Opening Windows on the Outside World
My Experiences as an International Classroom Speaker

by Jing Sun

I came to the United States in February 1998 as a visiting scholar to do research on teaching English to minority students in China. This was my first time here and almost everything was new to me. Before coming to the US, I had read books about American culture; however, it did not come alive in my imagination. So once here I was eager to learn; I would see, read, and experience as much as I could. But nothing did as much to immerse me in the new culture as becoming an International Classroom speaker, giving presentations on China to several thousand American school students.

CHOOSING THE CHALLENGE

I learned about the International Classroom Program run by the University of Pennsylvania Museum not long after I arrived. The program arranges for international students and scholars to give presentations and workshops about their country and culture to school students and adults. I was interested and, driven by the motivation to make the most of my stay here, I decided to take a risk and become a speaker. It was only two months after I arrived that I gave my first presentation (Fig. 1).

It was challenging teaching English in China is quite different from teaching Chinese culture in the US. For one thing, the English spoken here—the tone, the accent, and the rules of speaking—is a bit different from the English I taught. Also, being a teacher for 15 years didn't automatically make me an effective speaker, although my positive attitude did help me adapt easily to new situations. With little knowledge of American students and culture, I had no idea what to expect. I tried to anticipate the questions the students might ask and the topics they would be interested in. I wondered what I would do if there were misunderstandings caused by the different cultures, values, and customs, or if I could not catch the slang language. I was curious about what the students would think of Chinese people.

Fig. 1. The author (back row, middle) with students after her first presentation.

Fig. 2. Items of everyday life—here a piece of back and traditional female dress—help students understand China.
Photo by Renate Wiesner

Fig. 3. The author in Chinese traditional dress (Q Pan) demonstrates the lion dance with the help of members of the audience.
Photo by Bonnie Pres-Thal
But I also knew clearly that all the answers were there, waiting to be found during my presenta-
tions in the International Classroom there was a
world for me to explore and learn—and to share.

**PREPARE FOR THE WORST BUT HOPE FOR THE BEST**

I entered one classroom after another, in
schools in the New Jersey and Philadelphia area
as well as at the Museum itself. My presentations
went from not bad at the beginning to unexpect-
tedly successful later on. Nothing goes smoothly:
it takes time and hard work to unfold a beautiful
and meaningful picture. At the outset, I was
shocked and even upset by some of the students' 
questions and their impressions of Chinese peo-
ple. Some believed that all women in China had
bound feet, so they wanted to have a look at my
feet. They recounted a horrible story, which they
heard somewhere, that in China baby girls were
beheaded after they were born. And they thought
the Chinese were cruel and stonehearted for eat-
ing dogs. To some, China was something like a
demon world inhabited by uncivilized people.

A few students came to the classroom with a
negative attitude and a few mimicked my foreign accent
as soon as I began. Fortunately, it did not make
me too many minutes to gain their attention.

With so many eyes focusing on me, so many
hands shooting up as we worked out the math-
etical operations of the abacus, and so many
students practicing Chinese martial arts and Tai
Chi—and following me in Chinese traditional eye
exercises—I saw that the students enjoyed my pre-
sentations and discussions as much as I did. In
the end, they asked me back to their schools.

**COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY**

International Classroom helps develop cul-
tural awareness: students learn to appreciate and
tolerate other cultures and accept people differ-
ent from themselves. In order to help American
students learn more about China and under-
stand Chinese people better, I choose my topics
carefully, taking into consideration the ages of
the groups, their backgrounds, their interests,
and their knowledge about China. Topics cover
language, education, daily life, history, and also
Chinese arts, science, and religion. With so
many misconceptions existing, it is important
to give the students the facts. They believe what
they see. Therefore, I use many material objects
and artifacts such as pictures, postcards, family
photos, handicrafts, and traditional dress (Fig.
2). All these things help them get the general
picture of what my country and its people look
like. It is necessary to point out that no matter
how different people from other countries may
be, there is still much that is universal, such
as music. When I play a piece of Chinese tra-
ditional music, "Flights of Fancy—Eight Varia-
tions on the Butterfly Lovers," they immediately
recognize the emotions the music conveys. Even
hearing it for the first time they can tell that
Er Hu, a traditional Chinese musical instrument,
produces a sad and melancholy tone that is like
somebody crying. Once, my Chinese folk dance
stimulated a few students to dance hip-hop in
the classroom. We all have fun while learning
about each other's cultures.

Interaction with the students makes the class-
room quite lively. I try to involve them in ac-
tivities and have them participate in the class in
many ways. It fascinates the students to learn the
Chinese language—a language that is so different
from their own. Everyone tries to say loudly the
four intonations of each Chinese sound. They
are quick at identifying the radicals (elements)
in the pictographic characters, such as the female
sign in the word for "mom," the too many
mouths in "curse," the three drops of water in
"lake" and "river." Soon after being taught the
rules of the abacus, they are able to add sums on
it by themselves. Many are proud of becoming
expert in holding chopsticks; they cannot wait
to show off their skill the next time they visit a
Chinese restaurant. Eye exercises, based on acu-
pointure points, are very popular in China. They
help relax the eyes especially when one is reading
and focusing for a long time. They are useful
and easy to follow and the students do them in
real earnest. It is said that "eye exercises once a
day, your glasses away." Their favorite parts of
my presentation are when I demonstrate Chinese
martial arts and Tai Chi, and when they dance
with the lion mask on their head (Fig. 2). My
husband, a Chinese artist, sometimes joins me
later in the program, demonstrating brush and
ink paintings on paper and teaching the students
how to draw Peking Opera faces.

I always leave enough time in my presentation
for questions. I am glad to know the students are
making connections with what they are learning
about my country in their social studies classes.
Through their questions they get to know more
and change some negative thinking about the
Chinese. They don’t even realize they are learn-
ing. When I have finished, crowds of students
surround me, waiting to tell me their thoughts
and asking eagerly for the Chinese characters for
their names and the meanings of their names.
They aren’t satisfied until they get them. I
feel happy and rewarded when I hear them say
"Ni Hao" ("Hello" in Chinese) and "Xie Xie"
("Thank you") to me again and again. I feel we
are close in heart, and they remind me of my
8-year-old son in China.

**A WORLD OF THRILLS**

International Classroom has opened win-
dows that allow me to see this country and its
people more clearly, while it has offered me the
dChance to open more windows on China for the
students here and bring my culture to life. I be-
lieve where there is more communication, there
is more understanding.

While giving, I am receiving. I meet many
wonderful people—students, teachers, and the
specialists of the International Classroom who
arrange everything for me and take care of me
time. I get opportunities to visit many
schools and am invited back for special events like
Art Night, International Affairs, and the summer
camp workshops. I will have many stories to tell
my students when I go back to China. I receive
so much love from the students. I get the biggest
rewards in the beautiful letters of thanks from
the principals and the students. This is what the
students write:

"I think all the different cultures from
China are incredible... On the bus, we
talked about how interesting your inter-
view was." (Matt)

"It was very neat to learn all about your
culture and compare it to our culture.”
(Elizabeth)

"You should be proud of your ancestors.”
(Stacy)

"The eye exercises were very relaxing. I
taught them to my mom." (Dora)

"You had my attention the whole time.
You told me more than I ever thought I’d
know.” (Brad)

Almost everyone put at the end of their letter, “I
hope you come back and teach us more.”

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I am glad I survived in the program as a
speaker. More than that, as time goes by, Inter-
national Classroom becomes part of my life. The
experience is something I enjoy and will treasure
always. Come and join us in the International
Classroom, and you’ll find a world of thrills.
Look, the sunlight is pouring in the classroom
through the open windows. Immer in the sun-
shine, I feel like I am shining.

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