

A YEAR AT NANJING UNIVERSITY- 1985-1986

Mary Rose Shaughnessy
Nanjing University

The opportunity to spend a year teaching and learning in China is beckoning to more and more foreigners, now that China wants to modernize and is calling for foreign experts to help. I am one of the growing numbers who jump at the chance to see this ancient culture from the inside. I hope this account of my professional experiences at Nanjing University may help others to know what to expect when they come to China.

MAKING CONTACTS WITH NANJING UNIVERSITY

Nanjing University advertised for a Fulbright lecturer in American Literature; I applied and was notified by the USIA that I had been selected. I was delighted. Then I faced the first problem of dealing with Chinese universities' lack of communication. What classes would I be teaching? How many students? What books would they have and what books should I order? No one wrote. Did they know I was coming? Someone from the waiban (foreign affairs office) did eventually write me, saying I would be teaching English and American Literature, but he was not, I knew, speaking for the department. From the Fulbright lecturer then at Nanjing I learned that the department would use me to fill a slot in their composition program, as they had in her case, and I would find myself teaching senior composition unless I was adamant. I wrote to the foreign language department to insist on American Literature--the purpose for which Fulbrights are sent is to teach American studies. But Chinese universities are not famous for answering letters. Possibly they are confused about who is responsible for the foreigners--the department or the foreign affairs office, so it often happens that no one accepts responsibility and the foreigner is left to fend for herself. No letter ever came from the chairman of the department, the head of the English section, or the head of the teachers, acknowledging what or even that I would be teaching at Nanjing University, but I managed to let them know, through a series of letters, what I planned to teach--American Literature, not composition. And if they were interested and had the facilities, I would bring along a lot of video tapes of American movies and possibly teach a course IMAGES OF AMERICA. No answer ever came. When I arrived at Nanjing, I learned from the students that I had been scheduled from the previous spring to teach senior composition, but at the last minute the course had been given to another foreign expert, a man. I considered that this change had only come because I was so adamant; normally a man has the preference over a woman here. This failure on the part of the department to communicate with me, and their refusal to pay any attention to my letters was ignored once I arrived, when all the usual banquets were given, and we all became lao pengyou.

MEETING CHINESE COLLEAGUES

Banquets are given for all new teachers here at the beginning of the year, but the same heads--department, section, teaching, plus the Academic Vice President and various members of the foreign affairs office appeared at all the banquets. No effort was made to introduce us to Chinese colleagues. I met a few around the department offices and classrooms; my list of videos had been passed around, and I met a few film buffs. I slowly found several other faculty members who shared interests in women writers, in the American theater. A cynical view prevails that Chinese faculty will befriend a foreign teacher only if that teacher has something to offer the Chinese faculty member, but this is true in America too. I heard of one faculty member at another college, who was warned that he was spending too much time with foreign teachers. Those in daily touch with the foreign teachers know who visits whom and may gossip about teachers who come to visit us. One faculty member who came to visit me told me he couldn't stay to watch a movie with us because the gatekeeper had asked how long he intended to stay, and he had said only five or ten minutes. Through American films, women writers, and American studies, I have been lucky to make a few Chinese faculty friends, especially among those who have already studied abroad. Those who are teaching non-majors in the "general section" have a more difficult time meeting colleagues than those of us who teach majors. Usually the liaison member is the only Chinese faculty member one can count on seeing.

Sometimes there may be an unusual section leader who genuinely wants to help the students and tries to get all the faculty who teach them together. In spite of (perhaps because of) all the bands and groups the Chinese are in, they don't have much spontaneous interest in getting together.

TEACHING CHINESE STUDENTS

UNDERGRADUATES: Every Monday morning, from 7:30 to 9:30, I teach an undergraduate survey of American Literature to twenty-seven 3rd and 4th year students. This course is an elective, and the students receive only 2 hrs credit. The students who choose foreign teachers must sometimes take more courses than those who choose Chinese teachers; nevertheless, the students sign up for our courses in large numbers. (This is true on the graduate level too.) These undergraduate students are not up to the level of difficulty of authors like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville; last year in their Extended Readings course, they read mostly Hemingway, and they prefer modern writers who are easier to read. To add to their difficulties, they take 20-24 hours of class a week, so cannot spend much time preparing. I have resorted to quizzes to force them to read the texts ahead of time. Before class begins, they all dutifully read aloud from their texts *AMERICAN LITERATURE: THE MAKERS AND THE MAKING* (2 vol), a method they must have learned in middle school. I take attendance and

find they usually all attend unless ill. However, they are shy and immature, more like high school than college students. I cannot get them to volunteer or discuss. Consequently, I lecture, the method they feel most comfortable with. They look interested and seem to be following my lectures, but they seldom take notes. If I want them to write something down, I must write it on the board. Their notes are haphazard and without any method, although they have a class called note-taking. They drift along, letting me do all the work digesting and explaining the material to them during the course, but fear strikes them when I give an exam. At the first semester final, they worked themselves into such a state that some carried their books with them constantly and reread everything. Some were too afraid even to take the final exam; however, I did not fail them, for I was told that I would then have to give them another chance to take the exam. I saved face by giving them no grade, equivalent to a W (withdrawal). Chinese students are coddled by the system; once they are admitted to a university, it is difficult to fail them.

As a teacher of undergraduate majors, I also participate in the senior thesis project. All 4th year students are expected to write a 3000-5000 word thesis on some topic, with one of their teachers as advisor. The difficulty is that these students have had no experience doing literary analysis and independent thinking; I have begun working with my 3rd year students to prepare them for this great leap forward to independence next year. My four 4th year students are writing on topics in Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Willa Cather. One student wanted to write on Jack London, of course, and got my "Jack London is not a great American writer" lecture. The Chinese have been brought up to think Jack London is the American Shakespeare. One student came to me asking what "the American Dream" is. He had been given the topic "the collapse of the American Dream in DEATH OF A SALESMAN," by a Chinese faculty member. Phrasemongering is an affliction among those students who want to appear educated, but who don't have the background to understand what they're talking about. I have to weed out such generalizations as this: "The superficial lopsided prosperity has led to moral degradation and spiritual depression of men."

GRADUATE STUDENTS: I teach an elective course in American Authors to about 25 2nd year (and some 1st year) graduate students. Their level is just right for the material. I enjoy them and have come to know some of them out of class. Most of them have come from colleges around China where they were teaching non-majors. Now, with this training, they can return to their units and teach English majors. Where the undergraduate students seem immature and drifting, the graduate students seem practical, concerned about their careers and future. Few have any real curiosity about what we are reading. The best way to get a discussion going is to require them to write something ahead of time.

The Chinese system of testing and dividing people on the basis of the results breeds people who look on learning as a burden, not a leisure liberal pursuit.

Even graduate students, who have the most maturity to understand, are seldom curious about human nature or questions of happiness posed in literature. They have little freedom or control over their future, but they are anxious about guaranteeing that little bit of control. They are wheeling and dealing behind the scenes to get this job or that opportunity and seldom have sufficient detachment to rise above these practical matters.

Also they do not want to open up and reveal their opinions in class. They are with each other constantly and there may be some residue of fear lest another may take what they say and criticize them. I have found that they are most interested in discussions about relations between women and men, because they all have some personal experience with this topic.

I learn much from them about the problems of teaching in China. The unavailability of books and teaching materials is one of the greatest problems in Chinese universities. The materials that are available for the teaching of American Literature, for example, are all out of date, featuring Jack London as the greatest American writer. When they found we were reading writers they hadn't heard of because they were not in the old Soviet canon, they asked me if we revise our canon often. With the Fulbright book allowance, I can give them individual copies of texts to keep. The libraries in their own universities, some as far away as Urumuqi and Harbin, are woefully inadequate. They all envy Nanjing its library and appreciate the opportunity while here to get books.

These students are pretty conservative. The higher up they get in the ranks, the more conservative, I've noticed. They want to know the latest received ideas from abroad, the latest official opinion about a writer. They haven't much respect for their own or a classmate's opinion; they know the names of leading scholars and want to know what their opinions are. When I found they were so dependent on the critics for their evaluations, I outlawed secondary sources, and made them rely on their own judgments. I'm trying to give them various ways to think about literature, not just as a tool for understanding society using broad generalizations; e.g., "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a symbol of the decay of the South before the Civil War. They project interpretations based on their own cultural values: e.g., being alone shows alienation and is bad in Confucian (though not in Taoist) thought, so they have a hard time understanding the emphasis on solitude in Emerson and Thoreau or Robert Frost. I have tried to show them the many possible approaches to literature, using, e.g., Reception Theory.

It's clear that people in China receive a text differently, due to their cultural values. These students are very good at written analysis, if they can follow a method. They often go beyond my expectations in their thoroughness. I'm also rehearsing a radio play version of Thornton Wilder's THE MATCHMAKER with them.

SHOWING AMERICAN FILMS

I found that my tapes were in great demand and word had spread that I had brought them a whole library of new tapes. I would have felt better had they shown some interest in what I would be bringing beforehand and written the letter I had asked for, to get me through Beijing customs, where a box of 10 tapes was confiscated and I wasted a week trying to get them back. But now I understand that the Chinese cadres, including department officials, do not assume responsibility unless they must. A person coming with videotapes could be controversial, I suppose, and no one I wrote to about them wanted to be responsible for authorizing them. The Chinese authorities basically want a very bland teacher type, one who will do and teach whatever she is told. My taking the initiative must have put me out of line with them from the beginning.

First semester I taught a course in American Films to 4th year majors, another elective. Their favorites were THE GOLDRUSH and THE GENERAL, both silent films, and PLACES IN THE HEART. They learned about American life things I would never have predicted.

From KARATE KID they learned that American teenagers tell their mothers and other authority figures to let them fight their battles alone. From INNOCENTS ABROAD they learned that Americans are not very respectful of the past. They like American humor and direct action. They admired the character Sally Field played in PLACES IN THE HEART because she bravely faced difficulties with determination. This class, however, has had many problems: no electricity, inaudible sound track, no color, no communication with the technician running the tapes, but chiefly, little understanding of the dialogue, and no way to stop the tape and explain. The level of listening comprehension has to be very high to understand a film, especially when there is a sound track behind the dialogue. In this class I assigned 4 papers, reviews of the films. The few students who actually handed these in (about 1/3 of the class) convinced me that they were really thinking about the films. But the majority of the students were coming for entertainment; when I learned that the English Department was showing the films every Friday afternoon at large, I felt my mission was accomplished.

WORKING WITH THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Every Monday afternoon from 2 to 4 I work with someone from the Foreign Language Research Institute, American Lit Section. This institute has the ambitious project of writing a history in Chinese of twentieth century foreign literature. The areas are pre-WWI fiction, fiction between the wars, fiction after WWII (Northern writers and Southern writers are separately handled), drama, poetry, Black writers. Certain faculty are assigned full-time to the Institute. In addition, graduate students are given individual writers to work on. Since I have brought so many books (thanks to the Fulbright book allowance) many of those so assigned come to me for material. I am amazed, when someone tells me he has to write an article on Henry James within a month, to learn that he has not

read any major work by James. He takes the stack of books I lend him and somehow, in a month, he has come up with a first draft of an article, based on extracts he has made from the criticism. Has he read any of the books he has mentioned? I wonder. It seems that what most people here are looking for are secondary sources. They need to know the official line on a writer. They are rewriting literary history, trying to bring it more in line with the Western version. The last literary history published in China was in the 50's, under the influence of Russia, so revision is necessary. But, as with so much here, they are trying to modernize too quickly and carelessly, without really digesting and understanding the new. The whole area of popular literature is new to the Chinese; it is one of my favorite areas, and I came with a supply of science fiction, westerns and mysteries, which I hoped to introduce to Chinese readers. I convinced the head of the research project, Zhang Ziqing, of the importance of this area, so he gave it all to one graduate student. She recently came to me ready to tackle the whole field, including even best-sellers, romances, gothics, having never read a single book of any of these genres. I persuaded her to concentrate on westerns, mysteries and science fiction, since she had only the usual month, and I gave her several classics from each genre. Again, I am surprised at the willingness of the Chinese to say they can do the impossible. It would never occur to them to say "How can I possibly do a good job on that vast area in a month when I have never read a single book on that subject?"

I have the pleasure of working with one researcher, Zhang Jun-huan, who is assigned to do a tutorial with me. His area is Southern writers after WWII: Flannery O'Connor, William Styron, Truman Capote, Robert Penn Warren. Southern literature poses special difficulties with its wonderful humor, myths and exaggeration; it cannot be read literally or as social documentation, as the Chinese tend to do. His understandings, so gently expressed with an eager smile, provoke some of my most enjoyable attempts at explaining the whole Southern experience.

WORKING WITH TRANSLATORS

Occasionally I am asked to work with someone who is doing a translation of an American novel or text into Chinese. The seniors taking translation had just finished doing Edna Ferber's *SO BIG* (1924) and wanted to consult with me on the meaning, as Zhang had noticed that my dissertation was on Edna Ferber. The reason they had chosen this work was that it had won a Pulitzer Prize. This is one of the criteria for choosing texts to translate, apparently. I lent a copy of my book on Ferber to one of the seniors; he read the biographical section and the section on *SO BIG*; then we discussed the book. I cautioned them against using any material from my book in the introduction unless they credited my book. They assured me that they would, but it is common practice to take chunks wholesale from the works of critics and claim it as one's own. I have tried to suggest works for them to translate, e.g., *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS*, which has not been translated, but I was told that no publisher

would be interested in it because it was not saleable, as a recent best seller. On this basis, one of my students is translating THE COLOR PURPLE, which fortunately won a Pulitzer Prize as well. Erskine Caldwell's fascination for translators puzzles me. So far I have had to explain regionalisms in GOD'S LITTLE ACRE and HOUSE IN THE UPLANDS. When I asked why the Chinese would be interested in these pictures of ignorant, prejudiced, morally retarded people in the South in the 30's and 40's, I was told that Chinese could understand these poor people. I am suggesting Laura Ingalls Wilder's LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE series as more suitable to the Chinese puritan sensibilities.

CONSULTING WITH AN AMERICAN STUDIES COMMITTEE

Since Johns Hopkins University is going to open an American Studies Center at Nanjing University, there is an awareness here of the importance of American Studies. The visit here last year of the American Studies Committee, headed by John Ward, added to the impulse. Chinese faculty teaching American history and literature have formed an American Studies Committee. My contact with this nascent program is through Liu Haiping who has recruited graduate students to write papers to be read at an American Studies Conference at Nanda in May. This conference will inaugurate the American Studies Center here among the Chinese faculty. I have recommended topics, and generally encouraged the students. One student is writing on industrialization vs. pastoralism, using Leo Marx's THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN as a start. Leo Marx lectured here last year, so his ideas are popular. Another is writing on the idea of pluralism as it shows up in American writers. He began with every kind of pluralism he could think of: regional, ethnic, religious, even literary (all the various genres of popular literature). I had to convince him that the field was too vast and to limit himself to ethnic writers. Again, the problem is he has too many books and too little time to read them. I try to make the students read the books and THEN come up with the theories, but, under pressure of deadlines, they resort to formulating theories first, then looking for supporting examples in the works. After the May conference, a few papers will be chosen to be read at the American Studies Conference in Beijing later this year. Nanjing University American Studies Center will have a 5-year plan. The first stage will be the publication of a collection of essays on American studies translated into Chinese, to introduce the concept of American studies to Chinese. The next step will be the publication of a collection of essays on various American studies topics, written by Chinese faculty. An American Studies Journal is another project they hope to mount. Eventually a synthesis in the form of American Studies: Its Relevance for Chinese is planned. American Studies are useful to the Chinese only if they can help China modernize and catch up, so the emphasis will be on recent topics in American Studies. Parallel to and modeled upon the American Studies Center will be a Chinese Studies Center, in which an interdisciplinary approach will be followed. It is hoped that something authentically Chinese will emerge that will not just be a clone of a western method. China will try anything right now.

LECTURING

I have given a few lectures to groups here at Nanjing and at another college in Nanjing. The groups we are asked to address are usually non-English majors--undergraduate or graduate students who wish to practise their listening. We are told that we can "talk about anything"; so I spoke about "Self-Reliance" using the works of Benjamin Franklin, Emerson, and Thoreau, before graduate students at Huaxue, the local hydraulic engineering college, but found that the students wanted me to speak in "Special English" like the man on the VOA; otherwise, they couldn't understand me. On another occasion I gave a slide-lecture on "American homes, pointing out the design and function. Since everyone wants to go to America, most of us try to show them in advance what they can expect if they get there, so their shock will not be too great. I have found that books on American studies are the most helpful in preparing lectures. Other department members who are asked to give lectures borrow these books as well, looking for topics on the American Constitutions, the Bill of Rights, Religion in America, American mass media. We all become interpreters of our culture while we are here. The department here also arranges for us to lecture in nearby Zhenjiang, where we are banqueted and taken to see the sights to make a day of it. The student activities officer of the English Section also arranged for a series of lectures offered by the English teachers, for the benefit of all students wishing to practice their listening. These lectures were SRO; the most popular topic was "Universities in the Chicago Area."

POLISHING TRANSLATIONS

Another interesting job that arises and which I have participated in is polishing of translations. Through the Research Institute I was asked to go over a translation done by a team. The book is a recent one. I enjoyed doing this, because I find out about the current state of fiction in China. The use of certain vague expressions like "on a certain border where the war was" or "the people's sworn enemy," "the nation-wide movement," made me object that Western readers would not know what was referred to. I was told that works published within China must resort to this in order to avoid being criticized.

I feel very grateful for the wide variety of professional activities I was able to participate in at Nanjing University. I have found the year very full, never boring. Every day some new surprise awaited me. I learned much about China by giving of what I knew about my culture and being interested in learning about China in return.