9-4-2009

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September 4, 2009 in urban China by The China Beat | Permalink

By Daniel A. Bell

China, as everybody knows, is not a politically free country. There are constraints on political activity and many social critics fall afoul of the system. The foreign press often reports on those cases, leading to the impression that it’s impossible to do any good outside of official channels. What is less well known, however, is that some areas of social life that were once politically taboo – such as the plight of migrant workers and environmental concerns – are now openly discussed in the Chinese media. There are also a growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that do good work in those areas.

One such NGO in Beijing is called Xiezuozhe 协作者 (Facilitator) which came into being in the spring of 2003, when the SARS crisis hit Beijing. Today, it focuses mainly on the plight of migrant workers in large Chinese cities. Its methods are transparent and non-confrontational and it aims to be a constructive force for social change. The NGO gets funding from Chinese philanthropists and large Western companies, and a couple of years ago I joined my wife – a Chinese national who works for one of their donors – on an outing in a poor district in the outskirts of Beijing. I was impressed by what I saw – highly intelligent and sensitive young people clearly moved by the plight of migrant workers, listening to the workers and their children with respect and no hint of condescension, and thinking of practical ways of ameliorating their situation. So when I heard that they might be looking for English teachers to help with lessons for the children of migrant workers in the small lanes (hutong) of central Beijing, I jumped at the opportunity. My 14-year-old son Julien was also willing to help, and we volunteered as a father-son team.

We contacted the head of Xiezuozhe, who eventually put us in touch with a sweet and intelligent 23-year-old volunteer named Wang Lihong, a recent graduate in social work from Changsha University. She said that we could do four sessions, each one lasting an hour and a half, with about 15 kids aged 9-13. It was my son’s first teaching experience, and I had never taught English, so we planned four themes in advance. Wang Lihong wanted to know more details of what we would teach and how we would do it, and I wasn’t used to such “interventionist” methods but I did my best to explain.

It took a while to find the NGO’s “headquarters”, hidden among a maze of hutongs. The lessons took place in a small room with a ping-pong table in the middle. I was planning to stand to lecture, but Wang Lihong suggested sitting with the other kids around the table, presumably to make the atmosphere more friendly for the kids (or “egalitarian”, as a Westerner might put it). We started off by choosing English names for the kids: Jane, Tim, Mary, Sam, etc. Wang Lihong asked if we could explain the meaning of each name to the kids, but I responded that most English names do not mean anything other than (in many cases) referring to personalities in the Bible. I realized that the English language can be so boringly utilitarian compared to Chinese (one student was named Xinzhe 信哲, or
“faith in philosophy”; we named him “Mike”). I had the same feeling watching news about the full solar eclipse that same week: on CNN, the reporters limited themselves to expressions of enthusiasm like “wow” and “that’s amazing”; in Chinese, one expert after another recited poetry and related the eclipse – *rishi* 日食, “eating the sun” in Chinese – to various historical episodes in Chinese history.

We began the lesson with a skit about ordering and eating food in a restaurant. My son and I had printed out pages with key words like “fork and plate”, and we brought bread and peanut butter to demonstrate “Western” eating habits (Julien pointed out that nobody eats a peanut butter sandwich with a fork and knife, but I told him not worry about such details). At home, we burst out laughing as we were practicing the skit – it was hard to hold up a fork and say “This is a fork” with a straight face – but we were serious performing the skit in front of the kids. After one performance, we selected two kids – one from each end of the ping-pong table – to do the same skit. Our plan was that all the kids would perform the skit, the whole class quietly watching the two performers and waiting for their turn to do the same, each set of performers being rewarded with a peanut butter sandwich. But it was a bit of a disaster. The kids stumbled over their lines, couldn’t figure out how much peanut butter should be spread on bread, and the other students talked among themselves and ignored the proceedings. I looked at the clock and realized that we’d never get through the whole class if we stuck to the original plan. There was no air-conditioning and I was beginning to sweat profusely. Fortunately, Wang Lihong saved us. She pulled me over to the side, and suggested that the kids should practice among themselves, with private help from Julien and myself. That worked better. Julien and I went around the room until each group of two kids could recite the lines properly and understand the words. Then we made the whole class go through the lines together. With a few minutes left to go, we rewarded the kids with sandwiches (that we made ourselves) and apple juice. I demonstrated what not to do with the utensils, like holding the knife and fork upwards with an hungry look on one’s face, which seemed to generate a couple of laughs.

After the class, I thought we would go home but Wang Lihong said we should stay behind for an “evaluation” (*pinggu* 评估). I didn’t know that the other three adults in the room were English teachers, and they could provide advice. Wang Lihong also asked two kids to stay behind and join the session. I confess my teaching had not been submitted to such a rigorous evaluation procedure in nearly twenty years on the job, and I was a bit nervous. The kids spoke first. An endearing nine year old girl said it was “luan 乱” (chaotic). She also suggested that we pick friends when asking the kids to perform rather than one kid from each end of the table. Another said she liked the sandwich. Then the teachers spoke up. One said I was too “wenhe 文和” (soft and civilized). Another said I should be more “xiong 凶” (tough). They also made practical suggestions, like asking the kids to repeat words in unison four or five times (not just once), making the kids sing in English and using ppt [Power Point] to grab the kids’ attention. We were also advised to administer tests to the kids at the start of each class based on the vocabulary from the previous class. Half an hour later, my son and I were released. As soon as we stepped out the door, Julien said “that was really tiring!”. I told him “now you know how tiring teaching can be”, but the truth is that I had never been so exhausted after teaching.
That night one of the volunteer teachers named Gao Hong – a recent graduate from Peking University who works as an editor at Reuters's Chinese language service – sent me an email suggesting that we make the children play some games the next lesson. One game involved singing “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands, etc” and making the kids do movements that correspond to the song. Julien and I planned to teach about sports – one of our favorite common activities – and we decided to adapt the song for our purposes. I reread Gao Hong’s (Chinese language) email twice looking for polite words of praise – sincere or not, I didn’t care – but there were none.

We arrived early the second day, and Wang Lihong told us that the kids had already began making use of what we had taught them: one kid told her parents how not to eat with a fork and knife. There seemed to be fewer kids, which worried me, but a few trickled in late. Wang Lihong scolded the latecomers and told them there’s a high demand for this class and they had to cut off the number of students, so the students should show a bit more respect by coming in early, noting that Julien and I had arrived early. I was glad she said that.

We began the second lesson by administering the test. Then we asked the kids to say “My name is (English name)” in turn, followed by the rest of class repeating “Her/His name is __” four times. Julien whispered in my ear that it was too much, so we shortened it to three times (Julien had attended Chinese school for three years when he was about the same age as the kids so he had a better sense of what they were thinking). Then we taught the relevant vocabulary for that day’s lesson: baseball, football, soccer ball, birdie, ping pong ball, basketball, tennis ball. We had brought each of those items and showed them to the students as we were teaching the words. As we were doing so, one of the volunteer teachers whispered in my ear that we should explain the different meanings of football in different parts of the English speaking world, which I tried to do.

Wang Lihong had prepared the “If you’re happy and you know it” song on tape, and we played it, making the students sing it a few times (it was a rare occasion for me to sing in public). And then, the fun started. We divided the students into two groups, and put the balls in the middle. Julien and I sung “If you’re happy and you know it, take the…”, changing the ending to different types of balls. We gave two points for the team that took the ball first, and subtracted one point for each mistake. Julien whispered in my ear to trick them – asking them to pick a “bowling ball” that wasn’t there – and the kids were amused. He also suggested that I name two different balls. Sometimes I hesitated after the “b” and pointed to the basketball and then said “baseball”. The kids loved it, screaming in delight after each try. Success, finally!

After the class, another “evaluation session” with the teachers and two different kids. The kids were happy, no critical comments. “Mike” said he particularly enjoyed the ball game, but I unselfconsciously put my arm around him and told him he’s happy because his team won every time (I’m not normally a “body” person). One teacher said we should have focused more on team building before the competition, that it was more every kid for him/herself even though they were part of teams. We were also told to use more English in class, especially when praising the kids for a job well done. After the evaluation session, Julien didn’t say anything about being tired, but I still rewarded him (and myself) with a fancy restaurant meal.

That night, we went home and graded the exams. The grades varied from 0 to 100. Julien and I decided to just correct all the mistakes without writing grades, but we put happy faces on the exams, with a one face minimum and three faces for perfect performances. But we didn’t tell the kids about our grading system, so I’m not sure if they figured it out.

For the third lesson, we planned to teach kids about the names of different countries and three representative characteristics for each country. Gao Hong sent me an email with suggestions for games, and we adapted one of her suggestions. Julien prepared powerpoints with the names and flags of ten countries followed by three pictures of three characteristics of each country (e.g., Russia: Red Square, vodka, and ballet; UK: Big Ben, David Beckham, and the Queen). I promised to myself that I wouldn’t criticize his choice of national characteristics, but I couldn’t resist objecting when he chose the CN Tower as a Canadian characteristic (as a native Montrealer, I would have chosen the Olympic stadium). I also criticized his choice of “America”, saying that the the term refers to two continents,
better to be more precise and say "United States of America" (my son, who holds an American passport, reluctantly made the change).

We arrived early and ran into some of our students on the street, a few girls skipping rope. I asked if I could join them but they politely ignored my request. Inside, Wang Lihong had prepared the ppt slides that I had sent her by email. This time, we all sat on the floor, as there was no ping-pong table. We began the class by returning the graded exams, carefully praising in English the students that did well and saying a few encouraging comments to the others. Then we went through the slides, and I could tell it was hard to keep the kids attention. One kid in particular was disruptive — for example, we pointed to paella (a “Spanish” characteristic) and asked what it was, and he replied “shuizhuyu 水煮鱼” (Sichuan hot chili oil fish), to the general amusement of all. I was about to object, but I recalled to myself that I used to give deliberately wrong answers in class for purposes of humour when I was his age. He refused to recite the vocabulary along with the others, and when I asked him to join the class he just replied “wo bu hui 我不会” (I can’t do it). But I made him say the names and it turned out he could say them.

Then we divided the students into two teams and gave each group the complete set of the names of the countries and their distinctive characteristics (printed copies of the ppt slides) out of order. There were ten kids on each team and each kid was responsible for one country. The team that first ended up with each kid holding the pages for her/his country along with the three distinctive characteristics would win. Then Julien and I pulled back, but each team was aided by the other teacher volunteers. One team finished a few minutes ahead of the other, and I thought it was best to change the teams for the next game. I justified the change by saying that the losing team was younger overall, but kids on the winning team challenged my claim. I still changed the teams. We played the same game, but this time the kids were on their own, with no teacher advisors. It seemed to go well, but the kids were not as excited as the previous time. After the class ended, I told the kids they could keep the sheets of paper with their countries and representative characteristics.

After the class ended, we gathered for the usual evaluation session. The kids said the presentation was a bit boring. One teacher said the stronger team won because it had more girls, who tend to be more studious, and we should pay more attention to equalizing the sexes next time. Another teacher suggested we should explain to the kids why we were doing what we were doing. I responded that the class was meant to teach the kids about the world and perhaps to generate interest in particular countries. I turned to one of the kids and asked her what country she was responsible for and she said “Canada”. I said, great, maybe you can go to university there later! But I quickly regretted what I said, realizing that it’s mainly rich families who can send their kids abroad. We were asked what we’d be doing the next day, and I suggested taking the kids out to Kentucky Fried Chicken or McDonald’s after (I dislike fast food and so does my son, but I thought it would be a fun way to introduce them to more “Western” cuisine). But Wang Lihong politely vetoed the idea, saying it would be too difficult to organize. We’d have to walk half an hour to the restaurants, we might not get seats, etc. She suggested that the students do painting instead and we could bring pizza to the class. After the
evaluation session, Julien mentioned the troublemaking kid and said it must be hard to teach young kids, it’s not like teaching university students who are all so keen and studious; I didn’t reply, not wanting to deflate his image of university students.

That night, Julien prepared ppt slides of different painters. I wanted to choose Picasso and Monet, but Julien suggested we do slides of paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the seventeenth century Italian painter who made portraits out of fruits and plants. We also chose paintings with key words like sunflowers (Van Gogh) and animals (various Chinese art by unnamed farmers) that the students could then paint on their own.

Before class, one of the volunteer teachers wondered why in the previous session we had said Tokyo was the world’s most populous city: shouldn’t it be Mexico City? Julien replied that it depends on how you count and where you draw the boundaries (my son is a budding post-modernist, I thought to myself). We began the last session by returning exams. Wang Lihong wanted us to maintain our strict standards and give an exam that day, but it was the last meeting and we couldn’t grade and return the exams later. So we just asked two kids to stand up at a time and write the names of particular countries from the previous lesson on a blackboard. The first two girls were very nervous and reluctant to start, but I whispered in their ears that I’d help. They still wouldn’t go, but finally Wang Lihong forced them to go to the front of the class. They were really terrified, so I just asked them to write “USA”. The class laughed and the girls did as told. Then I told them to write “United States of America” and they sighed in despair. But I helped them to write the words and then the class applauded. We went through all the countries except China. Then it was the last two students and I said we’re still missing one country, the most important of all, and the class responded loudly, in English, “China!”. I confess I felt happy, almost feeling patriotic myself.

Then we went through the slides of paintings, spending most time on the Arcimboldo paintings, and arguing over the names of fruits that were used in the portraits. The kids were most attentive (and amused) at that part. Wang Lihong then took over. She divided the students into five groups, and each group was asked to do a painting of themes discussed in class, one teacher with each group. I was put in charge of a group of three girls. Two were very good painters but I felt bad for the third who didn’t seem to have as much drawing talent as the others. I consoled her by demonstrating that my drawing talent was even worse. Wang Lihong asked each student to do an outline of their hands, and write some words for Julien and I inside the handprints, and we were to keep the paintings. After an hour or so, each group presented us with the paintings as a show of thanks for the teaching. It was quite moving. Then a friend arrived with the pizzas. Most students had not eaten pizza before, though they were familiar with the word because we had taught it the previous lesson (as a “characteristic” of Italy). They seemed to enjoy it, each student taking two slices along with some Coca-cola. Wang Lihong told me it was also her first time tasting pizza. Deep down, I wondered whether I was doing the right thing.
We took some group photos and then we had a final "evaluation" session, but this time with the whole group. Wang Lihong started off by saying that she worried there would be barriers between the students and the two teachers, but she was glad that things worked out so smoothly and that we got along so well. I replied it's mainly thanks to her that things worked out. Gao Hong mentioned that she taught kids of migrant workers outside of Beijing in a classroom one-third the size of this one and that they were never served pizza (I was reminded of that Monty Python skit where the actors try to outdo each other in terms of their poor backgrounds), and drew that lesson that these kids should be grateful for what they have and try to help those less fortunate when they grow up.

The students seemed reluctant to express their views, and finally I suggested that each student should say what she/he liked most about the lessons and what she/he liked least. Most students said they most enjoyed the fighting over balls game. But none of the students would say what they liked least, they would all say the same "wo zui bu kaixin...meiyou 我最不开心... 没有" (My most unhappy moment... there isn’t any). Frustrated, I asked them not to be polite, that they should tell us what we did wrong so we could improve next time. One student named Fiona said her unhappiest moment was when she had to leave at the start of the second lesson because she tested high for fever (at the start of the session, one of the students would test all the others, including the teachers, for fever, to minimize the risk of swine flu contamination). Another student said that her unhappiest moment is now because the lessons are over. The remaining students reverted back to the usual formula. When it was my turn, I said "wo zui kaixinde shi... meiyou 我最开心的是... 没有" (My happiest moment is... I don’t have any). The kids all laughed. Is there a greater pleasure than making kids laugh, I wonder?

After the goodbyes, Gao Hong asked about my research on Confucianism and she said that was her passion as well, ever since she took a course on the subject at Beijing University. More evidence, I thought to myself, that Confucianism can provide the motivation for other-regarding morality. Gao Hong told me about the teaching she is doing outside of Beijing and asked if I might be able to help, and I was honored to be asked.

On the way home, I told Julien that China would be a truly harmonious society if everybody acted like the people we met at the NGO. He replied rather pedantically that society wouldn’t be divided between the haves and the have-nots if everybody acted like them, and there would be no need for such an NGO.


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