

CHAPTER 1

Four Teachers and Six Pieces (Part 1)

The first round of discussion was with the four principal teachers: Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang in China and Jack and Jane in America.¹ With them we have a close look at the life and work of writing teachers in the two countries. Six pieces of student writing were selected to represent their notion of “good writing.” The original commentary, both the marginal and the final, on each piece is presented, as are their additional comments at the interviews.

MR. WANG, A “NEO-CONFUCIANIST”

I had a hard time reaching Chinese teachers from America. First I enlisted help from Chinese graduate students studying in American schools, then I sought help from my friends and relatives in China. The result of both was disappointing. One day I received from a friend who must have been tired of my dogged pursuit a copy of “Anthology of Award-winning Student Writings” published in 1989 in China. Leafing through it, I was delighted: there was a teacher’s commentary attached to each piece. I immediately wrote to the editor of the anthology, explaining the project and my intent to find cooperating teachers in China. After two months of anxious waiting, I received a long letter from the editor, who turned out to be a high school teacher of writing himself. “After much consideration and delay—I assume you understand why,”² the letter begins, “I decided to write you this letter.” He continued:

This project provides an opportunity to introduce Chinese teachers’ experience and theories in teaching writing to the West and for us to learn from the West. If successful, it will certainly have a very positive impact on the understanding of the two countries. For this purpose, I would like to cooperate with you wholeheartedly.

The tone of the letter was appropriately formal for such correspondence, yet the writer’s enthusiasm was apparent. After a few more letters

back and forth, I was confident enough I had found the right partner that I boarded a plane for China.

A few days later I met the editor, Mr. Wang, at his home. Tall and lanky, with his back slightly bent and his complexion wan and wrinkled, he looks much older than his age of forty-nine. He talks slowly, as if contemplating the choice of each word. He always has a cigarette between his fingers, occasionally puffing at it energetically during long pauses in his speech, but letting it burn slowly by itself most of the time. Yet beneath this controlled demeanor is a man of restless energy. Mr. Wang wears a number of impressive hats: vice president of the Society of High School Teachers of Nanjing, president of the Young Teachers' Society (as a mentor figure) in the same city, and a member of the Research Association of the Teaching of Chinese of Jiangsu Province. He is also a classroom teacher, assigned the same teaching load as other teachers.

Through Mr. Wang I was introduced to half a dozen other Chinese teachers, almost all male. The gender gap takes an interesting twist in China. While in America teaching writing is generally considered a female profession, more so at the high-school level than at the college level, in China writing is not a college subject and is a predominantly male profession. Eventually I abandoned my "equal opportunity" plan in China and worked with two male teachers.

It was a homecoming trip after six years away from China. "What a joy to receive a friend from afar!" I was happily surprised that this injunction of Confucius' was still practiced with earnest in China. I was led to Mr. Wang's "humble cottage," invited to his class, introduced to his family and students, and, above all, trusted with his past, stories often painful to recall or to retell.

Mr. Wang's apartment is on the sixth floor of a newly built "teachers' complex," which has neither elevator nor air conditioning. Such complexes have become a familiar sight in Nanjing, the city where Mr. Wang now lives. Located on the northern bank of Yangtze, the longest river in China, Nanjing has a population of more than five million (including the suburban counties), and is considered a medium-sized city in China. It is known as one of the three "oven cities" for its unbearable heat in summer. Since houses in China are owned by the government and rented to the people at a rate lower than the cost of two pounds of pork per month, there is always a great shortage of houses, and owning an apartment is a privilege. In the last decade, because the central government issued favorable policies towards intellectuals, a special fund was allocated by the local government to build more houses

for teachers. Mr. Wang was a beneficiary of the new policy and was assigned an apartment four years ago after his family of four had lived in one room for six years. (A plastic sheet separated the room of twenty-two square meters into two sections, one for his wife and him, the other for their two sons.) This new two bedroom apartment was designed to make practical use every inch of floor space, so the “unit,” as it is called in China, has no living room. With a couch against one side of the wall, a coffee table in front, and a large photograph of a field lush with blooming tulips hanging on the opposite wall adding an illusionary depth (a gift from a grateful student, I was told later), Mr. Wang has ingeniously turned the narrow hallway into a small yet cozy living room. The hallway, however, became a narrow pathway only one person could go through at a time. Climbing six floors everyday was an added travail for Mr. Wang’s health after a long day at school, and a two bedroom apartment without a living room was by no means spacious for three adults (one of his sons is now working in another city), but Mr. Wang is sincerely content: “Most people in Nanjing still dream of having an apartment like this.”

Mr. Wang is well-read in Western literature and philosophy. He likes, in particular, works by French novelists, like Balzac, Maupassant, and Hugo, “because these writers try to be true to reality, and, at the same time, express their own opinions and sentiments.” Russian was the most widely taught language in Chinese colleges in the fifties. Mr. Wang learned Russian and read Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorky in his college days, but did not like what he calls Tolstoy’s lengthy “preaching style.” In English literature, his favorites are Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, as well as short stories by Mark Twain and *Martin Eden* by Jack London. He did not like Dickens’s novels much, because “they [Dickens’s works] are filled with trivial details, and the mood is too depressing,” and he also found it hard to appreciate contemporary American works, citing three reasons for his disenchantment: tedious plots, confusing structures, and bland language, although he suspected the last was the fault of translators. Of all Chinese writers, he admired Lu Shun most for his noble character, his insightful analysis of the so-called Chinese national character, and his relentless fight against the pervasive forces of corruption and hypocrisy.

Mr. Wang did not go out and join the student demonstrations during “the Tian An Men incidents,” but there was no question on which side he stood. Talking about the present political situation in China, he had two comments to offer, one pessimistic—“My generation is not going to see democracy, probably not even my son”—and the other

more hopeful—"You watch out, the whole thing is not finished [*mei2 wanr2*3]." He pronounced the last two syllables with the typical Beijing *r*, making them sound both casual and harshly satirical. With some self-deprecation, he commented that the greatest virtue of Chinese intellectuals was their forbearance. "The character of 'forbearance' is very interesting," he observed. "If you look at it carefully, you can see that it actually consists of two characters: a knife and a heart. Forbearance means you can withstand having a knife pointed at your heart. That's very painful, right? But you have to bear it." Often our talks on student papers turned into his deliberation on China's present political situation. He confided that he believed nothing reported in official newspapers (there are no private newspapers in China) "other than the date and the weather forecast." Without reliable sources for news, he had to depend on hearsay, many of which were sheer concoctions. One of the "news" items he related to me was that former Premier Zhao (a leading reformist and former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, removed after the Tian An Men upheaval) just committed suicide according to a Hong Kong newspaper, yet he had no access to any newspaper other than *People's Daily*. I sensed that the frequent meetings of his colleagues and friends in that "living room" are his major source of information. Despite his interest in the West and his years of Marxist and Maoist education, Mr. Wang is a firm believer of Confucianism in his own modified version, holding firmly to the five constant virtues that Confucius advocated in his life: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity. Sometimes he blames Confucius's influence for some of the educational problems in China, but he believes that many more have been caused by regression from Confucianism.

At the time I went to visit him, Mr. Wang's school had just celebrated its first centennial. The school was founded in 1891 by an American missionary known to the faculty then as Mr. Ferguson, a graduate of Boston University, and it had been managed by American principals until 1926. Times have changed; only the white bell-tower on the top of the school auditorium reminds the visitor of the Western presence on this campus a century ago. The school is now staffed entirely by Chinese teachers and administrators, and attended by Chinese students.

The last day I went to Mr. Wang's school was the day of the middle-school entrance exam. The school gate was heavily guarded by teachers wearing red armbands to keep anxiety-ridden parents out, and I was let in through a side door when they found out who I was—Mr. Wang had notified them ahead of time.

Hundreds of examinees, shut behind the gate, were waiting for the exam. The campus was errily quiet, many students nervously sitting and wandering along the corridors with ivy awnings, some murmuring softly to themselves. They reminded me of those “defining moments” in my own student life. In China, only one out of seven high school graduates can go to college. (The proportion between elementary school and high school can be twice as high, depending on where you live, city or country). The battle to college usually starts from elementary school, and, in some families, as early as the time when an infant starts talking. The first, and maybe the most important, “moment” is the middle-school entrance exam, for admission to a “key” middle school is almost a guaranteed seat in a college classroom. The school where Mr. Wang teaches is the second-best middle school in Nanjing, and the competition to get in is fierce. Mr. Wang attributes this phenomenon, which he describes as “all armies marching to one single-plank bridge,” to people’s disregard for Confucian teachings: “After the Cultural Revolution the long tradition of pursuing academic excellence was revived,” Mr. Wang expounds, with his deliberate pace. “Yet we now have given up everything to prepare students for the college entrance exam. Students have no pastimes, no weekends, and some parents even use financial incentives or physical punishment to keep their children at their books. We are going directly against Confucian teachings.” It must be bitterly ironic for him, a Confucian scholar, to see Confucianism, which emerged in a time when the society was torn by violence and greed, and advocated returning to virtue as the only remedy to save humanity from ruin, should be revived at the end of the 20th century by coercion and materialism. He added that Confucius, the saint-scholar who always advocated a rounded character development, specified six arts essential to students, which included horseback riding and archery.⁴

Yet Mr. Wang also criticizes without reservation what he views as the downside of Confucianism. In an article he recently published in a national journal for writing teachers in China, he strongly attacks the Confucian tradition that one should subject all his desires to “the will of the heaven,” which translates to the “will of the ruling government” in modern time. He argues that this tradition creates an educational system in China which “gives priority to knowledge, skills, and grades and almost forgets that students are what we teachers are here for.” He warns: “We are human beings dealing with human beings. That is at the core of our education. If we forget that basic fact, education has lost its soul.” This is hardly revolutionary if said in America, but in China it was

like a stone thrown into a serene pond and the splash was loud enough to make him a nationally controversial figure.

Mr. Wang tries to build a more equalitarian relationship with his students. He asked me to attend an after-class activity of his students. The students were putting on plays adapted from O'Henry's short stories, and the whole show was presided over by a student. Mr. Wang appeared on the platform only at the end, briefly introducing O'Henry's life and his impact on literature. The class was not as orderly as I would expect in a normal Chinese class; it was noisy, the students coming in and out and even chatting with one another, yet Mr. Wang did not seem to mind and never interfered. He told me: "In my class I allow students to converse with each other and even disagree with me. I want them to be involved and not just listen to me passively. This is an after-class activity; I let them do what they want." He also tries to create a relaxed political atmosphere in his class. "Students can write literally about anything in my class till the final year, when they begin to prepare for the entrance exam," Mr. Wang said. "I told them, 'Put aside whatever new ideas you have for the time being. You can pick them up again after you get into college.'" While he tries to democratize his class, Mr. Wang is clear-minded about where his class is situated.

Good writing, for Mr. Wang, has to have emotions: "Writing does not have to be very political; it does not even have to have an explicit moral message, but it has to have some kind of feeling, for what one hates and loves expresses one's moral standard."

For Mr. Wang the future of Chinese education lies in "the critical inheritance of Confucianism by borrowing from the West," but Confucianism has to be the foundation as well as the core. Self-perfection is the goal of his life, and his teaching. "I believe writing should be used to understand, improve, and perfect oneself," wrote Mr. Wang in a letter after I returned from China. "In the final analysis, learning to write is not just learning some techniques of writing. It is to enable people to live meaningful lives and to be useful to society." To achieve that goal, he believes that teachers should first of all set an example. His motto is "in peace with poverty, find pleasure in Tao [*an1 ping2 le4 tao4*]." Tao is translated as "the way of life" in America, yet it means a lot more than that; it can be morality, justice, ideals and principles. Confucius' idea that "inferior men strive for self-interest; great men strive for righteousness" has provided the inner strength for Mr. Wang to bear many political and personal setbacks in his life. He was denounced and publicly humiliated as a "class enemy" in the Cultural Revolution, and was incarcerated for months in an unofficial prison, never told what law he had violated. Yet

those painful experiences did not leave in him one ounce of resentment or cynicism.

Mr. Wang is proud to be part of a tradition created by men of high intellect and upright character. "Chinese intellectuals have fine moral traditions that are well exemplified in literature," he says. "Du Fu⁵ sighed, after the thatched roof of his dilapidated house was ripped off by the storm, not for his own misery but the multitude, 'If only I had thousands of great mansions to house all the poor in the world, so that everyone will be happy!' Tao Yuanming⁶ declares, 'I will never bend [my] head for five *dous*⁷ of grain.' They all demonstrated that poverty is not as shameful as the loss of one's moral integrity." He wants his students to be a part of that tradition, which he believes crystallizes the essence of Chinese civilization, although he is aware that he is pointing them to a tortuous road that promises neither fame or fortune.

At the last interview, Mr. Wang stressed again: "China is changing. Old values are being replaced by new, and the old coexists with the new. But one thing is certain: Chinese tradition will survive."

"There was Such an Old Lady" and "Me, Before and After the Exam" are recommended by Mr. Wang as "the best writing I have seen in recent years." He believes that they are typical of the kind of writing that most Chinese teachers would appreciate, and that they also reflect the kind of moral values that should be celebrated in writing.

The author of the first piece, "*There was an Old Lady*," was his student. The assignment he gave was to write about a good person, a person who had a noble character and was worthy of admiration and emulation. If the students felt that they did not know somebody of such high morality, they could write about an ordinary person, but a morally wicked person was unacceptable. The purpose? "Discover the good, the beautiful, and the real in the students' lives through writing," says Mr. Wang.

THERE WAS AN OLD LADY

There is an image I carry in my mind. Although memory has locked it up for many years, the image remains sharp and clear.

When I was in elementary school, my family lived at the far end of a small lane, quiet and peaceful. Especially in summer, walking in the shade of French parasol trees, one felt restful. Across the road from where we lived was a wall of vermilion color, within which was a small Western-styled house. Often some tiny violet flowers overgrew the wall and spread into the open space in front of our house. I did not know who lived in that small house.

One day after school, I found that I had forgotten to bring my key with me. Having waited outside the home for a while, I was so bored that I put aside the school bag and tried to pick the flowers on the high wall. The wall was so high that I could not reach any flowers and, on falling, sprained my ankle and cried. Pretty soon a small door in that enclosing wall opened and out came an old lady. After so many years, I still remember clearly the first sight of her: medium stature, with a straight back, silver-white hair, and a face cut with deep wrinkles, between the layers of which seeped profound kindness. There was nothing extraordinary about her dress, either. But for some reason, at that time, even at that young age, I sensed something special about her. Now I know it was her disposition. But I did not know what to call it then. The old lady smiled at me affectionately and led me into her small house. Once inside, she applied a medicinal ointment on my ankle and invited me to visit her later on. Returning home, I told my parents that I had met a kindly old lady. Yes, kindness was exactly what I felt from her.

From then on, every time I played in front of the window, whether kicking shuttlecock or jumping rope, the small door would open with a creak and that old lady would kindly invite me to come in and play. What did I play in her house? Nothing—I just told her things about school, about my teachers and my classmates. And she would listen to me quietly, her face radiating ever brightly with smiles. Finally, one day, I could not help but ask her, "Where are the others in your family? Where are your children?"

She was speechless for a while, and then her eyes slowly looked up to the sky above the enclosing wall, saying, as if to herself, "I had a son, but later I lost him."

"What? Lost?" Stricken, I stared at her and said, "My mother always holds my hand tightly whenever we go downtown. You did not hold his hand, did you?" She looked away from me, eyes moist, and then she turned round with her thin back to me—it was still very straight.

At home, I told my parents that the old lady had carelessly lost her son. My parents looked at each other, unable to stifle their laughter. Father told me that the old lady was a veteran revolutionary, thrown into the jail during the Canton Great Revolution. She had joined the Long March, and her son was probably lost during the Long March. My eyes widened: this loving and lonely lady once lived behind bars, and even climbed the snowy mountains and crossed swamps? But why did she look no different from my grandma? A hero in a child's mind is like . . . well, a hero should look close to the sculptures in front of the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. How could she be one of them?

After that when I met her, I became more respectful and reserved, but she acted as if nothing had happened and one day even consulted me about growing more trees in the lane. I then realized that she was responsible for the shade we enjoyed in summer.

Later, the old lady moved away. Before leaving she gave me some flower seeds. Later, a fat man with a big belly moved in, always bragging, "When I joined the revolution. . . ." Later, my family also moved, leaving that wall and that house. Later still, that Western-styled house was demolished.

Ten years or so later, I occasionally went back to that small lane where we used to live. The French parasol trees were still towering and straight. The image of the old lady appeared before me: a modest, affectionate, kind, and ordinary person. She gives me strength and inspiration; she teaches me to be sincere.

Mr. Wang explains that the writer of this piece always had a good grasp of the language, and the paper was excellent when it was first handed in. He made changes in a few places in terms of phrasing and suggested changing the topic from "There Is Such a Person" to the one used now. Other than that, he did not make any substantive changes at all, because he felt the paper was good as it was. The following is his comment on the paper, "There was Such an Old Lady":

Grade: 86. Through direct (what you saw and heard by yourself) and indirect (what your parents told you) description, you quite successfully portray an image of a revolutionary veteran with an admirable character. For the cause of revolution, she sacrificed her son; for the future generations, she planted trees with her own hands. She not only inspired you, but also educated me.

The ninth and tenth paragraphs are somehow rushed. For the rest please read my comments in the margins.

"Grades higher than 85 are good grades in most schools in China," Mr. Wang explains. "Rarely does the teacher deliver 90, and 95 is almost never given, because we do not want students to think that they have reached perfection; we want them to feel that there is still some distance for them to close up."

In the margins, Mr. Wang made four major comments. He underlined the sentence in the fourth paragraph, "She was speechless for a while, and then her eyes slowly looked up to the sky above the enclosing wall . . .," and commented, "a good detail, accurately depicts the expression of the old lady at that moment." He praised the parts where the narrator says, "You did not hold his hand, did you?" and where she reflects on the image of heroes as the monumental sculptures, for being

"Very realistic." Mr. Wang also likes the contrast created by introducing the fat man into the scene at the end: "This contrast sets off more emphatically the nobility of the old lady." For the last paragraph, he commented, "The fine character of the old lady has already exerted a subtle influence on you."

Asked whether he ever held individual conferences with students, he replied that individual conferences were held "only when the paper is of such bad quality that I did not want to grade it or the paper has some political problems better handled in private." He then gave me an example. Once a student wrote about the border war between China and Vietnam in 1984, which, as declared by the Chinese government, was "a self-defense war to teach the Vietnamese aggressors a lesson." The student, however, expressed doubts in his writing: "Why do we fight a so-called war of self-defense in another country? Is it just or unjust? I don't know. This is an odd [*mo4 min2 qi1 miao4 de*] war." Mr. Wang called the student to his office and talked to him alone. First, he repeated to the student the official line, "The war is fought in the best interest of our country; every one who loves our country should support it." Then he offered advice of caution: "There are things we don't understand, and if we don't, we don't have to write about them. You are safe with me, for I will not report this to anyone, but if what you have written leaks out, you will be accused of 'smearing the self-defense war' and you can be in serious trouble." Mr. Wang related to the student his own past experience as a cautionary tale: he was incarcerated for nine months during the cultural revolution for having made some off-the-cuff political comments. When he came out, his hair and teeth were both falling out like an old man; he had aged years in those nine months. After the talk, the student never wrote on any "dangerous" topics again. Mr. Wang encourages his students to be critical of trendy thoughts and to expand their horizons outside the classroom, but, to protect the students, he also teaches them to draw a clear line between what can be said in public and what should be kept only to oneself and one's best friends. It is a hard role for Mr. Wang, who views righteousness and honesty, along with others, as the bedrock of his values.

"Me, Before and After the Exam" is from the student anthology that led me to Mr. Wang, who is the chief editor of the anthology. It was written during a composition contest in which the student could choose to write on one of three given topics. Such contests are held frequently in China to simulate the condition of the college entrance exam, and the prize-winning papers are anthologized afterwards to provide models for other students. The other value of composition contests,

as Mr. Wang sees it, is to train students to think quickly under pressure, because on such occasions the time is usually limited to two hours, and the topic given on the spot. (What Mr. Wang did not mention is that this form of exam, improvising on a given topic in a restricted time period in a competitive situation, started in 587 A.D., and was then called "Imperial Exams for Civil Services.")

ME, BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXAM

The bell rang for class.

Miss Lee walked into the classroom. When her eyes, obviously searching for someone in the classroom, landed on me, she smiled understandingly. My heart sank, weighing me down so much that I was afraid to look her straight in the eye. How could I misunderstand? There was going to be a preliminary composition test tomorrow, and students coming out of that test would be qualified for the formal composition contest. She hoped that I would represent the class in the preliminary. I felt as if she were saying, "Come on! Win it for our class!" However, my heart was troubled. If only she knew there was another test tomorrow, too.

At dusk, I was strolling along the main street. The setting sun was so beautiful, red as fire, as blood, like a dazzling beauty ready to depart, and whose beauty people were allowed to admire up to the last moment. I walked back and forth along the boulevard, recalling what happened in the class that morning. Tomorrow—there was only one tomorrow; me—there was also only one me. Should I attend the composition preliminary or the ornithology test? I could not answer my own question, and nor could I convince myself either way.

As I strolled on, words of a classmate a few days ago came back. "You, silly you! What's the problem? Of course you'll go to the composition preliminary! Don't you realize that you can get extra credit if you do well in that preliminary? What does a bird contest matter? Besides, Miss Lee will be disappointed if you don't go."

"But I . . ."

I did not know what to say. My classmate was busy, and he ran off, leaving me alone and still undecided. Standing there for a long time, I wanted to cry.

I paced along the endless boulevard. "He is right. If I do not go to the preliminary, Miss Lee will be really disappointed." In order to prepare me for the preliminary, she had tutored me individually, brushing up my skills in writing during her break after the lunch, and borrowing supplementary materials on composition for me. At noon the day before, Miss Lee had called me to her office again. I watched her going through the supplementary materials carefully, her lunch

and several bottles of pills pushed aside. Recalling the scene, my heart winced. Disappointing Miss Lee was the last thing I wanted to do.

Maybe my mother was right. As I sauntered along the road, I remembered the long talk between mother and me the night before. Mother didn't agree or disagree with me. She stroked me with a loving hand and said, "A person who can conquer many opponents on a battlefield is a hero. Yet in everyday life, a hero is someone who can conquer himself," quoting the famous saying by the Indian leader Nehru. Mother left me deep in thought. . . .

Looking up, I watched the clouds gradually disappearing beyond the edge of the sky. Yet the setting sun was still so charming, red as blood, as fire, more beautiful in her final glow. A flock of wild ducks flew in front of her, and a minute later, a flock of doves, flapping their joyful wings, flew towards her. What a beautiful sunset! Yes, that beauty belonged to Mother Nature, belonged to all mankind. Let's take care of birds, because they embody the beauty of Nature. Loving birds, taking care of birds was what my heart desired. I said to myself, "Love the birds and do something for the birds. This is what you can give to Nature." I looked up at the setting sun again: happy ducks were charging towards the sun and flying away. I must conquer myself for those happy birds, for the magnificent beauty of the nature before me!

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After I had taken the ornithology test, I returned there. Watching the scene of the setting sun, the ducks were still charging towards the glowing sun and then flying away. No! They were flying faster and more forcefully; they were flying with more beauty and strength! I felt they were singing to me, and my heart opened up to them.

I ran toward the sun, the ducks. I believed I would see my teacher's understanding smile; I believed I would be greeted with the outstretched hands of my classmates; I believed I would hear mother's loving words. Yes, all these would happen! I may have lost something, but what I had gained was more! The beauty of Nature, the joyful songs of the ducks belonged to me forever!

The person I became was not the same person I was before the tests: free from hesitation, free from conflicts, my heart sings with joy! Toward the setting sun, I fly with the wild ducks.

This piece won a first prize in the contest, and the comments in the anthology are as follows:

This composition is exquisitely designed. The story flashes back as the narrator walks along a street and through the description of her psychological development. The whole piece is, as a result, focused yet natural, warm and touching. Episodes of "classmate's advice," "teacher's tutoring," and "talk with mother" are woven together naturally.

The most outstanding merit of the piece is its repeated brilliant descriptions of the setting sun, which sets the atmosphere of the time, the narrator's character and spirit, and also leads the movement of the narration.

Please read:

The first time when the beautiful sunset is described, it serves as a contrast to the hesitant mood of the narrator, unable to decide which test she should take.

In the second description of the beautiful setting sun, the narrator concentrates on the wild ducks flying high in the clouds and the happy flapping doves to express the narrator's love for nature, which foreshadows her resolution to conquer self and go to the ornithology test.

At the end, when she comes back to the setting sun for the third time, the narrator is at one with the wild ducks flying towards the sun, her heart singing with joy. As such, she powerfully expresses the theme of the piece: natural beauty cleanses human souls, and mankind should love Mother Nature. The ending triggers the reader's imagination. The three repeated descriptions of the beauty of the setting sun are imbued with strong feeling and sensitivity, which also enable the piece to flow naturally, as if written in one breath, reflecting real life.

Mr. Wang agrees with the evaluation. He concedes, as an afterthought though, that the author somehow overdramatizes the conflict between taking a preliminary composition text and an ornithology test, but he still likes the piece, because, he argues, the writer is dealing with a very real issue for Chinese students, which is how to balance schoolwork with one's other social responsibilities. In the piece the narrator triumphs over self and makes the right decision. He thinks the piece also deserves high marks for the technical merit praised in the comments.

JACK, A TOUGH-MINDED YANKEE

In his early forties, Jack teaches at a high school in a small university town in New Hampshire. Next-door neighbor to a major state university, the school seems to gravitate naturally towards higher education. It boasts high SAT scores and upper-level academic courses comparable to university courses. In 1990, 75 percent (the national average is around 50 percent) of the school's graduates went on to colleges or universities. Like a magnet, this public high school attracts students from nearby regions, students whose parents have high aspirations for their children but can not afford the high tuition of a private school.

Jack does not look like a typical Yankee to me at first sight. He is short in stature, and his voice sounds coarse and tired. With well-

groomed hair and a corduroy suit, he walks in quick steps and talks in a clipped and fast tempo and with well-chosen diction that conveys precision. He carries an air of formality. Yet deep down he is a man of strong convictions and high work ethics, qualities that remind me of those old tough-minded Yankees who descended from the Puritan tradition. The motto on the wall next to his desk, which is cluttered with student papers and newspaper specimen pages, reads: "Do not pray for an easy life. Pray for a strong person." In his daily swirl of teaching five classes a day, advising the student newspaper, coaching the student drama group, and other administrative duties, Jack still finds time to hold Bible discussions with students from his church once a week during lunch time. Jack has been teaching writing for twenty-three years. As an experienced teacher of writing, he is able to read student papers with the same tempo and precision as he speaks. He seldom falters about his judgment. Usually after he reads the student paper once, he can immediately write or talk eloquently about the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and deliver a grade. With a sharp hunter's eye he is also able to pick up typos and grammatical mistakes in the papers from drafts that have been proofread by several readers. Despite his formality, his relationship with the students is very close and warm. Our talks, held in his classroom, were frequently interrupted by students rushing in to seek his counsel on all kinds of subjects: schedule for drama rehearsals, recovering lost costumes, candidates for the volleyball team, and even some mechanical problems with the light in the school gym. One day, two girls came to request his conspiracy in pulling out a practical joke on a friend of theirs who, they claimed, had betrayed a "serious" vow. Jack winked and agreed.

Jack is not a Yankee liberal, though; he is a political and social conservative. He loudly regrets that America has lost faith and good values, that students nowadays have little respect for order and tradition, as evidenced by their lack of civility. In our discussion about honesty in writing, Jack could not hide his disgust even though he was speaking in well-modulated tones: "I would like a little polite hypocrisy. I would like to see somebody say to me 'Would you please open the door for me,' rather than have somebody bump into me and then just keep on going." For him, what happened in the sixties started the country on the moral downslide. He described those activists in the sixties as "all these middle-class kids who from my point of view were scorning all the things that had come so easily to them. These spoiled kids who had everything were turning their noses up at it."

Jack grew up in poverty, first in the woods of northern New Hampshire, later in Florida and a succession of seacoast New England towns, as his father, an itinerant automobile mechanic, chased success. The first home he remembers was a one-room cabin with no running water. In school he was laughed at for his “funny speech” and slighted for his “reading problem.” “There is nothing either ennobling or picturesque about poverty,” he concluded at a young age, and made up his mind to fight his way out of poverty. He became a serious student, and when he graduated from high school, Jack was class president and one of the top students at school. He planned to be a lawyer, yet an unexpected illness jeopardized his plan, and he found himself, instead of at the bar, back in high school, this time as a teacher.

His school years were in the time, as Jack recalls, “before the fall of Archibald MacLeish from the position of a major American poet.” Jack still remembers vividly the day when this most respected poet passed away: “That day, the school had a long period of silence. The church bell was tolled its ringing heard all over the town. He was sanctified.” For him MacLeish is not just another poet, but a symbol that stands for an era of positive life-affirming literature, and MacLeish’s later fall from the literary canon in this country signaled the passing of an era when the line between right and wrong was clear-cut, and hard work and faith were extolled. Then, Jack interposed, some radical changes took place after the turn of the century; the rise of Realism forces the reader to face the seamy side of reality: “Now in Modern art you see bums, hobos, sitting in the doorway of a vacant building with trash all around. Literature portrays people as victims of their circumstances and living in ‘the world between the gods.’ Now people find Williams’s poetry very distasteful, because it is so sappy, so sentimental. So he fell from grace.” Jack looked back at the changes with mixed feelings of acceptance and nostalgia: “Now the amount of space to him in American literature is very small. There used to be his very long poem as a must for all school children. Today only a few of his translations from Greek are read.” Yet the traditions celebrated in Williams’s poems are obviously well alive among the generation who grew up chanting his verses.

During a visit to his home, an elegant two-storied wooden house hidden beside a quiet road, Jack told me with pride that he built the house with his father-in-law seventeen years ago, and that the family had been living there ever since. Entering the house, what immediately caught my eyes was a huge fireplace on one side of the room: its red-brick chimney rising all the way to the ceiling, some wood stacked on one side of the chimney and worn-looking poker standing in a row on

the other side, adding a flavor of antiquity and elegance to an otherwise ordinary living room. In one corner of the living room is a narrow spiral staircase with a wrought iron railing that leads to the second floor, which has an inside balcony overlooking the downstairs and is heated by the huge chimney. Jack's wife came from one of the oldest families in the area and is also a school teacher. One of their daughters has graduated from college and the other is going to college this fall. Their only son is in high school. Jack has come a long way from a one-room cabin in the deep woods.

After a busy day at school, which can tax the strength of the strongest man, Jack still finds energy to write at home. He publishes on a regular basis, usually one article per year in some regional magazine. Jack considers himself a writer and views his relationship with his students as between writers, and his own experience of writing the best teaching guide.

Because the paper he chose seems to have a higher artistic quality than others, I asked Jack if art is what he is teaching. He disagreed:

The principal purpose of writing is to help people understand something they did not understand before. Art, communication are all secondary. Create something beautiful so it is pleasing to the eye, yet that is the means, not the end. Just like a beautiful painting helps me to understand something, even an abstract design of a rug—in some ways there is an element of understanding. I go to an art gallery and look at the paintings. I am trying to understand what human beings could paint, who painted them, what motivated them, why is that being produced. I understand them better. I just feel they come alive; I understand the way [the painter] looks at the world.

His understanding is obviously not confined to self; writing is a way of expanding one's vision, understanding the surrounding world.

Understanding, knowing the world, is at the core of Jack's perception of the purpose of both writing and reading. The author he is most fond of through most of his life is Charles Dickens, "because his characters are so realistic, but compelling examples of types of people." Thomas Hardy is second on his list of favorite writers," because he helps me probe into the psychological truth of people without them [the characters] even knowing it," explained Jack. "I mean they even don't know why they are doing what they are doing. That's very valid." When asked whether he is bothered by Dickens's thick and sometimes verbose description, he responded, "I am not saying I love the style so much as I love the characters. I think you can read Dickens despite Dickens' way.

After you have read it ten times, you know the scene and you can go rapidly over it. They [the characters] are so wonderful, you gloss over the rich description.” Then I asked him to rate the writers in terms of their style. “Actually I wouldn’t put Hemingway at the top, although he is very lean in style,” Jack said without any hesitation. “I think I will probably put Steinbeck there. I like him better than Hemingway or Faulkner. He has more poetry in his work than Hemingway, but he’s not as obscure as Faulkner.” Yet for him, content is far more important than style. “Style, that could get in the way, but when they [books] open up a new world, that’s what I want to read,” he said. “People can be taught. You can go to a publishing house, they can tell you how to structure a sentence, how a paragraph goes in certain ways, all that stuff, but if the person has nothing to say, all that style stuff is not going to make the book great. I read what I feel I need to know.” Right now, Jack feels he needs to know about other ethnic cultures, and he is reading writers from Alice Walker to Amy Tan. Of all the minority writers he has read he admires Toni Morrison most, “Her books make me think in a way I never did before, maybe understanding the black mentality, their way of looking at the world, which I didn’t understand very well.” Some time ago he read a novel written by a native Chinese writer, and, although he does not remember clearly the title and plot of the novel, he was impressed by the closeness between nature and people in that book, something he feels Americans have just begun to appreciate. He hopes to teach in China in the future to know the ordinary people there and to write about them. His warm feeling towards oriental culture and his eagerness to open his horizons made him an enthusiastic participant in this project.

Jack pulled “Beat Them ’til They’re Black and Blue” out of a stack of papers when I asked him to select some pieces that best represent his idea of good writing. The topic was chosen by the student, the form of personal narrative assigned by Jack.

“The writer,” Jack says, “is an exceptional student, certainly at the top of the class. She is in the advanced writing class. This piece has been with her for quite a while, and this is the polished piece.”

BEAT THEM ’TIL THEY’RE BLACK AND BLUE

My grandfather was a redneck, a poor-born Missouri farmer; never had a full day’s rest in all his seventy-two years. A skinny, crooked man, his back was bent forever towards the relentless sun.

Squinting eyes and leathery skin were steadfast reminders of the land and life he inherited from his father.

If he had any love in him, something locked it up behind the hardened grimace he always wore. Sometimes he would slip, and the stern frown etched into his face would lose its conviction. The story's told that when I was born, his first grandchild, he actually hugged my mother, something he never did when she was a child.

Old age seemed to mellow the man. A lifetime of withholding affection ended with me. Unlike his six daughters, I didn't know what it felt like not to be touched by your own father, unless accompanied by the bite of a switch.

I would lie in bed night after night under a wilted cotton sheet waiting for the oppressive Missouri heat to lift. Near my bed was a window which was always open to the sweet-smelling fields. The fireflies which performed their dazzling dance for me never ceased to amaze my little six-year-old eyes as I waited for the familiar creak of my grandfather climbing the stairs.

He would come into my room and tuck the cotton sheet around my chin. He stayed with me for hours past my bedtime, telling me stories of when he was a little boy. He told me how his family never owned a T.V. or a car. Instead of Saturday morning cartoons, he had Saturday morning chores. After two years in high school, he dropped out because his father needed all the help he could get on the farm. When he was sixteen, his father died, and he became responsible for a family of five. He grew up that year, working in the fields, the only life he knew.

With all the tales that he told, none of them ever included my mom or her sisters. It was like he had willfully erased that part of his life. Some deeper awareness told me to be content with his stories, so I filled in the empty spaces with make-believe stories.

His stories held me until my eyelids became heavy, and his soft Southern drawl lulled me to sleep. Each night before he left me, he kissed my cheek, tickling me with his prickly white stubble. Then he would whisper into my ear:

"Good night, sleep tight,
Don't let the bed bugs bite,
And if they do,
Take your shoe,
And beat them 'til they're black and blue."

With that he would leave me, but the scent of his pipe would linger, protecting me from the bedbugs.

Unknown to me then, each night my mom would come and kiss me good night. She and her father would pass each other in the hall,

never touching, never loving. She was a stranger in the house she grew up in.

Jack gave the paper an A and wrote the following comments:

The point of view is reflective first person—from the present looking back. This allows you to understand now what you didn't then. If you want to tell the story from a young child's point of view, the verb tenses would have to change. However, you are commenting on your grandfather in terms of what you understand and saw then, leaving out the understandings you have now. This seems to work very well because it leaves the reader with the job of assessing what it is in him (and in many people), to have a much easier time with unfettered expression of emotion with grandchildren than with children. Your story gives us some clues, but we know there are many factors, different in different cases. The issue isn't so much an explanation of the *reason* anyway. It simply looks at how this behavior affects others—you and your mother.

In the margins, Jack only indicated a few sentences that were unclear to him, but he did not change anything in the paper. He explained: "To put the word in their mouths to me is a violation of the process, which to keep the ownership of their own paper means the words have to be their own."

In the comments at the end and in the margins, Jack continued his dialogue with the writer that started after the student handed in the first draft. Initially Jack thought the beginning—"My grandfather was a redneck, a poor born Missouri Farmer . . ."—was a kind of background, not strong enough to be a good beginning. "Although it was ok," Jack reasoned, "for many noted authors frequently introduce their stories with that, but I felt I was not fascinated by him as a character." He suggested to the writer that the second paragraph be moved to the beginning, "because the mystery of him, what is behind his hardened grimace, may be more interesting as a lead." But in the group discussion, eight of ten students in that group said no, they liked the beginning with the redneck, and the writer herself did not want to change either, so Jack decided that he was not going to impose any change and just stayed with it. In the margin, though, he reiterated, "This para. (the second) is an alternative lead, but your lead is effective as is."

In the final comment, Jack continued his discussion with the writer about the paper's point of view, a discussion started in their conference. The writer said that she was telling the story from the point of view of herself when she was a little child. Jack disagreed, but was unable to

convince her. Now with the final draft, Jack put an arrow beside the sentence “Some deeper awareness told me to be content with his stories, so I filled in the empty spaces with make-believe stories,” and wrote: “That key sentence justifies the approach you have taken.” The approach, as he understood and restated in the final comment, is “reflective first person—from the present looking back.” Jack, however, was not suggesting any change, for he considered the point of view that the writer was taking in the paper was quite effective. He was only discussing with the student an issue he considered important for writers. Jack talked more about the piece in the interview:

In a lean and simple way it shows just enough of the surroundings, as well as a picture of the person. She lets us know that her grandpa is more drawn to the grandchildren than with his own children, but she does not allow us go off at a tangent that might be interesting, but waters it down to a simple story. That's very powerful. She does not rely on phony language. She has a more fluent vocabulary than indicated by this piece, but she is talking about a redneck Missouri farmer, so she picks vocabulary appropriate to the topic as well as to her level. It is also written with a natural style. She has a powerful way of suggesting the whole impact and significance. She does not go into the detail whether she ever beat the bugs, but that is the title. Maybe the title suggests some physical abuse in the family, or her mother was beaten metaphorically. It's subtle and suggestive, and that is excellent.

MR. ZHANG, A LANDLORD'S SON WITH AMBITION

County L, only twenty miles from Nanjing, the city where Mr. Wang lives, is under the administration of the same provincial government, yet the two places seem to belong to two worlds. As the bus left Nanjing for County L, I was struck by the feeling that I had not only left behind human and metallic noises, endless bicycle streams and sundry stores, high-rises and narrow alleys, but was heading to another China, where time flows slowly, if not stagnates. Looking out of the bus window, I saw a peasant woman scrubbing clothes against a slabstone by the river, and an ox was half immersed in the same water. Every inch of field, miles and miles extending infinitely to the horizon, was green with carefully cultivated rice paddies. So peaceful and elemental. I started to wonder if it was the same a thousand years ago.

Mr. Zhang's school was built fifty years ago through the donations of some local gentry and land owners. Although the gentry classes are