

What Teaching in China Taught Me About Freedom and Individuality in the World

Early in my travels, I became a teacher because something in me was deeply curious about how our world passed old values on to new generations. Working in education gave me unique insight into the parts of culture normally hidden from outsiders and casual tourists. It also gave me a deep resentment for those who maintain their culture at the cost of corrupting young minds. To see children be made into vessels for arbitrary cultural values on a massive scale would be the fire that would consume me.

Working with humans at every stage of development showed me that what most countries call education is a form of cultural narcissism. Whatever is important to prevailing authorities must also be made important to the up-and-coming crop of citizens. Because the old crop of humans believes in something, so too must the new crop. In witnessing this generational transfer of values, I saw the true enemy of progress.

By the time I booked my first trip to Asia to work as an English teacher in China, I had already seen many new types of extremes in the world. China blew them all out of the water. There, I discovered that a place existed where each day human beings were packed shoulder-to-shoulder in the street, and where homogeneity ruled. There was so much to see, but so little variety. It felt dystopian and surreal to become a functioning part of the social machine which existed to remove each individual's individuality.

Through daily interactions, I learned that the Chinese did not appreciate questioning why things were the way that they were in their lives. They had no reason to conceive of alternatives. Cultural awareness of life outside the empire was practically non-existent. The Chinese government was masterfully efficient at controlling the flow of information from within and outside its walls. The result was that the average person would only think things their political rulers condoned.

The control of information exerted by the Chinese government is the most impressive in the world. Only 34 foreign movies are allowed into the country every year, a number which was even lower until recently. Any form of media which portrays China in a negative light is instantly banned. This has led to certain major blockbusters specifically pandering to China in order to get on the limited list of approved releases and earn revenue from the lucrative Chinese market.

The internet, the greatest enabler of inquiry, communication, and collaboration in human history, is also heavily censored in China. Thousands of websites, including such giants as Facebook, Google, and YouTube, are stuck behind the "great firewall of China". Dedicated dissidents can still access social media and unregulated search engines if they are willing

to connect through a virtual private network (VPN) which masks their computer's IP address in another country – but to do so is extremely illegal.

The official explanation for China's Orwellian policies over the flow of information is that they are in place to protect the Chinese economy from outside competition, or because Chinese citizens run the risk of accidentally stumbling onto pornography and other harmful material without strict limits on accessibility. This is the story everyone I met in China was raised to believe. Few ever questioned it. As someone who values learning and inquiry so deeply, it was unsettling to live among such unconsciously imprisoned people.

Although China is ostensibly a non-religious nation, their own government has become the primary object of deification throughout the culture. During Chairman Mao Zedong's "cultural revolution" in the 1960's and 70's, billions of copies of his infamous *Little Red Book* were printed and distributed, with the goal of having 99% of the entire Chinese population read, own, and carry it with them at all times. Though Mao's reign is over, my experiences there showed me that they maintain a similar level of reverence for their masters even now. This was another significant blow to my ideals of independence and self-mastery.

In the 1990's a spiritual movement based on qigong and meditation called Falun Gong spread rapidly among the Chinese. The government quickly implemented a plan to eradicate Falun Gong because they saw its success as a threat to their own authority. Propaganda emerged labeling practitioners as insane and traitorous to the nation. Since the Chinese government keeps no public records of its own genocidal behavior, it can only be estimated how many followers of the practice they have arrested and executed. Evidence even exists that they farmed the organs of their victims for transplant into the more highly valued citizens of the Chinese empire.

The Falun Gong campaign came to a head in 2001, when five people committed suicide by fire under public eyes in Tiananmen Square. The government was quick to concoct the story that the demonstrators were dangerous people driven to madness by their practice of Falun Gong. No independent investigation into the incident was allowed, despite the fact that Falun Gong teaches against violence of any type. I can obviously never confirm these stories and what they imply about the Chinese ruling class, but what I personally observed in my time there does little to paint a more favorable picture.

While in the coastal city of Dalian – one of the wealthiest parts of the country – a train derailment caused by poor track maintenance killed dozens of passengers. I learned from the mother of a family I was tutoring for, who had connections in the local government, that records of the deceased and their luggage ever being aboard the train were eliminated before it could be reported by the local media. As far as the rest of China was concerned, no one had died in the accident. Anything which could be evidence of

government neglect was similarly wiped from public eyes before it became known.

Between working in government schools and privately in the home of this wealthy family, I was given an informative and uneasy view of real life in China. Chinese culture demands that all children remain unquestioningly submissive to their parents until adulthood. Adults then spend the rest of their lives taking care of their parents until they pass away, and the cycle continues with their own children. The irony of this hyper-authoritarian parenting approach is that children spend up to 16 hours a day away from home in school, being raised more by their understaffed institutions and dogmatic curriculum than their own parents anyway. This is the genesis of their group thinking and group identification.

Teaching in China was just one of many identity defining cultural experiences I would go on to have in the 45 countries I've visited since I started this whole journey ten years ago. Each would show me a part of myself I could not have come to know under the conditions of my original home in California. Some were dark, many were light, but each was valuable to my continually developing sense of self. I encourage anyone else who values freedom and individuality to embark on their own journey, in their own time and way when conditions are right.