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Meghan Armstrong

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# Teaching China

By **Meghan Armstrong**, Upper School Teacher

*[Suzhou] is a very great and noble city. The people are subjects of the Great Khan, and have paper money. They possess silk in great quantities, from which they make gold brocade and other stuffs, and they live by their manufactures and trade... In this city there are 6,000 bridges, all of stone, and so lofty that two ships together could pass underneath them.*

— Marco Polo, 1295

We gather in the lobby of our swanky hotel in Suzhou, China, and then walk up the elegant spiral stairs to our reserved dining room. We, the fellows of China Institute’s *Teach China* program, wait silently at the door for seating assignments. The fifteen of us, with our four guides, had spent the day with teachers and administrators of Suzhou High School, held by many to be the most prestigious high school in China. They were hosting a banquet to celebrate the many new relationships formed between teachers from China and the United States.

I wondered if I would be seated at the table of honor, or the “kid’s table,” as we had dubbed it. I did some quick calculations in my head, there were seven teachers older than I, and seven who were younger. I wasn’t sure how many administrators and teachers were coming, so my seating assignment could go either way.

“Meghan, please sit at the far table.” Yay! I was assigned to the table of honor! I felt ambivalent about being seated based on age, but I was proud to be considered one of the master teachers in my group. The seats at our table were almost filled with our American leaders and Chinese partners when Jim, with his long grey hair and grey beard, showed up late to the event. Our leader looked at me and asked, “Meghan, can you move to the other table please?” I had been demoted to the young teachers’ table! Well, okay, that table looked like much more fun anyway.

We had been in China for two weeks and were by now familiar with the cultural practices of a formal dinner: the highest ranking person sits at the far side of the circular table, facing the door. Then, elders are seated to her/his left and right consecutively, according to rank. All dishes are offered first to the person of honor, and he or she takes the choicest piece of meat or fruit. This person sometimes argues that it’s not necessary to have the best piece of meat, but it is the job of the inferiors to insist on it.

Principal Zhuo started the meal off with a formal toast, thanking the China Institute for traveling to Suzhou, and for helping the school further its mission of international exchange. We all stood around the table, holding our wine glasses with two hands, listening intently to the principal. In China, it is important for inferiors to show respect by holding their glasses slightly lower during the clink. Since we were all eager to show respect for each other, we started by clinking high over the table, but rapidly, the toasts moved lower and lower until wine glasses were all touching the table.

As the meal came to a close, the presentation of gifts began. First, Principal Zhou presented to our China Institute leader a framed photograph of Suzhou High School with its motto “Behave with honesty. Treat people with sincerity.” Then, I presented the China Institute gift to Principal Zhou. This entailed a rigid protocol for gift giving: First, you must say what you’re thanking the person for. Second, you describe the present to the audience and tell why you chose it. Third, you present the gift with two hands. Fourth, you smile for the photographs while both the giver and receiver hold onto the gift.

In my speech, I thanked Principal Zhou for taking the time to show us his extraordinary school, explaining to us their local geography-based curriculum, and walking us through the school museum which contained 5,000 year old artifacts that Suzhou High School students had unearthed, preserved, and curated. Our tour of Suzhou High School had truly changed the way I thought about education in China. While you’ll have to consult my co-fellows as to the adequacy of my gratitude speech and description of the gift, I can say that I managed to hold onto it with two hands while smiling for the camera. To me, it was a cultural success.

Suzhou was just one of the places I had come to see on this month-long tour. I was selected, along with fourteen other teachers from across the country, for the China Institutes’ annual *Teach China* study tour. We spent all of this past July on an information-packed tour of five Chinese cities. During this time, we traveled with our own personal professor, Professor Renqui Yu, who gave lectures almost every day. We met daily with experts and officials, learning about culture, religion, politics, education, economics, and history.

The fifth grade humanities curriculum at Bank Street is a year-long study of China. I co-wrote the China curriculum two years ago, with my humanities partner Eve Andrias. China has proven an excellent basis for our humanities curriculum as we are able to compare and contrast another culture in order to think deeply about our broad curricular themes of culture, geography, leadership, and immigration. The themes of the curriculum had been determined before we started writing; and Chinese culture, rich with ancient civilization and modern paradigms, has proven to be an exciting, engaging, and increasingly relevant way to explore those themes. Never having been to China, I had only secondhand knowledge of the country. Since



**Teach China Fellows at Suzhou High School.**

I was now using it as a vehicle to teach about culture, I felt the need to study the primary text: the country itself. I needed to see and learn for myself to be able to teach others.

The value of studying other cultures comes first from exposure to other ways of living. Once we've understood that, we come to have better perspective on our own way of living. We can even start to perceive aspects of our own culture that can seem invisible to us. While in China, we had the opportunity to visit an urban village. This walled community, which had the area of half of a square mile, contained most of the facilities and services necessary in a community: an ancestral temple, a community building for committee meetings and social functions, a school, and all the necessary shops. Families could trace their ancestors' roots in this village for tens of generations. Even in cities, Chinese people are deeply rooted to the land and their ancestors. By contrast, Americans are generally tied to the idea of individual accomplishment and families are often scattered across the continent. China, however, is changing rapidly, as much of the rural population is moving to urban areas for job opportunities fueled by the global economy. As we try to understand modern China, we must keep in mind Ancient China's core values.

In the fifth grade at Bank Street, we start the year off with a study of the concept of culture. We have an email relationship with a school in Beijing, through which our



**Presenting our gift to Principal Zhou.**

students are able to compare and contrast aspects of our and their cultures. Students share parts of their culture like transportation, holidays, sports, hobbies, music, and food. It is through these concrete comparisons, and through reading about many aspects of culture that fifth graders gain a better understanding of the abstract concept of culture.

We have an incredible resource here in New York City, in our Chinatown. As part of the culture study, we take a field trip to Chinatown and the students spend the day searching for evidence of Chinese culture. They notice groups of people playing *xianqi* (Chinese chess) in Chatham Park, stores full of Chinese herbs, and Buddhist temples alive with prayer and song. For many students, the most memorable part of the day is the meal at a Chinese-American restaurant. The food we are served in Chinatown only vaguely resembles the food in China. However, students delight in pouring each other tea, eating with chopsticks, and sharing dishes with the ever-rotating Lazy Susan.

The day is full of learning, and the meal is a chance for a new experience. But this year, there will be a new aspect to the meal we eat in Chinatown: seating according to status. Chopsticks and tea are a novelty. But seating according to status is a strong social statement, very different from American sensibilities. It has the ability to teach the students something new. Of course, this would require putting all the teachers and chaperones at one table and the kids at another. Similar to the banquet in Suzhou, the “kids table,” sounds like a lot more fun.