

Waldorf Education and Teacher Training in Chengdu, China

Elisabeth Swisher

Five years ago I took a sabbatical from teaching at the Chicago Waldorf School to teach English in a Chinese public high school in the north of China. I was amazed and in awe of what I experienced there. After I had finished teaching, I traveled through China on my own, stopping in Chengdu to see the panda research center. At that time there were no Waldorf schools anywhere in China, but I thought if I came back to China I would like to teach in Chengdu. I just liked the city, the parks, and the temples. Later on, people who knew about my connection to China introduced me to Zewu Li, Li Zhang, and Harry Huang, the founders of the new Chengdu Waldorf School. I was very happy to hear about their work and decided I wanted to help them in any way I could to support Waldorf education in China.

The Chengdu Waldorf School opened its doors three years ago with about ten children in kindergarten and first grade. Thanh and Benjamin Cherry are the godparents of this beautiful school. They provided the founders with much-needed practical advice as well as inspiration. Today the school has five kindergarten classes and seven grades. It sits on a huge, beautiful piece of land with a big pond, and is surrounded by farmland. There are plans in the works to build another classroom building. The growth rate of the Chengdu Waldorf

School is about the same as in the rest of China's economy. This is a little disconcerting because Li, Zewu, and Harry are burning out fast. And without them things would deteriorate quickly. Because they needed trained teachers, they decided to start the training courses on the school premises. These courses run during school vacation in the summer as well as in October and May.

There has been tremendous interest in the training courses. The first module of the grade school training had 100 students and the kindergarten training had 50 students. Twenty prospective students had to be turned away due to lack of space. Many of the students came from Montessori backgrounds, some came from other teaching jobs, and there were several who were "just parents," who came to learn about education, especially in the kindergarten course. One student, a Montessori school mentor and advisor, told me that she always felt that there was something missing in this education, which she has finally found in Waldorf education. Other Montessori teachers in the course told me similar stories. There were students from all parts of China: from Taiwan, Hong Kong and many areas of mainland China. One of the teachers at the school who also participated in the courses was from Tibet. It was very touching to see how Waldorf education and

anthroposophical striving brought all these people together to look in the same direction and to pursue the same goals.

The first module (three five-day weeks) of the three-year grade school training course held in July 2007 was led and planned by Benjamin Cherry from Australia and Harry Huang. Ben gave wonderful lectures in the morning about the nature of the human being (the three-fold, four-fold, seven-fold, and nine-fold human being) and the essential concepts of thinking, feeling, and willing in the development of the child. The second part of the morning was dedicated to the teaching of language arts, with Zewu taking the lead in Chinese and Ben giving assignments in English. In the afternoon I taught Werbeck singing exercises, choral singing, the “mood of the fifth,” and the pentatonic flutes. This course also included five days of biography work led by Ben, and folk dancing, led by me, in the morning to wake up, get moving, get to know each other, and have fun. The days concluded with reviews, questions, and answers.

In August the third module (two six-day weeks) of the three-year kindergarten training was led and planned by Thanh Cherry (from Australia, originally from Vietnam) and by Li Zhang. Thanh gave most of the morning lectures on such themes as the Nature of the Human Being; Rhythm, Ritual and Reverence; Child Study and Child Observation; Constitutional Types; and the Four Temperaments. I gave three morning lectures on Circle Movements, the Western Festivals, and Music for the Young Child and the Mood of the Fifth. The course also included classes on hand gesture games, presentations of morning circles by the students, creating regional festivals, singing, understanding the mood of the fifth, learning how to write songs, learning how to play the pentatonic Choroi flute, and folk dancing in the morning. Yang Ting, the handwork teacher of the Chengdu school, taught knitting (beautiful flute cases and cute babies), and plant dyeing with silk and cotton gauze.

Almost none of the students had any musical education from high school or university, but they loved to sing, knew many of their folk songs by heart, and they sang them beautifully on pitch. Very few people could not hold a tune (mostly the men). But when I tried to teach some rounds or two-part songs, many could not hear certain half-tone steps

and were not able to get them right. It dawned on me that the Chinese still live mainly in their pentatonic music (which does not contain half-tone steps), even though they know and love lots of Western songs, such as “Doe, a Deer. . .”, and that they have yet to complete this step into another consciousness through music and Anthroposophy.

Classical music, especially piano and violin, is much loved and some children of well-meaning, music-loving parents get exposed to lessons (and drills) at a very early age, usually around four years old. Achievement and money are keys to success, and materialism has taken hold of most Chinese people, sometimes even more strongly than in the U.S., which I was very surprised to discover.

The students were incredibly appreciative, loving, enthusiastic, and eager to do well, to shine, and to learn. They took in everything they learned without seeming to get tired, asked wonderful questions, and were very respectful to their teachers. They loved their pentatonic flutes and were very happy about the fact that they now understood more about music.

The challenge of teaching Waldorf education in China is not so much the language (we had fabulous translators), but the fact that the basic books by Rudolf Steiner have not been translated yet. Therefore, one has to present all the ideas of Anthroposophy that are relevant to Waldorf education in the class lectures. This also precludes the students doing independent reading of Steiner texts. We had to say many times: “You don’t have to *believe* what we are saying. You have to live with it, ponder it, and work with it to find out if the things we are telling you, which come from Rudolf Steiner’s insights, ring true to you. You should not just believe us, you have to give it a try, explore and feel if this is right out of your own experience.”

Another delicate fact is that some people are afraid of having anything to do with religion due to their Communist education. Christianity especially sounds suspicious to many of them, even though almost all of China celebrates Christmas for the gift giving and commercial fun, without really knowing what it is all about.

As you probably know, China has another big problem: the one-child family and the fact that many families still prefer boys over girls. The girls are sometimes given away for adoption so the parents

can try for a boy again. The boys then are raised by two parents, often both of them working all day, and four grandparents who all spoil them rotten into “little emperors.” The phenomenon has arisen that boys are especially disrespectful to their mothers: swearing at and hitting them, and not listening to them at all. The mothers are desperate. The teachers have a hard time with the boys, because their social skills are nonexistent. I was asked to attend two parent evenings where the parents were given the opportunity to ask questions, and many of these questions dealt with this topic.

The Chinese have been through many changes, and I hope that with the start of the Waldorf school and the teacher training a balance to the materialistic view can be brought to this part of the world. The Waldorf movement in China not only needs teacher training instructors, but also people who can mentor new kindergartens, schools, kindergarten teachers, and grade school teachers on a regular basis.

If you would like to help, please write to: Li Zhang at waldorfchina@126.com, or Harry Wong at waldorfd@126.com, or Thanh Cherry at thanh@hinet.net.au.

Elisabeth Swisher was born in Austria, was a Waldorf student in Stuttgart, Germany, studied music at the University of Vienna and did her Waldorf teacher training in Stuttgart. She taught music for all grades and teacher training at the Vienna and the Chicago Waldorf Schools as well as summer courses in different parts of the U.S. After a sabbatical in China she opened her own Waldorf early childhood program in Chicago in 2003. In July and August of 2007 she taught for five weeks at the Waldorf teacher training courses in Chengdu, China.



Li Zhang, Harry Wong and Zewu Li meeting in the Chengdu Waldorf School's hallway. Photo: E. Swisher