Teaching journalism in Guangzhou

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In Guangzhou

At the core of an effort to teach journalism in English to students in the People’s Republic of China is the question whether there is a point to exposing—for want of a better term—western values to students. They will work under a one-party, totalitarian police state which closely monitors a state-owned news media designed to suppress the bad news and exploit the good for the benefit of the Communist Party of China. A long-time American journalist writes of his experience teaching in an English-language journalism program at a Chinese university and his search for an answer to that question.

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The student’s question went right to the heart of the matter of teaching journalism in English to Chinese in the People’s Republic.

“China is a different place,” the young man began slowly in deliberate English, as if he were addressing listeners who knew so little about China.

He was a master’s degree candidate in the revitalized journalism program at the University of Shantou in the one-time free port of Shantou on China’s southern coast.

“The government controls the news,” he continued. “What is the point of learning western ways of journalism? We can never use them in China.”

I had asked myself the same question often while teaching in 2002 at a university in Guangzhou, southern China, in a new, English-language journalism program. What is the point, indeed?

I was one of several visiting American journalism educators in Shantou to meet students in the journalism program, part of a university that over 20 years had grown with the help of about HK$2b (about US$260m) in contributions from Hong Kong tycoon,
Li Ka Shing. Li, who traces his ancestry to Shantou, was determined to make this school in his home region of Chiu Chau a world-class university with a world-class journalism program.

I was fortunate; that tricky question was not directed at me. Responding for our small group was Arlene Morgan, assistant dean for continuing education and technology at the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. She had been for 31 years with The Philadelphia Inquirer, rising to assistant managing editor.

Emphasizing the positive, Dean Morgan pointed out that more and more sectors of Chinese society were opening up to the world. Politics, of course, was a no-no for journalists. But reporters or print and broadcast news media – virtually all state-or Communist party-owned – were examining the business, financial and economic sectors, reporting on social issues, such as health.

She noted she had come to Shantou from Beijing, where she addressed journalists at a conference on coverage of AIDS where government officials complained they were not getting enough coverage of the spread of the disease in China.

“There are plenty of areas where journalists can use their western-based training,” she concluded.

In my own case, the subject the question touched has risen often during the five months over two semesters I had taught journalism – entirely in English—at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou, a 45-minute plane ride from Shantou.

Here is the way a student in Guangzhou expressed herself in a message to me:

“Please give us some advice on how to be a good journalist?. In fact, most of us used to be enthusiastic about international reporting. However, as we continued with our studies at university, step by step we found that it would be too difficult and early impossible for us to continue with our dreams.

That’s because international news reporting is strictly controlled by the Central government. Unless we can be recruited by the Communist Party and the Xinhua Agency, we will have no chance to report international news. As a result, many of us get frustrated. We are still interested in journalism, but it seems that we can’t see our future. We are at a loss.”

Hers is a combination of need and awareness that is hard for a teacher to resist.

Deputy Dean Emma Du Huizhen of the Faculty of International Communication of Guangdong University (GDUFS) had asked late in 2001 if I would be interested in teaching in the new English-language program she was creating in Guangzhou. Her faculty was made up of a half dozen Chinese academics,
several with master’s degrees in mass communication from Leeds University in the United Kingdom, as she had. None had experience as journalists. Dean Du had the good sense to realize she needed someone who had worked as a journalist.

After a 55-year career that included being a reporter, editor and bureau chief for The Associated Press and a vice president of United Press International, I was ending nearly four years as director in Hong Kong of the Asian Center of The Freedom Forum, the American-based, independent foundation that dealt with news media issues worldwide.

During my Freedom Forum tenure, we had developed a news media program in China of workshops, seminars and conferences at People University in Beijing, Jinan University in Guangzhou and Shanghai International Studies University and with such publications as People’s Daily and China Daily in Beijing, the Guangzhou Daily Group, the Nan Fang Daily Group and The Yangcheng Evening News in Guangzhou and Shanghai Daily.

But The Freedom Forum was eliminating as of the end of 2001 its entire international division, including my center in Hong Kong and offices in London, Buenos Aires and Johannesburg. I had the time.

During a Freedom Forum program at the university in November 2001, I had met first and second year students, in English, and during a free-wheeling question-answer session was agreeably surprised at their grasp of English (I don’t speak Chinese) and their zest to learn. My favorite question came from a young woman, who posed this news media ethics dilemma about the death in a crash of Princess Diana of Britain:

“If you were covering Princess Di, would you report the story first or first call the police?”

I agreed to teach in March and April 2002, and returned for a second stint from October through December.

The roots of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies go back to the 1965 founding of a foreign language institute in Guangzhou. According to Dean Du, Prime Minister Chou En-Lai ordered the institute in south China to complement similar institutes in Beijing and in Shanghai. The institute merged in 1996 with a foreign trade institute to create a university with a well-regarded emphasis on language training.

More than 8,000 undergraduates study at GDUFS on a bucolic campus across from the municipal international airport in suburban northern Guangzhou at the base of Baiyun (or White Cloud) mountain. The university is in the midst of a busy expansion, building a conference center, a library that is supposed to be the largest on any campus in Guangzhou and new dormitories. The building that houses the 40 so-called “foreign
experts” or visiting foreign professors was gutted in August and renovated to provide modern flats equipped with kitchens, baths, air conditioning, telephones and television sets.

During the first semester, I taught four classes, each once weekly for 90 minutes, involving about 160 students. Two classes were news writing and reporting for freshman, a class in beat reporting for third-year students and international reporting for seniors.

Despite the differing course titles, the classes were essentially the same, repeating basics, based on practical exercise. I tried to have the students write in class or on outside assignment almost every session. The approach meant often grading 160 papers every week.

“Our professors would not stand such a work load,” said my son, a banker who is trustee of his alma mater, Amherst College, in the United States.

In the second term, we cut the load to two classes of basic news writing and reporting for second-year students, a total of 80 students. The load of 80 papers weekly still was heavy and made it almost impossible to give the students the individual attention they required.

My approach was as practical as the limited resources of the school permitted. I was determined not simply to lecture and to make sure the students produced copy for every session.

Essentially, I outlined a problem, for example, writing a lead, using the formula who-what-where-when-why-and how, assigned an exercise illustrating the problem, edited the students’ work, then discussed it in class, often writing my own version and explaining my thinking. If time permitted (it rarely did), I assigned students to rewrite their work based on my comments on their copy.

In discussing the topic, “reporting the spoken word,” I took advantage of a speech about the threat of AIDS to China delivered in October at a university in Hangzhou, China, by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. AIDS is a subject only now being spoken about openly in China.

The class read his text. We discussed the important points and what would make a lead. I assigned them to write a lead in class against a deadline, then complete the work for the next week’s class. We discussed their leads as well as the completed work after I corrected their papers.

I distributed for discussion a hand out containing examples of students’ copy next to suggested versions of my own. I also distributed copies of stories about the speech by The New York Times and People’s Daily, the Communist party mouthpiece (it was a rare case; the People’s Daily speech coverage was more detailed
and even more straight reporting than *The Times’* story).

I developed a series of hand-outs. We essentially were writing our own textbook. We did not use a text in class. Western-written texts were simply too complex and expensive for use.

I planned some lessons with the help of a thin volume, *Reporting and Writing News: A Basic Handbook* written in 2001 by American authors, Peter Eng, a former news editor for The Associated Press in Bangkok, and Jeff Hodson, a former deputy editor of *The Cambodia Daily* in Phnom Penh. As Freedom Forum Asian director, I had contributed US$10,000 toward the development of the text.

It was published in English for journalists for whom English was a second-language and were from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, Mekong Delta countries in which the Bangkok-based Indochina Media Memorial Foundation staged training sessions.

For my students and other programs, what was needed was a similar workbook-text giving examples, in English, from the Chinese news media. That is a future project.

Through the Internet, I had access to *The New York Times* online news site, from which I frequently drew. Although the Chinese government blocked such sites as *The Washington Post* and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), I had little problem finding examples of news stories from western sources. One of my conditions for working at GDUFS was having access to the Internet (other conditions included hot water for showers, a comfortable place to sleep and a kitchen -- all met quite well).

Despite censorship of the state-owned news media, at no time did anyone try to tell me what I could say or not say in a classroom. Discussion in class was free-wheeling.

All my classes were conducted in English, the only language I know. Dean Du initially suggested stationing an interpreter in class to explain or summarize some of my remarks. We never used one; it never seemed necessary. It was a wise course to keep my English simple and repeat from time to time. Students occasionally had difficulty expressing themselves, but often their questions were incisive and rewarding.

Their spoken English was far better than their written English. Writing required intense work, for which time to discuss and revise never was available. My only technique for improving written English was to keep them writing and revising on the basis of my corrections.

For the most part, they asked questions freely, although they felt surer asking questions after class rather than in class in front of their classmates. I often saved my answers to their outside-class questions for class time. The questions often reflected the
thinking in the group. I wanted everyone to hear the answer.

To obtain some idea of their English-writing level, I assigned a group of second-year students to write profiles of themselves in the third person. I asked them to write about their family, education, home town, ambition, accomplishments, hobbies and likes and dislikes.

What I got were brief essays describing themselves as shy, or anti-social (meaning they spoke little in public) or achieving nothing. When I complained about the negative approach of the profiles, I got back the answer that Chinese were trained to be modest, even deprecating about themselves.

In discussing the need to attribute copy to clearly identified sources or to separate fact from opinion in news writing, I also got the excuse that these practices were not the Chinese way. I growled that I was not teaching the Chinese way but the objective way of the west.

Students had difficulty reporting Western names, in much the same way western reporters often have difficulty with Chinese names. The confusion over the style for names is common throughout Asia.

They were unsure which was the given name or surname. They never broke away from the Chinese practice of using the full name on second reference. Or, just the given name. In the case of my name, students were unsure what to call me. I suggested Mr. Zeitlin. A Chinese journalist friend suggested they call me Professor Lin, Lin being a common name of Guangzhou. Eventually, most students called me Arnold. That was fine.

In preparing the classes for a mock news conference in which I was the subject, we spent a class discussing how to assemble background, prepare questions and how to choose a lead. I described news conferences as well as interviews as often a subtle conflict between interviewer and interviewee, each striving for control of the situation. I urged them to assert themselves.

Coverage of news conference was an example of a clash between Chinese and, what for lack of a better term, I call western news media values. As a reporter for Guangdong Radio described to me, reporters called to a news conference in China often are given news releases before the news conference outlining what they are to write.

“They are told what the news is,” she said.

In a dreadful clash of values, private companies calling news conferences in China often obligingly slip red packets containing cash into the press kits of the attending reporters to assure coverage. Reporters expect the money.

After the class news conference, conducted in English, I had students write leads in class against deadline pressure. They then
wrote the rest of the story as homework for the following week’s class.

In one class news conference, I commented in response to a question on the prospect of war in Iraq. In the second class, I mentioned my astonishment at the complete lack of coverage in the Chinese news media about the impending change in the Communist party’s leadership at the party congress the week before. Not one report in the press or on TV or radio mentioned that Hu Jintao was about to replace President Jiang Zemin as party secretary general—until the change was announced officially.

I noted the contrast with the reporting and speculation in the U.S. news media prior to the November 2002 Congressional election.

I thought both remarks merited a news lead. A half dozen students mentioned the Iraq remark but not in a lead. One writer, in the bottom of a story, mentioned the party change remark. Instead, they concentrated on what I had said about my family and the difficulties of a long career of reporting abroad.

I turned a guest appearance by a Hong Kong woman journalist into a genuine news conference. Because our guest wanted to speak Mandarin, a language she rarely used in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong, most of the Q&A was in Chinese. I thought the use of Chinese would produce more coherent stories than what I got back from the mock news conference in English. Not the case. Despite the Chinese Q&A, the stories—in English—were more clumsy than the stories from the English-language mock news conference.

I was hampered by a lack of knowledge of local custom in trying to assign work outside the classroom. Friends in the local news media gave me lists of sources for the students to seek. But they warned me that state and local officials rarely spoke to journalists and were less inclined to speak to students. That circumstances proved to be true. Students, more knowledgeable than I, were shyly reluctant to make official inquiries.

On the agenda for the future is an effort through the university to persuade officials it is in their own long-term interest to foster better reporting by cooperating with journalism students. This is a concept that in China is revolutionary.

We are back to the original question: What is the point of teaching—for want to a better term—western news media values and techniques—in English—to students in the People’s Republic of China, who, if they enter the news media, will work under a regime suppressing free expression and a free news media?

In five months of teaching journalism in China, I’ve achieved one end—illustrating to these students that journalism is hard
work and not the easy ride many thought it was.

On my return to the United States the end of 2002, I told a friend, Ken Kashiwaha, who while based in Hong Kong for the American TV network ABC, covered Richard M. Nixon’s China visit in 1972, that I taught journalism in Guangzhou. He responded: “There is no journalism in China.”

From his perspective, Ken Kashiwahar was correct.

But I have spent time with enthusiastic, motivated young people, almost all of whom were born since Deng Xiao- ping opened China to the world in 1979. They are thirsty for contact with the world outside China. These students are computer literate and Internet-aware (despite government restrictions on what they can download from the Net) and they have more information at their command than any Chinese generation for 5,000 years.

While it is likely that the news media will be last sector in China to be reformed and, perhaps, some day made free, to the extent that it happens at all will depend on these youngsters and those who follow them.

Here is a message to me from a young, highly regarded and almost fatally aware Chinese journalist:

“As my colleagues and friends, I face great dilemma: How can we keep our independence and enthusiasm?

During these 3 years, many of my colleagues and friends quit and took other jobs. In my points, they are all clever, responsible and they have great news dreams too, but they choose to quit.

Although feeling disappointed sometimes, I still want to do better and better. I still own the dream of being a famous journalist. Maybe these feeling is normal during the growth of every person, isn’t it?

Could you tell me whether you have encountered such dilemma? Could you give me some guidance?”

How can any journalist ignore such an appeal? My response: “Despite reservations about the future of the news media in China, I urge you to continue with your news media career, at least for a while. You are young, gifted and aware of the circumstances. If China’s news media is to emerge along with the rest of China as part of a modern, contributing state, the media will require dedicated, well educated and hard working men and women like you. Do not give up immediately, despite sad stories from your colleagues.

I have been fortunate to live and to work in the world’s freest environment (not necessarily perfect, understand). I have differences, even conflicts with my editors and colleagues but never on the basis of ideology or bias. I have had the privilege, if not luxury, of writing and reporting what I have seen the way I wanted to report and write. I have not always been correct but I
have done the best I could with what material and competence I possess. I have had a career that has given me great satisfaction, if not wealth or fame....

I can only wish the same for you....Your example and that of many friends in China give me immense hope. You and they are part of the reason I find working in China so fascinating and absorbing. You have the opportunity in China, with its huge population, to be part of development that could change the world for the better. I would hate to be the person to tell you to turn away from that opportunity.”

Finally, his response to that message:

“After I read your letter, I was greatly encouraged and my heart can’t keep calm. Your words disappeared so much confusion in my mind. ...There is still a hopeful future, although the current facts are not satisfying.... I don’t want to be the guy who make you feel disappointed.”

Those thoughts and that brief encounter are enough to give any long-time journalist satisfaction for a lifetime.