

# Resurgence in China

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*The editors thank Ben for this valuable and unique contribution to our understanding of the Waldorf impulse in China.*

Waldorf education is in its tenth year in Mainland China. The first school opened in Chengdu in September 2004 with five children in the kindergarten and a home school primary class for three of the teachers' children. Now there are about 300 children and long waiting lists. The school is preparing to continue on into high school (grade 9) this September. There are thought to be more than 300 kindergartens and 36 grade school initiatives throughout China, basing their work on Waldorf education. Added to this are six three-year, part-time early childhood teacher training courses, five more for primary school teachers and one for high school, along with a full-time course in Beijing and a plethora of shorter seminars and workshops in different places.

What is the reason for this rapid development and how can one ensure its quality?

One needs to see it in the context of what is bubbling up in all aspects of life in China in this time which the president has called the "Renaissance of the Chinese dream". For many, it is a time of optimism and exploration. There is an energy in the land and the people, a feeling of almost unlimited possibilities. The earth is being dug up and transformed into concrete expressways and high rise buildings at a rate that must be unprecedented in human history. As new cities are created, traffic is increasing and airports continuously expanding. High speed trains are being built everywhere, and people are continuously leaving the countryside in search of employment.

Socially, culturally, economically and physically, China is on the move. The environmental consequences are immense, with water pollution, and the smog and dirt in the big cities becoming huge problems. It is like a dream that

is wonderful, frightening and inexorable. For those who have money there is a growing awareness of aesthetics in architecture and lifestyle. For those who do not, the future is bleak. The divide between the wealthy and the poor grows day by day.

One can ask how this and the growth of an education movement which develops independent thinking can be taking place within a political system that is still communist. Here one enters into the subtle intricacies of the way of thinking that has evolved through China's long, dramatic history.

Though the government can be ruthless it is also pragmatic, and, because of its hold on power, can focus on the long term more than many other governments. Chinese people too are pragmatic. The essential attitude is one of free initiative, though penalties can be severe if something goes wrong or someone complains to the government. If it were not for this Waldorf education could hardly have begun, for out of the 36 initiatives which are working hard to develop themselves, only two are recognised by their local or regional governments! Through long experience people in China have developed the art of moving in the space between the legal and the illegal!



Several schools have been obliged by the government to leave their properties but so far none has actually closed down. Water has many ways of reaching the sea, and the carriers of the schools, too, find different pathways for

achieving their goals. Parents or benefactors in high positions have, in some situations, ensured that a school is protected. Relationship is what counts, along with courage, creativity and an abiding faith in what one is doing.

Another example of this mobile way of thinking is that over the past two years Waldorf teachers have been invited to participate in the annual conferences of an organisation called New Education, which is led by a professor of education who is a senior member of the national government. Two years ago I gave one of the keynote lectures, alongside professors from Japan and the United States representing other educational ideas, and this year Christof Wiechert gave an address. The central government is watching what is evolving in the Waldorf movement with interest and no doubt, caution. It is part of a wider research into educational methods worldwide into which they are investing a lot of resources, for there is growing discontent with the existing exam-oriented paradigm. In the public domain, on the internet and in magazines, there is a lot of discussion about Waldorf education, ranging from enthusiasm and gratitude to accusations of it being a religion.

China is a land of opposites. While there is openness to new ideas and a freshness in people's attitudes, one walks on egg shells. There are people in influential positions in government, universities and business who recognise this education as a path to the future which accords with the aspirations of Chinese culture. It is no less true that if the political leaders were to decide to close it down, it would be done immediately. The most sensitive areas, and all foreign visitors who represent Anthroposophy or Waldorf education need to know this are: religion, politics, safety and the infiltration of Western cultural values. One can speak about the spirit and find there is a genuine wish in people to understand it, but one must be very careful not to give the mistaken impression that Anthroposophy is a religion or a politically-oriented teaching. To do so would most likely bring about the closure of all the schools.

The fact that Chinese culture is based on philosophy rather than religion provides a safe ground on which to work with Anthroposophy. It becomes a training in tact and in thinking and speaking exactly, and is partly, in my view, the many resonances between the two streams of spiritual knowledge, ancient and modern, that has led to the growing interest in Spiritual Science. The encounter with Anthroposophy is also contributing to the longing in China to reconnect with what has been buried and almost forgotten on a cultural level.



In the second lecture of the cycle *Earthly and Cosmic Man*<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Steiner spoke of how the time would come when 'imprisoned Atlantean spirituality' would rise up in China and amaze and shake the Western world, challenging the West's sense of its cultural and spiritual tasks. His attitude towards this resurgence of the power of a distant past is that we should meet it out of a spirit of mutual respect.

Often I have wondered whether what he was referring to has already taken place. Many inspirers of the cultural, social and ecological revolution of the sixties were profoundly influenced by ancient Chinese writings, and for many in the West this and Tibetan Buddhism have become more potent sources of wisdom than Christianity. Perhaps this is what he was meaning but something is rising up in China now and many in the West (and the South) look upon it with amazement and fear, for it is not only a cultural resurgence, but a physical, economic and political one. It has power.

What is happening now in the meeting of Anthroposophy with Chinese culture is important, for Anthroposophy is one of the few

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<sup>15</sup> Steiner, R. (1948) *Earthly and Cosmic Man*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press. p. 46 [Lecture Date, 19 March, 1912. Given in Berlin, GA133, Lecture 2.]

streams of Western culture that unites spiritual revelation with clear practical application in facing the problems of our world today.

Not only is there a longing in China for an education which recognises the fullness of humanity in 'spirit, soul and body' or, to use the Chinese way of expressing the same thing, 'heaven, human being and earth', but for ways of growing food and working together based on a spiritual science. In all these areas, what is rising up culturally from the past can meet the future-directed impulse which Anthroposophy brings. In both streams there is a sense of wholeness, a recognition of the central importance of the human being and the arts, and the possibility of life itself becoming an art.

This is the way of the so-called 'junzi', which is so much at the heart of Chinese cultural aspirations. Traditionally the word has been translated as the 'superior man'. I find it more appropriate to use Rudolf Steiner's expression, the 'ethical individual', or even the 'becoming human being'. Through subtle correspondences such as this, these two great currents of world evolution can find a common pulse, and bring something fresh and new to birth.

I believe I can speak on behalf of others with whom I work in China in saying that this ideal works strongly in our will. Everything we do in the China Waldorf Forum, the network which takes on the task of trying to safeguard and enhance the quality of this education in China and keep the connection alive with Dornach and the wider world, is connected with this overall goal. The situation requires us to develop new ways in almost everything we do, for we have been advised that it would be politically unwise to set up a centralised association. Such respect as the CWF working group has from schools and training centres comes, not from our position, but the relationships we form and the example we try to set of working together.

Much has been achieved, for example, by a grass-roots approach to creating curriculum appropriate for China. Research seminars take place in different regions focusing on different aspects of teaching. Each seminar is led by a

group of more experienced Chinese teachers and all teachers from the region are invited. This collaboration is then continued in meetings organised by the teachers themselves. In the same spirit, what emerged from our annual conference with the theme Diversity within Unity was the recognition that the key for the development of quality comes from one's inner source of self-change as an ethical individual. The more clearly we unite in our ideals and goals, the more individual we can become in our ways of working towards them.

This is the inner task of the China Waldorf Forum and the reason why it is called a forum rather than an association. It has the potential of creating a space in which we can recognise the becoming human being in ourselves and each other, and from this centre of inner autonomy and responsibility go back to our separate locations. It is far from easy and it depends on many people with teaching experience and human-artistic quality working with us, but such is our goal. Most astonishing of all is the thought that the time may come when, through what Anthroposophy carries and what it illumines in Chinese culture, it can come to realisation on a much larger scale in society as a new expression of the ancient culture, in forms and concepts appropriate to today. ❖



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