

English Teaching in Provincial China

The effort exerted by China in terms of teaching of English at all levels is truly daunting. During the visit sponsored by the Daloon Foundation, I got a vivid impression of it during a two-day stay in the provincial - and beautiful – provincial town of Yangshuo in southern China.

Cay Dollerup

Fate would have it that in Yangshou I had my late dinner at a street-restaurant where I was sitting next to *Owen Chief*, the head of a local language school, who invited me to see his establishment the next morning. But due to a misunderstanding, we did not meet.

Returning to my luxurious quarters, I was approached by Mrs *Li Yun-Zhao* who offered her services on a personally conducted tour of the local sights which I gracefully accepted so that we were soon imbibing the fresh air from comfortable vehicles which allowed for good views of the countryside. Translated: when I got back to my flooded and modest hostel, a friendly woman showed me a number of entries made in a book and in which people described how she had taken them around and what they thought of it. Since it appeared that people were satisfied, I accepted the deal and we soon rode on bikes through the countryside to have a look at a stalactite cave and to climb the Mountain of the Rising Moon.

Well, this was supposed to be about translation and communication: it turned out that Mrs Li had had a week's intensive training in spoken English and had then carefully used her first clients as extra teachers to bring her up to a passably good standard for her job: to be true, there were misunderstandings galore, but there was certainly also information which got through better than it would with a guide who would have been more sure of their command of English. Whenever yours ever so curious asked for the name of some exotic fruit or flower, Li Yun-Zhao looked it up in an English-Chinese phrase-book. She pointed to the Chinese character and I could then take the English counterpart. It worked beautifully.

The school

Preparing for my departure the next day, I accidentally again met Owen Chief. So I now attended two classes at his privately operated school. There were elementary schools in town, but they taught no English to their nearly 2,000 pupils. This was counterbalanced by the 'Buckland Business and Language School', which in addition to Mr Owen Chief could count on sometimes enrolling native speakers of English as voluntary teachers against food and accommodation, from among the many backpackers who frequent the town.

The school has an enrolment of 120 pupils. Using English teaching programmes on Chinese tel-

evision, as well as videos and tapes in class the school caters primarily for a community in need of people who can take care of tourists.

The first class I attended - with a beautiful view of the surroundings - was highly motivated of 16-17 year olds. A Western team taught vocabulary, setting up words connected with drama in strokes, and then 'hanging the man' with the a delighted class. At once stage class work was taken over by a pupil who had to conduct teaching in English and whose (erroneous) word usage made for debate. But it was definitely an efficient way of learning lexis (and management). I was mystified by the fact that at one stage the class began to sing in Chinese, but the explanation was simple: the electricity and hence the tape-recorder had stopped, so the teacher had resorted to an ancient stop-gap solution.

The second class was fairly small with 14 pupils aged 10-11. The class was their 'performance class'. The group was noisy and the atmosphere enthusiastically competitive. The class focused on a dialogue made up by Owen Chief "Ice cream, ice cream. The best ice cream in Yangshuo." - "How much does it cost?" - "2 yuan" - "Too expensive. I'm poor, I'm a student. I'll give you one yuan." - "Ok. How many do you want." - "One for my daddy. One for my mummy. One for my cousin. And two for myself." - "Here you are." - "Here is your money. Do you have change?" - "Here is the change. Here you are." - "Goodbye" - "Goodbye. Have a good trip."

A few words were explained, but otherwise the dialogue was repeated several times, first by the class and then given in Chinese by the teacher and rendered correspondingly in English.

And then it was acted out by several pairs of students, sometimes helped by the teacher, prompted by the others, and watched over intently by everybody.

Geared towards local needs, and building in no small measure on idealistic teachers from the English-speaking world, numerous schools all over China are training primarily the Chinese who welcome the foreigners, and, secondarily, some of the people who will, at the local level, have to do translation and interpreting in future China.