

# TEACHING IN CHINA

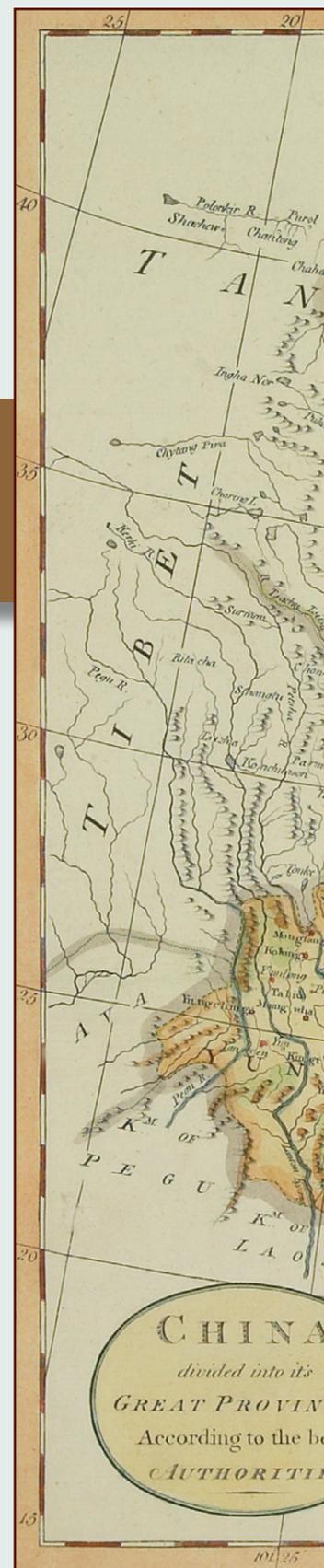
## TWO VIEWS

By Brian P. Coppola and Keith Kerr

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This article documents the experiences of two American professors who have taught in China and describes the similarities and differences between their students at home and abroad. Brian Coppola, who taught organic chemistry at Peking University (PKU), observes how the strengths in science preparation that Chinese students achieve in their precollege schooling are not exploited at the university, while the structure of US higher education seems to make up for the weaker preparation of US students relative to their Chinese counterparts. Keith Kerr taught sociology at Ningxia University, which is located in an isolated region of northwest China. He describes how Chinese students, who in some ways appear strikingly similar to their American counterparts, also reflect the distinctly communal and traditional aspects of their culture.

—Margaret A. Miller

By Brian P. Coppola

Here is the question: Why don't Chinese students taking organic chemistry for the third time outperform their US counterparts who are taking it for the first time?

Although higher education research about China is plentiful, information about the day-to-day reality of classroom instruction in Chinese universities is difficult to come by. So in answering the question, I rely on my first-hand experiences and reflections as the first native English-speaking Western professor who has taught organic chemistry at Peking University (PKU) and, as far as I can determine, anywhere in China.

Starting about eight years ago, a few universities in China began to offer some of their introductory science classes either completely in English or bilingually. At PKU, faculty members who are comfortable teaching in English now offer about 18 such classes a year. This change in instructional language has opened a previously closed window onto science teaching in Chinese universities.

In 2011, I taught the entire introductory organic chemistry sequence at PKU; enrolled in it were 35 first-year students (primarily majors) in the spring semester and 24 in the fall. I worked with one of my PKU colleagues, Professor Dahui Zhao, who had taught this course previously and who was indispensable because she understood the ins and outs of the PKU academic policies, procedures, and practices.

### OBSERVATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

I am loathe to over-generalize from my one deep dive into the teaching of chemistry at PKU and the handful of guest lectures I have given there since 2008. So I prefer to cast my observations and impressions from this experience as a set of researchable hypotheses rather than as conclusions.

Here is what I observed:

#### Students in China Have an Exceptional Precollege Experience

My PKU students had matriculated with a substantial knowledge of chemistry. For any given topic, they had the ability to make deep, vertical connections to factual details that, in my experience, only the best students achieve after

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taking the honors version of the introductory course at the University of Michigan.

Their prior knowledge, in my view, enabled them to do four things, based on the approach I took to teaching the class. In understanding organic chemistry, they were able to:

- appreciate the lateral connections and analogical reasoning that collapses encyclopedic information into larger conceptual chunks;
- make immediate sense of the literature as a source of examples rather than having me recapitulate the textbook;
- contextualize relevant details about experimental laboratory procedures; and
- understand both technical and colloquial scientific English.

But

#### College Students in China are Being Under-Taught Relative to Their Backgrounds

I have observed English-language organic chemistry classes over the past few years at different universities in China. Class time is filled with rapid-fire, content-heavy PowerPoint slides, mainly provided by publishers, which faithfully display every fact from the textbook. Students watch and listen, following along with printouts of the slides.

The first few times I observed this heavy flow of information, I wondered how on earth students got anything out of these classes. Then, on the first day I guest-lectured at PKU, I realized what was happening.

Nearly all of these first-year organic chemistry majors were arguably among the top 100 such individuals in China, if not the world. They walked into the first day of class with two years of prior instruction in organic chemistry (one in high school and another during the intensive classes they attended in advance of the Chemistry Olympiad, an international competition that attracts the best high school students from around the world). So the traditional organic chemistry class at PKU is their third time through this content, and any new learning is simply filling in the gaps.

At my home institution, my classroom is one of four that comprise the 1500-student organic chemistry offering. It seats 400 undeclared first-year students, who bring with them no prior experience in the subject and a big bushel of anxiety about it.

Although I use the same set of notes (combined with chalk, talk, and interactive discussion) for classes in both settings, I play those notes, metaphorically speaking, with quite different emphases. In my estimation, the entering PKU students have background knowledge about organic chemistry that is comparable to that of the average entering graduate student in the United States, and yet the approach taken by their standard curriculum is to simply repeat the same introductory class for the third time. I suspect that most of the students in my PKU class, for example, would have been able to perform quite well on their traditional final examination when they entered on the first day of class.

### Students in China Need More Time to Think

The difference between the educational experiences of my US and Chinese students is as remarkable as it is poorly understood by people in both countries (see the following table). In any given semester, students at the University of Michigan take four to five classes that account for about 14-17 hours of time per week. In contrast, chemistry majors at PKU take eight to nine classes per semester, with an average weekly class contact time of 35-38 hours.

In my course at PKU, I literally could not offer a regular office hour because there was no time in the students' schedules to visit me. At the University of Michigan, and in general in the US, we provide diverse learning resources alongside the formal class meetings.

Chemistry majors at the University of Michigan, whom we routinely place in the most competitive graduate programs in the US, are required to take only 15 chemistry classes (including labs), although most will elect two to four others before they graduate. By the time PKU chemistry majors

graduate, they have taken at least 45 chemistry classes (including labs).

That said, we do things at the University of Michigan that quickly bring our students up to the level in background knowledge and experience that the PKU students have on the first day of class.

For one thing, we do not equate the act of teaching (to say something) with the process of learning (to understand something). In our program, we also think explicitly about the learning environment as extending beyond class meetings and interactions with an instructor. We provide resources that students avail themselves of outside of class time, as well as an infrastructure to support them. We greatly value the role that relationships play in the more social aspects of learning.

There is simply no time to do this at PKU: Going to class is a full-time job. Homework assignments (particularly lab reports) are long and tedious. Most significantly, there is no time for the Chinese students to reflect on, think about, and

**TABLE 1**  
**FIRST-TERM ORGANIC CHEMISTRY AT U MICHIGAN AND PEKING U**

	U Michigan Fall 2010	Peking U Spring 2011
number of enrolled students <sup>a</sup>	1500	35
educational level of students	60% first year	100% first year
number of declared chemistry majors <sup>b</sup>	~0	34
prior organic instruction <sup>c</sup>	~0	2 years
instructional hours	40/term	60/term
chapters covered in the first semester	~70% of 10	~100% of 19
classes/wk (hrs/wk)	4-5 (14-17)	8-9 (35-38)
total chemistry classes for BS degree	15	45
<b>institutional resources to support learning</b>		
faculty-led open workshops	8-10 hr/week	0
one-to-one faculty interaction <sup>d,e</sup>	3-6 hr/week	~0
TA-led discussion sections	75 hr/week	0
participation in formal peer-led study groups	~60% of class	0
coursepack of old exams <sup>f</sup>	200 pages	0

<sup>a</sup>PKU: plus 140 majors and 600 others in different sections of Chinese language classes

<sup>b</sup>UM: historically, ~ 0-3 entering students are declared chemistry majors

<sup>c</sup>UM: ~35% students with AP Chemistry, with one chapter's worth of organic chemistry

<sup>d</sup>PKU: 1 office hour offered by Prof. Zhao before the mid-term & final; 1-2 students attended

<sup>e</sup>UM: office hours, individual appointments, email

<sup>f</sup>UM: no answer key; randomly selected problems from prior years; new selections each year

**The Michigan students are immersed, from the first day of class, in an academic culture filled with many resources that have been created over the years to support the type of learning we want.**

practice the breadth of skills we seek to develop in liberal arts programs, particularly those skills that develop from social interaction and self-management.

### **Students in China are Under-Performing Relative to Their Potential**

My students at PKU had seen every piece in the 1,200-piece puzzle box of organic chemistry before. They really knew and understood the individual pieces, but no one had ever told them there was a picture on the cover of the box or gave them a sense of how the pieces fit together.

In the organic courses at the University of Michigan, we use test questions drawn from primary journals in chemistry as a way to emphasize that just being familiar with the textbook or classroom examples is only the start of understanding. My colleagues and I believe that this testing approach requires students to develop a more adaptive understanding of the subject matter in order to be successful.

One might predict that PKU students would perform much better on any questions than their far less-experienced Michigan counterparts would, regardless of the style of the problem. But the Michigan students are immersed, from the first day of class, in an academic culture filled with many resources that have been created over the years to support the type of learning we want. These resources, ranging from drop-in faculty workshops to peer-facilitated group sessions, enable inexperienced students to bridge the gap between the strong memorization skills they bring to college and our demands that they both learn the basic concepts of organic chemistry and apply them to new and unfamiliar situations.

At PKU, we primarily used problems from past examinations at the University of Michigan to test the Chinese students. The result was an intriguing paradox: My 35 chemistry majors at PKU performed about the same, and in some cases a little more poorly, than the large class of undeclared students in the US who were taking organic chemistry for the first time.

The reasons for this under-performance relative to their potential seem clear to me. The students in the US have time and structured occasions before the exams to make errors and iteratively learn how to respond to the sorts of expectations we have for them. I believe, from my personal interactions during class, that the PKU students can do this

too. They can learn how to draw from their incredible backgrounds to respond to challenging questions that ask them to apply their knowledge, but they need the time to think, practice, and receive guidance on how to think differently.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

This experience has led me to several conclusions:

#### **The Biggest Challenge for China's Education System is not What to Do, But What to Stop Doing**

What I have seen in my PKU classroom I have seen repeated throughout Asia. I see cultures in which the teachers, the students, and the society at large embrace education. I see talented, hard-working students with strong skills who are being held back by the over-burdened, over-managed, and pedantic approaches to education that their societies have inherited and continue to practice.

Creativity, invention, independence, and discovery are the holy grails of higher education. The US believes it knows how to inspire and support them, and others believe we have a secret that they need to wrangle from us. Yong Zhao, at the University of Oregon, has studied the precollege education systems in the US and China. He posits that creativity and invention are inherent human qualities—and that the Chinese system simply does a more effective job of killing them off than the US system does.

My experiences in higher education in the US and China have led me to agree completely with him. In the US, we certainly matriculate many high school graduates who are as ready memorize and regurgitate as their Chinese counterparts (although the US students are not nearly as good at it). But we are good at constructing learning environments where students' inherent, and perhaps dormant, creative and inventive skills can flourish—as they do when Chinese students come to the US for their PhDs and find themselves in environments where the stifling effects of their undergraduate schooling are removed. We also mash students together in multiple settings where they need to learn self-management and self-regulation skills.

#### **China Cannot Just Adopt the US Liberal Arts System**

If Chinese universities suddenly reduced the numbers of classes their students take and opened up time to think, the shock to the system would be too great. Like their US

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counterparts who sometimes run wild when they enter the unsupervised university setting from their relatively structured high school experiences, Chinese students do not have the organizational and self-regulatory skills to do creative work without putting supporting structures into place—structures that the Chinese faculty have no experience in designing and implementing.

In fact, according to Zhao, the first thing that some Chinese administrators want to know is how American universities “manage” their students. China needs to develop a system that moves students from institutional management to self-management.

I suggest an experimental program that takes the current “8x4” structure (eight four-hour classes per week) and replaces it with a “4x8” structure, in which students take four classes of eight structured hours each. Faculty members could provide direct instruction for three hours and also lead discussions; these would be equivalent to their current teaching contact hours.

But in addition, students would participate in two two-hour, structured, peer-facilitated sessions, in which (for example) literature-based, highly divergent assignments would support the development of skills required for creative thinking. Juniors and seniors could be trained as leaders for these sessions. They would thereby both serve their institutions as an overlooked instructional resource and benefit themselves by improving their own understanding of the subject matter and by developing an array of important life skills (leadership, organization, confidence, self-expression, etc.).

Finally, an appealing target for immediate study is the transition made by an increasing number of students who have been educated in traditional Chinese secondary schools but matriculate at US universities. These students might be experiencing the best of both worlds.

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My lasting impression is that the US and Chinese educational systems produce students with complementary strengths at different stages of the educational process. As the number of Chinese university courses that are taught in English increases, there will be many opportunities for bilateral collaboration on instructional design that capitalizes on the two systems’ strengths. China should no more “simply Westernize” than the US should try to “simply Easternize.” Instead, we should study how to improve and strengthen both systems.

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## TEACHING SOCIOLOGY IN CHINA

By Keith Kerr

I teach at Ningxia University, located in an isolated region of northwest China. There, the strong cultural and historical forces that have rocketed China into the globalized world and brought an influx of Western culture are countered by equally strong cultural and historical forces that make my students ambivalent about these changes. Despite theoretical proclamations about the end of the local, “habits of the heart” die hard, if they die at all. Instead, the local and the distant, the old and the new, co-exist, mingle, and collide in my students. China is still in a state of what Wei Fui has called “incomplete modernity.”

### THE SCENE

Morning on campus begins with the slow and rhythmic whisking of straw reeds swept against cement. The cleaning by the ground keepers at the break of dawn alerts the students that it's time to fetch their daily water. They appear sleepy-eyed out of their four-to-a-person 15x20-foot cement dorm rooms with two-foot tall thermoses of every conceivable color.

The campus is located at the edge of the Gobi Desert and is unimaginably dry. Running water is only available to students for part of the day. And when they are not collecting their daily water, you are as likely to see them carrying towels and shower bags as books. The showers, like the potable water source, are centrally located in a building separate from the living quarters and are only open for limited hours. Laundry is washed by hand. At mid-day, sections of the campus look like a massive yard sale as sheets, blankets, shirts, and pants dry in the blazing desert sun.

Yet there is also a distinctly modern existence here as well. Science is well supported, with a wide range of labs that rival their American counterparts. The library system is expansive, housing nearly 1 ½ million books, including a respectable English-language social-science section. It is supplemented by libraries housed in many of the departments on campus.

Faculty have top-of-the-line computers, along with personal printers in their spacious offices. The newer buildings on campus house technology rooms equipped with built-in computers for lecturers and personal screens built into the

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desk of each student. The student center stands as an impressive post-modern work of art in the undergraduate housing section on campus.

The buildings in this desert region, though, are not air-conditioned. And while the school has a wireless network, it can only be accessed, if the signal can be found, through pay accounts purchased from one of the many cell phone companies off campus.

To save electricity, lights are rarely turned on—windows are simply opened. Hallways are always dark. Most classrooms are sparse: cement walls and floors, decades-old wooden double desks, and a blackboard at the front of the room. Although the “technology” rooms are as modern as any in America, most classrooms have only one plug. The opposite wall is the projector screen; the projector itself must be brought in, along with a personal extension cord to reach the plug. Copy machines are hard to come by, and the few that exist are ancient.

### OUTSIDE THE GATES

Outside the gates, the chaos and excitement of modernity is evident. I see more cars each trip, nearly all of them Western, and fewer bicycles. Meanwhile, livestock on the street becomes a rarer and rarer sight. A giant supermarket looms over the farmers markets and street-side vendors catering to the throng of students and huddles of elderly men playing various card and board games outside the campus's south gate. The street is bookended by a multi-story mall and a KFC. Pajamas, once a common sight on the evening street, are being replaced by Western clothes purchased at the mall.

Nevertheless, despite the many changes and Westernization brought here by globalization, outdoor life has not yet changed completely. The street is still the nation's living room. For my Chinese students, to be sitting alone in their rooms watching other people on a screen when they could be interacting with real people just outside the campus gate is still a foreign concept.

### THE STUDENTS

Like their American counterparts, Chinese students here are as likely to be text messaging as they are to be taking

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notes in class. To walk the campus between classes is to risk multiple collisions with students engaged in screen-based conversations with handheld devices, often while on bicycles. Basketball is the most popular recreation here, and the sound of loud, intoxicated students returning from the numerous karaoke bars just outside the main campus gates is not uncommon.

But the Chinese university is also a stronghold of an older, more traditional China. One of the ways this is manifested is in the honor paid to elders. The job of the professor is to teach. The students do everything in support of that function as a show of respect for the learned elder they are studying under.

Screens, projectors, computers—everything is set up by the students prior to the professor's arrival. Classroom monitors, usually the most promising students, attentively watch the professor for any needs that may arise during the lecture. The professor writes on the board; the monitor dutifully erases throughout the lecture. As the lecture nears its midpoint and the professor pauses to sip hot water, students appear at the front of the room to replenish the cup with water that they have freshly boiled. Offices are cleaned, plants are watered, doors are opened, conference travel is booked, and copies are made and distributed—all by the students.

Despite these differences, my American and Chinese students share the concerns of most people on the edge of adulthood: worries over job prospects upon graduation, the angst that comes from negotiating first loves, and the balance between the hopes and dreams of their parents and their own.

The majority of my Chinese students come from small rural villages where their parents still work as farmers. The students speak with excitement, and some unease, of the kinds of homes that are now in reach for their generation, of the cars and material abundance that just a generation before was reserved for the ruling elite. All of my students have expressed a wish to stay in the city or to move to an even bigger one where jobs and money seem more plentiful. A handful want to venture outside of China, to the US or Europe.

Yet they are caught between the promises of the consumer culture and the demands of traditional filial piety. Most of them also express a contradictory desire to live with their families, to help support and show devotion to their parents. As one student told me, "We don't say 'I love you' often to our parents. If you love them, you will return to help them as they get old. It is what you do that matters, not what you say."

## COLLIDING WORLDS

The differences and deep sameness between them were never more apparent than when I connected my Chinese with my American students "face-to-face" via Skype.

With a 12-hour time difference between us, arrangements were made to have my US class meet at 8 AM East Coast time, which was 8 PM Beijing time. The American class of 25 students gathered in their modern, air-conditioned, stadium-style classroom. The projector screen, electronically controlled, with built-in speakers throughout the room, broadcast in life-size images the scene from my side of the world.

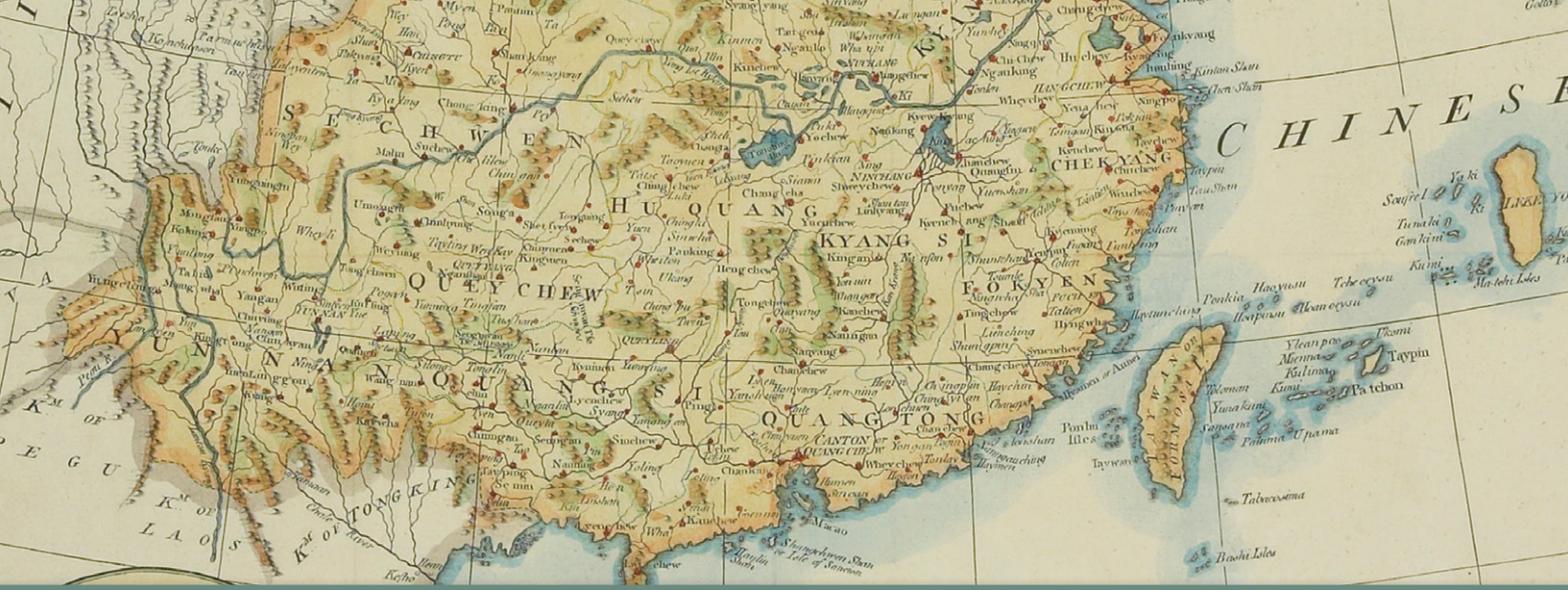
Gathered in my small Chinese apartment were eight Chinese students huddled around a small 13-inch laptop. The dimly lit room was crowded and hot, as a dust storm blowing outside forced us to close the windows, cutting off the only means of ventilation. As the American students sipped on their Dunkin Donuts iced lattes and cold sodas, the Chinese students and I sipped on boiled water.

Because my Chinese students' English, though proficient, is difficult to understand until you become accustomed to the strong accent, arrangements had been made for a translator on the American side. At first, though, there was no need. There was only silence. The Chinese students stared in what they later described as amazement at the modern, movie-like American classroom. On the American side, some students stared back, although many only looked at their own personal screens broadcasting competing images from some other distant place.

Coming from a more direct culture, the first American student asked a political question: "Does your government's Internet censorship bother you?" The response from the Chinese students was as expected—an automatic, ideological, programmed reply: "Some restrictions are necessary in order to maintain a harmonious and peaceful society. But the smart ones who really want to know something will find a way around." Many Chinese respond to critiques of their ruling party as they would to critiques of their family, whatever their private views might be.

A series of similar questions from the American side followed, with programmed, script-like, politically correct

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responses from the Chinese side. An American student: “What do you think of not having a democracy?” The Chinese reply: “China is a democracy and at the local level we have elections, but it takes time to create a new way of governing, and for harmony and stability, it is best that this is a slow change.”

But once the topics turned to the students’ daily lives, the tone changed and the predictable, robot-like responses ceased. Smiles formed, turning into laughs, with the realization that in their free time, the students were much the same. They found common ground in the music they listened to, the Western movies they watched, and the pressures that come from standardized tests and demanding parents.

While the session was scheduled to last only 15 minutes (the American students were to have 60 minutes of lecture by a guest professor afterwards), it only ended when the American students needed to make room for the next class. During that 75 minutes, the students in America and China danced salsa-style for each other, demonstrated their singing ability with songs that both groups knew the words to, and discussed their favorite alcoholic drinks. They also compared the cars they hoped to buy when they landed their first jobs—even though of my eight Chinese students who were present that night, only three had parents who owned cars.

As the session drew to an end, the Chinese, being both indirect and hesitant to get into political matters, finally felt comfortable enough to ask what they really wanted to know: “Why do you Americans love violence?”

While up to this point I had purposely stayed in the background, not wanting to interfere with the exchange that had unexpectedly and spontaneously sprung up between the two groups, I wanted my Chinese students to clarify what they meant. This was an instinctual cultural reaction on my part. I am an American. My culture and I are peaceful and free. Neither I nor my American students, I suspected, understood what the Chinese students had in mind.

The Chinese students clarified: “Most of your movies that we see are about war or violence.” “You feel strongly that your citizens should own guns.” “You have one of the highest murder rates of advanced societies.” And finally, the most damning indictment: “In our lifetime, you have been at war for more years than you have been at peace.”

The American students’ response: “We carry guns because we value freedom.” “We have a high murder rate because of our free and uncensored media and the video games that our children watch.” “We don’t fight wars because we love violence; we fight for peace and freedom.”

The American students, like the Chinese, responded with an automatic, ideological, programmed reply when confronted with a tough and challenging truth. The Chinese students were as confused and befuddled by their illogical and programmed responses as the American students had been at the same kind of reply from the Chinese.

But in the students’ dancing, the singing, the consumerist dreams, and their common adolescent confusion, I saw a deep and telling sameness. ☐