

China journal

BY PAUL REVILLE

You would think that traveling with a 2½-year-old would be enough to discourage trips halfway around the world. But when Primary Source, a regional professional development group, invited us on a two-week tour of China for “education leaders,” my wife and I jumped at the chance. For me, the trip represented an opportunity to explore a fascinating culture and civilization from the vantage point of my life’s work, education. My hopes were fulfilled in every way.

Our motley crew of superintendents, principals, and other educators visited four cities, several schools, a university, the Ministry of Education in Beijing, and lots of museums, religious sites, and cultural centers. We met Chinese people in formal settings, in restaurants, and in their homes. We returned home overwhelmed with impressions, memories, and the intellectual residue of a fortnight of nonstop exploration.

One of the most potent symbols in Chinese culture is the dragon. The head of a dragon is so striking that we focus on it, paying scant attention to the dragon’s enormous and powerful body. Similarly, looking at China today, there is a tendency to be captivated by the transformation underway in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where thousands of skyscrapers have sprouted seemingly overnight and thousands more are on the way. Then there is the body of the dragon, the countryside, where 70 percent of the nation’s 1.3 billion citizens live. Rural China looks like an agrarian, feudal society centuries removed from the present. Will the dragon’s body fuel or constrain the ambitions of its striking head?

Take education, a challenge of mind-boggling scope. There are 360 million school-age children in China; 80 million of them live in cities, the rest in the countryside. Outside of Beijing and Shanghai alone, we were told, there are 20 million children of migrant workers, children who have little or no access to schooling. (Bear in mind that, in the US, we have 50 million schoolchildren; the Boston Public Schools serves 65,000 students.)

We traveled to a small village in central China to visit a school that Primary Source and affiliated educators had been supporting financially on a very modest scale, by American standards. The school had a library and computer room it would not have had otherwise, but the school’s other assets were meager. We were embarrassed to be greet-

ed as conquering heroes. As we walked around the village, in hundred-degree heat and 100 percent humidity, we watched peasant women washing clothes in brackish water and teenagers making bricks practically by hand.

In the cities (which are environmentally threatened by runaway growth), we saw the opposite extreme, evidence of an ambitious nation furiously modernizing while struggling to resist Westernization. The schools that served the privileged were models of success, on a par with elite private schools anywhere in the world. Above all, we saw a work ethic among students and faculty that was impressive, if not necessarily healthy. We had dinner in the home of a trainer of teachers, a young mother who worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and was essentially separated from her 8-year-old child. Her husband, a doctor, worked similar hours, the two of them barely scratching out what is, in Chinese terms, a “middle class” living for their family.

The implications for the world that our children will inherit are enormous and frightening. How long can our students, who so often pursue their studies almost casually, compete with students who will work ceaselessly and for whom academic success is everything? One in every five people in the world is Chinese, and the Chinese are ready to compete not only for low-skill jobs, but increasingly also for high-end, high-skill, high-knowledge jobs.

There it was, in China, on a scale we had never seen before: the educational paradox of great success side by side with vast, devastating failure.

We saw a Chinese nation roaring into the 21st century as the world’s next great economic power. We in the US will be profoundly affected by this country and its people in the coming decades, our students—our children—especially. As teachers, we must think about the implications here at home of the re-emergence of this ancient culture and civilization on the world stage. How can we persuade our students to look outward toward China and other emerging nations when forces in our own culture tell us that self-absorption is the key to happiness?

But as we arrived home, we weren’t thinking about educational policy and practice. Our hearts were stuck on a more elemental, but by no means simpler, problem. What is to be done about the 9-year-old migrant worker boy we saw, growing up on a trash heap just outside of the prosperous city of Beijing? ■