

**Critical Thinking and Convivial Learning in Central China**  
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**Abstract**

In recent years, China has seen a marked increase in the number of parents seeking alternative forms of education for their children. Such alternatives include Montessori and Waldorf schools, homeschooling, unschooling, and participation in non-formal learning activities. Focusing on the last of these, this paper reports on an example of informal group learning reflective of Illich's (1973) idea of conviviality – autonomous interaction of persons for purposes of learning, unattached to the constraints of regulatory agencies or institutions. As researchers in one of China's major cities, the authors found evidence of such activity in the form of small reading/discussion clubs, learning activities hosted by local pubs or other free-standing sites, and loosely-organized nightly neighborhood square dancing. Such events and artifacts originate voluntarily and expand mainly by word of mouth or social media. Our paper highlights one such example – a series of learning gatherings in a major Chinese city attended by assorted students in grades six through ten and focusing on contextualized critical thinking. As participants and facilitators of these gatherings, we were joyfully impressed by the free-spirited, creative engagement of participants. We believe our experiences not only indicate the larger growth of interest in China for learning options outside the structure of public schooling, but also the potential for global conviviality through people-to-people interaction between the United States and China.

## Introduction

For many Westerners, the words “Chinese education,” at least as applied to secondary schooling, conjure up stereotypic images of classroom lectures, rote learning, passive students, cram schools, and high stakes testing. Students are perceived as rising early and attending classes until late in the afternoon. Then, after a quick meal, they rush to attend two or three hours of cram school, which is followed by two or three additional hours of study. These images are based in reality. A standing joke among teachers is that their students sleep in their clothes and go to school in their pajamas. More seriously, the function of social control is highly manifest in Chinese public schooling, in the sense that one’s future educational, occupational, and social status is tightly determined by dutiful success within the institution (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Spring, 2008; Shouse and Ma, 2015; Zhao, 2007).

On the other hand, emerging evidence suggests that some Chinese parents seek *alternative* forms of learning either to enrich or substitute for their children’s public school experience. Such evidence includes the growth (mostly in urban areas) of private Montessori and Waldorf schools. Striving for less coercive and more autonomously driven learning, these schools emerged in the early 1980s and now attract substantial numbers of youth from mostly affluent families (Johnson, 2014; Kuhn, 2016). Because such schools lie beyond the price range of most Chinese families (Buzali and McIntic, 2015), many parents seeking alternative learning options have turned to homeschooling, unschooling, (Gao, 2015; Pang, 2015) or “guoxue,” a traditional form of sage-based learning in areas of art, music, and philosophy (Chinasource, 2011; Matuszak, 2014). One current form of guoxue involves the creation of small learning communities connecting “foreign experts” (sometimes expatriates) to young people interested in music, art, or other subjects (Gao, 2015, p. 3).

During a recent year-long teaching and research project at a large university in central China, we discovered examples of such learning communities where young and old alike regularly met to share in various cognitive, affective, and physical learning activities. These included book and film discussion clubs, lecture-discussions of art and music, and exercise and dance groups. Activities took place in people's homes or local pubs, cafés, bookstores, and other free-standing buildings, some of which were specifically designed and run to facilitate informal learning. One example of the latter was a newly-constructed three-story building containing a library, gym, restaurant, computer stations, and rooms for private or public gatherings.

Given the nature of Chinese public education, we were happily surprised to find such activities and artifacts, as we consider them to be reflective of Illich's ideas of conviviality and convivial learning. "Conviviality" is a term applied to tools – human creations that serve, rather than manage; that are non-distractive, non-destructive, and promote "graceful playfulness" and creativity among persons and their environment. Convivial learning, thus, represents a voluntary union of people engaged in interactive autonomous learning, unattached to the regulation of external agencies or institutions (Illich, 1973, pp. xxv, 11). It was within this convivial context that we fortunately – and playfully – facilitated and participated in a series of learning events during the spring of 2015.

Our opportunity arose as we gradually learned of a substantial pool of youth (and their parents) interested in learning about "critical thinking," what it meant, and how it worked. Our awareness of this pool of interested learners grew socially through conversations over drinks and dinners with friends and friends of friends who had already organized book discussion clubs for youths and adults around the area. Their efforts were both entrepreneurial and intrinsic; to offer something of value – an opportunity for unencumbered social learning – for a reasonable

participation fee. From our conversations we learned that while many local secondary school-aged young people were growing familiar with the idea of critical thinking and its importance in American schools and universities, their daily school experiences offered few opportunities to practice it. We proposed to our friends the idea of expanding from books to cinema, as your lead author's area of expertise focuses on texts and social discourses embedded within popular film, especially those depicting leadership and social influence. Agreements were reached and word was spread through our friends' network of parents and likely attendees. As shall be described later in this essay, though the first few sessions highlighted discussions of contemporary film, group interest gradually expanded to other media such as video and music – as well as toward critical discussion of current social and political phenomena in China and beyond.

What we offer here, therefore, is not a traditional “research paper,” but rather a reflection, description, and discussion highlighting how convivial learning opportunity unexpectedly emerged from our social interaction within a global context. In other words, we did not travel to China to launch or evaluate an “intervention.” Instead, the opportunity for global cross-cultural conviviality opened before our eyes as we reached outside the formal academic parameters that initially brought us to China to engage in informal Chinese social life. And although our case was limited to one major Chinese city, our experience and subsequent informal research leads us to infer that the type of learning activity described here is not unique and that similar learning groups are emerging throughout China, especially in similar demographic contexts - middle-to-upper class urban areas, proximal to universities, where visiting professors or expatriates tend to reside.

In addition, implicitly highlighted here is how our case represented a joyful connection of “East – West” understandings. In particular, given the often socially and politically disparate

nature of American-Chinese relationships, we believe our case calls attention to the need and potential for further people-to-people global conviviality.

### **The Emergence and Context of Our Convivial Experience**

The learning activity we experienced over this two month period, we believe, represents an emergent counter discourse against the backdrop of institutionalized education, particularly as it becomes increasingly marked by rigid test-driven curricula and centralized governmental structure. Our sessions were voluntary, non-competitive, required minimal tools or resources, and were generally disconnected from formal educational structures, purposes, and governmentalities. In other words, we confidently present this overall experience as reflecting the elements and spirit of conviviality; acts of “autonomous creative intercourse of persons with their environment” (Illich, 1973, p. 11). Though we doubt that such activity (at this point) poses any substantial competition to China’s public education system, we were happily surprised to discover its existence in the nation’s heartland.

The idea for this learning initiative began in December 2014. At that time your lead author while living and teaching in Beimen (the fictional name of a large, central Chinese city) was introduced to people seeking to develop non-traditional English-based learning programs for local students. The programs were to be scheduled for evenings and weekends for the purpose of informal educational enrichment. The individuals involved had already launched some learning sessions revolving around works of Western literature (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Animal Farm*). The sessions were guided by and took place in the homes of ex-patriate English teachers and students paid a small fee to attend. As an aside, in fact, we happily noted the easy availability in local bookstores of both English and Chinese language editions of relatively

controversial literary works; for example, *Animal Farm*, *1984*, *Brave New World*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*. In addition, your lead author had been happily surprised with the degree of academic freedom he enjoyed as a visiting professor at the city's largest university. This freedom included the unquestioned ability to incorporate film and other media into his courses on organizational leadership and public administration.

After discussing various curricular and instructional ideas and possibilities with session organizers, we were invited to sponsor a new learning series in which youth in grades six through 12 would view various Western and Chinese films, the narratives of which we believed posed authentic social problems likely to generate lively discussions of philosophic or political ideas. Prior to each showing, we provided general descriptions of each film and made suggestions about significant events and questions to watch for and think about. After viewing, and with the help of assorted "playful" strategies, group members were invited to comment, raise questions, and engage in interactive discussions guided by your authors.

Over a four-month period in the spring of 2015, eight learning sessions were conducted. These typically ran for 150 minutes, attracted anywhere from eight to twenty youth participants, and were held at local cafes or other "non-official" sites. As previously stated, we began with the idea of using provocative works of cinema to generate participant response – to ask questions, identify key problems, exchange opinions, and discuss possibilities for further social understanding or investigation. Wishing to act as equal learning participants and to avoid pushing particular views, our guidance was loosely structured and emergent relative to participant response. In fact, given the relatively restricted nature of Chinese social discourse, we had little idea as to what sort of responses to expect. As will be described later in this paper, responses and interactions were lively and – we suggest – convivial. Over time, in response to

what we perceived as participant enthusiasm, we introduced other media and discussions expanded to address specific local, national, and global social and political issues. These typically related to music or other art forms, views of leadership and justice, the importance of free speech, rights of LGBT and minority citizens, and the impact of Chinese culture on social relationships and political expression.

Some of the young participants attended nearly all of the sessions, but each session had new faces. They had varying degrees of English proficiency ranging from advanced beginner to near-fluency. Sessions were thus conducted mostly in English, and I (lead author) was fortunate to work with a native Mandarin partner who could help with difficult words or ideas.

### **Session Highlights and Themes**

Our sessions evolved over time to consist of three broad types of activity; film viewing, music/poetry, and the “grab bag.” This section describes examples of each activity and is then followed by a discussion of the key emergent themes.

#### *Film Viewing*

Though four films had originally been selected for viewing, two were dropped from the series due to technical difficulties and to the previously described shifts in interest. We thus viewed two films; *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) and *Please Vote for Me* (2007). *Twelve Angry Men* (TAM) is the story of an all-male jury having to decide the guilt or innocence of a 19-year-old “kid” accused of capital murder. The film addresses numerous issues such as justice, courage, persuasion, leadership, and prejudice. *Please Vote for Me* (PVM) is a Chinese-made documentary about a third-grade teacher’s classroom democracy experiment in which three students waged campaigns to win an election for class monitor. Filmed in a large central Chinese

city, PVM was effectively banned in China for several years, but is now readily available for on-line purchase or streaming.

Prior to group viewing, we offered a backdrop or context for each movie. For TAM we offered a brief legal and historic introduction to the American jury system, which prompted a good deal of interest and questioning among our group. Less information was needed to introduce PVM, but we did ask group members about their experiences and opinions regarding China's class monitor system. In addition, we suggested how the films could be enjoyed at different levels; for example, as interesting authentic stories and as "lessons" about important concepts like justice, leadership, corruption, or prejudice. We encouraged our group to enjoy the overall story of each film, but to also think about and be ready to discuss scenes, events, and character behaviors they found interesting, puzzling, or meaningful. We hoped this would help stimulate a collective guided construction or deconstruction of various salient discourses associated with each film.

For example, in addition to raising awareness of America's jury system (including its evolution since the days of white-male-only participation) TAM can be viewed as posing a textual challenge to formal, rank-oriented understandings of leadership. In China, for instance, *lingdao*, the Mandarin counterpart to *leader* or *leadership* almost always refers to an assigned rank and an associated right to exercise formal hierarchical authority. In TAM, however, leadership is presented as a more organic and communal phenomenon that can originate from any point within a formal or informal group. TAM opens by presenting viewers with a character known only as Juror 8 who initially stands alone against 11 other jurors in his refusal to cast a guilty verdict. The remainder of the film presents his effectiveness at gradually introducing reasonable doubt in the minds of other jurors. In other words, TAM examines the ability of a



non-privileged individual to generate a current of leadership within a formal organization (Shouse, Bai, and Ma 2017). Thus, before showing TAM we asked the group to share thoughts regarding the meaning of *lingdao*. Though some members expressed the idea of formal authority and “being the boss,” others added that it was “more than just being the boss.” As one young woman put it, “A leader inspires people... [He/she] makes them want to believe in [him/her].”

We then asked the students if one could be or exercise *lingdao* without having any special position of authority, that is, without being a “boss.” After a long pause, one young man recalled a time when “we had a class president, but no one really liked him or listened to him,” a response implicitly suggesting the leader as a holder of formal position. Because the young man’s words were followed by a further pause, we guessed that students were having trouble coming up with examples of leaders without formal authority. We then asked if they were familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King. Everyone vigorously responded yes and one student described him using the term *lingxiu* (“great” or “historic” leader). After explaining that Dr. King had no formal position of broad authority, we asked whether he could still be considered a leader. Though some group members nodded or responded affirmatively, we left that question hanging and raised another. “What is it, exactly,” we asked, “that leaders do?” We further asked the group to consider the behaviors, characteristics, qualities, and intents of the jurors they were about to see in TAM.

After viewing TAM, we asked students, “who were the leaders?” One young man replied, “the judge.” Another mentioned Juror 1, the jury foreman. But other members shook their heads in disagreement. “The judge didn’t really inspire anyone,” one young woman stated. “Neither did the foreman. He just managed the group,” said another. Without any prompt from us, discussion

shifted to “Juror 8,” the main source of influence on the jury and the person whose arguments ultimately persuade it to vote unanimously for acquittal.

“But what was his formal position?” we asked, hoping to suggest the thought that “*lingdao*” could be attempted by anyone, not only by persons in formal position. Next, we asked, “why was Juror 8 successful?” At first, responses focused on his courage, communication skill, and friendly yet firm character. Again, however, and without prompting, a young woman remarked that “Juror 8 would have failed without the help of other jurors.” Her response led another group member to suggest that “you need good people to be a good leader,” thus raising the idea that leadership, or *lingdao*, was more a collective quality than an individual trait. For the remaining time, we ventured into a discussion of how non-privileged individuals and groups now or throughout history promote social change by generating a current of *lingdao*.

Group members also expressed surprise at the American “jury of one’s peers.” “Aren’t they trained in the law?” one boy asked, stating how in China accused criminals are judged by legal experts. We then asked if anyone knew the conviction rate of those accused of crimes in China. One member offered an estimate of “about 95 percent,” an estimate that turned out to be quite accurate. We mentioned that it ranged from 60 to 85 percent in the United States and asked whether this difference related to fairness or effectiveness. At that point, a young woman exclaimed that “the boy in the movie was probably guilty!” Several other people nodded their heads in agreement. “So,” we asked, “then why did the jury find him not guilty?” This led to an interesting open-ended discussion of the concept of “reasonable doubt” and the possible differences and conflicts between “punishing the guilty” and “achieving justice.”

Three weeks later, PVM was shown to a mostly different and younger group of participants. On the surface, PVM presents an experiment in third-grade democracy; the story of

a girl and two boys competing to be elected class monitor. As the experiment continues, the candidates and their supporters appear to engage in a variety of political games that often border on outright corruption and mudslinging. As theorists might put it, the candidates sought to gain formal rank through the exercise of non-legitimate power. Wondering if the group would pick up on this theme, we asked them to take notes and jot down their thoughts during the film.

“It wasn’t fair!” erupted one 9<sup>th</sup> grade boy after the lights went back on. “The parents cheated!” He was referring to the intense parent involvement on behalf of the two boy candidates, which included coaching, pressuring, and even encouraging the use of bribery and mudslinging. A young woman in our group suggested that “the parents are worried more about this than the kids!” Another group member stated that the boy who won the election did so because “his dad was a policeman!” In fact, the movie includes a segment in which this father treats the class to a free ride on the city’s monorail. “It was like a bribe!” insisted another member of our group.

We then asked, “Does this movie remind you of anything?” After a moment of reflection, one group member replied, “There’s so much on the news about corrupt government officials.”

“Do you think this film was meant to be more about democracy, or more about corruption?” we asked. After a mixed response from the group, one young man complained, “I don’t understand why this teacher did this! What do children know about picking a class monitor? They just voted for the person who threatened the most and bribed the most!” Discussion continued regarding how this reflected real life politics and what might be done to solve this problem. Needless to say, many questions were left unasked and unanswered.

*Music, Poetry, and Leadership*

At the start of our series, several parents seemed intrigued by the connection between critical thinking and leadership, especially as it related to their children's social and academic development. As discussed in the previous section, Chinese citizens tend to view leadership, or *lingdao*, in terms of formal position. In addition, parents whose children might wish to attend American or other Western universities are well aware of the importance of "leadership experience" on college entrance applications. Our goal for this segment of the series, however, was to offer an alternative lens for understanding this concept. The challenge was how to turn this goal into a lively topic for a group of 24 young teens. My partner and I arrived at the only conceivable option – I would need to sing and play my guitar. More on that in a moment.

We set up the discussion by showing a slide with photos of four people; U.S. President Barack Obama, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Bob Dylan, and (a statue of) Iris Chang. A caption beneath the photos asked, "Which of these people are leaders?" Everyone in the group responded that Obama and Xi were leaders. Only two group members recognized Bob Dylan as a famous American singer and songwriter. No one recognized the statue of Iris Chang (researcher and author of *The Rape of Nanjing*). Neither Dylan nor Chang were recognized as leaders. We then informed the group that the statue of Iris Chang could be found in Nanjing at a very famous historical site. Still, there was no response.

"What historic event, what tragic event, took place in Nanjing?" we asked. One young woman asked, "Do you mean the war?"

"Yes," we replied. "The Japanese invasion and the slaughter of innocent people." Several group members nodded their heads. I continued. "Iris Chang is the woman who did the research to uncover the extent of the massacre. Her statue is there at the memorial. Her work raised the world's awareness of the tragedy."

After a few silent moments I picked up my guitar and told the students that I would sing them a song. “It’s by Bob Dylan. You’ve probably heard it. In fact, I think most of your parents know it!” The slide changed to show the words to “*Blowin’ in the Wind*.”

“Blowin’ in the Wind was a very popular song in America back in the early 1960s. And today I think it’s familiar around the world.” My partner and I began to sing.

“How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man?” Several group members smiled and began to sing with me. At the end of the three verses, we divided the group into three smaller groups. Each was assigned a verse and asked to discuss its meaning, as well as the meaning of the song’s title. As the groups talked, we walked, listened, and asked a question or two in reference to the lines in each verse.

Referring to the line, “how many seas must a white dove sail,” we asked one group, “What is a white dove?”

“A sign of peace?” suggested one young man.

“Ok, so what does the ‘how many seas’ question mean?” Without answering, we walked to the next group and, referring to the line asking “how many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free,” we asked, “Who are the people who should be ‘allowed to be free’? Remember, this song is from America in the early 1960s.” We moved to the next group and, with reference to the line “how many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry,” asked, “Who is crying and who isn’t hearing?”

After gathering back together, group member comments uniformly expressed a sense that the song was against war and hate and supportive of freedom and humanity. One young woman asked, “Is this song related to Martin Luther King?”

“In a way,” I replied. Bob Dylan wrote and sang this song during a time when many Americans were marching and protesting to gain equal rights for Black citizens. The song also became a symbol for those who were opposed to war.” After a pause, we continued. “And do you see how Dylan is asking a bunch of questions? Can you see how he’s demanding answers? But where are the answers?”

“Blowing in the wind?” said a young man who went on to ask, “Does that mean there is no answer?”

We smiled and asked the group to think about what Chang and Dylan had in common in terms of social impact and how they were similar to or different from Presidents Obama and Xi. We followed this with another question. “A person who manages a nation may be a leader. But what should we call a person who helps change the way people think?”

Leaving that as a question for further thought, we continued with the theme of music as social influence by showing three film clips. The first, taken from *The Buddy Holly Story*, portrayed the series of events surrounding Holly’s band, The Crickets, becoming the first White act to perform at New York’s Apollo Theater. As the curtain opens, the audience boos – but are won over as the music continues. We followed this clip with a discussion of how unusual and risky this was during 1950s America. In some states, for instance, it was illegal for Black and White persons to perform music together on the same stage. We left students to consider the question, “Could Buddy Holly be considered a ‘leader’?”

We followed this with two clips from the film *Monterey Pop*, a documentary on the 1967 California music festival. One clip showed the band The Who performing *My Generation*. Students were given the song’s lyrics and after viewing the clip were asked to react.

“What meaning did you gather from this performance?” Several students were amazed at how the band smashed their instruments at the end of the song. We asked them to talk about what they thought this might mean. Though a few students raised ideas about protest and social rebellion, it seemed that these ideas were either unfamiliar or not easily expressed. We again offered the context of American and British culture, “the sixties,” and the anti-war and anti-materialist trends of that time.

We then showed the finale of *Monterey Pop*, the performance by sitar player Ravi Shankar. This is the longest segment of the film and one we felt best captured the filmmaker’s overall message. We asked the group to enjoy Shankar’s performance, but to pay close attention to the filmmaker’s perspective and the audience’s reaction. When the lights came back on, to our happy surprise, several group members raised interesting points.

“We don’t even see the musicians at first. All we see is mostly sleepy people waking up and packing their stuff!” stated one young man.

“Why do you suppose the filmmaker did this?” we asked. A young woman replied, “Well, the festival was about over, I guess, and [he] wanted to show everyone leaving.”

“Yes,” another member replied, “but then he shows the audience still sitting in the arena. A lot of people looked sleepy at first. They didn’t really like it...they were just sitting there being polite. But after a few minutes the music was more exciting...the audience really started to like it.”

Another group member agreed. “At first, the music was very strange to the people, but at the end the music seemed to make people happy and excited.” The discussion continued, sparked by the observation of how over the course of 20 minutes, Shankar’s music had shifted an audience from something like polite bemused disinterest to avid appreciation. As the

conversation wound down, group members raised questions suggesting a connection between musical creativity and social leadership. Was Ravi's performance educational? Could it change the thinking of people in the audience that day? What about the thinking of the people who subsequently view the film? Did the performance – and does the film – have social impact? After suggesting to the group that Shankar, the other musicians in the film, and the filmmaker himself might be referred to (in English) as “artistic leaders,” we asked if anyone knew a comparable Mandarin phrase to express this idea. The fact that none in the group suggested any phrase was no surprise since, as previously noted, the Mandarin word *lingdao* is rarely used outside the context of formal authority. Nevertheless, many seemed intrigued by the implications of these questions.

### *The Grab Bag*

Most people love to play and young teens like to play a lot. The grab bag (a simple small bag filled with questions written on small slips of paper) triggered a tremendous amount of fun and laughter as well as thoughtful discursive engagement. We used the bag in different ways, but the activity boiled down to having one person or a small group respond to some open ended question. Most of the questions were prepared in advance and focused on moral, ethical, or social issues (e.g., your parents don't like your friends, how to handle a disagreement with a teacher, how should Chinese society change over the next 20 years?, what puzzles you the most about America?). Often, however, we asked the group to write questions and add them to the bag. Sometimes they wrote questions aimed at us; about our personal lives or life in the United States. We used this activity at nearly every session, usually by having the whole group pass the bag around in “hot potato” fashion until an alarm sounded. Whoever held the bag had to draw and



respond to a question. It's difficult to describe in writing the sort of excitement this triggered, but readers who recall being 14 years old might get the idea .

On one occasion we used the bag in a very different way. Instead of responding with words, we asked small groups to prepare a skit – a piece of dramatic play – to act out their responses to the questions or scenarios they drew from the bag. It's interesting to note that this evening's session was held in something like a “fishbowl” – a room surrounded by windows through which many parents opted to watch the activities. Though we had some concern that this might muffle the groups' expressions and performances, we were happily surprised by the ease with which the groups presented controversial ideas.

Three group skits stood out in terms of their creative and thoughtful critique. The first group drew a slip of paper from the grab bag containing the following questions: “Are all men are created equal? What does this phrase mean to you?” After a few minutes of prep time, the group acted out a scene where a poor disheveled unemployed man seeking a bottle of water was denied entry to a convenience store on the basis of his appearance. An observer in the store then buys a bottle of water for the man and has some admonishing words for the store clerk.

The second group was asked to, “Describe what you think school was like for your parents and how it was different from what you experience today.” Here, the group first enacted a scene in which a teacher spoke harshly to students using ridicule and corporal punishment. This was followed by a scene with a friendly encouraging teacher.

The third group of interest drew the following scenario from the grab bag: “A friend tells you that one of your classmates is gay. What do you think, what do you say, and what do you do?” This question had been in the grab bag for quite some time without being drawn and we were a bit apprehensive about having included it. LGBT issues are becoming less hidden in

China, in fact, at the time of this session, the People's Daily had recently published an editorial calling for greater tolerance of gay and lesbian people. Despite such change, LGBT matters still lie within a sort of gray area in China, between acceptance and shame. Although Beimen has a reputation for being one of China's more open cities with respect to LGBT persons, given the age of our group members we suspected that the scenario might produce awkward moments. To the contrary, the group handled the question conveying a sense of ease and fun, acting out a scene marked by openness and friendship. The group indeed seemed gracefully playful, adding the angle that the boy had a crush on one of his male friends. In turn, the friend explains, "Look, we're friends and it's ok that you're gay. But I have to tell you that I'm not. But we're still friends, right?"

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on our experiences in central China, we draw two key narratives. The first relates to the phenomenon of people seeking unregulated learning activities. By "unregulated," we refer to activities unencumbered by the needs of governing agencies or discourses. Such learning may be considered "convivial" to the extent it serves, rather than manages, the needs and interests of persons and their relatedness to others. Yet seldom do we reflect upon how difficult it can be for young persons to become sufficiently untethered (in terms of time, emotion, social awareness, etc.) from organized public schooling so as to even recognize possibilities for convivial learning. We suspect that such recognition is eased as agencies and discourses of public schooling become less powerful, less centralized, and more diffuse. Thus, if imagining and pursuing convivial learning is difficult for American youth (and their parents), one must concede that it must be far more daunting in the Chinese context, where scores on public school

exams tightly determine the boundaries of one's future life in terms of status, occupation, and other assorted social characteristics (Shouse, Bei, and Ma, 2018). We were therefore encouraged to find within this context what appears to be a slow-growing awareness that alternative forms of learning are possible. Moreover, we were gratified for the chance to learn of and share in a movement toward convivial learning activity among people we might expect to be most encumbered by public educational structures.

A second narrative relates to the potential for global cross-cultural conviviality to emerge in contexts otherwise largely shaped by longstanding discourses of conflict and fear. For decades, agencies (governmental, corporate, media, academic) in both China and the U.S. have contributed to discourses that negatively shape popular views regarding each nation's motives toward the other. The result has been a generalized mistrust that ranges from simple stereotyping to the implicit acceptance of militarized mutual relations (Johnston and Shen, 2015). In their study of the history of Mandarin language learning among American students, for example, Sun and Shouse describe how government and higher educational institutions, while advocating the importance of Mandarin language education, often worked in ways that limited learning to elite students seeking careers in areas of national economic or political need. One example Sun and Shouse describe is how political and scholarly opposition toward the Confucius Institute emerged around the time it became perceived as effective in facilitating people-to-people opportunities for Chinese language and cultural learning among American high school and college students (Sun and Shouse, 2016).(1) This sort of response reflects what Pan (2004, 306-307) describes as "a discursive construction of other," part of a "China threat" discourse running through U.S. foreign policy and its related literature. Against this discursive backdrop, we

suggest that our experience of people-to-people contact serves as counter-discourse to such thinking.

In sum, we view our experiences in China as the intersection of two encouraging potentials – one for the further growth of creative learning opportunities for Chinese young people, the other for increased relatedness and understanding between the people of China and the United States. This nexus of potential, we suggest, may be advanced through increased informal interaction such as those brought about through academic or cultural exchange. At this point, however, “exchanges” seem to flow mostly in one direction, from China to the U.S. Though opportunities exist for Americans to travel and study in China, these tend to be underutilized compared to those for travel to areas of the world perceived more familiar and less politically complex. Against this backdrop, Sun and Shouse (2016) note how U.S. resources devoted to competing with China (e.g., STEM and related initiatives) vastly outweigh those aimed at increasing mutual relatedness and understanding.

The experiences described in this paper grew from comfort we acquired over years of visits to China. With comfort comes informality and, we argue, it is the combination of these that form a basis for successful conviviality on any local or international scale. Ultimately, we thus hope schools and other institutions will work harder to demystify and normalize China as a readily accessible source of joyful learning for students, scholars, and average citizens.

## Note

1. The Confucius Institute (or Institutes) is a global initiative, supported by China's Ministry of Education, aiming to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries, particularly at the high school and university level.

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