

# Philosophy for Children in China: A Late Preliminary Anti - RePort

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**I**n his classic study, *The Structuring of Pedagogical Discourse* (Volume IV: Class, Codes and Control. London: Routledge, 1990) the British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein wrote that whatever the dominant educational ideology of the moment, the most prominent characteristic of pedagogical practices and principles are their formidable uniformity. For those of us who work in philosophy for children, one of our most important challenges is to see whether the practice of philosophy could eventually contribute to any transformation of those practices and principles.

Bernstein's observation certainly holds true for the U.S. and Latin American - our respective places - and our first observations of the Chinese educational system seem to bear it out as well. We were part of a group of five academics visiting China in July 2000, in order to conduct two workshops in Philosophy for Children in two widely disparate cities - Kunming, in the ethnically diverse, far-from-Beijing southeastern province of Yunnan; and Shanghai, long known as the city where East meets West. Although we could not even read street signs, much less speak at all except through the kindness of interpreters, yet we sensed that Kunming and Shanghai were two different realities of contemporary China. The workshop in Kunming was conducted at the Southern Railway School, where P4C is being spearheaded by a tireless and enthusiastic principal. In Shanghai, our host was the Institute for Research in the Human Sciences, an organization which is at the forefront of the new educational reform movement in China, devoted to principles like active learning and critical thinking.

The Kunming experience has been going on since 1998, led for the previous two years by Laurance Splitter from Australia, and Kennedy. By summer 2000, work had progressed to the point where teachers and interested administrators were actually developing texts in Chinese for their students, who study philosophy in language arts class. This year, the Kunming project was being evaluated by members of a committee composed of professors from the University of Yunnan, and members of the office of the Secretary of Education at both the municipal and the provincial level. They drafted a report at the end of the conference which expressed strong approval of the work already done, and support for expanding the experience to other schools and provinces. The

Southern Railway Station School is a large one - its 3000 students, grades 1-5, are children of families which work for the Southern Railway Company. Even though our actual contact with the school was quite superficial - classes were not in session, and the conference was held at a hotel - it seemed to be a place where all those systems of rules, codes and techniques that configure modern school as one of those privileged spaces of social construction of subjectivity, feel at home.

The role assigned to each of us in Kunming was «foreign expert» (in Shanghai the word «foreign» was mercifully replaced by «international»). Perhaps it was our very discomfort with the implications of the word «expert» which goaded us to explore what possibilities the practice of philosophy might have for introducing any real change in educational practice. In fact, the teachers and principals seemed already to be convinced of these possibilities - this was not a question for them, it looked like a strong belief. They were eager to demonstrate how they were reforming their educational practice across the disciplines through philosophy. But were they? Are we? Is the practice of Philosophy for Children - at least in the way it is currently being developed all over the world - actually changing the forces prevailing in educational practice? Are we practicing philosophy or simply memorializing it? If we are practicing philosophy, is the way we are doing it making possible a different form of educational praxis? Are we succumbing to the aggravated uniformity of the system, and dutifully taking our place – under the new slogans of «critical thinking,» «moral education,» «multiculturalism», «human rights» or «citizenship for democracy»- among the time-worn mediocrities of the interests of State, market, tribe or whatever? Do we bring philosophy to education for transformation or assimilation? How does, or can, or should philosophy travel across cultural divides? What is philosophy, or what can it be? Perhaps our initial discomfort in Kunming was also due to the fact that, as experts, we were expected to offer answers and solutions in the context of a form of educational practice based on a positive and certain position in respect to all these questions.

Not that they are easy questions. In fact they might be unanswerable, at least in our present situation. But it could be that our experience in China offers us a way of thinking about them. The structure of the seminar in Kunming was «traditional»: lectures, demonstrations by teachers with students followed by evaluations from the «foreign experts,» a seating arrangement so disposed that each of the 80 odd participant teachers saw, other than the back of a few colleagues' necks, the faces of the experts assembled in a formidable row at the head of the room - nowhere near what is usually called a philosophical community of inquiry. So our first dilemma was, should we attempt to alter these conditions or accept them? Would it not be ungrateful and presumptive, and culturally impositional to challenge them? Who were we to blunder in imperial arrogance into local customs and rituals which were performed with an apparent harmony and good will that seemed to belie our itch for transformation?

Not that we were all in agreement about what was possible or desirable or professional or compassionate in the situation. Kohan, perhaps because he is a Latin American, and therefore more irritated by the cynicism of Western «professionalism,» and not so decorously weighted and hampered with the guilt of the Empire, was less disposed to play it safe, and insisted on taking some risks. Under his leadership, we began to force the issue. We rearranged the seats in a circle. We called for periodic division into smaller groups. We began to resist the urge - which issued both from the clear expectations of our hosts and from our own vanity - to lecture. Rather than holding forth, the experts began to turn the job they were invited there to do back on the people who had

invited them. We dropped long range plans and reacted to each moment with a new invitation to dialogue. We began to make it clear that we were there, not to bring answers, but to participate in an inquiry. No more evaluations, but shared discussions on our common experience, guided by questions emerging from among all of us. We began saying, sometimes directly and sometimes in so many words, «We are not here to tell you how to do philosophy in community, but to do it with you. And this means to question our own practice, to problematize what we are as educators. We cannot promise you anything but the opportunity to inquire together about philosophy and education - and therefore about freedom and subjectivity and intersubjectivity and culture and human system and change and possibility, and anything else you want to talk about.» Our host-organizers, unfailingly polite and responsive, yet seemed baffled. The personal warmth between ourselves and them, which continued to grow as the conference progressed, was complicated - not unpleasantly, but as a sort of bemusement, a puzzlement - as to what in fact we were trying to do, where indeed we were trying to take things.

The children were less puzzled. Although it was summer vacation, there was a group of them there every morning. Dressed in a motley combination of summer clothes and school uniforms - in some all that showed of the latter was the bright yellow and blue kerchief, tied neatly around the neck – they filed and tumbled onto the stage, took their seats, then snapped effortlessly to collective attention at three hand-claps from the teacher, to which they responded with three perfectly timed claps themselves.

The teachers modeled three separate lessons they had prepared for their classes - one in science, one in language arts, and one in philosophy itself. The first two were in keeping with the stated intention of our organizers, which was to develop «infusion» curriculum - that is, to apply at least the methodology of P4C to other disciplines. These lessons were highly controlled. Although teacher-student rapport was warm and responsive (nor did the children seem at all intimidated by performing in front of roughly one hundred adults, or using the latest technology in microphones and computer graphics projected on a screen) our sense was that students were being led, however kindly and smoothly and gently, towards the conclusions which the teachers had already planned to lead them to.

The philosophy class was not much different. The text under discussion was a one-page story written by a Railroad Station School teacher. It concerned a young boy from Nanking who was inspired to become an engineer after the collapse of a bridge on the Quin Huai River during the Dragon Boat Festival, which resulted in many deaths. We read, in an English translation provided by our hosts, «Having heard the unfortunate news, Mao Yisheng was very sad as if he had seen himself the wretched scene that many people fell into water one after another, including men and women, the young and the old. After having recovered from illness, he ran to the river and looked at the broken bridge silently, lost in thought. He said to himself, 'I'm determined to be a bridgeman when I grow up. The bridges I will build are durable and will never collapse!'

«Thereafter, Mao Yisheng paid special attention to various kinds of bridges, whether flat or arched, being made up of board or stone. When he was out, in spite of meeting what kind of the bridge, he always measured it up and down with the eye, observed it carefully, then drew it down after coming back home. When reading books and newspapers, he collected the material on bridges

carefully. Day after day, he had accumulated a lot of knowledge on bridging. He studied diligently, researched arduously and finally realized his own dream of becoming an expert at bridging.»

In the discussion that followed the communal reading of the story, the children followed the cues provided by the text - and marked in large discursive gestures by the teacher's questions - flawlessly. In short, there was no problem here. Both story and discussion were ritual celebrations of Chinese social values - individual dedication to the welfare of the collective, empathic relations with others, the relationship between passion and hard work, the transformation of everyone's world through selfless dedication by each individual. And these second graders had, it seemed, long-since mastered this discourse. No assumptions were questioned, or even identified, but simply used to make the claims that both the story and the teacher had already decided-upon.

These sessions, and especially the one in philosophy, directly contradicted what we had experienced in previous years in Kunming. Then, Splitter and Kennedy had conducted sessions with some of these same children and watched teachers do so, using materials from the Philosophy for Children curriculum. In all cases, the students showed a passion and flexibility of mind - and an ability to express ideas in clear and dialogical discourse - which was exhilarating. In the case of Splitter's and Kennedy's facilitation, we struggled to keep up with them in translation, but when we did engage them with counterexamples, requests for definition, or logical clarification, they responded with pointedness and ease. The argument proliferated effortlessly - positions emerged and their relationships were probed through exemplification and solid conditional and syllogistic logic. There was not the slightest sense of fear - of the constraint to say what one was expected to say. The Chinese teachers who presided over this emergence did so for the most part silently: choosing the next speaker, offering an occasional question, returning the conversation to the theme when it strayed too far into a particular case or example. They, like us, appeared excited and gratified with these children's philosophical sensitivity and enthusiasm.

Dewey says of children that one of their chief virtues is what he calls their «plasticity»- by which he means their capacity to adapt to situations, or, in the case of adults, to play their game. When adults are pleased by this trait, they sometimes call it «obedience.» Chinese children seem doubly gifted in this characteristic, growing up as they do in a culture which values plasticity - which still, unlike Western societies, has a sense of the social whole as important in relation to its parts - yet living in a moment of the (however carefully monitored) emergence of values of individualism. Their plasticity is doubly evident in the ironical fact, pointed out by Splitter, that when Chinese children are told by adults to think for themselves, they do so with greater ease than do U.S. and Australian children, who, having grown up in a culture which professes to value autonomy, find it more difficult to do so. Is this because heteronomy hides its face in the West under the collectively celebrated mask of rugged individualism? The Chinese are discovering individualism with all the hope and aspiration of springtime, as the West enters its long winter of the same.

We could not help but wonder at this year's more orchestrated performance. It could be attributed to the fact that the Chinese teachers are developing their own texts, which, as in the above example, tend towards the moralistic and the admonitory, although there are also texts in the collection they have put together and published which problematize such philosophical issues as freedom, dreams, theft, and the supernatural. Perhaps it was the texts they chose this time, both

prompted and guided in their discourse by the presence of local and regional hierarchs. It could be that the challenge to the problem of thinking for oneself and with others that Philosophy for Children and community of inquiry praxis represents is beginning to reveal its deeper social implications, and, as the program becomes more visible, there is a pulling back, an adjustment going on. It seems too early, and we ourselves are too ignorant of the culture and the current socio-political atmosphere, to tell.

Our Chinese hosts, both teachers and administrators, were very emphatic in pointing out that they wished to introduce and practice Philosophy for Children in a manner which is coherent with their own tradition. They want to do their Philosophy for Children, and have no qualms about how that might be different from other forms. This is probably one of the most interesting questions raised by our experience. How does intercultural dialogue through philosophy work? Is it possible at all? And what for? For those of us enculturated in Western forms of life and thought, and with only a superficial acquaintance with Eastern philosophy, and representing - whether we like it or not - a civilization associated with cultural, economic and military imperialism, this is not a minor issue.

One week later we were in Shanghai, where we were greeted and hosted with both infectious warmth and impeccable decorum by the head of an institute which is active on the national level in educational reform. Our weariness with the struggle to put the chairs in a circle, to elicit the questions which bared the deeper assumptions, to reinvent ourselves as interlocutors rather than experts, to model dialogue rather than delivery - a struggle the outcome of which we left Kunming ignorant - was necessarily put aside. Early on the morning after our late-night arrival and consultation with our hosts, we were driven across the bright, hot, teeming city to a new, recently built primary school - a school, as we came to understand, which was a key participant in the new reform efforts.

The Shanghai group of teachers was completely new to Philosophy for Children, but the ground had been carefully prepared. They had heard about the Kunming project, and even watched videotapes of classes in Kunming which the Institute had loaded onto its state-of-the-art website. Several teachers had begun practice in their respective schools, based on a viewing of these tapes, and, as we understood, a look at the IAPC Philosophy for Children curriculum, which has been translated into Chinese. Like the Kunming group, those in Shanghai seemed to find this curriculum inspiring but, for the most part, culturally inappropriate. The schedule of the three-day workshop, shown us in advance, included two demonstration classes, to be followed by commentary by the experts. As we entered the school in the morning, relieved even at 8:00 in the morning to find an air-conditioned room (the only one in the school), we sensed a different atmosphere than Kunming. Perhaps it had to do with Shanghai's long acquaintance with the West; perhaps with the Institute Director's powerful combination of sophistication and enthusiasm; or perhaps our experience in Kunming had given us an at least slightly more detailed cognitive map, and therefore more confidence for this next exploration of the territory. The room felt friendly, interested, watchful.

We had the demonstration first thing. It was a discussion, conducted by a language arts teacher (and as part of language arts class) of a story called, in translation, «To Eat or Not to Eat - A Story of Honesty,» written by a teacher. It took place at the end of the Sung Dynasty, a period of



war and social turbulence, including «robbery and brigandage.» A group of playing children are forced to flee an approaching group of bandits. Wandering for miles in the hot sun, they come upon a house which has been pillaged and abandoned, with a pear tree in the front yard heavy with ripe fruit. Xu Liang climbs the tree and begins picking pears for himself and the rest of the group. Only one child - Xu Heng - refuses a pear. Xu Liang asks him,

«'Aren't you thirsty?'

Shaking his head Xu Heng answered, 'Yes, I am. But how can I eat those pears that don't belong to me?'

'Don't be such a fool! It is chaotic and the masters are nowhere. What's wrong with it anyway? Here you are.' With these words, he gave Xu Heng two pears from his pocket.

'No,' Xu Heng said, 'Even if the masters are not here, we must be masters of ourselves. Honesty is what counts. So it will make us thieves if we eat these. I would rather die of thirst than eat others' pears.'

This 'fool' in the eyes of his peers turned out to be an outstanding scholar and statesman of his time and earned reverence from later generations.»

The discussion which followed was both predictable and astonishing. The assembled fourth graders, about 15 in all, quickly and enthusiastically elaborated philosophical positions - deontological («it's immoral; if we do the same thing as bad people, we are the same»), consequentialist («never eat, because there's not a life at stake, and if everyone acts like that it will make the turbulence worse»), situationalist («the bandits make things different. I can eat and pay later»), relativist («It all depends on your perception. If you don't consider it a theft, it isn't»), characterological («face reality bravely. It isn't affordable even to tell a white lie»). A proliferation of examples soon moved the topic of honesty to that of lying, and a wealth of finely nuanced positions emerged, roughly analogous to the positions on stealing. There was the example of finding a penny on the street, of being entrusted with a dangerous secret, of cheating on an exam, of telling someone they have cancer, of whether to tell the truth when parents would be jeopardized, of escaping from bullies by lying about where one lives, of stealing candy. There was discussion of what a «white lie» is and whether it is really a lie, of the «beautiful lie» - i.e. of lying for someone else's good - of whether anyone can be honest all the time even if they want to, of the constraints which poverty can put on honesty, of the pressure from other people to lie in little ways, of whether it's O.K. to lie to «evil people,» of the difficulty there is in «hitting the mark» of honesty all the time, of upholding the «virtue» of the Chinese people, of the necessity of always telling the truth to «relatives and friends,» of truthfulness as a «ruler by which moral quality is measured.» It was a rich, well-connected conversation.

The teacher made about three interventions - once to restate a point, once to offer reassurance («All of us want to be honest») once to poll the students on how many had ever told a lie. All of the children raised their hands. At the end she offered the least obviously problematic position - «All of us want to be honest, we do our best.» The children had quickly and surely worked into a complex problematization of the issue of honesty. They had articulated ambiguities and complexities which, one sensed, could become dangerous if pushed too far. Without the support of a facilitator, they graciously fell back on the positions provided for them by the stable adult world around them, and that adult world was pleased to see it. Were they engaged in philosophy?

What seemed clear to us is that the children were, with a natural spontaneity and an instinctive sureness we had not seen in the West, doing philosophy - if doing philosophy means problematizing ontological, epistemological, and axiological concepts and building arguments that support reasoned judgments, through communal dialogue. Children are able to do this because they have not been trained out of it. Adults have been trained out of it by being led, through the discourse patterns of the adults in their lives - which communicates the discourse patterns of the culture at large, and its manner of deliberation - to hold certain assumptions to be unquestionable. The moment an assumption becomes unquestionable, dialogue is closed down. Adults live in a more or less non-dialogical philosophical environment. Children are rapidly assimilating to that environment, but are still flexible enough that, when offered the opportunity, the inherently dialogical nature of language, human interlocution, and the innate fuzziness of the beliefs by which we live, propel them into philosophical inquiry.

It would seem that Chinese and Western adults are no different in their socialization into the discomfort and sense of danger with which they approach the deeper assumptions by which we live. What does seem different is the capacity of Chinese children to enter the zone of problematization. Our suspicion, following Splitter's insight about the irony of childhood in authoritarian cultures, is that at this moment in history Chinese children are able to do something their elders cannot, and they do it wholeheartedly. They can do this because, although their parents cannot, they have given their children permission to do so. By contrast, Western adults give mixed messages to their children. They themselves have been raised in a tradition which values fundamental inquiry, but which has experienced the ambiguity and the disorientation which such inquiry entails. Because Chinese basic social values are more unanimous, less conflicted, when the lid is taken off them, they can be looked at clearly. When they are subjected to inquiry, they open seamlessly along the fault lines of their inherent logical structure, and reveal the assumptions that support that structure.

The demonstration finished, the experts gave their feedback. Kennedy mapped the positions which had emerged in the conversation and identified them as positions in the tradition of moral philosophy, then offered a discussion plan designed to probe and clarify them. Cochran outlined the characteristics of a philosophical story that promotes philosophical dialogue through dramatizing various positions in the narrative. He suggested that the epilogue might be changed to be a bit more «open-ended,» and that the plot itself could suggest options that increased the moral complexity concerning the «stealing» of the pears: one of the children being seriously dehydrated, the intention to compensate the owners, the possible death of the owners at the hands of the bandits, etc. Guin. Taking a more general approach, Kohan offered a five-part definition of «philosophy as practice»: 1) The questioning of assumptions, through problematizing the natural, ordinary and obvious in our experience; 2) The emergence of difference through dialogue («Why have a dialogue if we all agree?»); 3) The examination of implications and consequences of those positions («Asking 'why' and 'for what' rather than 'how'»); 4) The clarification of meaning («When we say 'honest' or 'fair' or 'true' do we all mean the same thing?»); 5) Transformation («How are our words related to our practices?» «Philosophy is necessary but also uncertain»).

Kohan finished his more general response by calling for the children from the audience to come to the front and sit down with him on the floor. About six children readily complied, and Walter asked them if they had any questions. They were quick to comply, while their parents and teachers looked on with a decorous combination of humor, anxiety, and curiosity. They asked him:

Why do you have a beard? Where do you come from? What time is it?  
 Do you know how many soccer stars there are in our country?  
 Are you hungry? Are you a professor?  
 What's the highest price of fruit in your country?  
 What kind of apples are most expensive? How large is your country?  
 Have you ever done anything that risked punishment?  
 «Where shall we begin?» Walter asked.

«Let's begin with the easy questions,» one child replied.  
 «Begin anywhere,» said another.

«Does that mean that all the questions are the same?» Walter asked.  
 «Let's begin with the question, 'Are you a professor?」 offered another child.  
 «What does it mean to be a professor?» Walter responded.  
 «It means you're clever.»

«It means you work until 1:30 in the morning.» «If you were clever and worked until 1:30 would you be a professor?» Walter asked.  
 «You need to be older.»

«You need to be well-dressed.»

«Why do you need to be well-dressed?» asked Walter, who was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

«Because only poor people living on the street are untidy.»  
 «Because he must have knowledge.» «Because he has the money to buy clothes!» «What,» asked Walter, «is the difference between being clever and having knowledge?» «They're the same.»  
 «How do you know someone is clever?» «Your IQ and EQ.»  
 «You give them a list of questions to answer.»

At this point, as the conversation was moving toward the making of distinctions and the offering of criteria, it was ended by the lunch clock. Kohan's expert gambit was subtly closed off. Later, Kennedy asked one of the translators what the audience had thought of the conversation, and she answered that they had considered the children to have been acting in a «naughty» way - through questioning Kohan's beard and his dress we presumed.

After lunch, the group divided in two, and Kohan and Kennedy led 20 people - including two children of about 10 years - in reading a story, developed by the Kunming project.

### *After School*

After school, Teacher Wang accompanies her students to the school gate and tells them, «Please go back home on time and do not spend your time lingering on the street.» Qiangqiang would listen to the teacher no more and cannot help yelling to Xiaoqing: «Free! We are free now!»  
 «Free for what? We'll never be free,» Xiaoging comments in dejection.  
 «Where has your sense of freedom gone?» Jingling asks.



«Don't be so upset, we will find freedom together,» Ningxing kindly says.

«No! That is impossible!» Xiaoqing answers in a firm tone.

«Don't you expect freedom? Let's go and find it,» Ningxing invites again.

«Expectation does not help at all, it is more like a dream. We are always subject to teacher, parents, and even grandparents!» Xiaoqing says.

«Why don't we go to the park, where we can be free!» says Jiayuan.

Once I heard this suggestion I wanted to join my classmates very much, and we started moving towards the Qiu Park, which is not far from our school.

Qiangqian, Xiaogang and Ningxing all go onto the boat and are rowing the boat to the middle of the lake. The rest of us, Jingjing, Xiaoqing and I leave our bags on the grass and lie down on the green grass. Looking up at the birds in the sky, I cannot help expressing the idea of turning into a bird that can fly freely. However, Jingjing cannot agree with me. She says, «What is the advantage of becoming a bird? They fly because they have to look for food. Isn't that tiresome? What do you think, Xiaoqing?»

Xiaoqing says, «I don't think its tiresomeness would bother me much. What I don't like are the restraints imposed by the adults. I wish I could grow faster - then no one could take control of me.»

«What would life be like if we were grownups?» I ask them. Before they answer, I see Jiayuan passing by and say, «Why don't you come and join in the discussion of our idea?»

Jiayuan replies, «Ideas are not born from random talk. How can you realize your idea just by discussing it? Let's go and have fun over there!»

At this moment, the caretaker of the park rushes up to us and shouts, «How can you kids lie on the grass, walking on the lawn is not allowed, can't you read the sign? You unruly youngsters! I'll report you to your teacher!»

We are so frightened that we run away from the caretaker, while Qiangqian's group is also forced to leave the boat by another caretaker. Even worse, the caretakers insist on charging us! Since we have no money, our bags are required as guarantee! «But how can we finish our homework without our schoolbags? And our parents will scold us for not turning in our assignments,» one of us says. «Please pardon us, we didn't do all this on purpose,» I say.

«Pardon you? Don't you know you should follow park rules? A nation is managed best under law, just as the school and the family need to regulations in order to perform better. We couldn't open the park to the public if everyone behaved like you!» says one caretaker angrily.

«Good sir, please give us a chance. We promise we won't do such things next time,» Jiayuan pleads.

«O.K., we'll let you go this time. But you must give us a written report tomorrow.» It seems we have no choice but to accept his offer.

Once out of the park, Jiayuan nags me, «Hurry up, Liming is waiting for us to help him with his lessons!»

«I won't go!» I answer angrily.

«Come on, we promised him, since he's ill these days. He'll be left behind if we don't help him.» «His illness has nothing to do with me. Why should I go? I have no responsibility for him.» I still don't want to go with Jiayuan.

«How can you say something like this? If Liming falls behind, his performance on the final exams will certainly affect our class average.»

«His falling behind is none of my business. It's the teacher and his parents who should be responsible for that. I will not go,» I answer. Then I walk quickly ahead of Jiayuan and go back home. But I can't figure out whether I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing. I'm totally worn out.

After reading the story, we called for questions. Does teacher Wang limit the students?

Are animals free? (Kennedy)

Is it true that we are losing our freedom?

Can freedom bring happiness to human beings? Society needs certain regulations and rules. Can we talk about freedom without talking about them?

Is anybody free? (Kohan)

Does too much freedom mean indulgence? Does freedom mean self-indulgence?

In the discussion that followed, there quickly emerged a clear sense of ambivalence about the value and the implications of freedom. For those who chose the subjective definition, it was easier to resolve: freedom is feeling happy when you're doing something. Others emphasized what seemed a dangerous element in freedom. One participant argued that «where there is no constraint, there is more pain.» Others emphasized that it was a relative term, that one could only be free within a framework of constraints. One queried whether freedom was to be valued over love. The two children in the group defined freedom as being free of their parents' constraints. They were open and enthusiastic in giving examples: free to go out of the house with some money, with no one to tell you what to do. Free from your mother nagging you about homework or chores. The adults listened with amused silence.

What struck us about the conversation was, that, relative to the discussions we had witnessed among the children, there was very little dialectical movement. The consensus opinion, the accepted version - that freedom is always relative, and if pursued apart from the rules and regulations of society is dangerous and productive of chaos and distress - was stated by the participants in various ways, with more or less sophistication. Alternative viewpoints did not emerge, or an implicit search for criteria through the weighing of examples and counterexamples. There was neither a conflict of ideas nor a building upon others' ideas, but an affirmation of commonly held beliefs. The spirit of free and self-structuring play with concepts, with no fear of entertaining counterintuitive or potentially unacceptable positions, was not present.

This difference among adults and children's approach to group philosophical discussion is also characteristic of the West; the only further difference is, that in the latter, disagreement is more acceptable. But this disagreement, when it does happen, is expressed as debate - a taking of sides - not as dialectical search. In debate, a personal investment in a position is assumed, and the conflict of ideas is constructed as a matter of attack and defense, of holding one's position against all possible arguments; of turning the other's argument against him or her, or offering examples designed to destroy rather than problematize the other's position. The difference between dialogue and debate can often be subtle, for conflict is inherent in both. What characterizes the former is the willingness to put one's own position at risk, to submit both positions to interrogation.

The space of dialogue - the «between» - is one which governed by the question rather than the statement. When statements are put, they are implicitly considered to be provisional. Whether

they turn out to be temporary markers or more durable ones, they are considered in the same way. Children seem spontaneously to understand this, and the reason, we hypothesize, is because they still know how to play. As in all imaginative play, they slip easily into that transitional space between subject and object, real and imagined, true and false, possible and impossible, where the boundaries become negotiable. This can be interpreted by adults as both to children's advantage and to their disadvantage: the latter because the play world is one in which there are no real «stakes» - where survival is not an issue, and the play passes as just another episode. From this perspective, the «between» of dialogue is a space without implications or consequences, and thus is more a theater, a magical space illuminated within a night of relative unconsciousness, rather than a forum in broad daylight, where words and actions must confront each other. This would appear to be the basis for the perennial arguments - from Plato to modern parents and teachers - against doing philosophy with children. On this account, it creates relativists, persons who object for the sake of objecting, superficial wranglers who learn to justify, any behavior or attitude with specious arguments. On the other hand, those who understand the transitional play space of philosophical dialogue as an advantage see it as a practice room, where one learns the art of mediation which can be applied to «real» life - where one finds the sense of communal trust and intellectual passion that in fact allows us to reconstruct the real through the art of dialogue.

Perhaps considering that discursive impasse, for our next, afternoon session, we decided to introduce the same issue mimetically. We asked the group to divide into six smaller groups of three each. Three groups would prepare skits or pantomimes which represented «no freedom,» and three which represented «total freedom.» The participants easily and enthusiastically assumed this task. One group represented a mother and child, with the former imperiously demanding he finish his homework and go to bed. In a second group a child (played by an actual child) fervently rushed out of his house, shouting «I'm free, I will go out to play!» A third group represented freedom through travel - they discussed together a trip they were making from one city to another. In a fourth, a child was represented leaving the house with money. In a fifth, a child being disciplined by both his parents. And finally, three people trying unsuccessfully to communicate in different languages.

After these brief representations, we asked again for questions. They were as follows:

Why can't a mother grant her daughter the freedom that she needs?

Is freedom just the absence of constraint? Why is freedom associated with disorder? What can we do to get as much freedom as possible?

If I were done wrong, would it be possible to prove my innocence without breaking the law? The discussion that followed showed a bit more evidence of movement. Freedom was initially defined as a relative term, and lack of freedom an absolute term. In the sense of complete absence of constraint, one could be free, it was hypothesized, only if one were the only human being in the universe. A call for definitions followed, and the term was characterized as meaning: a complete absence of constraint; the capacity to make choices, have alternatives; an internal feeling; doing what you want to within the law; and what was named as «Hamurabi's Law,» i.e. «freedom always within the context of law.»

Given what felt like the inability or unwillingness of members of the group to enter into some creative play with the term, Walter offered a provocation. «I have a friend,» he said, «who

thinks that only by breaking the law can we be free, because the law represents imposition by the most powerful.»

This challenge didn't draw much of a response. Although a voice here or there was emerging which seemed to begin to be ready to take the concept out of its firm contextualization in the concept of non-freedom - to look at it, as Westerners do, from an anti-realist perspective - to imagine the best and the worst, to play with context - seemed a step that was attractive to some, but, given the general climate of «wisdom,» felt a little dangerous though not impossible. Perhaps it was our own preshaped perception of what we would find in China, but we had a clear sense of caution among the participants to say much more than what would be accepted by an elder, an authority, stated by a respected member of party/society. But at the same time, it was as if the world of questions we brought hovered on the close periphery, beckoning. And when we asked as we finished for further questions which might have emerged as a result of our discussion, they had a bit more of an edge:

How can we realize freedom? Why do we need freedom?

Is the lack of freedom absolute?

If our parents and teachers gave us more freedom, what would it be like?

What is the relation between survival and freedom?

Why do different age groups have different definitions of freedom?

The last question is interesting, for it was the two children (boys) in the group who had presented the most radical - if the most naive - view of freedom. In a sense, the question represents, however obliquely, the problem which philosophy for children represents to the Chinese: if it is the young who carry a vision of untrammelled freedom, freedom as the absence of constraint, who want to play with the boundaries of freedom, then to give them a voice is problematic. And perhaps this is the problem of education in general, which makes for that formidable uniformity we spoke of in the beginning of this paper. The young are the weak spot in culture, the open space for chaos, transformation, or what is more likely, both. They are the place where cultural transmission happens, and therefore the place where it can break down. They touch the social nerve in adults which is located on the boundary between tradition and innovation, stability and evolution, stagnation and chaos. They are the unstable element in the system, and therefore the element which inspires the most hope and the most fear in us; for we know the system never stops changing, is always reconstructing. The fear of change is as healthy an element in the system as the longing for transformation, and children are located on the fault line that both separates and unites them. This poses a problem for educational philosophies and structures, and tends to politicize the business of schooling. In every culture, educational structures and practices hold children hostage to adults' deep-seated prejudices and hunches, not just about the good and the moral life, but even more deep-seated felt ideas about the relationship between personal and social identity, and the amount of freedom within the system allowed them for experimental play with social and personal structures.

We finished the Shanghai conference by calling for a final set of questions. We were interested in how they might have shaped. The result presented us with an intriguing mixture of entrenched practicality, anxiety, wonder, and nuanced subversion:

How should the exercises be arranged?

There are no students who cannot be taught to learn, but are there teachers who don't know how to teach?

In order to teach, do we need preset goals? What if no one is interested?  
How can Philosophy for Children be infused into language arts?  
What do you do with a noisy classroom?  
How do you evaluate the effectiveness of Philosophy for Children?  
What are the criteria by which we choose Philosophy for Children texts?

The teacher is a mentor, a guide and someone who solves problems. If the teacher has less authority, and cannot give the children answers, the parents complain.

A familiar group of questions, in any cultural setting. The same hope, the same passion, the same fear, the same dogged methodism. Yet for us Westerners, both Kunming and Shanghai offered, in slightly different ways, glimpses of another possible result from introducing philosophy to children - itself the result of another cultural adult-child balance. Because Chinese children seem to perform adult expectations better than Western children, could it be that when a space of interrogation, conceptual play, and reasoned inquiry into deep assumptions is opened, that there is actually less resistance to the transformation that implies, rather than more? If this were the case, it would be one great ironical moment in the historical dialectic of individualism and collectivism, autonomy and heteronomy, liberalism and authoritarianism. It may seem ironical to us from this side of it, but, were we to let our romantic historical imagination play out even further, it may be a moment of dialectical synthesis: China as a civilization in which the individual and the collective, freedom and constraint, self-realization and responsibility, find a new, millennial balance.

At the very least, even though Chinese schools do not look very different from those in the West, China offers an opportunity for Philosophy for Children to question its basis, its methodology, its aims. It seems to be expressing a different cultural voice, and to be disposed to the kind of dialogue we are more used to claiming than practicing. Both Kunming and Shanghai provide, in their own ways, formidable contexts: the deep, strong and disciplined educators of Railway Station School of Kunming and the scholarly, sophisticated and committed members of the Shanghai Institute for Research in the Human Sciences seem determined to take Philosophy for Children, not just beyond their own limits as Chinese, but beyond the limits Philosophy for Children has already established for itself in the West. Philosophy for Children in China, then, looks like a wonderful opportunity to think ourselves - what we are as educators engaged in the practice of philosophy - again. An invitation to think ourselves again. Is this not what dialogue and philosophy are about? It's up to us to accept the invitation.

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