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Chapter 8: It's not about English teaching

This chapter explores the possibility that oral English teaching at PSU in its present form cannot be expected to succeed; there are simply too many constraints. These include the issues explored in previous chapters, of unexamined differences between the teachers' and students' cultures of learning, circumstantial constraints, and the assessment backwash that renders oral English somewhat intangible. It also includes the teacher accountability system as it currently exists, in which foreign teachers perceive pressure from students and managers mainly to be 'fun' rather than effective. Given these conflicting pressures, the outlook for oral English at PSU is bleak.

However, the PSU foreign teacher program grew in size and scope between 2007 and 2011; the foreign teachers are now employed to teach oral English classes for students in other programs of study, including Masters degrees. Additionally, some foreign teachers now teach other subjects, including a course entitled 'Western culture' that Beth, Ryan, and Leo piloted in 2008-2009. So, quite the opposite of the 'bleak' outlook that I have described, the University Cooperation program at PSU is going from strength to strength. Given the difficulties described above, this is counterintuitive.

But perhaps the mistake is to frame the endeavour in which the foreign teachers are involved at PSU as English teaching at all. Instead, a new conceptualization may be required, in which the participants are engaged not in English teaching but in something else. This chapter explores the tantalizing nature of that 'something else', examining possible purposes behind the hiring of foreign teachers to teach oral English at PSU. I start with a discussion of the participants' own motivations and the way these influence their work. I then turn to the question of teaching 'culture' as part of oral English teaching and, so, to an inductive definition of the foreign teacher role. As the title of this book suggests, the *de facto* role is quite different from the teachers' own purposes and understandings and it is in this sense that they are shanghaied in Shanghai.

Foreign teacher recruitment

Minimally qualified Western teachers may be motivated to work in China for reasons other than teaching and, perhaps as both a cause and effect of foreign teachers' association with 'backpacker teachers', English language teaching may be regarded as a low-status expatriate role. Val explains:

TESOL has that image; it has an image problem. ... If you want to travel and earn some money, then, yeah, you can be a backpacker and teach. ... It's not associated with people who know what they're doing.

(Val, *Old China Hands* focus group, 08/09/07).

Against this background, it is difficult to attract and retain well-qualified ELT professionals in the numbers required by China's educational institutions including universities. Dan explains his understanding of the wider Asian market for foreign English teachers:

It's a teachers' market because everyone wants to hire, so if someone's a total washout at a school in China or Korea, they can go down to Indonesia or Thailand and pop up teaching somewhere else.

(Dan, interview, 11/09/07)

Leo explains his experiences of the difficulties this causes:

The teaching market is such a seller's market [i.e. the teachers who sell their labour]. I mean it's not like I can just fire you, because if I fire you I need someone there right away to come in and do it. And so the lesser of the two things would be to have some unqualified teacher keep on teaching, rather than have no teacher to teach. ... The bottom line is I need my 12 teachers to show up, smile, show their white teeth, and open their mouths and speak English, that's the bottom line. If they can, I would like them to be active, I would like them to be motivating their students, to build their students' confidence, and I would like them to be engaging, to be helping the students. If they can even do better than that, I would like them to go into their lessons with, maybe, an aim, and a focus on exactly what they teach, and try to teach it. ... But if they can't do that, it's OK. ... That's the reality. It's a seller's market.

(Leo, interview, 30/05/08)

One factor affecting teacher recruitment in mainland China is that institutions must compete for teachers with South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, all of which are in a position to offer higher salaries (ESL Cafe, 2008). The salaries of the oral English teachers at PSU, while substantially higher than those of local English teachers, are much lower than expatriate salaries such as those of, for example, teachers at international schools. Leo explains the constraint that salaries place on teacher recruitment:

10,000 Yuan [RMB; per month] with co-pay insurance? [i.e. the teachers contribute to the cost of their health insurance.] You cannot get qualified teachers for that. So although the students may want more than fun, the type of teachers who take these jobs are the backpackers.

(Leo, interview, 11/06/09)

Thus the PSU salary is problematic as well-qualified teachers can find better paid work elsewhere.

Ryan explains his understanding of teacher recruitment, framing teachers' motivation types as a binary of 'running towards' and 'running away from':

The people who apply for and get these jobs are those who are willing to uproot and leave their present situation. People who are willing to leave everything they know and love and be whisked off to a foreign corner of the world are usually either running from something or running to something. That something takes precedence over their job as a teacher.

(Ryan, e-mail, 21/08/08)

Ryan describes his own motivation of 'running towards' opportunities unavailable at home:

I was running towards life experience, towards a deeper understanding of the world and its people, towards the unknown, towards a free life. Teaching was my means of doing so, but it was never my goal, it was never my purpose. If they had said that

garbage men are needed in Asia and that garbage men make enough to live a decent life in Asia, then I probably would have been a garbage man. ... Teaching is the grunt work that I have to do [to be here].

(Ryan, e-mail, 21/08/08)

Leo concurs with Ryan's view of his own motivation, and of this as a common motivation type:

A lot of the teachers' motives are to be here to have a good time. Just like Ryan, he's very honest, 'I'm not here to teach, I'm not interested in teaching, I don't care about teaching, but I can teach, I can smile, I'm White, I'm Canadian, I can make fun, I can be a clown, you pay me, I get along, travel around'. That's what a lot of the teachers want to do, is travel around.

(Leo, interview, 30/05/08)

However, teachers who are instrumentally motivated, such as by the desire to 'travel around', may contribute to the problem of 'fun' teaching described in Chapter 7, as Phil explains:

I don't think most of them [the foreign teachers] are perceiving themselves as entering a career [in Education] or a proper job ... In their heads they're only coming for a year so they're going to basically stay in a comfort zone for a year, and that comfort zone is keeping them [the students] entertained. ... The motivation's more a year's worth of stories ... [teaching in China] it's just another bar story.

(Phil, interview, 05/10/07)

As discussed in Chapter 7, some of the participants perceived that expectations of 'fun' teaching may be caused in part by students' prior experience of foreign teachers who do not question students' demand for 'fun teaching and so may perpetuate the notion that 'foreign equals fun'. But not all foreign teachers are instrumentally motivated. Among the study participants, only Ryan did not express at least some teaching-related motivation, at least initially. As a result, all, including Ryan, struggled with the identity attributed to them, of foreign clowns passing through; this is discussed further in Chapter 11.

Beth explains that she has learned to counter the image problem of foreign teachers by seeking legitimacy through her qualifications, but says:

It makes me angry, because I feel like, 'why should I? I don't have to justify my background to you. I'm here as a teacher, the default for most cultures is that you give a teacher respect of some sort.

(Beth, interview, 03/06/08)

Leo confirms that foreign teachers may have to legitimize themselves through qualifications: [Foreign teachers] come in dressed in, like, jeans and flip-flops, and their [students'] first impression is that they're an idiot. If you take out a PhD certificate ... then they'll assume you're knowledgeable. ... In China, people are identified by who they are and what they have done, not by what they can do or their personality. ... They'll see Todd or Ryan and think, yeah, a clown. ... If Ryan had a PhD and ten years experience and he wore a suit, he could sit down and say, 'my justification for doing all these meaningless activities is because I have a PhD', and they'll go, 'ooh, yes, that must be true'.

(Leo, interview, 11/06/09)

Sadly, though, the reality of the teacher recruitment market may make the teacher type that Leo describes exactly the 'default' that the students encounter. This would serve to perpetuate Beth's problem.

Foreign teachers or foreign creatures?

But the discursive construction of 'foreign idiots' may run much deeper than the issue of many foreign teachers' own instrumental motivations. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a view in China that Chinese and foreign cultures are irreconcilably different and that there is a benefit for Chinese people in gaining skills and confidence in 'dealing with foreigners'; this was actually the title of a training course for Chinese managers that I co-taught in Shanghai in 2003-2004. Beth explains her understanding of the binary Self/Other distinction:

Here in China you get identified as the Western Other, there's no acknowledgement that there are various cultures ... you're White so you are American. It's this view of monolithic culture, singular.

(Beth, interview, 09/06/09)

Dan and Ollie explain what they perceive the students gain from contact with foreign teachers:

They can acquire some experience with foreigners ... but 80 minutes, once a week, maybe they acquire the *sight* of a foreigner ... it's like going to the zoo, because they go and see this unique creature in a safe environment ... and they get to interact with us in a safe way ... like, some kind of a petting zoo, or in some cases a heavy petting zoo [Dan is referring to the PSU teachers who pursue sexual relationships with their students; this is discussed in Chapter 9]. ... As a teacher, do I want to stay in this zoo? No, I don't.

(Dan, interview, 11/06/09)

It's an opportunity to have access to someone who's foreign ... I don't think it's necessarily about English, no. I think it's a much broader thing. ... It's not *not* about English, but it's much more about Western culture. ... We can't employ Black Africans or Indian people ... If you're not White, if you don't look European you can't be employed as an English teacher ... The universities just won't accept them [non-White foreign teachers], they just want White foreigners, because they represent 'Western culture'.

(Ollie, interview, 13/06/09)

These quotes are echoed by other participants' and students' views of foreign teachers as representatives of 'foreign culture', and constructed as very different from and, crucially, lesser than Chinese teachers.

This may explain Leo's perception of the need to 'perform foreignness' in order to gain legitimacy as a foreign teacher, particularly as he is ethnically Chinese. As discussed in Chapter 3, performativity is an important factor in identity negotiation. But the 'foreignness' Leo performs is not (or perhaps not *just*) his own notion of 'Westernness'. Instead, he describes his conscious effort to *differentiate* his behaviour from that of his construction of Chinese teachers:

The animation, the walking around the classroom, the jokes, the humour, the chewing of the gum ... the making fun of the students is ... all a part of my job. An act

to make me as different as possible, to make me as animated as possible, and to make me as interesting and humorous as possible, to attract the students' attention.
(Leo, interview, 13/09/07)

In a later interview, Leo responds to his own quote, explaining his rationale:

I had to prove myself ... I might look Chinese but I'm really Western. ... If you look Chinese and you act Chinese why would they accept you? I'm not going to wear my Canadian passport around my neck every time I go in. ... I have to make myself into this fool at first. Once they accept you as a *laowai* [foreigner] ... you can be knowledgeable.

(Leo, interview, 11/06/09)

Stereotyping about 'fun' foreigners, from which Leo's performance seems to be derived, also results in a demand for teachers that look and behave like Chinese constructions of 'typical Westerners'.

If foreign teachers are mainly employed as foreigners rather than as teachers, Leo's hiring policy makes sense. He explains that he prefers to employ teachers who are young, blond(e), bubbly, attractive, and entertaining, even if unqualified as English language teachers. Beth, who analysed possible reasons for various teachers' scores on the student evaluation forms, further explains this preference for young, physically attractive teachers:

Phiona: Ryan has no [language teaching] qualifications, no training.

Beth: No. But in his case, he does pretty well [i.e. students like him].

Phiona: Would he, if he looked like you or me [30s and female]? Or fifty?

Beth: Um, right. Yeah, Ollie, who does have training ... he's too old.

Phiona: He's 40.

Beth: Yeah, he's 40, which is too old for Chinese students, because they don't think he's attractive. They would relate to him ... It doesn't matter what Ollie does, he will never be one of the top evaluations.

(Beth, interview, 03/06/08)

Against this background, and with the students' evaluations as the only salient evaluation of teachers' work, Leo's policy of hiring young, fun teachers to behave as 'foreign monkeys' is perhaps understandable. But there is a vicious circle, here, of imagination, representation, performance, and reification. The more innocuous part of the foreign teacher's role is to be students' point of contact with the non-Chinese world. But the pressure that teachers experience to perform an Occidentalist notion of 'Westernness' suggests that the overarching purpose is to represent and reify foreignness in a way that distinguishes the foreign Other from the Chinese Self, bolstering Chinese self-esteem (and perhaps also nationalism, as discussed in Chapter 3). PSU discourses position foreign teachers as exotic curiosities, akin to zoo animals. Less than foreign *teachers*, the participants feel they are foreign *creatures*.

Teaching culture: Western artefacts and meanings

Another reason to hire foreign teachers is the teaching of 'culture', and this was often mentioned (although always in very vague terms) as part of the foreign teachers' role. But 'foreign culture' is amorphous and this section problematizes the what and how of culture teaching in oral English. Western cultures appear to be the *de facto* cultures to be learned about whenever there is any mention of covering 'culture' in class. The role of English as a

lingua franca was rarely acknowledged in any classroom, staffroom, or co-teacher discussion that I heard, and my own PSU students mostly dismissed the notion that they might one day use English with other non-native users. (In fact, most anticipated little future use for English at all.) Culture, and indeed English itself, was therefore mostly framed as an exercise in learning about 'the West' and, specifically, in *comparing* (an idealized and essentialized) China with (a constructed, imagined) West.

As for how culture might be learned, or learned *about*; in common with the treatment of language described in Chapter 6, the objective of Chinese students and teachers seems to be to learn facts *about* Western culture(s) rather than to learn *how to operate* in them or learn about culture more generally, including students' *own* cultures. Indeed, this was the view taken by some of the foreign teachers. Ollie, for example, explains his approach:

A group I had ... kept asking me about culture and so, all right, 20 minutes, last class, 'we'll do something on culture'. So I put up on the board, uh, 'England' and then I put up here 'China'. And on this side [left hand column] I put money, health, politics, transport, all these things. [And I asked] 'what do you think the differences are in England and China?' Well, money, the currency's different; there's the pound and the yuan. But 'do you think people have more money in England, or do you think they're poorer?' ... And they think people have more money in England and, yeah, I agree, people are much richer [in England]. ... And politics? 'What's the difference between politics in England and politics in China?' 'Well, you have one party in China and we have three parties in England'.

(Ollie, interview, 04/06/08)

This 'culture' teaching activity assumes as its objective an explicit, though simplistic, knowledge about some aspects of one Western culture.

This is different from the views of other participants. Beth, for example, explained her purpose in teaching culture:

They have to learn strategies for figuring out what people mean. Because if you're standing in a hotel in Shanghai and somebody from Zimbabwe speaks to you in English you have to know that what he says is not necessarily going to have the exact same meaning for you that it does for him. ... My hope is that [in my lessons] they've learned coping strategies for dealing with other cultures, because a lot of these students want to stay in Shanghai, want to work for international companies or they want to work at hotels, and so that's something they realistically need out in the world, a way to interact in a foreign language with foreigners that probably aren't going to be American. So I hope that's something they can take away, I would like to think that.

(Beth, interview, 03/06/08)

Beth takes a view of culture teaching as 'meanings behind messages', and she reports that she taught culture *instead of* English to all her ostensibly oral English classes in 2008-2009. This was because she felt she was more effective teaching culture than English, an issue I return to in Chapter 11.

The inclusion of cultural content, in whatever form, appears to be at least part of why the foreign teachers are employed at PSU, and it seems to have been well received. So there is some awareness that culture teaching is important, and both Ollie and Beth address this by

providing content knowledge mainly about Western culture/s, with an extension into comparative discussions and intercultural skills acquisition in Beth's lessons.

Another, less obvious form of 'culture teaching' was the teaching of Western-associated attributes such as self-confidence; most of the teachers mentioned the goal of enhancing students' willingness to venture contributions in class without necessarily knowing the 'correct' answer. As discussed in Chapter 2, the sharing of students' views and half-considered answers in class is not common in Chinese education, which is underpinned by a positivistic epistemology and deference to teachers and textbooks. The foreign teachers attributed students' in-class reticence to a lack of confidence, though, and Ryan, among others, described and evidenced efforts to encourage students to contribute more:

It's much easier for them to say, 'I agree with him', as opposed to 'no, I don't agree with that because of this, this, and this.' ... It could be that they don't agree, but [at] their language level they don't have the confidence, so it's like, 'yeah, I agree'.

(Ryan, interview, 28/09/07)

This may explain Ryan's delight, expressed in Chapter 5, that students were 'at each other's throats' in a debate, as it may be evidence of increased confidence and of them becoming more 'Western' in their interactions. A parallel curriculum of learning 'Western' classroom norms and pragmatics is, then, another take on culture teaching.

Teaching culture: Exploring *Chinese* culture

But Ryan's approach to teaching culture focuses on *Chinese* cultural artefacts and their underlying messages and details. Another difference is that Ryan sometimes uses Chinese to do this, which he rationalizes as scaffolding for the lower language-level students, although he says he also enjoys the chance to use Chinese as his own learning is his stated purpose for being in China. Ryan attributes culture discussions mainly to his own interests, about which he says he sometimes feels guilty. In some of his observed lessons, Ryan used a discussions-based approach, in which he introduced a topic (often loosely related to the *New Interchange* unit for the week) and conducted a whole-class discussion on it. These were among the most engaging lessons I observed, with real communication taking place and longer, more complex utterances being produced by more students than contributed in most of the other lessons.

During the discussions, Ryan often touched on somewhat taboo topics, such as press censorship and the removal of migrant workers from Beijing ahead of the Olympics. To motivate students to participate, he asked a lot of informed and specific, but open, culture-based questions to stimulate the discussion, mostly in English, of quite complex, often political, topics. This relied on his knowledge about China. Ryan usually conducted the discussions from a position of sitting on a front-row desk rather than standing behind the classroom lectern, often putting himself in the position of *learning* about China *from* the students.

Thus Ryan took a 'knowing about' approach to culture, with a focus on students' *own* cultures rather than notional target-language culture/s. He did not specifically aim to develop students' intercultural competence, although his use of Socratic-dialectic questioning and his encouragement of argument-based discourse are implicitly Western,

and so students arguably experienced something of 'Western culture' through their involvement in the discussions.

Ryan also positioned himself as students' equal through his role and positioning in class, through flirting with his students, and by performing as a 'cute' foreigner: exposing his own ostensible areas of ignorance and asking the students to tell him more about China. He also showed that he valued the knowledge the students brought to class. Ryan scored highly on students' evaluations, and his approach to 'teaching culture' appears to explain why.

As a result, 'culture teaching' varies widely, from Ollie's reductionist 'facts' about Chinese poverty and English wealth, to Beth's input and discussion of Western cultural artefacts, to Ryan's discussions about China. Not all these approaches were equally successful at PSU in the form they were conducted, and further research into the teaching of culture is necessary to determine quite what is understood by 'teaching culture' and whether any of these approaches are suitable. This is revisited in Chapter 12.

The foreign teachers' role: A clearing in the woods

As discussed, the foreign teacher role may not be solely, or even mainly, about language teaching, and Leo confirms that the role is not well defined:

The school [university] never really defined what exactly teaching [oral] English is, and what kind of English we need to teach. ... It's like, maybe we're not even supposed to be teaching English, it's just not clear. ... There is no clear objective.

(Leo, interview, 30/05/08)

The largely unstated, but existent, expectations might explain the popularity of some 'backpacker teachers' who, perhaps unwittingly, correspond to Chinese notions of prototypical Westernness and who perform the implicit role of foreign teacher that is 'firmly fixed but ill-defined' (Phil, e-mail, 21/01/09). This section discusses a possible purpose of employing foreign teachers: as a foil to students', and perhaps also Chinese *teachers'* identity constructions. This would necessitate the construction and reification of a distinct foreign Other through the positioning of and expectations about foreign teachers.

However, the role of the foreign teacher is not unitary. Instead, I conceive the role of PSU foreign teacher as a clearing in the woods within which individuals can take different positions, rather than a single role/identity. Thus several PSU teachers have found ways in which they can successfully negotiate roles that both fit their own identity, and are also acceptable to their PSU students.

Beth explains her perception that actual English teaching aimed at language development, is firmly outside of the clearing in the woods; it does not form part of the acceptable role of a foreign teacher. She says:

We have to go in there and be cute, eat out of their hands, and then go in to the next group. ... It just wears you down every day. ... You're treated as not just interchangeable but completely disposable, and so it's no wonder that people like me, like Dan, like Karen, just wear down until all you end up with is people who teach like Todd, who doesn't teach, he just plays games. ... And he talks about teaching here [in a way that makes it clear] that he just doesn't care at all.

(Beth, interview, 09/06/09)

The 'wearing down' process is something Beth returned to, responding to Phil's quote that the role definition is 'firmly fixed but ill defined':

It's kind of like growing up where you push your parents to find the limits, like, I can push it this way, I can't push it that way. And then you accept the role as it is and you stay right within that framework, Jon [a British teacher, cited in Chapter 9] went to the extreme of, 'OK, just games it is then', or you try to manoeuvre it and push at some of those ill-defined edges and see if 'OK, if I can do this, can I do this?'

(Beth, interview, 09/06/09)

Karen describes the same issue, of trying out different positions both within and outside the 'clearing in the woods', and realising that some roles were more acceptable than others:

I decided [this semester] that I was actually going to try and teach them something, mainly for my own sanity. And so I tried to do that in the beginning [of this semester], but then straightaway I felt that they didn't like me as much as the teacher before [the classes change teachers after the first semester]. ... I lost that sort of friendship that I had in the first semester with them. ... They weren't taking me wanting to be a proper teacher well. ... This semester I guess I just felt too tired for it. Like, the thought of having to be all bubbly, every lesson. ... But because I was trying to be a good teacher I couldn't actually take it back to just being, you know, entertaining. And then when I got my feedbacks ... [they] were a lot lower than they were last semester even though I'd probably taught them more this semester.

(Karen, interview, 29/05/08)

Teachers' feelings of disinvestment with their work at PSU are explored in Chapter 11. Salient here, however, is the process of finding the clearing in the woods, which Beth and Karen describe as a gradual wearing down until the foreign teachers' practice corresponds with a role that students are willing to accept. Students' primary tool in this process is unresponsiveness in lessons, but students may also complain about teachers they dislike, and/or express their views in teacher evaluations. As mentioned before, these are the only marker of teacher quality at PSU, and are the basis of teachers' bonuses. So most teachers eventually bend to students' constructions of foreign teachers.

Ryan's story: The ideal foreign teacher?

Within this paradigm, Ryan scores very highly on students' evaluations, and he can be said to be one of the most *successful* oral English teachers at PSU, if not necessarily the most *effective*. While there may be some overlap between these constructs, they are distinct.

Beth explains:

[The student evaluations] they are a complete popularity contest, it's how much do the students like you. ... [They like] Ryan, because he's young, cute, he's funny, he tells funny stories. ... It's just his whole, kind of, foreigner package that will always put his popularity up. ... He's their age, um, he's, you know, he can flirt, be funny, and still make them talk. ... [The students] don't like Dan, no, because he tries to teach language. [And] he doesn't have that easy, fun, manner that the students want. They see him as rather intimidating, because he's a proper teacher. ... Ryan, he's the ideal teacher here. ... But Ryan is an odd situation because you have someone who's really interested in Chinese culture, that speaks Chinese, but he's still young, and funny, and cute, and you're not going to find all that many people like that.

(Beth, interview, 03/06/08)

Thus, although Ryan says he does not care about teaching, his lessons are perhaps the most truly 'communicative' of the oral English lessons at PSU because he is interested in Chinese culture and knows the questions to ask to have students discuss cultural issues in class with him. Without realizing it, Ryan may be delivering exactly the curriculum implicitly intended by the PSU contextual constraints: cross-cultural contact with a Chinese-speaking, culturally sensitive foreign Other who is interested in, respectful of, and knowledgeable about China. In addition he is young, male, White, blond, sociable, and attractive, and perhaps conforms to the (mainly female) PSU students' sense of a 'typical' (that is, idealized) Westerner, given their 'evidence' of Western foreigners from American films and TV series.

It is important to ask what type of capital it is that Ryan, and others like him, bring to teaching in China; why might his attributes be valued more highly than those of, for example, ELT expertise? Certainly, there is an enormous classroom value to Ryan's cultural knowledge and his ability to engender a classroom atmosphere in which communication might take place among often-reticent students. It is also doubtful whether foreign teachers are useful as a source of language clarification and input, given students' many years' experience of learning English without having had much opportunity to practise it.

But Ryan offers an additional capital, that of allowing Chinese students to feel good about being Chinese. Ryan has spent years studying Chinese language and culture(s), and he can be constructed as a foreigner who submits to China by giving its language and culture the respect that every country may feel it deserves. This is particularly salient for China, given its victim/victor nationalism discourse (Li, 2008), discussed in Chapter 3.

I put this suggestion to Ryan, who agreed that China's 'victor' narrative may frame the way he is constructed in class:

My speaking Chinese can be seen as submission [to China]. ... I have no professional goals as a teacher so I'm willing to sacrifice my identity as a teacher to fit the mould of what they want ... because I'm more interested in China than in teaching [English].

(Ryan, interview, 10/06/09)

Beth suggests that Ryan's proficiency in Chinese provides a platform for students to build rapport with him. It may also allow students to feel that Ryan understands their struggles to learn a language:

Beth: [Ryan's] a cute, foreign guy, and he's their age ... he can flirt, be funny, and still make them talk. And he speaks Chinese.

Phiona: Does he use Chinese in class?

Beth: Sometimes.

Phiona: And they enjoy that?

Beth: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Because it's their chance to tell him, oh, his Chinese is rubbish. And they'll say, 'oh, your Chinese is so bad'.

Phiona: But it isn't. It's way better than their English.

Beth: No, but they can tell him that, and it gives them something better than him. That they can say, 'well, our English may be bad, but your Chinese is bad'.

(Beth, interview, 03/06/08)

Ryan's knowledge of and interest in China may therefore be constructed by students as a validation of Chineseness. Ryan also suggests that the very presence of foreign teachers, and even the need for English language teaching, can be constructed as evidence of Chinese cultural superiority:

They use a White person to show it's an English class. ... It's like, 'foreigners don't speak Chinese', right? ... When I say, '*ni hao*' [hello] to someone and they're like, 'wow, your Chinese is so good'. They're very arrogant about their language, it's almost like, 'you can say one, two words of Chinese and you're a foreigner? That's amazing.' ... [They think] Chinese is way too hard for foreigners to be able to speak, that's why they've got to go and learn English.

(Ryan, interview, 10/06/09)

The construction of foreign teachers as different from, and inferior to, Chinese people may be a mechanism for the affirmation of Chinese self-esteem. It may also be that the Chinese co-teachers, many of whom appeared to be self-conscious about their own level of communicative competence in English, construct the foreign teachers as fun but ineffective as it is professionally safer to do so; this was exemplified by Hua in Chapter 7. Of course, many of the activities that the foreign teachers are pushed into undertaking in class *are*, in fact, fun but ineffective. This adds evidence to this construction, particularly when viewed from a Chinese culture of learning in which communication-focused activities may appear insubstantive.

Infantilizing Chinese students

The discursive construction of the role of foreign teacher as a foreign entertainer is dangerous, though, as it may create and entrench negative stereotyping more generally, on both sides. While students seem to construct foreign Others as less accomplished and less serious than the Chinese, the participant teachers may also construct the students as children and the Chinese education system as inferior.

The foreign teachers construct the students as *Others* mainly by infantilizing them, for instance by referring to them as 'kids'. This is common practice among the teachers at teachers' meetings and in their conversations outside class. In addition, some teachers used very childish games/activities in class, justifying them as age-appropriate for their students, most of whom are in their early 20s. One example was Harry's drawing activity, explained at a teachers' meeting, for which he had asked his students to bring colouring crayons to class; Harry was the PSU oral English senior teacher in 2007. Another example of an activity, also suggested at a Wednesday meeting, was to have the students act out a dating agency role-play and have them explain to the teacher, playing the role of their 'father', why the partner they had chosen was appropriate. Infantilization also occurred in the classroom observations: Ryan repeatedly asked his students what colour of chalk they would like him to use and Ollie and Leo used teacher and students' drawings on the board to elicit laughter from the other students.

Beth attributes some foreign teachers' use of the word 'kids' to refer to their students to teachers' own struggles with their role and professional identity:

It really jars, especially for the teachers who are, like, 24. I'm like, 'you're two years older than they are'. It's a very diminutive way to refer to them ... In some ways I think it's a method of distancing yourself from them because you are very close in

age to them, that you distance yourself by calling them 'kids'. It's a way of, you know, establishing, re-establishing your status. ... It could be a way to, for you to, kind of, reaffirm your own position, that you're the one with power, ... because you're feeling that you need that power or that you don't have that power.

(Beth, 27/05/08)

The *Old China Hands* give a different explanation for the construction of Chinese students as 'kids', citing their perception of Chinese students' immaturity compared to behavioural norms of young Western adults:

Val: I don't find that strange at all. [Chinese university students] they're so immature. University students here, you can take five years off them mentally, not intellectually, but emotionally and culturally, because the culture is like that ... they're not allowed to be independent.

Neil: We all started part-time jobs at 15. They don't; they're children. They sit around watching TV, playing video games.

Val: They're 22, whatever, and they're like children. They're walking around with these *Hello Kitty* t-shirts [*Hello Kitty* is a Japanese cartoon character]. They are emotionally much, much younger.

Ursula: Boys on one side [of the classroom], girls on the other.

Greg: Yeah, Chinese students are not very worldly.

Val: [In Western cultures] we travel [as young adults], these people, no, they've never been out of the courtyard [Chinese apartment blocks often have a courtyard in which children play].

(*Old China Hands* focus group, 08/09/07)

But perhaps Val is interpreting students' behaviours through a lens of what these might mean in her *own* culture. For Val, wearing *Hello Kitty*, watching TV, and not having travelled might signal childishness; in China, the meanings and norms associated with such signifiers may be different. Claire gives another example of a potential misreading of students' outward behaviour:

They speak a lot of Chinese [in class] and I think it's only to be expected, because they're at that sort of age, aren't they, where they don't want to seem like they're speaking English all the time and be showing off to their friends.

(Claire, interview, 13/10/07)

Ryan gives another misinterpretation-of-symbols explanation, this time language related: 'of course Harry gets them to bring crayons and he thinks they're kids. Harry's Chinese is crap. When you don't speak Chinese it's easy to think they're stupid. You can't see the complexity in what they say' (Ryan, interview, 02/10/07).

The PSU teachers' construction of the students as kids may also lead them to reduce Chinese university education. Sam, a PSU teacher in 2008-2009, compares his own university experience with his perception of PSU:

Teaching here I got lazy, thought of games to play because that is what our children (oh sorry, students!) want to do. ... When I was at university we would discuss topics such as abortion and have big debates about the ethics of it. Over here, we have to think of a game to play with every topic. It is like being a children's entertainer/clown. ... And I personally feel that after 10-12 years of learning English most of my students should be ashamed of their level of English. I went to France for

a year [as part of my university degree] and I passed 15 exams and wrote a 8000 word thesis in French. In China we play games!?! What is that about?

(Sam, e-mail, 26/06/09)

Sam's point of view is perhaps understandable, given that the students he teaches push for 'fun', and that they appear to construct the role of foreign teachers as entertainers. Beth also described her view of the PSU students: 'we would consider them less emotionally mature for their age than American students; all they want is recess' (interview, 09/06/09).

Karen described how she had formed a similar opinion of her 'childish' students:

[A friend] teaches little kids ... and he'll tell me about the lessons that he did ... and I thought 'oh, that sounds funny, I'll try that with my class'. And it was so childish, it was literally every time I showed them a card with the word in Chinese they had to throw a ball at the correct word in English. Childish, yeah? They loved it. And every lesson they just want to play stupid, pointless games like that. ... It makes me think less of the students.

(Karen, interview, 14/06/09)

Of course, we might ask why Karen chose to use such a 'childish' activity in the first place, and she goes on to explain her struggle to know what else to do in lessons, in which she feels under pressure to be 'fun'.

It also makes me think less of myself, because it makes me think 'what am I doing here?' ... But it passes the time and that's all I think about, is getting through those hours. What we're doing is pointless. ... It's a joke, English teaching is a joke.

(Karen, interview, 14/06/09)

Child-like assumptions about the students are being made by most of the teachers. However, some students are behaving in child-like ways, perhaps as they perceive that the foreign teachers expect this 'fun' behaviour, as the foreign teachers are themselves constructed as 'fun'.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the possibility that oral English teaching at PSU is not about English teaching at all. It is my contention that there is a hidden curriculum and that this dictates the conceptual space within which the foreign teachers are allowed to operate. This may not be intentional, but it is an unstated construction of the type 'foreignness' that is allowed and valued in the context. It is not mainly about English language teaching.

Instead, the hidden curriculum for students appears to be primarily one of contact with representatives of Chinese constructions of 'the West', and with attributes deemed 'Western' such as personal confidence and expressing opinions. Ryan's case is explored as indicative of this possibility as he consistently received very positive feedback from his students but would be considered ineffective against almost any measure of English language teacher competence (e.g. Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). It is therefore suggested that Ryan's practice represents the implicit curriculum, and his case has been studied with the intention of understanding this hidden construct.

Of course, it is epistemologically problematic to infer purpose from practice. Instead of there being ulterior motives lurking under the surface, the constraints and challenges described thus far may simply be the nature of working in a cross-cultural context, with an under-qualified Director of Studies hired by a profit-making recruitment company, at an

under-funded second-tier university in a rapidly developing country. This, of course, takes place within the globalized world economy in which individuals may seek to acquire transnational capital, whether by teaching in China for a while or by making 'foreign friends' with their Western English teachers. However, a hidden curriculum *does* appear to be operating at PSU. In this, the students' learning outcomes are different from the ostensible outcomes intended.

Similarly, for teachers, motivations for 'teaching English' at PSU may in fact be primarily the opportunity to acquire capital such as 'China experience' including language skills and all-important *guanxi* (connections), the cachet of transnationalism, or life experience more broadly. However, if this is the case, a number of further questions are raised about the nature of the intercultural contact that is taking place in this setting. The negative Othering of the Chinese students, teachers, and institutions in which some foreign teachers indulge raises the question of whether bridges, or barriers, are being built between Western and Chinese cultures in the PSU context. This is revisited in Chapter 11.

However, not all the foreign teachers experience PSU the same way. As discussed in Chapter 3, they bring themselves, and their *habitus*, with them, and these pre-existing identities affect the sensemaking they undertake in the context. This may explain why Karen or Harry, for example, infantilize their students while Beth and Ryan are more critical of this practice. Another factor affecting teachers' experiences in the context is gender, and the next chapter discusses teachers' gendered identities both as PSU teachers and as transnationals in Shanghai.