Chapter One: The Road To Learning

by Shenzhan Liao

From My New York: An Ordinary Person's Twenty Years in America
© 2026 Shenzhan Liao. All rights reserved.

On December 8, 2023, an education symposium was hosted at Teachers College, Columbia, titled *'Cross-Fertilization' of Culture and Education for the Common Good*. Organized by the Center on Chinese Education, it was to mark the centennial of the College's International Institute. Experts on Chinese and American education from China, the United States and Canada, along with representatives of international organizations, convened to discuss topics on international education and cross-cultural exchange. At the invitation of Professor Henan Cheng of Teachers College, I chaired a panel on international education as Senior Vice President for Education at China Institute in America, and as a member of the College's class of 2004.

• • •

Teachers College is the oldest and largest graduate school of education in the United States. It began in 1880 as a training school called the *Kitchen Garden*, founded by Grace Dodge in Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan, teaching poor immigrant women practical skills — cooking, sewing, hygiene and health. In 1887, with the help of the then president of Columbia University, the famous philosopher Nicholas Murray Butler, *Kitchen Garden* was renamed the *New York School for the Training of Teachers* and eventually moved to a campus on 120th Street on Manhattan's Upper West Side, on land donated by George Vanderbilt, one street away from Columbia's main campus. With six teachers and 122 students in its first year, the school trained qualified teachers for New York City's poor children. In 1892 it was renamed Teachers College (hereafter "TC") and formally joined Columbia University as its graduate school of education. However, it kept its independent board of trustees and the power to appoint its own president, as it does to this day. One wing of TC's classical red-brick building is named for Grace Dodge. With Columbia's Butler Library across the street, the two pioneers of education seem to continue quietly telling the story they set in motion more than a century ago. Preserved along with them is a record of how education in America advanced through the accumulation of capital and the growth of philanthropy: of TC's eight interconnected, maze-like Gothic buildings, four are named for famous philanthropic families: The Dodges ran the largest copper mines in America; the Macy oil business was later folded into Rockefeller's Standard Oil; Thompson Hall is named for Frederick Ferris Thompson, a banker of the mid-to-late nineteenth century; and Zankel was one of the early founders of what is today the preeminent multinational conglomerate Berkshire Hathaway.

James Earl Russell, an early dean of TC, was invited to the College in 1897. He not only repaired TC's then-precarious relationship with Columbia but transformed it from a vocational school into a research institution that gave equal weight to the humanities and the sciences, grounded in educational pragmatism, with an emphasis on research and practice in education, psychology and health. Many of the professors under Russell were eminent, none more so than the psychologist and philosopher John Dewey. Dewey's pragmatic progressivism, championing education's social function, and insisting on working with the natural laws of

children's physical and mental development, aligned exactly with Russell's philosophy of education. At Russell's invitation, Dewey taught at TC from 1904 until his retirement in 1930, making the College a principal ground of progressive education. By the time I arrived at TC, Dewey's words were still carved into the wall as I walked through the doors of Zankel Hall every day, taken from *My Pedagogic Creed (*Article 5, Chapter I):

"I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."

A dark bronze bust of Dewey stands not far from the inscription. Dewey was not only a world-famous philosopher but also had deep ties to China. In 1919, at the invitation of his student Hu Shih, he visited China and stayed more than two years, exchanging ideas widely with Chinese educators and profoundly shaping the development of modern education in China. Every single scholar coming from China knows Dewey's name, and they all make a point of having their picture taken beside his bust.

In 2023, more than five thousand students were pursuing master's or doctoral degrees at TC, with international students making up nearly 28 percent; more than half of those (over 80 percent) came from Asia, and Chinese students were the largest group of all.

• • •

I set out early on December 8, taking the M60 bus from near my home in Astoria, Queens, up to TC for the symposium. The route crosses Harlem in northern Manhattan, and to my surprise there was no traffic at all so I arrived early. The breakfast reception in the Everett Lounge, right by the Dewey bust, was already winding down. Ambassador Huang Ping of the Chinese Consulate General in New York and several visiting Chinese professors were exchanging pleasantries. At the door I ran into Dr. Adewumi, vice president of IES Abroad, the largest study-abroad organization in the United States, professor emeritus and former provost at Penn State, and a well-known expert on oil and gas. As he was speaking on the panel I was chairing, we had already met once on Zoom and exchanged a good many emails, so when we met in person we greeted each other warmly, like old friends. Professor Shi Zhongying, dean of the school of education at Tsinghua University, had taught me philosophy of education when I was a student at Beijing Normal. We had just seen each other in October at an exchange event with a delegation of New York public school principals visiting the Tsinghua High School, and meeting again at TC felt naturally like a reunion. Henan, the chief organizer, wore a stately dark blue velvet dress. She said a hurried hello and then invited everyone to take their seats next door in Milbank Chapel, as the symposium was about to begin.

The symposium was held to commemorate Professor Paul Monroe's founding of the International Institute in 1923, and its theme, "Cross-Fertilization of Culture and Education," carried forward an idea Monroe had championed in the early twentieth century. In 1928, in an article published in the journal of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Hawaii, titled "*The Cross-Fertilization of Culture: The Function of International Education*", Monroe made a pointed argument that foreign students who cross oceans to be educated in America not only carry American ideas back to different countries but also bring diverse cultures into America, and are thus the true vehicles of "cross-fertilization." The idea seems unremarkable now, but without educators like Monroe pressing it firmly since the beginning of the last century, it might never have taken such deep hold today. After earning his doctorate in history at the University of Chicago in 1897, Monroe was recruited by Dean Russell to TC to teach the history of education, and conduct research on the foundations of education, its historical development and present achievements, as well as the state of education in America and abroad. His monumental five-volume *A Cyclopedia of Education* (1911–1913), which gathered papers by more than a

thousand scholars on all kinds of questions in culture and education, became the most authoritative encyclopedia of education for the next half century while laid the groundwork for Monroe's international comparative research. Many TC professors of Monroe's generation, including Dewey, Dean Russell's son William F. Russell, and William Kilpatrick, who coined the "project method," showed a keen interest in understanding and studying education in other countries. This was partly because the United States as a victorious democracy after WWI felt a conscious duty to spread "democracy and science" to the world by educating other countries' students, and partly because they recognized how different cultures those students brought enriched American society and culture in return. In 1923, with support from the Rockefeller and Macy families, Monroe founded the International Institute, devoted to training international students from around the world and to spreading American modern scientific ideas of education, curriculum design and teaching methods. Many of its graduates returned home to become influential educators in their own countries, a significant force in shaping the face of modern education worldwide.

Chinese students have always formed the core of TC's international enrollment, and among them are scholars who profoundly influenced modern Chinese education: Kuo Ping-wen, the first Chinese doctoral graduate of TC, was the founding president of National Southeastern University in 1921; Hu Shih, an initiator of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, president of Peking University and ambassador to the United States from 1938 to 1942; Tao Xingzhi, founder of the Xiaozhuang Normal School and an energetic advocate and practitioner of the idea that "life is education"… Monroe's International Institute drew a steady stream of Chinese students to TC. By the time Monroe published his article for the Institute of Pacific Relations in 1928, more than two hundred Chinese students had received TC degrees, and forty to fifty Chinese students were enrolling at the College each year.

I was attending this symposium not only as a TC graduate but also because of Dewey and Monroe's connection to China Institute in America ("China Institute" for short). Their deep engagement with China and close contact with Chinese students had made both men aware of how necessary it was for the American public to understand China — by then large numbers of Chinese students were coming to America every year, while the American public knew next to nothing about their country. With Dewey's support and Monroe's energetic advocacy, the U.S. government passed legislation returning to the Qing government the unused remainder of the 1901 Boxer Indemnity, and in 1924 the China Education Foundation was established to promote the development of science and education in China. In 1926, with the Foundation's support, China Institute was founded in New York to serve Chinese students and to actively promote American understanding of Chinese culture, with Monroe as the first chairman of its board. Many Chinese students at TC were involved in building the Institute from the very start, and its first president was Kuo Ping-wen. A century has passed and those early founders are gone, but the international comparative education Monroe pioneered still draws an endless stream of Chinese students to TC, and the institute he worked so hard to establish has become, over a hundred years, the largest nonprofit educational organization in New York dedicated to Chinese culture, still carrying on its important mission of building bridges through understanding between China and the United States.

I enrolled in the department of education at Beijing Normal in 1995, came to TC in 2002, and joined China Institute in 2008 — a path that seems to have been entirely my own choices, plus a little luck. Sitting that day in 2023 in the stately Milbank Chapel, I realized I had inadvertently come to stand at the point where TC and China Institute intersect. It looks like a coincidence, but in fact I owed it to possibilities that had

long been in place: Monroe's foresight, and a century-old tradition of Chinese students studying at TC, already made it possible for me to knock on that door by chance at all.

• • •

Isn't each of our fates a combination of the possible and the accidental, worked out somewhere beyond our sight? And my fate, like that of countless Chinese of my generation, is inseparable from examinations.

China's imperial examination system took shape during the Sui dynasty, in sixth to early seventh century, giving people of humble origins, however poor, an opportunity to "study and enter officialdom." For most people of modest backgrounds, this was the only real path to upward social mobility. While the examinations were abolished in 1905, the tradition of selecting talent by examination had been deeply rooted in Chinese culture after thirteen hundred years — whether under the imperial dynasties, or in the Republic influenced by new Western ideas, including Dewey and Monroe, or in socialist China after 1949. Even though it has drawn much criticism during the modern time, no better method has ever been found, at least in China. The Cultural Revolution, when schools were closed nationwide to make way for "revolution", is the only chaotic period in contemporary China without examinations. As soon as it ended in 1976, the college entrance examination was immediately restored in the following year. The belief that education can change one's fate runs so deep in China that examinations gradually became the baton conducting all aspects of education. Today, in a country of 1.4 billion people, students, schools and families are exhausted by furious competitions to excel in examinations and yet unable to do anything to change it fundamentally.

I was born in the county of Rongchang (荣昌, "Prosperity" "Bright"), Chongqing (重庆, "Double" "Happiness"), Sichuan (四川, "Four" "River") Province in 1977, so you could say I came into the world with examinations looming around. As a small child I lived with my mother in Shuanghe (双河, "Double" "River"), a town not far from the county seat. Since there was no one else at home to look after me, my mother, who taught Chinese language arts at Shuanghe Central Primary School, simply had me sit among the first graders she taught. When I took my first examination, I was not yet four and couldn't hold a pencil properly. I scored eighty out of a hundred, which made me feel a little embarrassed since plenty of my classmates were above ninety, and a good number got perfect marks. Most children start first grade at six, so I was the youngest in the class. That went on until university, when for the first time there were classmates younger than me.



Lotus Square, December 18, 2016, Town Center of Rongchang, Chongqing

After finishing first grade at Shuanghe Central Primary School, I moved with my mother as she was transferred to Eastwind Primary School in Changyuan, the town center of Rongchang. Because of my young age, I had to repeat the first grade at Eastwind before transferring to another school called Jade Screen Primary School, the town center's "key" primary school with a much better reputation than Eastwind. It had a modest campus, with a large playground immediately after the entrance for school assemblies, for instance, the weekly flag-raising ceremony; a row of low-rise single-story buildings along one side where we sometimes had music classes; and the teachers' dormitory block. Behind the playground was an L-shaped classroom building, first grade on the ground floor and sixth at the top. Each year the homeroom teacher and classmates stayed almost the same, but the classroom moved up a floor. Outside of the classrooms ran a long corridor, where most students leaned on the railing and looked out between classes, while plenty chased around and made a fuss too — a headache for the principal and the teachers, I imagine. In front of the classroom building were a few small flower beds, and up a few steps behind it was a larger field where the schoolwide sports day took place. In one corner of that field stood an enormous ever-green Chinese banyan tree, its trunk broad enough for several children to sit on; in another corner was an iron double-deck carousel, with five seats on the upper deck, ten on the lower, that only turned if someone pushed. During the ten-minute breaks everyone rushed to get on it, and somehow we always found a way to take turns pushing and riding. And there were always students trying to climb up that banyan, for no reason other than to stand for a moment in the middle of its huge trunk. Those things must have been removed long ago as naturally they worried a good many teachers who were concerned about students' safety. I don't mind much about the carousel; but the banyan tree would be a shame to be removed.

I entered *Jade Screen* in second grade, the only transfer student in the class at the time. Since I had done first grade twice, which made me a "repeater" — normally only students who fail an academic year would repeat. As the school made an exception to admit me as a transferer, it charged a two-hundred-yuan transfer fee, which felt like an astronomical sum at the time, and I was also considered as a student who "paid to get in". Classmates and teachers brought these labels up occasionally, and none of them felt very good. If I fidgeted in class, for instance, a teacher who noticed would say, "Your family paid extra to send you here — how can you not study properly?" — which taught me at a very young age what it means to feel you have let your family down. I'd work hard after those "reminders", though forget all about it soon enough. Fortunately, I was a reasonably bright child, and though occasionally mischievous I was in general studious and self-disciplined; my marks were consistently near the top, and over time no one mentioned those labels anymore.

Continuing to middle school depended mainly on Chinese language arts and math scores, so the other primary school subjects were rarely tested, and everyone was fairly relaxed in those classes. The teacher lectured in the front while the students got up to all sorts of things below: whispering to the classmates in front, behind and next to them; passing notes; scribbling and drawing on the wooden desktops — after we learnt about the young Lu Xun carving the character for "early" into his desk to remind himself getting up early and working hard every day, a great many "early" characters appeared on our desks, without any noticeable decline in latecomers. The teacher was much taller than the students and usually stood on a platform several inches above the floor, so I'd imagine nothing should have escaped their eyes. But with forty-odd students in a class, so long as basic order was held, most teachers probably turned a blind eye.

I was fairly outgoing and quickly got to know my classmates. Everyone lived in town, and though our parents' jobs differed — some were town officials, some ran small businesses, some were teachers' children — overall the differences were not significant. In the early 1980s, China's economic reform and opening had only just begun; a "ten-thousand-yuan household" sounded fabulously rich, and yet all it amounted to was carrying around a brick-sized mobile phone called "Big Brother". I walked to school every day, came home for lunch, and after a nap went back for afternoon classes until five, then home again. It took only ten minutes to walk from my house to school, and it was much the same for the others. Classmates who lived close by often ran into each other on the way to and from school and gradually grew closer than the rest. My good friend Dai Hong lived in the residential compound owned by the town Labor Bureau and diagonally opposite to Eastwind Primary, where my mom taught and was assigned a small apartment on campus for the family. We often walked to and from school together. Sometimes after school I did my homework at her place, and so got to know her parents, her brother and sister. Occasionally we enjoyed hanging out so much I forgot to go home, and my mother would come to the compound to call me back for dinner.

The days were packed with classes, while the ten-minute breaks gave us some rest. Apart from Chinese and math, the other subjects — music, physical education, science, and later civics — felt more like classes for interests the school had arranged, where students got to know one another and picked up some interesting knowledge along the way, which incidentally created a fine opportunity for building relationships. Schools today call for attention to social and emotional learning — perhaps if there are fewer scheduled high-pressure classes, students would find the chance to develop it on their own.

• • •

Getting into Rongchang Middle School was the first big accomplishment for me as a student. Middle-school student life is completely different too.

The original Rongchang Middle School was founded in 1902 and has more than a century of history. After the Qing government was defeated by the alliance of the eight western powers in 1901 and signed the Boxer Indemnity, ceding territory and paying indemnities, modern-style schools were built all over China in the hope of saving the nation through education. A county primary school for upper grades was built on the old site of the examination hall constructed in 1833 by the magistrate Zeng Cankui, and that school later became Rongchang Middle School. By 1989, when I graduated from Jade Screen, the school had been through every kind of transformation: the primary section had been abolished; the school had integrated the county middle school for girls and became Sichuan Provincial Rongchang Middle School, with junior and senior sections. The junior section I entered had only two classes per year, fewer than a hundred seats in total. In 1988, the school was designated as a key provincial middle school, gaining a status considerably higher than that of the county's other two junior schools — Great East Middle School and Rongchang Middle School #3. Indeed, getting admission to the school meant passing the required entrance examination with a fairly competitive score. I was quite proud of myself to become a student of Rongchang Middle School.

Compared with my primary school, the middle school campus was far larger. There were two entrances, one front and the other back; inside there were three classroom buildings, a laboratory building, an administration building for teachers, plus an indoor gym, a canteen, student dormitories, teachers' housing and so on. Most teachers lived on campus, and some of the senior students, who had tested in from nearby townships, boarded during the week and went home only on weekends and holidays. The campus made full use of Rongchang's hilly terrain, with paths rising and falling with the land: some classroom buildings sat on the crest of a small hill, others rose from a flat plateau. When space was reasonably available, playing fields of different shapes and sizes were scattered among the buildings. There was even an open-air swimming pool, built at some unknown date, though by the time I enrolled it was a stagnant pond overrun with duckweed, sitting unsightly and unused in the middle of the school, surrounded by a small circle of lushly planted bushes. One year a principal made the effort to have an old-style octagonal pavilion built there, with carved railings and painted beams, upswept eaves and curving walls, named *Naifu* Pavilion after Liu Naifu, a Rongchang martyr during the Sino-Japanese war. When I went back to the old school in the autumn of 2023, *Naifu* Pavilion was still standing there, the trees around thicker, as if they had grown into one another. The unattended pool had vanished without a trace: one year a teacher's child sadly drowned there, and the school made the decision to fill it in.

When I first enrolled, my classes were in "Building Five," a small three-story block on a rise, with cream-colored walls, half hidden behind a tall, luxuriant plane tree. The two ground-floor classrooms were taken by first-year classes; up a narrow wooden staircase were the music room and the art room. The music room was just an ordinary classroom with an old reed organ added. Taking advantage of the petite music teacher who had just graduated from a teachers' college, students were busy socializing in her class, so loudly that her voice was regularly disappearing in the collective noise of casual chatting among students. At a loss, she would simply bury her head in the organ and let them fool around. The art room, by contrast, was quiet and crammed with plaster casts, wax fruit and pots of paint. A few senior students specializing in art had their easels set up there, sometimes with unfinished drawings, watercolor flowers, other times oil paintings of a green glass bottle and some fruits. The art room being right on the doorstep and open to students, I became

fascinated with it for a while and would just hang out there after school. Nobody taught me, nor cared to be bothered, but I copied what I saw and practiced still life objects with great seriousness, sometimes too focused and even forgot to go home for dinner. Building Five was unremarkable in itself, but because of those classes I remember it with a particularly lovely fondness.

Middle school coursework was much heavier. For the first morning reading period, students had to be at school by seven to read aloud on their own — Chinese on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; English on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. We had six days of class a week then, with only Sunday off, the two-day weekend not a practice until much later. Since teachers didn't lecture during morning reading, plenty of students simply chatted, though from a distance it all sounded like a hum of recitation. I gradually came to love reading aloud: besides the textbook, I sought out classical poems from the 10th to 14th centuries Tang and Song dynasties that I liked, copied them into a special little notebook, and recited them at the top of my voice. English was a new subject that began in the first year of middle school, and morning reading was a good chance to practice pronunciation. Later we also read short pieces from *New Concept English* as a supplement. Apart from desks and chairs there was no audio equipment of any kind in the classroom, so we could only recite from memory, in a glorious muddle, of what we believed the correct pronunciation, learnt from English teachers, who had most likely never set foot outside of China themselves. Both the junior and senior classes had morning reading, and anyone coming onto campus at that hour really could have an earful "sound of study." When I later taught Chinese in American schools, I discovered students weren't used to reading aloud at all and found it downright strange.

A good number of my primary schoolmates joined the same middle school, plus students who had tested in from other primary schools in the county town center — the primary school affiliated to a local teachers college, West Street Primary, Eastwind Primary and so on. Of the forty-two students in the class, only one had come from a nearby town called Anfu (安富, "Peace" "Wealth"), and lived in the dormitory like the senior students. Anfu was only a little over an hour's bus ride from the county town center in those days, nevertheless an impressive distance at the time. The girls' dormitory was a three-story brick block beside the canteen: generally eight girls to a room with four bunk beds facing each other, with only space for a narrow wooden table in the middle. While dorm conditions weren't especially good, I was curious about dormitory life and often went over to visit. And I liked eating the canteen's communal meals — my mother allowed it only occasionally, since the food at home was much better. But anything beyond my own household's life felt fresh to me: the canteen food may have had little to brag about, but eating with classmates was endless fun. My best friend Dai Hong also got into Rongchang Middle School, though she was in Class One and I was in Class Two. It was only a small disappointment, since I quickly made a lot of new friends and forgot all about it.

From primary school on I had preferred Chinese Language Arts, maybe because my mother was a Chinese teacher and all my homeroom teachers taught Chinese too. My primary homeroom teacher, Zeng Qiang, had just graduated from college when she taught me, and I was in her first ever class. I've long forgotten what her teaching was like. All I remember with affection is her warm and kind smile, the dimple in her one cheek, and her long hair she often wore in a single braid. My middle school homeroom and Chinese teacher, Hong Weixiang, was much stricter. Students were somewhat a little nervous around her, but her classes were always engaging. When we studied Lu You's poem about armored horses crossing frozen rivers in his dream, she got so carried away and acted out as if she was one of the soldiers on the horseback, forging across the river, shouting, except that she was in front of the blackboard. She was a little over forty then, mid-height,

slightly plump, her jet-black hair coiled in a bun at the back, her eyes bright — nowadays a teacher can easily find a professionally made short video online to show the scene of the poem to the class, but I'd say the impression she made went much deeper.

I also took English to heart at once, from that first year. My first English teacher was an old-school gentleman, known to be a graduate of Southwest Normal University and had studied in the Soviet Union. He always wore a gray-blue suit with four pockets, buttoned up all the way to the neck, and taught sitting behind the lectern, which struck us with a manner distinctively from those who have studied abroad. The second, Yuan Qinglin, had just been assigned to the school after graduating from the local teachers' college. With a round face behind black-framed glasses and long hair gathered into a small ponytail, she carried a far livelier manner. Both, in fact, taught British English, which everyone in my class learnt naturally since we didn't know otherwise until I got to New York and opened my mouth - people I met for the first time would often ask me: have you been to England? Why do you have a British accent? No one believed my English teachers had never set foot there.

The sciences, by contrast, were my weakness. From primary school on I wasn't very interested in mathematics, but as an examination subject I had to grit my teeth and study it. While primary mathematics was fortunately all very basic, in middle school not only did mathematics get much harder, but other sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology were added. I paid reasonable attention in class and worked during my own study time so that I could scrape through the various tests. But it was nothing like Chinese and English, which I spent extra time learning beyond class with real passion.

From the moment I could read I loved books: at first small-print picture books, where the plot unfolded in hand-drawing panels with a line or two of text beneath each. In those days there were small picture book rentals on the streets of Rongchang, a few cents for one. Gradually I moved on to text-only books: magazines like *Reader's Digest*, Chinese and foreign novels, biographies and so on. Balzac, the French realist, and Hugo's novels made a deep impression on me, as did *Gone with the Wind*, which I later loved. Building Five had a small reading room on the top floor, but with very few good books. After going for a while I found it dull and stopped going there. On the other hand, I found plenty at the county's Xinhua (新华, New China) Bookstore and the newsstand at the town center bridge. Opportunities to encounter English outside class were rare. Apart from study books like *New Concept English*, the Xinhua Bookstore had almost no other materials. Luckily English songs were getting popular then and were being sold on cassette. I nagged my mother for quite a while and finally, under the name of "practicing English listening skills," got an Aihua (爱华, Love China) cassette player that could play and record tapes. I was overjoyed! The first thing I did was listening all night to a Michael Jackson tape I had bought with my New Year red-envelope money. Popular science books were practically unheard of, though that may also have had to do with my own interests: when I went to the bookstore, it never occurred to me to look for anything to do with science. So apart from reading about Madame Marie Curie and the like in biographies, my contact with the sciences was limited to class and the workbooks we practiced through in study period.

• • •

By middle school, it was obvious that I enjoyed studying the humanities. When the second year of high school came and we had to choose either humanity or science streams, choosing the humanity stream seemed only natural to me. My best friends then, Wei He and Huang Ping, were both in the science stream, so I did hesitate a little. Had I chosen the science stream, what would my life look like now?

When the college entrance examination was restored after the Cultural Revolution in 1977, it was divided into two categories, humanities and sciences. The former covered Chinese, mathematics, history-and-geography, and politics; the latter Chinese, mathematics, physics-and-chemistry, and politics. By 1995, when I was preparing for the examination, it had been changed to a "3+2" model: Chinese, mathematics and a foreign language were the three mandatory core subjects for both categories, while humanities students took exams in history and politics, and science students physics and chemistry. The examination later went through all sorts of reforms: by 2023 some provinces used a "3+3" model — the three core plus three elective subjects, with the core scored at 150 points and the electives 100 each. Others chose "3+1+2," where beyond the core three at 150 points the other three electives are weighted differently. And yet some simply used "3+X," the core three plus a general humanities or sciences exam. A variety of tests appeared as well — a national one, while Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin all had their own versions — bewildering to keep track of.

The examination was still uniformed nationwide the year I prepared for it: while it was administered by local education authorities at various levels, the whole country used the same tests, taken over three days on July 7, 8 and 9. In preparation for those three days lives of final-year high school students were extraordinarily tense and boring: one period of morning study, then a full day packed with classes in every examination subject; the school day ended with two evening study periods, followed by continuing whatever workbook exercises left to finish at home, which often meant not getting to bed until mid-night. In the second year we had all taken the examinations for graduation — the provincial standardized examinations in each subject, which one only had to pass to get the high school diploma. Since the graduation exams weren't hard and the results didn't count toward the college entrance examination, for students they were a piece of cake — after which physics, chemistry and the like were dropped for humanities students and all our time went to prepare for the examination subjects. The students in science stream, in turn, were released from history and civic studies. Even in the examination subjects, the final year introduced almost no new materials. Experienced teachers sped up in the second year to finish the whole syllabus, leaving the third for test drilling: weekly tests, monthly tests, diagnostic tests, mock tests and so on, concentrating on the same material over and over to prepare students for July. For most students in a county town, taking the examination and getting into a good college was the most reliable and promising path to leave the town and go out into the wider world, hence the most supported by their families and the entire society.

For me it was the only way. From primary school on, my parents would from time to time say to me heavy-heartedly that the family had no money and no connections, and that only by studying hard and getting into a good school would I achieve anything later. As for "achievement", they simply defined it as being able to support oneself with a respectable job, and that was all. The two hundred RMB "transfer fee" for Jade Screen Primary was probably the only pricey tuition of my student life. I tested into both junior and senior high schools with excellent results, and my family never had to pay extra for me to enroll. After entering the humanities stream in my second year of senior high school, I was often among the top three in my year academically. Judging by Rongchang High School's record — the campus information board posted photographs of recent graduates who had made it into top universities — it looked very promising for me too. However we all knew the college entrance examination was a single-plank bridge, a battle with your back to the river: three years of study in each subject came down to a hundred and twenty minutes. And the college admission was dependent on the scores and nothing else. So until the examination was over and the universities had finally published their cutoff scores, no one could afford to relax.

According to data available online, in 1995 some 2.35 million students nationwide registered for the college entrance examination, and in the end only 930,000 — 37 percent — squeezed across that single-plank bridge. But for key universities, and especially the most famous of them, admission rates were far below that average. For instance, 12.93 million students took the examination in 2023 while Peking University admitted 4,483 undergraduates in total, of whom only 3,018 were students from mainland China admitted through the examination — to say that getting into China's elite universities is like sifting gold from sand hardly does its justice. Beyond that, universities have different quotas for each province, and for all sorts of tangled reasons those quotas are not proportional to the student population. Look at the data in 2023 again: Sichuan, one of the country's most populous provinces, had 600,000 graduates, and Peking University's planned quota was seventy (including twenty-three to the medical school). On the other hand, Beijing had an undergraduate quota of 167 from Peking University, with 58,000 graduating students. The odds are small either way, but for a Sichuan student, Peking University was more remote than a mirage. For Chinese students, Peking University, renowned for the humanities, and Tsinghua, for the sciences, represent the most sacred halls of higher education. There are of course many other famous universities across the country. Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai, with their geographic, historical and economic advantages, are where the great universities cluster. Provincial capitals generally hold the best local higher-education resources — Chengdu, Hangzhou, Wuhan and so on. And some other cities, like Chongqing, home to Chongqing University, or Jinhua, home to Zhejiang Normal University, also have plenty of universities people aspire to. Admission rates at these well-known key universities aren't quite like Peking or Tsinghua University, but to say the road through the entrance examination in recent years is brutal would not be an overstatement.

There were even cases of students with respectable scores failing to get anywhere. In those days we could list three preferences in the college application form. A university first admitted qualifying scorers among students who had listed it first, and only with available spots did it consider second-preference applicants. The third preference was just a filler. Generally, the three preferences were arranged by the universities' cutoff scores: the first required the highest score, the second next, the third lowest. With a score that meets the first-preference cutoff, one would most likely get into an ideal university. But if the first preference was missed and the colleges listed second and even third had already filled their spots, one could find oneself with no place at all despite a relatively good score, simply because of a miscalculation in preference listing. The high school often offered a "repeat class" for students who had failed the exam, or who wanted to repeat a year and try for a better university. But for most graduating students, the repeat class was not an option worth considering first.

After June, summer heat came. In the classroom students sat in rows at their desks, heads buried behind stacks of workbooks. The ceiling fans droned, everyone dripping with sweat while studying at their desks recklessly. That is my last memory of the final high school year. A few weeks before the examination date, words came: I had earned the admission to Beijing Normal University through a selective recommendation process, the national entrance examinations exempt.

The recommended-admission system had been piloted in China since 1985. In 1988 the State Education Commission formally issued the *Regulations on the Admission of Recommended Students by Institutions of Higher Education*, designating fifty-two universities nationwide, Peking University among them, that could admit a very small number of recommended students from across the country. These students were nominated by their own schools and, if approved by the university, could be admitted directly without taking the college entrance examination. Rongchang High School, as a key provincial school, had a few such quotas that year.

Based on the combined rankings from the mock examinations, the school nominated several top students to apply, and I was one of them.

When filling in the application, I didn't get my hopes too high. I had been preparing for the examination for so long and was confident I could get into a preferred university. After all, a recommendation was not a guarantee: a university could decline the students the school nominated. Nevertheless, the opportunity was given to me, and the list of universities accepting recommended students included plenty of famous ones, it was very appealing.

I was set on studying in Beijing, where I had never been. For a high school student like me, Beijing was a concept from books, or an image from films and television. In our primary school textbooks, a profile portrait of Chairman Mao always hung over Tiananmen Gate, with light radiating from his back — the books were black and white, but never stopped me imagining golden glow in the image. Meanwhile, I grew up under the influence of my mother who was a teacher. Her entire family — my grandparents, uncle and aunt — were all primary and middle school teachers. So without realizing it I absorbed the atmosphere of a teaching household and set my heart on China's best teachers' colleges. Those two conditions combined, my first choice was Beijing Normal University.

Beijing Normal happened to be on the list of universities admitting recommended students, and several programs were open: the Chinese department, including Chinese language and literature, and teaching Chinese as a foreign language; the education department, including educational administration; and the law department. Only one preference was allowed to pick. I had a special love for literature, while thought being a lawyer was rather a good career choice too, as it happened that I could make good arguments. While I was taking time to make up my mind, my father spoke up and said I should consider the education department — he had run into an old acquaintance from the county cultural bureau on the street who, asked about my choice and declared flatly that educational administration was good as I could be a principal one day. And, wasn't Beijing Normal's education department the best in the country? The internet didn't exist then, search engines like Yahoo were unheard of, and visiting a campus was unthinkable. The university guidance the school provided consisted mainly of a classroom full of admissions posters sent in by various universities, those swaying schools and departments hung on thin strings, feeling as if they had little to do with the future. I thought the education department sounded fine too. All that mattered was getting to Beijing Normal. And like that I listed the education department.

• • •

One day at the end of August 1995, my father and I stood at the south gate of Beijing Normal University in a quiet tree-lined avenue in Haidian District.

The taxi dropped us at the gate and drove off in a cloud of dust. The two of us, father and daughter, hauled our not very numerous bags to the front of the main building. Heavily influenced by Soviet design in the fifties, many universities in Beijing then had a "main building," not especially tall but solemn and imposing, with simple heavy lines, a gray-yellow tone that was stolid and yet grave. We were standing on the steps in front of the building, wondering where in that enormous campus to go, when several young senior students in white shirts swept lightly by us on bicycles, laughter scattered, leaving a trail of crisp bell-ringing behind them. That was my first impression of Beijing Normal: just like a first love it is all about sunshine and youthful lightness, still imprinted in my memory, decades later.

Beijing Normal has a long history. Established in 1902, its predecessor was the teacher-training section of the Imperial University of Peking, and was renamed Beijing Normal University in 1923, the first normal university in China. Later the Peking Women's Normal University, Fu Jen Catholic University and others were merged into it, forming the Beijing Normal University of today. The year I enrolled, people were speaking about Beijing's four top universities as Renmin, Peking, Tsinghua and Beijing Normal Universities. I must admit that it tickled my small vanity to hear Beijing Normal mentioned alongside the other three in a place like Beijing, with the greatest concentration of institutions of higher learning in the country, and notable universities beyond counting. The main campus is close to the urban center of Beijing, just in between the second and third ring roads, nestling right in a bustling commercial district, convenient for transportation but leaving no room to expand. To me, though, the campus carried a delicacy that was rare for colleges in the north. The straight, broad avenues were lined with tall poplars, cypresses and ginkgoes: in spring the poplar fluff drifted; in summer they gave shade; in autumn golden ginkgo leaves flew, and they were a fine place for flocks of crows to roost in winter. Besides the various buildings for classes, dormitories and playing fields, I loved some of the small pretty corners. For instance, the garden between the mathematics and physics buildings, planted with walnut trees, where I often took an English book to read aloud without anyone finding it odd; the pavilion near the library, where a small memorial stele commemorating Liu Hezhen, a student of the Beijing Women's Normal University who was killed at only twenty-two in 1926 in a student protest against the warlords … When I arrived, Beijing Normal University's campus still felt steeped in history. Many of its timeworn buildings bore the unmistakable imprint of the 1950s. Later the university gradually added quite a few new buildings, the Soviet-style main building torn down and replaced with something newer, taller and more contemporary. I go back to the campus whenever I have the chance till today but recognize less and less.

I spent four undergraduate years at Beijing Normal, studying educational administration. Most classes were taken together with classmates from the same department, as well as the various university-wide activities — the December 9th choral competition, the sports day, and so on — were also organized by department. As a result, in addition to classmates from my own program, I got to know people in pedagogy studies and early childhood education well. The study work wasn't too heavy, and there was plenty of time to read what I liked in the library reading room. Like many others, I started looking for part-time work in my first year — tutoring was the most common; during summer breaks I also did odd jobs like market surveys, editing books, and translation. Some income was welcome, of course, and it also was a first taste of the wider world. I still yearned for Chinese literature and occasionally skipped a program elective to sit in classical Chinese literature course in the Chinese department, where I saw a girl brought instant noodles for breakfast in class, steam rising right up to Professor Guo Qingyu's nose. I was astonished by the Chinese department's free and open atmosphere.

When it came to choosing a graduate program to continue, my strong undergraduate academic record earned me a recommendation to continue within the education department, examination exempt again. I had considered taking the examination for the Chinese department, but as it happened Professor SHI Junyu, whom I particularly liked and admired, was taking on a recommended graduate student, so I stayed in education and went on with comparative education, studying under Professor Shi. That choice, one could say, set the direction of my study and career for life: when I took the GRE and TOEFL and chose to apply to anthropology and education at Teachers College later, all were also inseparable from the field of education.

• • •

When Professor Shi Junyu taught us comparative education as undergraduates, she had just returned to Beijing Normal as a visiting scholar in North America, and was one of the few professors in the department with fluent English. In her class I encountered far more original English-language materials on education. After becoming her graduate student, the greater benefit, beyond coursework, was doing research projects under her direction and taking part directly in some international exchange programs. Though as a student I was only accompanying visiting foreign professors, running errands for them during their stay or interpreting at conferences, it was excellent training. Professor Shi was fiercely independent, highly intellectual, exceedingly sharp and capable, all of which left a deep mark on me. She also looked after her students with great care: at holidays she would gather her master's and doctoral students at her home and cook a family meal herself, so the students got on wonderfully and called themselves "Shi Squad". For someone who had come alone from a small city in Chongqing to study in Beijing, that atmosphere meant even more than the studying itself. Looking back, it may be one of the main reasons why, all these years later, Professor Shi and "Shi Squad" still feel so close to me. Because of it, Beijing is not merely where I studied, but also a place I lived with a warm memory.

In 2002 I left Beijing to continue my studies in New York. With Professor Shi's financial help, I got my first DELL laptop there. As an international student I agonized every semester over the next semester's tuition, and what I earned from part-time work barely covered the basics of living. That laptop became my most important companion in study and stayed with me throughout Teachers College. My master's thesis, on how illegal immigrants from China settled themselves down and survived in the United States, was typed out on it word by word.

In 2004 when I returned to Beijing and stayed in China briefly, I was able to join a China-UK poverty-alleviating education project as a coordinator, upon Professor Shi's recommendation. While I wasn't there long, the project, funded by Britain's Department for International Development (DFID), gave me the chance to work with domestic and international education experts and to gain valuable experience — within a few months I traveled with the team deep into rural areas in provinces including Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Gansu, conducting field research on the educational situation of disadvantaged groups, especially girls. When I later applied for the job at China Institute, Mr. Andy Brook, the program's director, wrote a warm letter of recommendation that helped me get in.

More than fifteen years have passed since I joined China Institute in 2008, all spent on educational programs connected with Chinese culture. I am continuously taking part in and reflecting on teaching Chinese language and culture in America - grounded in Chinese culture itself, yet with a cross-cultural perspective - and finding myself benefiting from Professor Shi's influence back then enormously. One part of it is the cultivation of one's own sense of self. Everything she said and did convey a belief and trust, that regardless of age, gender or family background, a person is born with curiosity about new things and new environments, and that the journey of thinking and inquiry has no end. The other part is a humane concern grounded in China. As a member of "Shi Squad", I studied in the field of comparative education, particularly Chinese-Western comparison. We compared, discovered, reflected on and explored China's education problems from a point of cultural equality, whereas the western theories and models were not always viewed as more advanced. Looking back, being trained in that stance and with that humane concern was just as important as learning rigorous research methods, perhaps even more so: when I came to New York, a place where wildly different cultures meet, in an era when relations between China and the United States rise and fall unpredictably,

every single working day reminds me of the stance and concern I learnt from Prof. Shi — in a sense it is no longer merely study or career, but my way of being in America.

• • •

When I went to Beijing Normal, I had no plan ever to leave China. And now it is nearly twenty years since I graduated from TC.

The wave of Chinese students going to America was already well under the way when I was an undergraduate. In my fourth year an outstanding classmate turned down a recommended graduate spot in the education department and instead got into an American college, the first among my classmates to study abroad. By the time I was a graduate student the trend was even stronger. My best friend Wei He was tested into Beijing Normal's economics department after finishing her undergraduate degree in the city of Nanjing in the south. As we were reunited on the same campus and spent three more years as fellow students, four years after high school, Wei convinced me to study with her and prepare for the GRE and TOEFL together.

The GRE, or Graduate Record Examinations, is the test you must pass in order to apply to the great majority of North American graduate schools. The three exams assess whether a student has reached the level of academic comprehension, logical and mathematical reasoning, and critical thinking required for graduate study in the United States, Canada and elsewhere. Because of its difficulty level —non-native speakers would find the first hurdle is to simply understand questions stuffed with abstruse academic vocabulary — preparing for it is a boring and tense business. Like most Chinese students at the time, we signed up for test-prep courses at a center called New Oriental, spending every weekend in a packed auditorium alongside hundreds of other students. In those days the vocabulary, logic and mathematics sections were each taught by a dedicated teacher, who stood on the auditorium stage with a microphone lecturing to the eager students, mostly analyzing questions in past papers and imparting test-taking technique (guessing included). The rest of the time we buried ourselves in the library working through the workbooks published by New Oriental. It was said that a few of New Oriental's founders, in their pursuit of authentic test-prep questions, had once smuggled GRE paper tests out of the examination hall. Later, when the test went computer-based, they sat it repeatedly and memorized the questions outright. Such rigor and persistence are admirable in its way, but the practice nevertheless infringed on the copyright. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), GRE's copyright holder, did sue them ultimately, however millions of Chinese candidates had, with New Oriental's help, got the scores they wanted and gone abroad by then, making New Oriental the largest study-abroad training center in China.

Launched in 1936 by four American Ivy League universities including Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia, the GRE is like a dwarf in historical terms, compared to the imperial examinations China had run since the Sui dynasty in the 8th Century. But for me, having been recommended to both college and graduate school, it was a bit ironic that the most important, standardized test of my student life turned out to be an American one. That summer of 2001, I studied for two sweltering months in the library on campus, and in the end did poorly on vocabulary, which I had the most confidence in, while scored unexpectedly high on logic and got a perfect score on mathematics, which I had always thought as my weakest — though Chinese students, drilled through every kind of examinations throughout the student life, have always looked down the GRE's mathematics section as an easy child's play compared with Chinese mathematics tests, and took anything but a perfect score as a failure. With those scores for my application to American universities, I had no confidence at all. But what harm is there in trying to apply, after having already gone through the

tests? With pride (and over confidence obviously), I considered none other than the five education programs that ranked highest at the time by *USA Today*.

• • •

The first international Chinese student to America was Yung Wing. He went to the United States in 1847 and later entered Yale, the first Chinese on record who graduated from a top American university. He returned to China in 1855, and through his advocacy and effort the Imperial Qing Court initiated the Chinese Educational Mission, and beginning in 1872, sent 120 boys averagely under twelve years old to America in four groups to "learn the superior techniques of the barbarians in order to get an upper hand," as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement. Although the mission was terminated in 1881 and ninety-four of the 120 boys were brought home, some grew up to accomplish a great deal: the railway engineer Zhan Tianyou, the late-Qing diplomat Liu Yulin, and the early Republic premier Tang Shaoyi. Yung Wing's late book *My Life in China and America* has a lasting influence in the history of China-U.S. encountering and education exchange. Though he became an American citizen, his heart remained with China all his life, devoting himself into the self-strengthening cause and the reform movement, as well as supporting Sun Yat-sen's revolution before he passed away in Connecticut.

Since Yung Wing, Chinese students have come to America like an endless stream. By the 2002–03 academic year, nearly sixty-five thousand Chinese students were spread across American institutions of higher learning, more than fifty thousand of them in graduate school and fewer than ten thousand undergraduates. I was one of those fifty thousand graduate students.

I studied anthropology and education at TC, within the large department of International and Transcultural Studies (ITS). Among its most distinguished professors were Lambros Comitas, known for anthropological research on Latin America and the Caribbean; George Bond, who studied social construction and cultural identity in postcolonial Africa; and Hervé Varenne — a French-born anthropologist who got his doctorate at the University of Chicago, made the United States his object of study, and extended anthropological methods to school settings and beyond. Since the department had no China specialist, Comitas suggested I go across the street to Columbia's anthropology department and see Professor Myron Cohen. Columbia was a major academic field of cultural anthropology championed by Franz Boas, fiercely opposed to the Eurocentric mainstream tradition of ranking races and cultures by supposed natural superiority and inferiority, and trained a number of famous women anthropologists, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Professor Cohen had done fieldwork in Taiwan in his early years and specialized in classic questions of cultural anthropology in Chinese culture: family, economy, state and society.

My time at TC was not entirely smooth. I had to adapt to research-based study in a completely different environment: while I only half understood what the professors said, class discussion moved fast, and my English simply couldn't keep up during the student discussions especially, which left me feeling fairly beaten by the study itself. Meanwhile the financial pressure was demoralizing — in 2002 it cost $725 per credit at TC, and international students were required to take twelve credits a semester. TC gave me a scholarship of twenty-four credits, which at first glance looked like a considerable seventeen thousand dollars or so, but in fact only offset the first year's tuition. When Chinese students met each other at TC in those days, the most talked about topic was where to find work. There was a long-held myth that many Chinese students took on odd jobs in restaurants to make ends meet, and it was only once I became an international student in New York myself that I discovered, to my astonishment, that working off campus was illegal.

The F1 visa international students hold — the one the consulate handed me that summer of 2002 — permits only study, plus certain teaching and research assistantships on campus. On graduating, international students can generally obtain Optional Practical Training (OPT), which gives permission to stay in the United States for usually a year to look for an internship or a job, allowing a transitional period before a legal H1B work visa can be obtained. Since H1B applicants each year vastly exceed the quota the immigration service issues, many who find work still fail to get the necessary work visa and have to look for another way out when the OPT expires — go back to the home country; or resume F1 status by applying to another school and wait for a future opening. Some may marry an American citizen and apply directly for a green card that grants permanent residency, the most direct way of skipping the H1B altogether. Whichever it was, as long as you are a student with F1 visa there was no possibility of legal work off campus: odd jobs like washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant falls into a gray area America tacitly accepts — immigrants who have entered the country legally or otherwise supply the cheap workforce certain industries of the American economy require, while gaining a small income to make a living in a country they have just arrived in.

Once I was settled at TC, I did try a job as a cashier at a Chinese restaurant on Manhattan's Upper East Side — the job involved taking payments, answering the phone for takeout orders and passing them to the kitchen, and getting the delivery packages ready. Since it required communicating with customers in English and writing down the orders for the kitchen in Chinese, it paid fifteen dollars an hour, above the average at the time. To get that kind of job, I very bookishly went to a training school in Flushing for several weeks, applying my university work ethic to learn to be a cashier and waitress in the Chinese restaurant business. The few hundred dollars in tuition was more than several months of what I could have earned through the part-time job in a restaurant.

Fortunately, once the summer vacation began, I found a job in the TC library and later got a position as a Chinese teaching assistant in Columbia's East Asian department, which gave me twenty hours a week of legal income on campus and covered my basic needs. At the same time, working in the restaurant gave me a chance to get to know Chinese immigrants working illegally there, and I took that opportunity to do anthropological fieldwork — in Chinese restaurants nearly everyone, from the chefs to the delivery boys, is undocumented. I gained a thorough understanding of the organized tradition of smuggling people out of coastal Fujian and encountered a world I had never imagined. As a result, I wrote the discovery and understanding in my master's thesis. During my thesis defense, one professor with a very red face asked: "If working illegally is so brazen, why have the police never simply walked into a Chinese restaurant and taken those undocumented immigrants away?"

While I was standing there speechless, Comitas cut in:

"The police don't work during their lunch break."

Laughter burst out, and no one pressed the question further. That was 2004, and the president was George W. Bush, in his second term.

• • •

At TC I finally learned what it tastes like to struggle with your studies.

The story goes that Chinese students in America are generally diligent and high-achieving, and that getting a straight A is nothing out of the ordinary. In the first week after classes formally began, my confidence took a heavy blow. Comitas lectured as though there were a small bellows in his throat, six words in ten indistinct;

Bond was sonorous and forceful and fond of citing sources, but the works he cited were unheard of to an anthropology student like me, converted halfway; Varenne's French accent was crammed with abstruse GRE vocabulary — obscure words like "amethyst" that I had memorized over and over for the test prep and was told (by GRE instructors!) I would never seen again turned up constantly in anthropology readings. I was the only Chinese student among my program cohort, and the other international students included a beautiful Jamaican woman who spoke English faster than anyone; an Italian who had already done research on political conflict in South America; and a South African classmate who became pregnant after the first semester — to this day I wonder how she kept going.

Beyond the language, what was really hard for me was adapting to the American way of studying. As a top-tier research higher institution, TC has strict requirements for the doctorate degree: besides defending a dissertation, PhD candidates must complete seventy-five credits of coursework while EdD students ninety. How to meet those requirements is, to a certain degree, left to each student's ingenuity, figuring out a path that's most suitable. Many students were working on the degree alongside a job, and the process could be very long indeed. However, international students, because of the F1 visa requirements, were full-time students with one eye looking for part-time work. My department didn't assign advisers at the start. Students are expected to settle on one only after finishing two years of departmental core courses. The obvious advantage is that students and professors have time to get to know one another, but one could also fall into a kind of drift and, two years on, have no idea where the wandering would have taken you.

Of all the coursework, the one that put pressure on every student was a weekly 3-hour core colloquium. During the first year, two students of the cohort were to give a presentation each week on assigned major work of anthropology or sociology, and they then had to face rounds of questions from several of the department's senior professors, associate professors and fellow students from the cohort. In the second year, students had to settle on their own research topic and complete a presentation before the end of term, a process simulating a doctoral proposal defense. Only by passing this colloquium could one go on to prepare for the doctoral qualifying examinations.

Three hours of the colloquium could be very heavy, particularly as I didn't follow all the discussion. The moment I opened my mouth I felt I wasn't saying what I meant, and the students and professors around me exchanged glances, as though I had blundered inappropriately into a lively party. Meanwhile, it was hard to concentrate for three hours while just listening to the discussions— and with only twenty-odd people in the room, I could hardly hide myself if doze in a corner, which would be quite an embarrassment, and a really indefensible waste: while I am not the only full-price student among the cohort, I could hardly justify coming across ten thousand miles and paid $725 a credit to falling asleep in class! But those monumental works by Durkheim, Weber and Lévi-Strauss are genuinely difficult — not only international students like me found them hard; my American classmates did too. Everyone started out adrift, so after class we would gather at the Amsterdam Café, a bar near campus, to compare notes, gossip about the professors, and feel out a workable path to graduation.

With all the struggles in studying and working on the side, I finally accumulated enough credits in 2004 for a master's degree from TC and ended my academic journey right there. Study and work couldn't both be maintained, and in the end, I chose to work, becoming a Chinese teacher at a private school in Long Island. Once again, I was lucky: Chinese-language learning in America was just taking off then, and like that my career in America opened, which was never imagined when I started to work as a Chinese teaching assistant in Columbia's East Asian department a few years earlier. Even now, whenever I think of the doctorate I

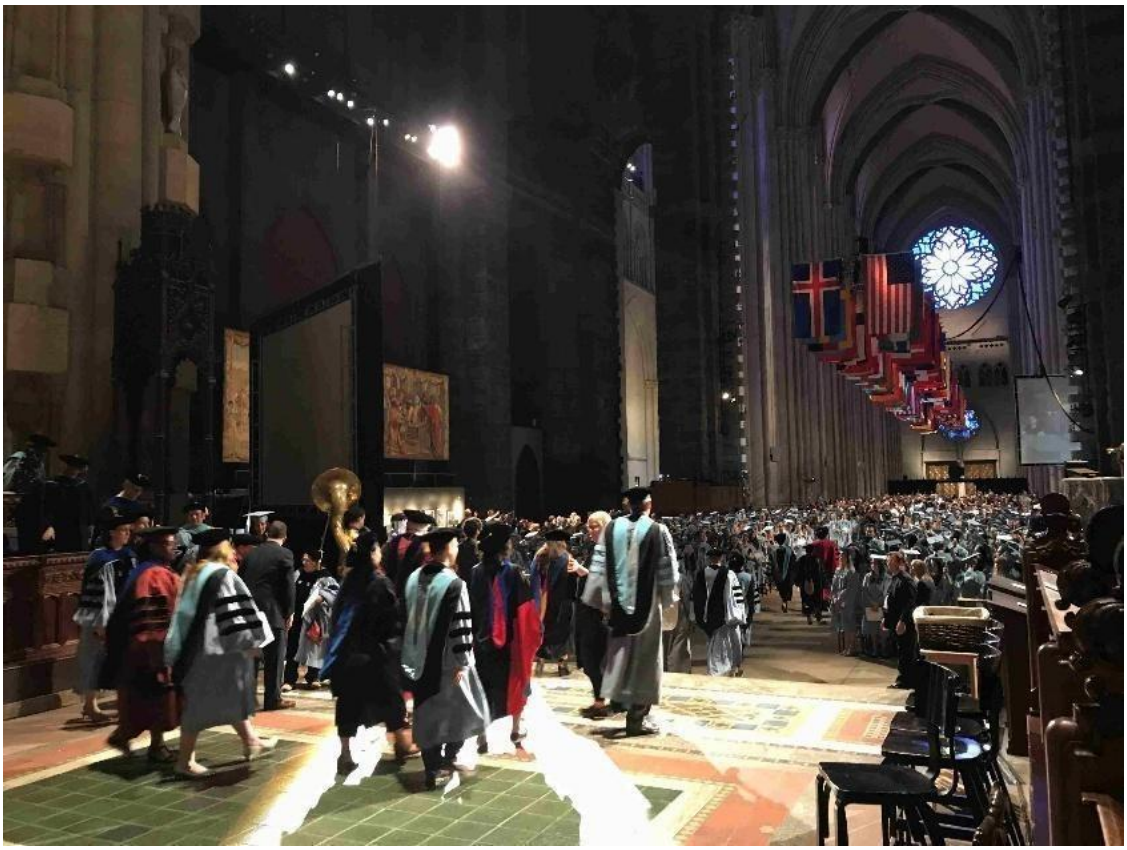
never finished, I feel deeply disappointed, with a sense of ambition that is unfulfilled. Later, when someone new saw my title of senior vice president and politely addressed me as a "Dr.," I would be thrown into shame, like Fang Hongjian in *Fortress Besieged* caught out in his imposture.

• • •

Education really did change my fate. When one is born, there is much that cannot be changed — the individual makeup, the family, the era and culture one finds oneself in, for example. It is like a seed that can't choose where it is to be scattered. Nor can a seed choose whether it is a pea, or an acorn. But a person differs from the seeds in that the tens of thousands of genes that make up a person can take on infinite possibilities in a world with infinite varieties. In the end only one possibility can be realized. For me, education gave me the chance to choose that one possibility, and in the process to feel that I had some grip on my own fate — luck played a large part too, of course, but the pursuit of education made me believe firmly that I am the master of my own destiny.

Looking back, a child from an ordinary family like mine could hardly have made her way from a small town in Sichuan to New York had it not been for China's economic takeoff and the wave of studying abroad that was already well underway. TC's tuition was expensive, but ultimately it was something my family could get through by gritting teeth (plus, of course, the boldness that comes with not knowing better). In 2010 China became the world's second-largest economy after the United States, and the number of Chinese students in America kept surging, skewing ever younger. In 2014–15 there were more than three hundred thousand Chinese students in the United States, including 124,000 undergraduates — the first time undergraduates outnumbered graduate students. The figure kept climbing. By 2018–19, before the Covid19 outbreak, the total number of Chinese students in America was 372,532, the highest in history. I was only one drop of water at the beginning of that surge. Education gave me the chance to join the biggest Chinese student's study-abroad tide in the early twenty-first century.

To this day I can't give a clean answer to why I chose to go abroad. My family never put any pressure on me; nor did I have the kind of die-hard determination for the college entrance examination. After finishing graduate school at Beijing Normal, staying in China to work would have been a perfectly good choice — over the next twenty years China's economic takeoff brought a considerable portion of the population to genuine comfort; the government's poverty alleviation drive impressed the world; many of my classmates and friends witnessed and lived through the development with China's speed. There are still a small number of people who have had to leave China for political or religious reasons, and that has nothing to do with me. To say that I was curious about the "outside" world, and came to America with a coincidence or two, sounds insufficient — how could such a major decision, one that changed the direction of one's life, be made so casually? But I can scratch my head all I like and still not come up with a better answer.



Commencement Day, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, May 16, 2017