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Editorial: Making a Remote Culture Vital

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EDITORIAL
MAKING A REMOTE CULTURE
VITAL
BY WILLOWDEAN C. HANDY

CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN
CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR
TEACHERS AND PARENTS

COORDERATIVE SCHOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS
HARRIET JOHNSON NURSERY SCHOOL
BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

69 BANK STREET NEW YORK CITY
With this issue we embark on our second year of 69 BANK STREET. The plans for the year look good to our eyes, the response of last year's friends was very gratifying, and we look forward to a new year of publication with hope and confidence.

Our aim remains the same: to be an informal medium of exchange for current ideas on some of the manifold problems and interests that touch the educational world today. We hope at some time during the year to reach the particular interest of each one of our readers, whether it be two-year-olds or twelve-year-olds, teacher-training or the more general educational problems of the adult world. If we miss our mark, you can help us to focus better by being articulate concerning your interests; and if we reach it, you can increase our courage by letting us know.

Our plans for this year include articles on classroom programs at three different age levels, two or three of more general adult interests, one on teacher-training and one by a specialist on the problems of maladjusted children. These are some of the phases of thinking and research on which our Bureau Staff, teachers in the Cooperating Schools and other workers in the field of experimental education are working; and we hope the notes they will hereby give you will have something of value for all co-workers in education today.

We hope, even more, that this bulletin may become a starting point for further discussion. Will you help us to that end by making your reactions known?
MAKING A REMOTE CULTURE VITAL

Willowdean C. Handy

Mrs. Handy's experiment in making a remote culture vital to American twelve-year-olds was far more than an experiment in content. Obviously twelve years in the Far East has given Mrs. Handy a factual background and world contacts with people and things both rich and rare for an Occidental. Fascinating as all readers, I think, will find the content aspect of her program, her ethnological approach seems to us of equal significance. Mrs. Handy was not a casual resident in the Orient. She was an ethnologist approaching the work habits, the thinking and feeling habits of any people as a cultural expression which had grown out of the past and was in a particular stage of development. This same ethnological approach she applies to the culture of her own people. Our American habits of work, of thinking and feeling are also a cultural expression of our past and even now are in a state of flux. The children, returning constantly to the behavior in the "here and now" world around them, saw their own culture as well as China's and Japan's as twelve-year-old ethnologists.

After her return from the Far East, Mrs. Handy became interested in modern education and spent one year as a student at the Cooperative School at Bank Street. Even these few pages show Mrs. Handy as a distinguished teacher with direct experiential techniques. Her full account of her joint experience with the children in the group is shortly to be published. Ethnologists, educators, and writers wait for it.—Editors' note.

My own experience with alien peoples has been personal. Returning to the United States from ethnological work in the South Seas, I found myself a different person. There I had grown tolerant of strange customs, even those distasteful to me; sympathetic with a social order that pressed individuals into molds reminiscent of Asiatic hierarchies but modified by informalities of tropical living and by island deficiencies of resources. I found myself admiring a traditional art of strict procedures and accurately repeated motives; respecting a belief in continuity of life, that passed easily from natural to supernatural and back again without any sense of break. In other words, my mind was functioning critically without barriers of prejudice; and this state of judicial kindness had been born, in the main, of the emotional attraction which individuals of these islands exercised upon me, and also of a poignant pity for their miserable plight under white governance totally destructive of their own satisfactions.

From the glow of this enlarged personality I looked out upon the murky prejudices and pallid fears of my fellow countrymen with shock. From what riches of human contact they were deliberately cutting themselves off! To me, after years of residence and work on Pacific islands and one year on the continent of Asia, this ignorance took on an ominous complexion.
In such mists and obscurities war clouds form, and drench the earth. I began to wonder if I could pass on to young Americans this education in social thinking that had come to me through direct contacts with other races. When I was offered the opportunity of teaching a group of twelve-year-olds, I determined to try to awaken in them an appreciation of the human qualities of Chinese and Japanese people and of the value of their cultural contributions.

Personal contacts that would kindle feeling and provoke research were the hinge upon which such a curriculum should swing. Preparation was arduous, perhaps, but interesting; often discouraging, but in the end repaying my effort. Letters to acquaintances in China and Japan asking for suggestions or for addresses of nationals in the city of our school sometimes were unanswered, sometimes sent me to find Japanese who had just been "recalled;" but I found interest and cooperation among both Chinese and Japanese as I located them in organizations and institutions devoted to preserving and popularizing their literary and artistic classics in this country. One shipboard acquaintance I pursued to Williamstown, where he was a delegate to the Institute of Foreign Affairs, and persuaded him to devote his own delightful personality to arousing friendliness for his fellow countrymen. It was fortunate that I could devote my summer to making such arrangements, for after the opening of school, late afternoon or Saturday morning appointments were inadequate for the necessary social approach. Even after interest was aroused, it was difficult to secure the help of these busy people during school hours. Often I had to solicit services gratis from individuals accustomed to remuneration or subject to contracts with lecture bureaus, since neither the school nor I had funds for many such affairs. Once I had to reorganize my program and assure the distrust of the children when a gentleman broke his engagement. But all these discouragements were forgotten when I saw friendliness being born between the children who were "scared" and the few Chinese and Japanese people to whom I was able to introduce them.

There are Chinese who have lived in this country for generations, usually in a section of their own in our larger cities, where, of course, direct contacts may be obtained; but most Japanese are sent here for special purposes, and the personnel of these missions is frequently changed. At first it seemed unwise to take children as young as twelve into homes, schools, and temples in Chinatown for intimate acquaintance with another race who were adapting themselves to an American environment. Yet the section could furnish us with certain aspects of the material culture to which the Chinese were still clinging so many miles and generations away from home. Displays in groceries, drug stores, restaurants, and book stores were closer to the daily living of the people than the exquisite crafts displayed on museum shelves. The sight and feel of Chinese edibles provoked wry faces, but the knowledge of a scale of tastes outside our own added a small stone, I thought, to the building of tolerance. Since these immigrants were following American patterns in housing and clothing, we had to turn to the museums to supply this deficiency. However, in an exclusive Japanese club the children saw ladies garbed in their own inimitable way; and the effect of this living pageant upon the children was magical, transforming their impressions of misshapen and awkward people into visions of butterflies of light and beauty.
At a Pan-Pacific luncheon in Honolulu I once heard a Japanese woman say, "We talk so much about getting together, but we must have something to get together on." It was to provide "something to get together on" that I initiated the giving of tea parties for our Far-Eastern guests. I counted without disappointment upon their bringing hobbies or interests--writing materials, musical instruments, a fish to fly for Boys' Day--something involving working together; but I felt that the children should contribute something if there were to be a real exchange. The making and serving of tea is a genuine adventure for twelve-year-olds.

A great deal of thought went into the detailing of water boilers, tea pourers, sugar and cream passers, cake and fudge guardians; a great deal of energy into assembling all the appurtenances of the tea table. We took our stand upon a familiar American custom, well known to the children. From this base we worked out into agricultural and industrial abstractions, made as concrete as possible by the examination of a single tea plant in the Botanic Gardens, the drying of leaves of substitute "teas," the viewing of a movie of tea picking, the participation in official tea tasting, and a visit to a tea blending and packing establishment. We worked into literary abstractions recounting the history of trade between Occident and Orient, and outlining the disabilities forced upon China and Japan and their long struggle to free themselves of them. For the tea parties provoked a long chain of research as well as craft expressions.

These particular children were exceedingly sensitive to the beauty of materials and the quality of workmanship displayed in museum objects or in those loaned us by interested friends. They had been prepared for such appreciations by their own years of effort in various crafts, and they profited greatly by the few personal contacts with Oriental craftsmen that I was able to arrange. There was a Chinese scholar meticulously grinding his ink stick upon a stone plaque, testing the liquid again and again before finding its consistency satisfactory, handling his brush with delicate precision; another Chinese making his two-stringed instrument sing strange melodies with unaccustomed rhythms; a Japanese connoisseur of art pointing out "heaven, earth, and man" in an arrangement of pine branches and white chrysanthemums; another Japanese savant spreading on the floor thirty woodcuts designed for the building of a single picture, kneeling with the children to handle lovingly the print struck from each block. These were unforgettable revelations. The teaching staff of one museum helped make antique porcelains and silks come alive. To handle the one and later to experiment with the stitches of the other took these treasures in some degree off the shelves of antiquarianism and put them into the hands of craftsmen.

Such intimate acquaintance with the finest porcelain inspired the children to refine their own work. They had undertaken to make a tea set for our parties, and they turned busily to grinding their cups thin with sandpaper. The making of a "set," however, posed a more significant problem. Encouraged from their earliest years to be individualists in their creative crafts, they scoffed at copying and prized originality. Could a tea set be composed of pieces utterly dissimilar in pattern and color? It was decided that each should satisfy himself in this regard. Then, in order to have a complete set to serve all members of
the group and guests, must those who had no urge to make pottery be forced to do so? The problem became a social rather than an aesthetic one. There being a pressing need for finishing the service, the extra cups were finally made in a mold and glazed, the group organizing itself for piece work. Cooperation in a craft was a triumph for them.

The acute aesthetic problem in this course was how to present a traditional art without interfering with free expression, how to avoid plunging the indifferent ones into copying, how not to antagonize those who clung to their inalienable rights of originality. I felt that a certain degree of identification was necessary for understanding an alien art. There was only one possible solution: to think deeply enough into Chinese and Japanese art to strike the wellspring which caused it to take its own particular form. Symbolism is the key to Oriental design, and symbolism is not foreign to the minds of twelve-year-old Americans. They responded eagerly to the suggestion that they make their own cryptic designs; and having made them, they were easily led into the thinking that produced the famous Chinese and Japanese designs. It was through the symbols embroidered and woven into silk that they became interested in that great invention and wrote and illustrated a book on the history of silk. It was through the symbols that they discovered the religious and ethical beliefs that have from time to time swept over China and modified her living and her art. Examples of the Buddhist arts of gardening and flower-arrangement I could actually show them; the tea ceremony I could relive for them out of my own personal experience. Many times I felt them slip into my shoes and look through my eyes.

Questioning our visitors, they came face to face with some of these beliefs as they affect daily living; but it was largely through reading that they had to experience applied philosophy. Literary source material is very meager. I discovered nothing written by Chinese or Japanese that vitalized either the beliefs of the people or the history of their countries, save Mrs. Sugimoto's "Daughter of a Samurai." And yet we fared not too badly because of a few excellent books written by foreigners resident in the Orient. Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth," Nora Will's "House of Exile," and Elizabeth Lewis' "Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze" led these children into a tender regard for Chinese farmers, aristocrats, and apprentices. Since then I have discovered Alice Hobart Tisdale's "River Supreme" and "Oil for the Lamps of China," which would have helped to make concrete the clash between Westerners and Easterners in the opening of trade. Perhaps the most difficult reading the children had to grapple with was the current history in newspapers, but it acted as a spur to their historical research. These were the exciting days of Japan's seizure of Manchuria and withdrawal from the League of Nations, so that the conversations at home and our discussions at school soon made inveterate readers, of headlines at least, and faithful collectors of pertinent pictures.

Very little which did not have some "here and now" significance could rouse the interest of these children who lived so vividly in the present. It was the immediate present that roused curiosity about the philosophic, economic, and political histories of China and Japan. Such burning questions as, "Why does everybody think China can't govern herself?" could be answered only by
a survey of the past. Here-and-now significance, however, is broader and deeper than merely the environmental. Whatever tied in with their personal emotional present was significant to these children. There was a moment of pleased illumination when the seasonal myth of the dragon's retirement into a cave during the months of cold and dark bore evidence of thought similar to that of the Greeks, with whom they had identified themselves in an earlier year. The Boston Tea Party and the clipper ships of earlier acquaintance took on new meaning when the fur-silk-tea trade was investigated from China's point of view. Their admiration for American pioneers struggling with land conditions was extended to include Pearl Buck's farming people.

As twentieth century children of the active West, born in an era of change and experimentation, they seemed at first to stand on the farther side of a great gulf fixed between them and those who lived contemplative lives, content with ancient ways in the timeless East. As they approached the opposites from various angles, I found out that, though impressed intellectually by our high-powered age, they were very much akin in their own inner development and aesthetic expression to the people of a slower age. Though intellectually scornful of the legends upon which Orientals are nourished, they expressed themselves naturally and without self-consciousness in terms of dragons and kitchen gods when making their own dramatic play. Though they came alive with joy when they visited the highly mechanized tea packing house, and had no sympathy with China's outdated methods and her clinging to the past, they themselves were obviously at home in a handcraft culture. Upon the basis of craftsmanship they could meet Asiatics as understanding fellow workmen. When they were encouraged to express their own ideals of human behavior, they found much to compare with the ideals of the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, and Mo Ti. In fact, they sank back with almost Chinese contentment upon the precepts of Confucius, perhaps because of their twelve-year-old desire to be told what to do. And when these attitudes toward life could be compared with modern reactionary, conservative, liberal, or radical points of view, they whirled back into their own intellectual present, on tiptoe with interest.

To establish a fair-minded attitude, an inter-racial friendliness based not on idealizations but on the sober truth about other people and ourselves, the shuttle must not only weave back and forth between us, but it must trace a well developed picture. China's contributions to the world have come mainly through her inventiveness; but studies of tea, silk, porcelain, and paper lead only so far. Not all of her people are artisans, artists, and philosophers. The balance of farmers and soldiers is needed. Nor are they living and working in mid-air. Under them all broods the power of the land to give and take. Nor is the picture static. Through their ranks is slowly percolating the spirit of change born of scientific research and cultural exchanges. Encouraged to imagine what physical changes would result from commercial contact with the Occident, the children searched through reference books to discover the facts of native systems of money, counting, measuring, time keeping, ways of administering justice, collecting revenues, and holding public office. Finally, they tried to envisage the psychological changes, to account for the different reactions of Chinese and Japanese to Western methods, to comprehend the shift from the precepts of Confucius to the principles
of Sun Yat Sen.

The necessary research was not undertaken without a struggle. Reading and writing were still tasks; and even when interest was aroused, it was hard digging in such old soil. My urging was needed to spur them on, to link the tea packing house and the silk factory that we visited with the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Magellan; or to connect China's importance in the crisis of 1932 with her first unequal treaties, or Japan's independence with her tight governmental organization. Nor was the academic result wholly satisfactory. Reports were often merely observations on trips without any enrichment from correlative reading, or transcripts from reading unenlivened by actual experience. Answers to questions were often vague. It was in the dramatic play of the children that I discovered the depth and breadth of knowledge and feeling they had absorbed. In a spring play they unfolded the history of invention and trade in scenes of historical accuracy. In another, a scene in a Chinese household on New Year's Day, they not only used their garnered facts and looked up what they needed, but during a long devotion to fashioning costumes and furnishings they gradually succumbed to the Chinese atmosphere which they themselves had created, and in the actual performance slipped through the barriers of feeling and became one with the Chinese people.

At least a slender bridge was built that year across the gulf. These young Americans began by scoffing at superstitions and ended by admitting their reasonableness, given a limited scientific knowledge. They learned to listen with interest and respect to beliefs they rejected for themselves, and to like people personally whose eating habits disgusted them. They even went so far as to declare them "just like anybody else." They retained their preference for originality, informality, and naturalism, and their distrust of symbols that were "dishonest," such as an unplanned log standing for a living tree ("It was really dead, wasn't it"); but they could not help admiring Oriental handiwork and wishing that we would make everything beautiful. They spent hours in museums drinking in colors and forms, which often led to bursts of poetry. They loved Chinese and Japanese poems of few lines and poignant sentiment, and were emboldened to commit their own intimate thoughts to brief expressions. They were themselves enriched by the great culture from beyond the Pacific. In the future may they not see other peoples through more understanding eyes and judge their benefactors with kindliness?
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