher Zhang hurried over. She was middle-aged, with large, alert eyes and a gentle manner. “I think that it was difficult for them,” she said.

I thanked her for her patience, and I said that we would continue to work on Mandarin at home. I waited for Ariel and Natasha to calm down before we walked to the subway station. Along the way, we passed a large red sign:

> Chengdu Experimental Primary School
> (Founded in 1918)
> Experimenting and Researching
> to Guide the Region

The school had no other American students or teachers, but early on it had been heavily influenced by ideas from the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, John

Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, had pioneered the concept of the experimental, or laboratory, school. For most of his career, Dewey had no special interest in China, but in the spring of 1919 he was invited to deliver a series of lectures in Japan. When Dewey was in Tokyo, a delegation of Chinese scholars visited and persuaded him to travel to China for a lecture tour.

Dewey's trip coincided with a critical historical moment. On May 4, 1919, three days after the philosopher arrived in China, thousands of university students gathered in Beijing to protest the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The students were upset that the victorious Allies planned to give German concessions in eastern China to the Japanese. Their protest expanded to address other political and social issues, eventually becoming known as the May Fourth Movement.

For more than two millennia, the Confucian emphasis on learning had been a strength of Chinese culture. But the primary goal of education had always been narrow: to prepare men—and only men—to pass the imperial civil-service examinations and become government officials. In 1905, the examination system was abruptly abolished, leaving intellectuals with an existential question: What should be the purpose of schooling in a modern China?

The title of Dewey's first public lecture in China was "Democratic Developments in America." More than a

thousand people attended, and soon the American was being hailed as a "second Confucius." He extended his lecture tour to last for more than two years, and he delivered some two hundred speeches around the country. *The Chinese Students' Monthly*, an expat publication based in New York, described the reception:

> Bankers and editors frequent his residences; teachers and students flock to his classrooms. Clubs compete to entertain him, to hear him speak; newspapers vie with each other in translating his latest utterances.

Dewey emphasized pragmatism and experimentation, and he warned his Chinese audiences against blindly importing any single Western model of schooling. China needed, in Dewey's opinion, "a new culture, in which what is best in western thought is to be freely adopted—but adapted to Chinese conditions." Dewey believed that education should prepare students to participate in democracy, an idea that was embraced by the May Fourth Movement, which promoted values that students personified as Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. Other political thinkers also took note. In 1920, a young Mao Zedong mentioned in letters that he was studying Dewey's works, and initially the young Communist was swayed by the American philosopher's stance against violence. In an early essay, Mao wrote, "Thus we will not provoke widespread chaos, nor pursue that

ineffectual ‘revolution of bombs,’ or ‘revolution of blood.’ ”

A number of educators who attended Dewey’s lectures and classes subsequently tried to incorporate his ideas into Chinese schools. One of these figures was Hu Yanli, who eventually became the principal of Chengdu’s most important primary school. In homage to Dewey, the school’s name was changed to include the word *shiyan*—“experiment; test.”

Hu Yanli led Chengdu Experimental for a dozen years, and the school still celebrates this period. On the twins’ first day, in the main courtyard, we passed a series of prominent commemorative displays. One featured a black-and-white photograph of Hu and other teachers gathered on the site of the current school. Another featured a quote from Hu, along with a reference to the most famous student educated under his watch:

> “In order to make it easier for other schools to adopt these concepts, we didn’t do anything capricious, but we consistently emphasized self-motivated study, and in particular we emphasized the fostering of a democratic spirit. We hoped to adapt to the individuality of each student and fully develop their genius.”
>
> From 1935 to 1939, Li Peng, the former Premier of the State Council, studied in Chengdu Experimental Primary

> School.

The school agreed that, in the beginning, Ariel and Natasha would be responsible for only their math homework. For *Yuwen*, or Language class, it was impossible for them to jump in at grade level, but there was no mystery about what they had missed. In the earliest grades, Chinese writing is itself a kind of math: an exercise in basic addition, as characters are memorized one after another.

Across China, all first graders begin the march to literacy with the same character: 天, “sky; Heaven.” From there, during the fall semester, children learn two hundred and ninety-nine more characters, and they add another four hundred in the spring. The pace accelerates in second grade: four hundred and fifty a semester, with the final lesson ending on 坟, “tomb.” All this is laid out in a series of four textbooks that are accompanied by boxes of flash cards, published by the Ministry of Education. In order to become proper Chinese third graders—to go all the way from Heaven to tomb—Natasha and Ariel needed to memorize a total of sixteen hundred characters.

They started with ten a day. Leslie organized our system of home study, and every afternoon, when the twins returned from school, she handed them a new stack of flash cards. For each set of ten, we quizzed them twice: first on recognition, then on writing. The flash cards outlined the

correct stroke order, and the twins wrote the characters over and over in dozens of cheap brown exercise books that lay scattered like autumn leaves around the apartment. On the opening page of the Language textbook, there was an image of the Chinese flag, a crowd of happy children from various ethnic groups, and Beijing's Tiananmen Gate with its famous portrait of Chairman Mao. The top of the page said, in large characters:

That semester, the twins spent thirty per cent more days in class than they would have at their Colorado public school. There are few school vacations in China, and the only significant break in the fall is for National Day, on October 1st. In 2019, children had five days off for the holiday, but they were required to make up two of those days on weekends. Ariel and Natasha's class was also given thirty-six pages of math homework to be completed during the break.

Leslie and I often felt overwhelmed, but even the parents whose children had been at Chengdu Experimental from the start seemed to be playing catch-up. Most of Ariel and Natasha's classmates were enrolled in private supplemental courses, and it was hard to imagine parents who were more attentive to their children's schooling. On the first day of class, I counted forty-nine beeps from the WeChat group. There were seventy messages on the second day. Day Three clocked in at two hundred and thirty-seven—an average of

one beep every six minutes for twenty-four hours. That was also the day that I figured out how to mute the alerts on WeChat.

Parents wrote at any time of the day or night. Once, when Leslie and I were uncertain about a math assignment, I posted a question, and in less than ten minutes the parents of two different children had sent photographs of the homework. The school relied on the parent group to handle certain administrative duties, like distributing official notices and collecting fees for uniforms and lunches. Occasionally, a parent visited a class in order to photograph the children's activities. Late one evening during the first week, Tang Zhiyun's Mama began posting pictures that she had taken during science class. Each image was perfectly focussed on an individual child wearing a white lab coat; I found Natasha in the thirty-first frame and Ariel in the seventy-third. Finally, after midnight, and after a hundred and seven photographs, the WeChat dialogue came to a temporary halt:

> 12:10 *A.M.*
>
> Number 42 Lei Hejia's Baba:
>
> @Tang Zhiyun's Mama, you still haven't gone to bed? You've been working hard
>
> 12:15 *A.M.*

> Tang Zhiyun's Mama:
>
> I have a lot more, but I can't send them all right now. Tomorrow . . .

Sure enough, ten hours and eleven minutes later, Tang Zhiyun's Mama posted another seventy-six images of children in lab coats.

At afternoon pickups, I looked at the faces around me and marvelled at the apparent normalcy. Most parents seemed like typical middle-class urban Chinese: they didn't dress in expensive clothes, and many of them took the subway, like us. They appeared unfazed by the presence of foreigners, and they referred to the twins as Cai Cai and Rou Rou. In China, it's common to simplify a three-part name by doubling the last character, and the twins had been nicknamed almost immediately.

"You're telling me I should leave the artists' commune that saved me from my stepmother's tyrannical élitism, where I have seven boyfriends, to become the impotent figurehead of another unjust power structure?"

Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

It was remarkable how quickly they were incorporated into the school's system. On the second day, Teacher Zhang found two students who spoke some English, and each child shadowed a twin. At the end of the first week, a school rally celebrated Chengdu International Poetry Week, a local

festival. The WeChat group distributed a poster with an image of the rally, at which all students had been seated in rows on the sports field. The children wore white uniform shirts and red Young Pioneer scarves, and with their left hands they held blue volumes of a Chinese classic, "Three Hundred Tang Poems," against their chests.

I saw that Natasha and Ariel had been positioned in the front row. Somebody must have loaned them the scarves, and they clutched books that they couldn't yet read. Like everybody else, the twins were waving their arms at a forty-five-degree angle. Also like the other children, and like many Chinese in photographs, Natasha and Ariel were not smiling. If it weren't for the classical-poetry books, the scene could have been a Maoist rally, and it gave me a strange sensation. But that was all part of what we had signed up for—the characters, the poetry, the nicknames, the rallies. *I am Chinese*.

Like some Chinese American couples, Leslie and I had given our children different family names to be used on each side of the Pacific. In English, the twins were Hesslers, but their Chinese family name—Zhang—came from Leslie. The first character of their given names—Xing—had been selected more than a century before their birth, by one of their maternal great-great-grandfathers. He was a native of northeastern China, the region once known as Manchuria.

Throughout most of history, the northeast had been remote and unpopulated, but it started to develop at the end of the nineteenth century.

The twins' great-great-grandfather capitalized on these changes by buying an oil press and flour mill. Soon, he became the largest landowner in his village, and he established the foundation for what he hoped would become a great clan. He married four wives, built a family compound, and opened a primary school for his offspring and some other local children. For good measure, he named the next twenty generations of Zhangs. These names were arranged in a poem that read, in classical Chinese:

> *Feng Li Tong Xing Dian*
> *Hong Lian Yu Bao Chao*
> *Wan Chuan Jia Qing Yan*
> *Jiu Yang Guo En Zhao*

The members of each generation would adopt one character in their names, following the lines in succession—a poem that, in human terms, would be finished in approximately five hundred years. As part of the fourth generation, Ariel and Natasha were given Xing, the fourth character, which means "prospering." The poem connects the family's success to that of China:

> The phoenix stands in the palace of prospering together

> The swan connects and nurtures the dynasty of treasures
> Ten thousand generations pass on the continuing family celebration
> Nine ornaments display the favor of the nation.

The Zhang patriarch believed in Confucian values, but he was also open to some new ideas. At the family school, he had his daughters educated alongside his sons, which in previous eras would have been unheard of. He decided that his first wife's second son—the twins' great-grandfather—should be prepared to enter the modern world. The boy was sent to the first middle school in Jilin Province that followed a curriculum called New Learning. The school taught the Chinese classics, but the top priorities were mathematics, history, geography, and the natural sciences. The boy excelled, and in his late teens he won a scholarship to study in the United States.

At some point after arriving in America, in 1920, he marked the transition by adopting a new name: Zhang Shenfu. The last two characters come from a classical phrase that means "many diligent men drafted into service." Shenfu was part of one of the first significant waves of Chinese students to come to the U.S., and this was also when John Dewey was spreading his ideas across China. In America, young Chinese tended to major in pragmatic subjects that they believed would be useful in their homeland. More than a third of the

Chinese students who went to the United States between 1905 and 1924 became engineers.

Shenfu had intended to study literature, but he switched his major to mining engineering. He attended the Michigan College of Mines, near the Canadian border, and after graduation he worked a variety of jobs across America. In his diary, he describes his work experience in terms of patriotic responsibility:

> January 26, 1926
>
> China still does not have a person who manufactures machinery. To have it begin with me in the future would be a most wonderful thing.
>
> February 4, 1926
>
> Harbin's transport is very convenient; I would like to do some work there. But its railways are all in the hands of foreigners. This is a hateful thing.

He often exhorts himself to self-improvement, and he admires American technology and many aspects of the political traditions. But he maintains a deep wariness of the culture:

> January 1, 1926

> My personal conduct must be honorable and in my dealings I must be more frugal.
>
> I had lunch with my landlord, Harry Weart. His neighbors, an old couple, like to play with dogs and birds, and they spoke of their pets. I am disgusted by this kind of talk.
>
> January 9, 1926
>
> The youth society in America is all about dancing and cars. Family life has been completely destroyed. The women pursue dissolution and the men seek idleness as pleasure. Thefts and murders are increasing by the day. Morality is regressing. . . . China must take America as a forerunner of what is to come.

In the two-thousands, when Leslie was researching her book "Factory Girls," which includes some sections on family history, she translated entries with the assistance of a scholar of classical Chinese. In the diary, rows of Chinese characters are punctuated by the English names of various enterprises: Sincerity Coal Company, in Herrin, Illinois; International Lead Refining Company, in East Chicago, Indiana. Shenfu tries factory jobs, engineering jobs, mining jobs. While visiting mines in Colorado, he finds a restaurant called Mandarin Chop Suey. ("There was a half-Chinese waitress who was very pretty and cute, only sixteen years old.") Sometimes, in these hard-edged towns, he feels

unsafe:

> April 26, 1926
>
> In the morning I went to the factory to work. The night before, two blacks killed a white guy with a knife. Yesterday the whites set fire to a black church. The situation on the streets is very nervous. Tonight the whites have chased all the blacks out of the area. I packed my luggage and will go to New York tomorrow.

This fear seems to have passed quickly, or maybe the excesses of the Roaring Twenties were a distraction. They must have seemed nearly as bizarre to a mining Manchurian as they would have to a Martian:

> May 22, 1926
>
> In the morning I went into the No. 72 mine and looked at the rotary dumps.
>
> Since I started work here, I have gotten up every morning at 6:15. I am full of energy. People should get up early and not oversleep.
>
> A theatre operator in New York ordered a woman to take off her clothes before five hundred guests and stand in a giant bottle of alcohol, then he served the alcohol to the guests. There is a lawsuit about this.

In 1927, after seven years away, Shenfu returned to China. His father—the man who had named twenty generations of Zhangs—welcomed his son with a grand celebration in the village. The following day, the patriarch pummelled Shenfu on the backside with a traditional wooden rod called a *jiafa*. The ritual beating was carried out because, on the other side of the ocean, the young man had changed his major without requesting permission from his father. Nearly a century later, it seems incredible: a Chinese parent who beat his son for switching from literature to engineering.

In Chengdu, Leslie and I had thought that math would be relatively manageable for the girls, because numbers are universal. But we quickly realized that Chinese textbooks often bury digits beneath a pile of words. Much of Unit 1 was dedicated to logistics in a crowded country, as students waded through word problems that involved seating large numbers of people on buses, trains, and boats. There were also questions about schoolyard rallies:

> The class has 18 boys and 18 girls who will participate in drill performances and group calisthenics.
>
> Naughty: "During drill performances, we classmates stand in 4 lines."
>
> Smiley: "During group calisthenics, one pattern is formed by a set of 3 boys and 3 girls."

> In drill performances, what's the average number of people standing in each line?
>
> During calisthenics, how many patterns can be formed by 36 people?

Problems were often conveyed through dialogues between cartoon characters, some of whom had loaded names: Naughty, Little Sloppy, Clever Dog, Wise Old Man. Long paragraphs included irrelevant background information, with some details designed to distract. Occasionally, a mistake was deliberately inserted into a word problem:

> While multiplying one two-digit number by another two-digit number, Little Sloppy misreads 22 as 25, and as a result his answer is higher than the correct answer by 69. What is the correct answer?

After a long day teaching at Sichuan University, the last thing I wanted to do was clean up Little Sloppy's second digits. But Leslie and I plowed ahead, dictionaries at hand. Sometimes we came across a word that we didn't know even in English. In Unit 7, we learned *run*, or "intercalary," which, according to Merriam-Webster, means "inserted in a calendar." Cai Cai and Rou Rou kept missing questions about *run* years, until we read the fine print on page 69 of their math textbook:

> [Every four years] there is a year that adds 1 day in

> February, for a total of 366 days, and these are called *run* years. It is also stipulated that if a year ends in double zeros, it must be divisible by 400 in order to qualify as a *run* year. So the year 2000 is a *run* year, but the year 1700 is not a *run* year.

If Leslie or I had ever learned the divisible-by-four-hundred rule about leap years, we had long since forgotten. After all, it would be personally relevant only if we lived until the year 2100, when, at the age of a hundred and thirty, we would need to make plans for a February with just twenty-eight days. But Chinese third graders needed this information now:

> Out of 1900, 1996, 2018, and 2016, how many *run* years are there?
>
> Out of 1800, 1960, and 2040, which is not a *run* year?

Children also had to memorize the number of days in each month, and questions were devious:

> Ping Ping: "I was looking through a calendar and saw that there was one year when November had five Saturdays and five Sundays."
>
> Huang Feifei: "So what day of the week would November 1st have been that year?"

Was this really math? Chinese learning strategies often depend heavily on rote memorization, and I had assumed that math would involve repetitive worksheets. But the subject was far more dynamic than that. Even the problems had problems—students had to figure out what the question was really asking, and which information was extraneous. They were required to show how they arranged equations, and grading was strict. At the end of the first semester, when parents gathered for a conference at the school, the math instructor concluded her talk with a statement on values. "Math is virtue," she declared. "Math is a way to cultivate yourself."

Cartoon by Edward Steed

It also seemed tailor-made for a hyper-competitive society in which citizens needed to be alert. One guiding principle behind Chinese third-grade math could be summarized as: Don't be a sucker. Leslie said that when you read an American exam you can tell that the writers of the exam want children to get things right. But the authors of Chinese exams are aiming for wrong answers.

Our favorite question that semester appeared on page 56 of the math textbook. There was a drawing of a mirror, and inside the mirror was an image of a clock. The question read:

> Long Yiming started to do his homework after he got

> home from school. In the mirror, he could see that his wall clock (which had only graduated markings, no numbers) said the time was 6:30. After Long Yiming finished his homework, he turned on the television, and "Dragon Gate Story," which is broadcast at 18:30, was just beginning. How is this possible?

Those were typical distractions—the digressive grammar, the confusing use of both "6:30" and "18:30," the sneaky detail of a clock without numbers. But the principle remained the same: Don't be a sucker. If an image is reversed, an hour hand that appears to be to the left of six o'clock is actually to the right. Rou Rou scrawled the answer in her fledgling characters:

> He saw "6:30" in the mirror, but the time was really 5:30. So he did homework for one hour.

Shortly after the twins' Chinese great-grandfather returned from the United States, one of their American great-grandfathers made his own academic journey. Frank Dietz—my mother's father—travelled across the Atlantic rather than the Pacific. Eventually, he settled on a different version of Zhang Shenfu's dream: to study in the West and then apply that knowledge in China.

Like his Chinese counterpart, Frank had grown up in a provincial town that was starting to develop. His father, who

worked for a train line in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, died suddenly, at the age of twenty-nine, probably after being infected by an early wave of the Spanish flu. Frank, the eldest of three brothers, was only six. In time, his mother realized that she couldn't raise the boys alone, and she enrolled them as boarding students at Subiaco Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in west-central Arkansas. Frank was a talented student, and the monks encouraged his interest in the priesthood.

In 1929, the Benedictines sent Frank, who was eighteen, to study as a monk at Sant'Anselmo all'Aventino, an abbey in Rome. As part of the transition, he changed his name to Frank Anselm Dietz. In Rome, he kept a diary, which, like the journals of Zhang Shenfu, has been passed down by descendants. Sometimes these two young men—one writing in classical Chinese, the other in English—comment on the same things. Both wrote about Benito Mussolini on anniversaries of January 3, 1925, the day on which he had assumed the powers of a dictator.

Zhang Shenfu:

> January 3, 1926
>
> Since Mussolini's rise, Italy's social situation has improved and the ambitions of its citizens have increased and recovered very much. This will create more problems for

> the rest of Europe.

Frank Dietz:

> January 3, 1931
>
> Read Mussolini's good-will speech to America. I think about half of it is "boloney."

Both diaries describe poor health, undoubtedly from the stress of living in strange environments. Language was part of the challenge. Shenfu learned English, and Frank battled with Latin, Italian, and Hebrew. One patch of common ground between Confucians and Benedictines is self-flagellation, and the tone of certain Shenfu entries—*in my dealings I must be more frugal*—is echoed by Frank:

> January 12, 1931
>
> Am dreadfully lazy and "sleep in" for the first time this year, and Deo volente, the last time.
>
> January 24, 1931
>
> Can't get any interest in any of my classes and don't do any work all day. This can't go on!

But the writers' orientations toward their home countries are vastly different. For Shenfu, China's poverty and political chaos represent personal burdens, and his entries are full of

distressed references to warlords, race traitors, and foreign aggressors. Frank, on the other hand, almost never comments on news from the United States. His boat docks at Naples the month of the stock-market crash of 1929, but he never refers to that event, or to the Depression. Apparently, Frank is confident that the United States will continue to flourish in his absence, and, in any case, this is not his struggle. He often seems to lack direction, but then, in the spring of his second year, there's a sudden spark of life:

> March 18, 1931
>
> Dom Francis Clougherty, chancellor of the Catholic University, Peking, arrives here to-day on his way back to China. A big strapping Irishman.
>
> March 22, 1931
>
> Fr. Clougherty is very interesting to listen to. According to him the University is under a perfectly solid foundation and he has received promises to come out to China from a considerable number of very capable teachers, both Benedictine and otherwise.
>
> March 23, 1931
>
> All small talk among Americans is now about China.

March 25, 1931

Pontifical High Mass this morning and Solemn Vespers before dinner. . . . Talk to Hugh and Donald about China upon my return. Fr. Clougherty had a big day to-day but came down to Donald's room and gives Donald, Hugh, Edward and me an inspiring talk. We are so wrought up that when Clougherty leaves at 12 o'clock Donald, H, and I stay up and talk it over till almost 3 *A.M.* I believe that this is the turning point in my life and I am going to sign up for China. God be with us!

"He's not even appreciating the window seat."
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

The Catholic University of Peking, known in Chinese as Fu Jen, had been established by Benedictines from Pennsylvania in 1925. Like many foreign projects of the time, the university sought to combine pragmatism and faith, science and God. Pope Pius XI issued a proclamation: "You should supply the University at Peking on the one hand with the men best fitted to govern, to teach, and to bring up souls in piety, and on the other hand to provide the equipment and instruments to teach the sciences properly."

Father Francis Clougherty—the "big strapping Irishman"—was actually Irish American, from Pennsylvania. His visit to Rome was brief, but he inspired Frank and other young

monks to change career plans. That spring, Frank's diary tracks their progress as they try to negotiate with the formidable Catholic bureaucracy. Some Church titles would not have been out of place in the future People's Republic:

> March 27, 1931
>
> Everything is China at present. I breathe, eat and sleep *China* and I think that is about the case with all of our "China group." Fr. Clougherty is sick in bed this morning. . . . He & Donald have an interview with Cardinal Van Roseum, Prefect of Propaganda, this afternoon.
>
> May 8, 1931
>
> Raph receives very encouraging letter from his senior at Washington saying that he has no objection to Raph's changing his vows for China.

Frank's superiors remained noncommittal about his China dream. In 1932, Frank returned to the United States, where he planned to be ordained as a priest. He told his Benedictine superior that he had received a call from God to serve as a teacher at the Catholic University of Peking. The superior replied that occasionally God gives a false call, in order to test a young man's obedience to his earthly superior. And, in this case, the earthly superior expected Frank to teach the next generation of schoolboys at Subiaco

Abbey, in rural Arkansas.

By the middle of November, Rou Rou and Cai Cai had memorized more than five hundred characters, and they understood most of what was spoken in class. Leslie and I had worried about the twins becoming a burden, but Teacher Zhang never expressed frustration. I couldn't imagine handling two foreigners along with fifty-three other third graders, especially in the Chinese way. There were no groups or divisions: all fifty-five moved through the material at the same pace. At one conference with parents, Teacher Zhang talked about *weibade wenti*, "the problem of the tail." Using a PowerPoint slide, she showed us how, during the previous semester, seven students had failed to reach ninety per cent in the final exam. This term, the number of sub-ninety children had been reduced to four. "These are the students that we spend the most time with," she said. It was probably one reason that she seemed comfortable with the foreigners—if Rou Rou and Cai Cai lengthened the tail, Teacher Zhang could handle it.

Whereas American education often values small classes, the Chinese system tends to focus on efficiency and specialization. A typical American primary-school teacher handles all subjects, but Teacher Zhang taught only Language. She was assisted by a teacher in training, who was also a specialist, and another instructor came to the

classroom for math, another for English, and so on across the subjects. Throughout the day, children hardly moved from their seats. Lunch was wheeled into the classroom on a metal cart, and the kids ate at their desks, like little workaholics. During class, they sat with both feet on the floor and their arms crossed neatly atop the desks. If a teacher called on a student, the child stood up before speaking. In math, whenever a student drew a line in an equals sign, a minus sign, or a division sign, she was required to use a ruler. For a while, the math teacher tolerated Cai Cai and Rou Rou writing these symbols freehand, but then she started deducting points, and the twins quickly adjusted to using rulers. This discipline was part of the over-all emphasis on efficiency: if children were orderly, they wasted less time.

The system also maximized parental support while minimizing input to effectively zero. Parents were discouraged from entering the front gate, with the occasional exception of photographers or others with special business. On WeChat, parents busily engaged in fee collecting and other administrative duties, and they exchanged countless messages about homework, uniforms, and virtually every other topic under the sun. But I never saw a parent post advice for Teacher Zhang. There were no suggestions, no complaints, and no criticisms. The message from the school was clear: We are in charge.

And the “we” of the chat group—the way that parents were subsumed by their children—was also true in person. Parent-teacher conferences were held with everybody at once, and adults sat in their children’s assigned desks. Only Leslie and I attended as a complete Mama-and-Baba set, because having twins gave us the right to two seats. Every other couple had to select one parent to attend.

The moment the adults occupied the desks, their body language changed. They kept their eyes to the front, and they didn’t fiddle with their phones except to take pictures of PowerPoint slides. The conferences could last for two hours, but parents remained fully attentive. In four semesters, nobody asked a single question. That message was also clear: You are here to listen.

Another Chinese educational strategy involves a hierarchy of academic priorities, almost to the point of triage. At Chengdu Experimental, everything revolved around Language and mathematics, which produced almost all the student’s homework—usually, a total of between two and three hours a night. These two subjects also had the best textbooks; in particular, the math book was brilliantly organized. But some of the other textbooks could have been tossed together by Little Sloppy and his cronies. In English class, the government-published books were full of inane stories about accident-prone children who were constantly falling down,

breaking bones, and going to the hospital. These dumb kids couldn't even board a plane without experiencing some far-fetched disaster:

> Mary and her mother are flying over the mountains in a small plane.
> Suddenly there is a loud noise. The plane has a problem!
> It crashes.
> Mary's mother is hurt. She says, "Mary, I can't move. We need help."
> Mary has a good idea. She writes SOS with her feet in the snow.

There were more catastrophes in Morality and Rules, the political class that was supposed to teach third graders to behave well and to love the Communist Party and the nation. In that textbook, children often drowned in rivers and ponds, and they were abducted by apparently friendly aunties who turned out to be predators. One chapter told the story of Mo Mo, a nine-year-old who plays with his father's cigarette lighter in a vacant field. The good news is that the dedicated staff at the hospital save Mo Mo's life. The bad news:

> But he suffered extensive burns all over his body, resulting in permanent disability. Blind curiosity and careless experimentation have brought great misfortune to Mo Mo, his family, and society.

It was telling that the nouns “curiosity” and “experimentation” were both connected to negative adjectives. If one guiding principle of Chinese primary education was “Don’t be a sucker,” another seemed to be “Fear everything outside the classroom.” This was one of many contradictions at an institution whose name included the word “experimental.” The school’s beautiful campus included basketball courts, a soccer field, a jungle gym, and a track. But I rarely saw children playing outdoors. They had daily recess and P.E. class, but the math teacher had the right to requisition these periods if she felt that kids needed to study. Occasionally, Rou Rou and Cai Cai had three math classes in a single day. After school, when I asked them what they had done at recess, they often answered, “Math.”

Strict safety rules forbade any child below sixth grade to touch the jungle gym. The twins found this ridiculous—they said that the jungle gym would have bored any Colorado kindergartner. Near the displays about the school’s history, there was a sign with the heading “Rules for Primary School Students.” The guidelines ran for nearly three hundred characters, organized into nine parts, from the Party to Polonius and beyond:

> 1. Love the Party, Love the country, Love the people. . . .
>
> 6. Be honest and keep your promises. Insure that you are as good as your word, don’t lie or cheat, return borrowed

> things on time. . . .
>
> 8. Cherish life and keep safe. Stop at red lights and go at green lights, avoid drowning and don't play with fire. . . .

The rules didn't mention individuality, self-motivated study, or other virtues that had been extolled by Hu Yanli, the principal and John Dewey acolyte. In the schoolyard, the sole reference to "democratic spirit" was the one that appeared on the same sign as the name of Li Peng, the former premier. Nearby, there was a short biography of Li and a display of his calligraphy. Of course, none of these materials mentioned that, in June of 1989, Li Peng had reportedly advocated for the use of force to suppress the student and worker protests in Tiananmen Square. In the wake of the massacre, in which at least hundreds of people died, the most famous alumnus of Chengdu Experimental was nicknamed the Butcher of Beijing.

After Dewey's lecture tour, he never returned to China, and most of his ideas failed to gain traction there in the long term. Mao Zedong quickly turned against the principle of nonviolence, although he continued to value pragmatism and experimentation, at least in the early years of the revolution. Mao, in his home province of Hunan, researched local peasant movements in a systematic manner, and his observations contradicted dogmatic Marxists. Mao concluded that support for Communism was more likely to

come from rural regions than from the urban working class, an idea that proved instrumental in the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Nevertheless, after Mao rose to power, he initiated political campaigns attacking Dewey and his Chinese followers.

This was a common pattern for early educational exchanges between the U.S. and China. It was largely a history of missed connections and lost opportunities; from the American perspective, it often seemed as if China took the pragmatism without the democratic values, the science without the faith. In the case of Frank Dietz, the China dream ended quickly. His first false call from God was also his last: without the option of going to Beijing, Frank decided to leave the Benedictines. He enrolled in law school, married, had two children, and eventually ran a small business selling insurance.

Later in life, my grandfather rarely talked about his decision to decline ordination. He remained a devout Catholic, and I never learned about his interest in China while he was alive. In my mid-twenties, not long before I went to China with the Peace Corps, my mother gave me Frank's diaries. I often wondered what would have happened if he had joined the other Benedictines at the Catholic University of Peking. Father Clougherty—the "big strapping Irishman"—spent more than two decades in China. During the Second World

War, while directing relief work in support of Chinese soldiers who were fighting Japan, he was arrested by the Japanese. He spent four years as a prisoner of war; after surviving that experience, he had a long retirement in the U.S. Back in Beijing, Catholic University was taken over by the Communists, who came to power in 1949. The university's facilities were assigned to Party-run institutions. Eventually, another version of the university was founded in Taiwan, where it's known as Fu Jen Catholic University.

Zhang Shenfu's working life was also shaped by war. During the fight against Japan, he used his American education to oversee Chinese mines on behalf of the Kuomintang government. Accompanied by his wife, Xiangheng, Shenfu moved frequently, and all of the couple's five children were born in remote mining towns. Shenfu continued his diary:

> July 17, 1940
>
> These few years have passed quickly without much meaning. First, I have no friends, because I have lived so long in the mountains, separated from the outside world. Second, I have no ideals in life, knowing only about mines and mining work. What is the ultimate aim of life? I have not decided yet. Forty-two years have passed in this way. This is worthy of pity and regret.

After Japan surrendered, in August, 1945, the Kuomintang

needed to regain control of valuable mines. Chinese Communists were building support in the northeast, often with the help of Soviet troops. The following January, the Kuomintang instructed Shenfu to oversee the return of an important coal mine in Fushun, in Liaoning Province. Fushun was dangerous, and another official, who was known for political maneuvering, had found a way to decline the assignment. But Shenfu had always been motivated by duty. Unlike Frank, he had never taken a monk's vow of obedience, but his patriotism seemed as powerful as any religious faith. He accepted the Fushun assignment.

At the mine, local Communist and Soviet agents prevented Shenfu from carrying out a proper inspection. He tried to return to the provincial capital, but a band of armed soldiers boarded the train at a deserted station. At nine o'clock on a bitterly cold evening, the men marched Shenfu and six other Kuomintang mining engineers to a nearby hillside, where, with their hands bound behind their backs, they were murdered with bayonets. Shenfu was stabbed eighteen times. A Chinese newspaper reported his last words: "To die for my duty, I have no complaints."

"I warned you there'd be pinecones and needles, jutting roots, sharp twigs, and every kind of pebble known to man."

Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

Shenfu's second son was only nine. His name was Zhang

Ligang—Li was the second character of the patriarch's poem. The family fled the mainland in 1949, and the boy became a standout student in Taipei. For graduate school, he also journeyed across the Pacific. He studied engineering and physics in the United States, where he married another science student from Taiwan. Eventually, they became American citizens. With the births of Leslie and her brother—Tonghe and Tongyi—the family poem inched forward another character. Back in China, the official who had declined the Fushun assignment abandoned the Kuomintang, joined the Communist Party, enjoyed a long career in government, and lived to the age of a hundred and two.

Nobody in the Party took credit or responsibility for Shenfu's assassination, and they never explained why they had targeted a civilian. For Shenfu, the Communists had always been mysterious. In America, almost twenty years to the day before he was killed, he had written:

> January 19, 1926
>
> Those people who sing the praises of Communism, it is hard to know what they are really thinking in their hearts. Lenin and Trotsky have endured many sufferings without changing their orientation. They have good morality. But China's Communists, I don't know what their morality is like.

During Cai Cai and Rou Rou's second year at Chengdu Experimental, they learned to use Morality and Rules class as a time to catch up on math homework. By now, they had worked through the boxes of flash cards and could study at grade level. On some cards, the contextual sentences also did the Party's work:

> Plunder: The imperialist countries plundered a lot of wealth in China.

In June, 2020, along with their classmates, Cai Cai and Rou Rou were given gold pins that marked their membership in the Young Pioneers. They wore the pins and red scarves on Mondays, and they participated in the various rallies in the schoolyard. The twins seemed instinctively skeptical of these routines, and sometimes they came home with tales of a lesson about American imperialists or China's claim to the Spratly Islands. Leslie and I always told them that they should be respectful, because they were guests at the school, but that they had no obligation to believe everything they were taught.

Once, in a speech at Peking University, President Xi Jinping described the project of educating young people in core socialist values as similar to "fastening buttons on clothes." He said, "If the first button is fastened wrong, the remaining buttons will be fastened wrong." Leslie and I realized that there was no need to counteract the propaganda, because

our daughters, as Americans, had buttons that were wrong from the start. Cai Cai told me that sometimes in Morality and Rules class she kept the text open with her math book inside. She also liked to *zoushen*, a term that means "the spirit walks away"—to daydream. My own students at Sichuan University reported doing similar things during their mandatory political courses.

It was one of many mixed lessons in a Chinese school. Politics was omnipresent, which meant that students often learned to tune out the Party. Some classes taught more eternal truths about bureaucracy, principles, and the art of dissociation. A chapter of the fourth-grade Language textbook told the story of Liu Yuxi, a Tang-dynasty poet and government official. In the story, Liu takes a stance against corruption and is relegated to a remote place called Hezhou. In Hezhou, a petty superior repeatedly demotes Liu to worse lodgings. With each bureaucratic transfer, the poet's residence is diminished, but he finds his own way to *zoushen*—he gazes out the window and writes a subtle verse about the disconnect between what he sees and what's happening inside his head. The story concludes by noting that, a thousand years later, Liu's poems are still alive, while the petty superior is *yipou huangtu*—"a handful of yellow earth."

In the book "John Dewey in China," Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, a scholar of education, notes that Dewey believed

there was much to be learned from Chinese traditions, a conclusion that seems common among foreigners who spend significant time in Chinese schools. More recently, in "Little Soldiers," the Chinese American author Lenora Chu described her son's experience in a Shanghai kindergarten. Chu is critical of many aspects of the school, but she admires its high academic standards. She also pushes back against the common notion that Chinese rigor necessarily stifles creativity. Chu believes that "a strong academic foundation, couched in knowledge, enables higher-order thinking and even the creative process."

Both Ariel and Natasha liked Chinese math for similar reasons. It was more than simply a gateway to *STEM*: the subject was full of words and ways of thinking. As a parent, I liked the systematic nature of Chinese schooling, the specialization of the teachers, and the dignity with which they carried themselves. I also liked the fact that nobody cared what I liked—along with every other Baba and Mama, I was welcome to flush any nervous parental energy down the whirlpool of WeChat. During our time in Chengdu, my older sister, who had taught for nearly thirty years in primary and middle schools in Missouri, left the profession. She told me that she had noticed children and parents becoming less respectful of teachers. My sister's experience doesn't seem unusual for American teachers, whose burnout rate is high.

I rarely heard such complaints in China. In the nineteen-nineties, I taught English at a teachers' college there, and since then I've stayed in close contact with more than a hundred of my former students, whom I often ask to fill out surveys. I estimate that at least ninety per cent of them still work as teachers in middle and high schools. In 2021, when I asked them to rate their job satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, the average response was 7.9.

Still, despite these teachers' over-all happiness, they are highly critical of the system's flaws. "China's education is like junk food," one English teacher wrote in response to my survey. Another remarked, "Most of what students are learning at school is useless." Their peers often complained about the volume of homework and the way that pressure builds as students get older, because of entrance examinations for high school and college. But nobody seemed to have any idea how to change the system. Once, when my family had dinner at the home of one of the twins' classmates, her parents said they hated enrolling their child in private supplemental courses. "Would I rather have her relaxing and learning things other than math?" the father said. "Of course. But there's nothing I can do about it. That's the way all parents feel. It's too competitive. But, if you want your child to have a chance, you have to do all this stuff." His solution was to send his daughter to spend summers with relatives in the U.S., where she could learn other things with

less pressure.

My family left China in the summer of 2021. Before departing, we attended our final parent-teacher conference. Teacher Zhang warned that some children were getting fat, because of physical inactivity. She also emphasized independence. “You can’t wait until they are eighteen and say, ‘O.K., now you start making your own decisions,’ ” she said. “You shouldn’t fear your child failing.” Of course, these messages were contradicted by the textbooks, the school rules, and the sheer workload. That summer, the Offices of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council issued a series of guidelines that were intended to reduce pressure on children. But getting around the rules turned out to be relatively easy, and, two years later, my teacher friends report that little has changed.

Such failed attempts at reform aren’t entirely different from what happened a century ago, when John Dewey was in China, and Zhang Shenfu was in America, and the Benedictines were establishing their university in Peking. Leslie and I were also following a well-worn path. Like many people with experience in both China and the United States, we wanted something in between. But each country had a tendency toward extremes, and deeply entrenched systems resisted reform. Solutions tended to be at the individual level, like the classmate whose parents sent her overseas

every summer. In order to combine the strengths of both places, it seemed necessary to have two lives, two educations, two names.

After returning to Colorado, we decided that Cai Cai and Rou Rou would continue to follow the Chinese curriculum for Language and mathematics. Our rural public school in the town of Ridgway agreed, and two mornings a week the twins stayed home and connected by video with a tutor in Chengdu. At night, they did Chinese math problems:

> A certain number, when divided by 3, leaves a remainder of 2; when divided by 4, leaves a remainder of 3; when divided by 5, leaves a remainder of 4. What is the smallest that this number could be?

During the first week of school in Colorado, Ariel reported that she had to stop herself from crossing her arms on the desk and standing up whenever teachers called on her. During the third week, the Ridgway middle school bused all students and teachers to a lake on the Uncompahgre Plateau, where, at an elevation of nearly ten thousand feet, they camped for three days. Midway through the semester, Natasha announced that her favorite class was shop. She and her classmates began the term by fixing tables and chairs in the library, and later they learned how to change an automobile tire. One morning, the teacher showed them how to use an extension ladder. He opened the ladder, propped it

against the side of the shop building, and had the children take turns climbing up. Natasha said she was thrilled to stand on the roof of the school without any rails. ♦