

Chapter 2

A Conversation with a Shanghai Principal

‘Warmly welcome Professor Chen Huiping to our school!’ announced the billboard at the school entrance.

‘Chen Huiping’ is my Chinese name. The announcement was posted in bright red letters on the school’s electronic billboard. I noticed the same announcement in almost every school I’ve visited in Shanghai. That was the Chinese principal’s way of welcoming guests like myself to the school. I felt honoured yet slightly embarrassed about the publicity: I certainly did not see myself as a VIP.



Photo 2.1 An electronic billboard in a school compound welcoming me to the school. It reads ‘Warmly welcome Dr. Chen Hui Ping of the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore to our school!’

I arrived at the school in the principal’s car. The principal had sent his chauffeur to pick me up from East China Normal University, where I have been staying. Most Shanghai principals are provided with a car and a personal chauffeur – all paid for

by the authorities. ‘What a luxury!’ I once remarked to a school principal. ‘It’s actually a necessity as we need to attend many meetings, events, lunches and dinners in different parts of Shanghai’, he replied.

Indeed, Shanghai principals have much to do as they take full responsibility for all school affairs. School principals in China used to be Communist Party secretaries appointed to carry out policies made by the Ministry of Education before the mid-1980s; since the mid-1980s, educational professionals have been appointed as principals and the party secretaries become the ‘right-hand’ persons in schools (Johnson, Møller, Jacobson & Wong, 2008, p. 417). In some schools, however, the principal assumes the dual roles of principal and party secretary. The establishment of the principal accountability system in 1985 means that the school principal takes full responsibility for school affairs, together with the Communist Party secretary. The principal’s duties include carrying out the policy initiatives from the district education bureau, making decisions on the school administrative affairs and the use of the school funds, supervising the teaching activities, hiring and dismissing the school staff, and rewarding or punishing the teachers and staff (Tian, 2011, pp. 15–16).

Upon my arrival at the school, I was ushered into the conference room where the principal had been waiting for me. ‘Teacher Chen! How are you!’ he greeted me with a big smile. I first met the principal in 2008 when he came to Singapore to study for a Master’s degree on educational administration. Now a principal of a top-performing (known locally as key-point) senior secondary school, he still looks the same, albeit having put on a few pounds. We proceeded to sit down and had a leisurely chat over Chinese tea.

The Conversation

‘How time flies! I have been in this school for 8 years.’ He said reflectively.

‘That’s quite a long time’, I remarked, ‘so what kept you busy all these years?’

‘Yes. When I came to this school, I made some adjustments’, he replied. ‘The first was to develop the school motto based on the moral values of love and integrity. For a school to grow, we need first of all, a development ideology, a guiding ideology. The second adjustment was to cultivate a school spirit, especially among the teachers, that encourages them to give their best in service. I personally believe that teachers are service providers, you need a high standard to serve, but this service is one of giving your heart and mind.’

Listening to him, what struck me was a principal who has a clear vision for the school.

Taking a sip of the tea, he continued, ‘In China, we often have this saying, “There are no students who cannot be taught well, only teachers who cannot teach well.” [meiyou jiaobuhao de xuesheng, zhiyou jiaobuhao de laoshi]. So if you’ve a whole-hearted spirit, you’ll teach well.’

That was the first time I had heard of the saying. That sounded like expecting a lot from the teachers, I thought to myself. Shouldn’t the student or the parent take

some responsibility for the child's learning? What if the student has learning difficulties or low motivation to learn? It is fair to judge a teacher based on his or her students' achievements? These were some questions that went through my mind. But one thing is for sure: the saying illustrates the very high cultural expectation on teachers in China – a cultural script that shapes the teaching and learning in Shanghai.

'I'm sure there're many things you've to handle as the school principal, especially for a big key-point school like yours.' I commented.

'Yes', he said, nodding his head. 'But I think a principal just needs to focus on two things', he added. 'The first is to be concerned with the classroom, because a first-class school should have a first-class classroom. So we're concerned with the students' quality of life in the classroom. It's not just whether the students' results are good today or tomorrow. It's the total development of students for them to be emotionally healthy, moral and able to withstand pressure. Next is learning ability, which means students have a good foundation, are able to learn various things, and can meet the demands of society, including the demands of various ways of learning.'

What he said reminded me of what I have read in the policy papers on curriculum reform in Shanghai. His goals for his students are essentially what 'quality-oriented education' [suzhi jiaoyu] is about – to shift from the traditional exam-oriented education to one that underscores the all-rounded development of students (see Chap. 7 for more details).

'To achieve the two goals', he continued, 'we need school-based research-training [xiaoben yanxiu], to focus on teachers' standards, because managing a school well depends on the teachers. Likewise, teachers' abilities to nurture students and help them grow, primarily depend on the training given by the school. External teacher training by the universities and districts are important, but I think school-based research-training is most important as we know what the teachers really need.'

He has just highlighted to me a feature of education that is unique to Shanghai: the emphasis on and effectiveness of school-based teacher professional development or 'research-training'. The Chinese term for 'research-training' [yanxiu] comprises two characters that mean 'research' [yan] and 'improvement' [xiu]. Together, they signify not just 'training' but training that is research-centred for the purpose of teacher improvement. Under the decentralisation policy, principals now have greater autonomy to formulate and carry out their school-based teacher professional development plans. As a visitor to Shanghai, I was impressed by the extent and quality of teacher professional development in Shanghai schools (see Chaps. 17 and 18 for details).

'How then did you bring about the changes you intended in your school?' I asked.

'This school, in the process of development, has implemented some reforms', he said. 'One reform is to regulate the management system. Times have changed so your management system needs to change every two or three years, otherwise it'll be outdated.'

Fond of quoting Chinese proverbs, he said, 'In China, we've this saying, "Eat from the big pot" [chi daguofan]. It means it's the same whether you do your job

well or not, whether you do more or less; everyone gets the same pay. But this attitude cannot hold anymore in China. So under our allocation system, we underwent massive reforms and began to reward those with good educational results, good teaching results. We underwent changes in the school salary system, in appraisal system, in giving monetary rewards. Now we've a "with labour comes reward" [youlao youchou] system. You'll get more if you do more. I think this is very necessary because at the management level, there is an invisible hand to manage and direct the school.'

As he said this, he moved his hand in a wave-like manner to illustrate the motion of an invisible hand in the air.

'I'm not saying that "human beings are willing to die for money and birds are willing to die for food" [renwei caisi, niaowei shiwang]', he added, quoting another well-known Chinese proverb about the materialistic instinct of human nature. 'But human beings still need to consider their survival. We do not expect everyone's thinking to reach the same level, but money can still have certain effects. So this is one reform. Of course there're other reforms, such as regulation of the teaching system and so on. But I think this monetary reform is the most important.'

He went on to elaborate on how the 'invisible hand' works using the example of 'public' or 'open' lessons [gongkaike]. A public lesson is a lesson conducted by a teacher that is observed and critiqued by others. The 'others' could be teachers from the same school, teachers from other schools, educational experts, parents and members of the public. It can be offered at the school level, district level or municipal level and is a requirement for teacher professional development and teacher appraisal in Shanghai. Such a lesson requires a lot of preparation and can be stressful for teachers.

The principal said: 'For public lessons, we've already created a structural culture. So if you don't want to conduct a public lesson, there's an invisible hand to direct you, to make you do it. Otherwise, you cannot be promoted to the next grade, your assessment score at the mid-year appraisal will not be high'.

I was initially surprised by what I heard. It appeared somewhat incongruent with his earlier sharing about the lofty goals of education, about the moral dimension of teaching where teachers are expected to give their best wholeheartedly. On second thought, however, I realised that what he has shared was not self-contradictory but complementary: his teachers are motivated to give their best through moral suasion *and* material incentives. Perhaps that explains why Shanghai principals are able to lead schools to success: they combine idealism in vision with pragmatism in action.

An engaging conversationalist, he continued, 'A first-class school also depends on having a first-class classroom. 'And a first-class classroom, in my view, needs to point to a direction in reform. This direction needs to suit the students' cognitive development, suit society's development demands, and will not fail in practice. Our school-based curriculum fulfils the spirit of the second phase curriculum reform, and also fulfills our school's requirement for special characteristics.'

He went on to elaborate how his school has launched new expanded and research courses (I shall explain these courses in Chap. 7) and innovative teaching approaches that emphasise student-centred learning. These include experiential learning where students apply scientific principles to test the quality of food they purchase from the supermarkets and a teaching approach that underscores student group discussions and oral presentations. It is evident that the principal has leveraged on the school autonomy given to him to design interesting courses and teaching approaches that are tailored for the school's needs. At the same time, he is careful to ensure that his school initiatives adhere to the spirit and requirements of the curriculum reform.

Turning his focus to the international scene, he added, 'We also want to expand the international horizon of our teachers and students because Shanghai is, after all, China's reform pioneer'. What he said reflected the progressive and outward-looking mindset of many Shanghai principals.

'We need to strengthen our links with schools in Taiwan, the United States, Singapore, for us to nurture students who can truly serve the world in the international arena. So this school vacation, we've 3 teachers who'll go overseas for two months. Two English language teachers and one Chinese language teacher. The Chinese language teacher will go Taiwan. Taiwan, in my view, has transmitted the Chinese cultural tradition more completely than mainland China. One English language teacher will go to the United States, one to the United Kingdom. When they return, they'll lead a big group of teachers over.'

'That sounds great. Where did you get the ideas for your school-based curriculum?' I curiously asked.

'I've a teacher who has a Master's degree,' he explained. 'When I recruited him in 2005, I told him that I would like to read his thesis. I found it very good and since then, I've also consulted other books. So the teacher and I constructed the theoretical framework for the school-based curriculum. I then led the teachers to implement it in the school.'

It was apparent that he was a hands-on principal who led the teachers to explore and research new ideas and implement these ideas school-wide. His school reforms were detailed in the school publications he gave me subsequently that contain a number of research articles and reports written by him and his teachers. It is common for, and expected of, principals and teachers in Shanghai to be active in reading, research, writing and publication. In fact, it is a necessary part on which one's appraisal, continual employment and promotion in Shanghai depends (see Chaps. 17 and 18 for more details). Interestingly, another Shanghai principal candidly told me that she was shocked when she came to Singapore and realised that Singapore principals and teachers rarely published.

The principal's active involvement in the school activities is also evident in his lesson observations of teachers. 'I observe lessons every school term. On average, I listen to 4 lessons per term', he said. Alluding to the cultural value of collectivism where teacher sharing is common, he said, 'I just observe lessons randomly. I'll just say, "Little He [a teacher's name], I'll observe your lesson tomorrow". After that we'll have an informal chat and discuss any problems that arose. It's becoming a part of our



Photo 2.2 Examples of literature published by some Shanghai schools

culture. I call it “Open the classroom door to create learning together as one body” [dakai jiaoshi damen, gongchuang xuexi gongtongti].’

‘How about the results?’ I probed further.

‘We’ve obtained certain results’, he replied. ‘Actually I’ve obtained a prize for my school’s teaching and research performance at the district level in 2009. In total, we’ve 17 teachers who have won awards last year. Among them, we had two teachers who obtained first prize in the national teaching competitions. One is a moral education teacher, another is a Chinese language teacher. Think about it: there are 1.3 billion people in China, and we’ve 2 teachers standing on the first prize national platform’, he said, his face beaming with pride.

‘Our exam results have also gone up’, he added enthusiastically. ‘Our school now commands a greater influence in the community. In terms of our college entrance rate to a four-year university course, it was below 70% in 2006 but it’s over 80% now. Many students want to be admitted into our school. Our school is now ranked sixth or seventh in the district.’

What came across strongly in his sharing was his reliance on prizes, exam results, college entrance rates and school rankings to validate his school’s success. This is a common phenomenon in China – references to quantifiable yardsticks that are perceived to be objective, scientific and fair. The value and preponderance of targets, indicators and evaluations to measure a school’s success in Shanghai reminds me of a performative culture. It is a culture that ‘employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’ (Ball, 2003, p. 216) (I shall return to this topic in Chap. 19).

Another observation I made was how he was able to skilfully balance the implementation of school reforms with the continual need for students to attain good exam results. How was that possible?

‘To be honest, Teacher Chen’, he said to me, ‘Chinese students have very heavy workloads, so we can only have the Expanded and Research courses in the first school term for students in their first and second senior years. I cannot do this for the second school term as the students have to cope with their examinations. We do not have these courses for year 3 students, as they have gaokao and the school standard examinations coming up, and will be dead tired’, he said.

I was surprised by the principal’s frankness. Under the requirements stipulated by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, all schools need to introduce innovative courses through the expanded and research/inquiry courses to students at all levels (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, n.d.) (I shall elaborate on these courses in Chaps. 8 and 3.). These courses have been introduced to promote ‘quality-oriented’ education to prepare the students for the demands of the twenty-first century. What the school principal did was to respond creatively to the official policy by replacing the innovative courses with exam-preparation lessons in the second school term and Year 3 so that he can effectively juggle innovative learning with maintaining or improving the test scores. His action aptly illustrates the Chinese proverb, ‘The top has its measure, the bottom has its countermeasure’ [shangyou zhengce, xiayou duice]. This refers to responses from someone of a lower rank (in this case the school principal) to circumvent the order given to him or her by someone of a higher rank (in this case the municipal and district authorities).

So what’s next? Despite the school’s achievements, the principal is not one to rest on his laurels.

‘How about tomorrow?’ he asked aloud. ‘The first thing we needed to do was to increase the teachers’ professional quality. Secondly, we need to improve the educational system, for example, by giving the teachers more funds and technical support in training and giving them more platforms to showcase their talent.’

He continued with a determined voice, ‘Although we’ve won prizes, I feel that the school reform is still insufficient. It’s not about the prize, but about educational reform to complete the students’ character. We’ve not done this very well, we still need to persevere’.

Special Characteristics of Shanghai Principals

The principal I spoke to is typical of many Shanghai principals I have met. He embodies a number of attributes needed by a school leader to bring about educational success in Shanghai.¹ A professor at East China Normal University, Shen Yushun, has identified a number of what he calls ‘special characteristics’ of Shanghai principals that set them apart from other principals in China (Shen, 2006a, 2006b, pp. 210–252).

¹ It is instructive that many of the attributes evident in Shanghai principals are found in Shanghai people in general. For example, Law (2007) avers that Shanghai people, when compared with Chinese and other nationals in the rest of China, are perceived to be more knowledgeable, open minded, quick minded, practical and have ‘a strong sense of superiority in the pursuit of the quality of life and Western styles’ (p. 29).

Professor Shen is well acquainted with Chinese principals as he directs the national principals' training centre in Shanghai. I have reorganised his points into 6 special characteristics and added 3 more of my own.

Special Characteristic 1

Shanghai principals have their own systematic ideology for school management. Everyone has his or her own views on educational problems, understanding of the educational value system and own options for action based on their foundation of understanding.

Special Characteristic 2

Shanghai principals have a very strong sense of professionalism. They have strong learning awareness and are keen to learn. They possess a strong dedication to work hard to fulfil their own educational goals.

Special Characteristic 3

Shanghai principals are open minded and innovative. They are willing to accept new things, accept new educational ideals, and incorporate them into his or her school's educational practices.

Special Characteristic 4

Shanghai principals have a very strong sense of crisis and competitive awareness. Every school is concerned that its students will lag behind others, so key-point (high-performing) schools keep a close watch on one another to avoid lagging behind.

Special Characteristic 5

Shanghai principals are good at making use of opportunities to foster their school's development. This refers to opportunities provided by the country's education policy and by the school's advantages in a locality, through collaboration with the community and international education market.

Special Characteristic 6

Shanghai principals have a strong awareness of the need for good public relations management. They establish a positive societal image of their school and engage in activities that are beneficial to their school's development.

We see all the above characteristics manifested in the principal I spoke to. He is very clear about his vision and development plan for the school. He has been actively involved in researching and conceptualising the school-based curriculum and implementing it in the school. He is open to new ideas on student-centred learning and keen to experiment with them through the school-based curriculum. At the same time, he is mindful of his students' exam results, college entrance rate and school ranking. While keen to collaborate with schools in other countries so that he can adapt the best practices from elsewhere, he also consciously builds up his school's reputation in Shanghai to make it a popular choice among junior secondary graduates.

I would like to add 3 more special characteristics to Shen's list, based on my observations and interactions with Shanghai principals.

Special Characteristics 7

Shanghai principals are good at motivating their staff by using both extrinsic factors through the structural systems of appraisal and promotion and intrinsic factors through the school vision.

We see this characteristic manifested in the principal's use of the structural system (the 'invisible hand') to motivate teachers, coupled with his emphasis on the moral dimension of teaching. In subsequent chapters, we shall see how the 'invisible hand' and the moral dimension of teaching complement each other and work together to spur Shanghai teachers on to improve themselves and contribute towards educational success.

Special Characteristics 8

Shanghai principals are skilful in balancing the implementation of curriculum reform and ensuring good exam results. To do so, they attempt to and succeed in assembling their own logics, tactics and countermeasures to achieve their goals for the school.

We see this characteristic in the principal's explanation of how he balances innovative courses with exam preparation. The countermeasure of the principal is not an isolated case. Another Shanghai principal told me that it is not uncommon for principals to cut down or even cancel physical fitness lessons for the entire year for their graduating students in junior and senior secondary schools. An academic in Shanghai points out that 'the curriculum time meant for the elective courses is

reflected in the timetable, but because of the pressure of exams, it is actually used for the teaching of other subjects' (Zhen, 2006, p. 123, as cited in Tan, 2012, p. 163). A survey reports that 30.7% of primary and secondary schools do not devote sufficient amount of curriculum time for innovative elective courses (specifically inquiry/research courses) as required by the authority (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2007a, cited in Tan, 2011a, p. 163). The resistance and intervention of the principal demonstrate the active role of the school leaders in their interaction with the global form of curriculum reform.

Special Characteristics 9

Shanghai principals have a poetic sense of humour.

We have seen how the school principal I interviewed was adept at quoting Chinese proverbs to illustrate his points. I have met many principals who similarly use humour to illustrate and amplify the challenges they face as principals. Their wittiness is often linked to an appreciation of the rhythmic structure or a play of words in the Chinese language (that shows the beauty of the Chinese language too).

For example, in explaining the struggle of many Shanghai principles to balance college entrance rate [shengxuelü] with innovative elective courses, a school principal (not the one mentioned in this chapter) said to me while bursting into laughter:

English translation	Chinese version
If you <u>don't</u> have (high) college entrance rates, you cannot survive <u>today</u>	你没有升学率, 你过不了今天。 Ni <u>mei</u> you shengxuelü, ni guobuliao jintian
If you <u>only</u> have (high) college entrance rates, you cannot survive <u>tomorrow</u>	你只有升学率, 你过不了明天。 Ni <u>zhi</u> you shengxuelü, ni guobuliao <u>ming</u> tian

He has used a couplet consisting of 2 lines that rhyme and share the same metre. In the Chinese version above, we see how the 2 lines consist of the same number of characters and are almost identical except for the underlined characters.

Sometimes it is a play on words. Another school principal explained to me that the shift from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education makes people question whether they should really value 'quality' [suzhi] in quality-oriented education or 'value of scores' [shuzhi], the latter referring to the exam scores in an exam-oriented education. The two words 'suzhi' and 'shuzhi' sound almost the same (with differences in pronunciation and tones), but their meanings are worlds apart.

English translation	Chinese version
Quality	Suzhi 素质
Value of (exam) scores	Shuzhi 数值

Conclusion

The Shanghai principal I interviewed represents principals in Shanghai who are distinguished by their qualities of being visionary, dynamic, open minded and pragmatic (for details on the conditions and practices of successful principalship in Shanghai, see Wong, 2005). As we parted company, the principal said to me earnestly, ‘We’ll carry on, and I believe our curriculum content will be even more substantial in 2 to 3 years time’.

I have no doubt about that.

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