



Teacher's Day in China

One of the joys in working in a “foreign” country is learning about the traditions and outlooks of the people there; the stories behind and alongside the stories the home media decides to tell, which are often the only stories the home audiences are told. I was reminded of this simple fact recently when my partner, Jacquie, and I were the surprise subjects of a Teacher's Day online celebration, organized by the Paleo, Group staff and students at Nanjing University (NJU) in China, where I now teach.

Since the lockdown last Spring I have been teaching online from the UK; first, a *Statistics and Data Analysis in the Earth Sciences* course during the Spring semester and then a long, three module “short” course in *Writing a Scientific Article in English*, with Jacquie in the Summer. As I'm sure many of you realize, online teaching has its own positives and negatives for both teachers and students. But one thing both groups can agree on, it's a lot of work, made even more difficult in my – and the students' – case by the eight-hour time difference between Nanjing and London.

The writing course finished at the end of August and was quickly followed by Teachers' Day in China which fell on 10 September this year. As it turns out, most countries have a Teacher's Day to recognize the efforts and contributions of its educators. But owing to the fact that many countries celebrate this day on different dates, the international impact of the celebration is diminished. Thus, you can be forgiven for not recalling when Teacher's Day is in either the US (the Tuesday of Teacher Appreciation Week which falls on the first full week in May) or the UK (5 October, the date of World Teachers' Day). Suffice it to say, in the west Teachers' Day seems to have the same status as innumerable other obscure group-recognition days (e.g., Squirrel Appreciation Day, 21 Jan; National Weatherperson's Day, 5 Feb; Middle Child's Day, 12 Aug.) in which nothing much happens or is noted. Not so in China.

It will come as no surprise to many that China imbues education in general, and teaching in particular, with a reverence only westerners older than myself might recall, dimly, from their own youth; a time when teachers were accorded a level of status in their local communities akin to those of medical doctors, lawyers, clergy and bank managers. Sadly, this is very much the exception, rather than the rule, today at least in the west. But the teaching profession is highly regarded in China and has been throughout its long and eventful history.

Anyway, to get back to my story, Chinese Teachers' Day came and went this year and Jacquie and I barely noticed it. Last year I received bouquets of flowers from the Nanjing University Earth Science Department and a few students, but I had only just arrived in Nanjing to begin teaching my first courses there and didn't have any students yet. But this year, thanks to the COVID virus, it was back to the western standard of “no big deal”.

Then Jacquie received an unusual e-mail request from my NJU colleague Prof. Junxuan Fan that she attend the first part of regular — now online — graduate student research seminar which had been scheduled for last Friday (18 Sept.). Jacquie's not a paleontologist so this stuck us as somewhat odd. We assumed it was going to be a wash-up discussion of the Scientific Writing course, but it seemed bizarre to us to include that

discussion at the beginning of a series of graduate student research-project updates. However, over the past year we've learned to "go with the flow" in matters such as these with our Chinese friends and colleagues.

Once we'd logged into the Zoom meeting we were surprised to see that the whole of the NJU Paleo. group was in attendance. On close inspection (while we were waiting for a few stragglers to join) I was even more surprised to see the students we'd had on the final, and most intensive, module of the Scientific Writing course in attendance as I knew, from their manuscripts, they were not paleontologists. Indeed some were not even NJU students. But it came as a complete surprise when my secretary, Shuyi (Ariana) Xu announced that the first part of the program would be Jacquie's and my Teachers' Day Celebration!

The students quickly organized under the direction of Ariana and Huiqing Xu (not related) to introduce themselves and thank us personally for our teaching of the Scientific Writing course, which all had attended in some form. Then the students joined together to recite stanzas of the Kevin Huff poem, *Teachers* (see below), and Robert Frost's well-known *Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood*; all in English. Needless to say, Jacquie and I were both moved and touched by the outpouring of emotion and kind regard; justified, for the most part, solely as a result of our work on a single course (albeit unusual) course. Such a contrast with the importance teaching is accorded in the US and UK.

The lesson? We should all take care to remind our own teachers of how much influence they've had on our lives and to both thank and honor them for their efforts. The wider society might not accord teachers much respect these days, but that doesn't mean we have to succumb to its philosophies and standards. Also, we should spare a thought or two of thanks for our students. Their road is difficult, as was our own when we were students. Many have sacrificed much to be students and work toward a goal whose successful attainment is all too uncertain, at best. After all, without students willing to listen to, and learn from, what we have to say, we couldn't be teachers.

I've long regarded academic communities as islands within the larger towns/cities, regions, states and countries in which they are located and, like any island, they usually play host to an amazing variety of more-or-less endemic species. The larger culture may regard these endemics as objects of curiosity or surprise; on occasion disdain. But they are all part of the intellectual ecosystem that's sustained us for critical parts of our personal voyages of discovery. For some lucky few, we've been fortunate enough to spend the whole of our lives there. Recognizing and giving simple thanks to those who have helped us along our way doesn't seem like a lot, but when we take the time to do it, its importance is immeasurable, as is the responsibility we bear for assisting, encouraging and teaching those younger and/or less experienced than ourselves.

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Teachers
by Kevin William Huff

Teachers paint their minds;
And guide their thoughts;
Share their achievements;
And advise their faults.

Inspire a love;
Of knowledge and truth;
As you light the path;
Which leads our youth.

For our future brightens;
With each lesson you teach;
Each smile you lengthen;
Each goal you help reach.

For the dawn of each poet;
Each philosopher and king;
Begins with a teacher;
And the wisdom they bring.