

Expanding the Circle of Inquiry: Introducing Philosophy for Children in the People's Republic of China

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Located midway between the countries of Asia and the United States, the islands of Hawai'i form a natural bridge of sorts between the peoples and cultures of Asia and the West. This meeting of cultures can be seen in the ethnic make up of students in Hawai'i's public school classrooms where it is not uncommon to find in a single classroom children of a variety of ethnic backgrounds - Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Euro-American, African American, Hispanic, Portuguese, and more. And one of the best things about doing Philosophy for Children in Hawai'i is the opportunity to sit in a circle and participate in an inquiry with such a diverse group of voices.

Over the past decade, the Hawai'i Philosophy in the Schools project has had the unique opportunity to expand the circle of inquiry by participating in an on-going inquiry on education in the People's Republic of China. With support from the Beijing Soong Ching Ling Foundation and the University of Hawai'i, teachers, administrators, and educational specialists from both Hawai'i and China have visited each others' schools, classes, and homes, initiating a fruitful, cultural and educational exchange.

The Hawai'i - China connection began in the early 1990's through the efforts of Dr. Jinmei Yuan, an award winning story writer and professor of Philosophy from Nanjing, who left China in 1993 to pursue a Ph.D. in Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Having been trained in the practice of Philosophy for Children by Dr. Thomas Jackson, and having spent several years in Hawai'i public school classrooms helping teachers facilitate philosophical inquiries with elementary school children, Ms. Yuan felt that Philosophy for Children might be just the kind of program Chinese teachers and researchers were looking for to help their students learn to think more critically and independently.

The decision by Chinese scholars, educators, and offi-

cialists to explore P4C can be seen as part of a wider trend over the last several years toward both decentralization and methodological reform in Chinese education. With its new found wealth, China was building better schools, and with their new found freedom, Chinese educators and local officials were actively seeking out alternative ways of teaching which might help alleviate what many saw as a nation-wide problem - namely, that in the course of preparing children for the college examination system, China's schools were producing students who were good at memorizing, but disinclined to think critically, creatively, and independently.

Another problem faced by Chinese educators was what had become known as the Little Emperor syndrome. As a result of China's one child policy, children were growing up without brothers and sisters. For most parents there would be only one child, and for most grandparents, only one grandchild. As parents and grandparents focused all their attention and affection on one child, elementary school teachers in China began to notice an increasing lack of initiative, independence, and responsible thinking in their students.

Through the cooperative efforts of Ms. Yuan, the Beijing Soong Ching Ling Foundation, the SINOPEC Corporation, and the University of Hawaii, the first team of Hawai'i P4C practitioners arrived in China in 1995. Led by Dr. Thomas Jackson, Director of the Hawai'i Philosophy in the Schools Project, the Hawaii team traveled to the small northern industrial city of Yanhua to conduct a week long

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educational specialists, teachers, and administrators to Hawai'i to observe and study the actual implementation of Philosophy for Children in the public school classrooms. While in Hawai'i, the Chinese teachers spent a week living with the family of a teacher, and a week in their classrooms where they observed classes, participated in P4C sessions, and taught Chinese songs and games to the classes. Upon returning to China, this group convinced district education offi-

workshop for local educators, administrators, government officials, and business leaders. Intrigued with how Philosophy for Children might be adapted to help improve the thinking of children, but still wanting to learn more about its actual implementation, the Beijing Soong Ching Ling foundation assembled a team of top teachers from various provinces and sent them to observe P4C in action in Hawai'i classrooms. Impressed by the safe atmosphere and harmonious relations between teachers and students in the P4C sessions, and by P4C's ability to inspire both logical and creative thought, these educators convinced officials from the government and the Soong Ching Ling foundation to invite the Hawai'i P4C team to other cities in China, and to make the study of P4C a top priority. Since its first trip to Beijing in 1995, practitioners from the Hawai'i Philosophy in the Schools Project have made two more trips to China, giving presentations and workshops in Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Zibo, and Jiaozuo.

Of these cities, Jiaozuo, a small mining city of approximately 4 million in northern Henan province, has emerged as a leader in adapting and implementing Philosophy for Children. Teachers, administrators, and educational researchers from Jiaozuo were first introduced to P4C in 1997 when the Soong Ching Ling foundation invited Dr. Thomas Jackson and a team of practitioners from Hawai'i to present a workshop there on the practice of Philosophy for Children. The following year, 1998, Jiaozuo sent a group of

officials to implement the use of P4C in several of Jiaozuo's experimental schools. However in attempting to adopt Philosophy for Children, teachers encountered two chief obstacles in the Chinese educational system — class size, and the sizable amount of material teachers were required to cover. With an average class size of well over 50 students, Chinese teachers found the Hawai'i P4C model of sitting in a circle, and giving everyone the opportunity to speak, difficult to implement. And with the large body of material they were required to cover in a limited class session, the teachers could find little time to facilitate open-ended discussions of things for which the children would not one day be tested.

Unable to regularly conduct open-ended philosophical discussions with their students, Chinese researchers and educators decided to adapt P4C and some of its tools and principles in the various content areas. The result, which was termed Elicitation Inquiry Style Teaching method (*qifa tanjiu shi jiaoxue fa*), challenges children to seek for themselves different solutions to problems in the content areas. According to Li Junjie, the assistant Director of the Jiaozuo Institute of Education Research and chief architect of the Elicitation Inquiry method,

For us *elicitation* entails having teachers stimulate students to energetically reflect and ponder, and to seek out answers and solutions by themselves. *Inquiry* entails encouraging students to expand their

thinking and to take initiative in seeking out different ways to resolve questions².

Whether in math, art, science, or literature, teachers following the Elicitation Inquiry method designed lesson plans and class activities which encouraged students to raise questions, to engage in small group discussions, and to think for themselves about possible solutions. For example, in one class the Hawai'i team visited, children were given the task of drawing a circle - but unlike the traditional model of education, where the teacher would stand in front of the class and show the students the proper way to draw a circle, teachers demonstrating the Elicitation Inquiry Method challenged students to work together in small groups and to think of as many ways as possible for drawing a circle.

Like P4C, this new method likewise encourages children to seek out clarification, reasons, implications, and assumptions, and to reflect on their thinking. However in comparison to the open-ended model of inquiry practiced in Hawai'i, in which the teacher does not know in advance the direction in which the inquiry may go, teachers practicing the Elicitation Inquiry method in China were expected to play a more active role in keeping discussions on track and moving in a particular direction.

This requires teachers to maintain control as the leader, to guide students by way of appropriate and skillful means, to give students an opportunity to unload their thoughts, and to raise questions. In conducting an inquiry on a question, teachers need to let students think about methods of solving it,

but they are not able to permit endless discussion and ought to make a transition when it is time for a transition².

In this way, teachers found that they could adopt the inquisitive spirit of P4C and certain of its tools and principles, but at the same time work with a class of 60 plus students and still cover required content. According to Li and other educational researchers in Jiaozuo, this adaptation proved more successful than anticipated. In the year 2000 twenty-one schools took part in an experimental trial of the Elicitation Inquiry Method. In April of 2001 both Jiaozuo's Municipal Education Committee and its Institute of Education Research recommended that all schools in Jiaozuo adopt the Elicitation Inquiry method in their classrooms.

In the summer of 2001, Dr. Jackson and the Hawai'i P4C team returned to Jiaozuo to take part in the "First Philosophy for Children - Elicitation Inquiry International Conference," and to observe the implementation of these two methods in Jiaozuo's schools.

Notes

1. Li Junjie, *Jiaozuo Daily* (4/6/2000)
2. Ibid.

Bibliographic References

1. Jiu Tuiguang, "Qifa Tanjin Shi Jiaoxue Fa' Da Jizhi Wen," *Jiaozuo Ribao* (6 April, 2000: A2).

