
CHINA EFL: ONE REASON FOR MIDNIGHT RUNNERS

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INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for foreigners teaching English as a foreign language in China to pull a midnight runner. A midnight runner is simply when a foreign teacher disappears in the middle of the night without explanation and not due to accident, illness, injury, death or kidnapping. By stealth, and usually right after pay day, the foreign teacher packs his/her bags, waits until everyone is asleep, and leaves without a trace, no forwarding address or any word to anyone.

There are a myriad of reasons for this kind of behavior, sometimes it is due to unhealthy and even dangerous or life-threatening working conditions. Sometimes it is a simple case of homesickness or culture shock. But more often than not, it is a case of missed expectations resulting from some basic misunderstanding. Foreigners come to China with expectations based upon their own personal prejudices and life experiences and when China does not measure up, disappointment and even despair sets in.

SOME ASSUMPTIONS

When westerners look at China's higher education system we tend to judge it by western standards and that includes certain western assumptions. For instance, we assume that higher education means advanced learning. We assume students with a baseline preparatory education. We assume educational goals and objectives based upon western priorities. We assume psychologically mature and motivated students. We assume that foreign teachers are required for the same goals and objectives as if they remained in their homeland educational system. And we assume a western sense of justice. These assumptions lead to false expectations and differing levels of frustration, that, if not brought under control, can and do lead to psychological abnormalities that may culminate in a midnight runner.

HIGHER EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY

China places great emphasis on Science and Technology while Arts and Humanities receive only 10% of the attention and funding as Science and Technology.

Properly prepared and qualified students are directed into Science and Technology programs.

Arts and Humanities could just as easily be called Advanced Warehousing for those unable to get into Science and Technology. Do not overlook the warehouse mentality because it explains a lot of what westerners find unacceptable in China's higher education system. Young people are warehoused pending an optimistic job market expansion by the time they graduate. Keeping them in school, any school is better than letting them roam the streets and end up in prison. Foreign teachers usually teach English as a foreign language in the Arts and Humanities division, even though they may have students from the Science and Technology division. Some Science and Technology schools hire foreign EFL teachers who work for the English Department within the Arts and Humanities Division.

STUDENTS

It is my layman's observation that Chinese college students have the psychological development of western junior high school students, and a much narrower world view than their western counterparts. These kids are not academically or psychologically prepared for the rigors of a real college education. They require babysitters or entertainers, not highly qualified college professors. And if you are managing a warehouse of young people, you need babysitters and entertainers as tools of crowd control. CLASS MONITORS ARE STUDENTS APPOINTED BY THE ADMINISTRATION TO BE CLASS LEADER, PROVIDE SERVICE TO THE DEPARTMENT AND SLATED FOR PARTY MEMBERSHIP. Many foreign teachers see the class monitor more as a spy who reports everything the foreign teacher says and does. Class monitors are not an established factor in any western institution of higher education and thus create confusion and misunderstanding for the foreign teacher.

FOREIGN TEACHERS

Foreign teachers fall into two distinct categories: Visiting Professors (VPs) and TEFLers. VPs are treated with high regards and excellent perks. TEFLers are treated with much disdain, mostly earned through poor teaching or anti-social behavior according to Chinese standards. China has put up with 25 years of TEFLers who have constituted a collective great disappointment. VPs retain their university affiliations back home and bring prestige to China. TEFLers are perceived as a group of unemployables in their home country. VPs come to China through formal cooperation channels while TEFLers come any way they can, even using illegal means.

CHINESE ADMINISTRATORS

The academic administrators mostly have little or no formal or informal administrative training or education. They are simply party members in good standing with academic accomplishments that by western standards are not bona fide academic accomplishments. But the academic administrators do not even run the schools.

Every academic administrator has a shadow Party Secretary calling all of the shots. The Party runs the colleges for Party purposes.

CURRICULUM

The core curriculum for all majors is Party Doctrine, not academic subject matter. Westerners could better understand China's higher education if the colleges were called Party Education Camps. This is the training ground for future party leaders.

SUMMARY

“Foreign Experts” hired to babysit and entertain young people, who are treading water until there is adequate job market expansion to absorb them, in “Colleges” and “Universities” whose main goal is to train future Party leaders, become easily disappointed and even disenfranchised due to their own lack of understanding of the Chinese educational (sic) system and their real role within that system.

China is a land where men digging ditches along the roadside wear business suits and doormen and women at hotels are college graduates. A college education is required for any government job, including jobs cleaning toilets in state owned business enterprises.

China claims to be developing a highly educated society. English as L2 is mandatory throughout China's educational system, primary through college. But it is all English learning and not English acquisition, 16 years of learning all about English to pass CET 4 and 6 without acquiring any ability to speak or write comprehensible English. A Highly educated society with Chinese characteristics does not compute with any western standard or ideal of “highly educated.”

The major limitation of this paper is that I am a westerner looking at China through western eyes that recognize how little they really see. Maybe that recognition is why I have never felt compelled to do a midnight runner.