

National Taiwan University and I

Kirill O. Thompson/唐格里

Professor

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

Introduction

In August, I commenced my thirtieth year of teaching at National Taiwan University. In fact, I became acquainted with NTU even longer ago than that. As a graduate student at the University of Hawaii from 1973 until 1980, I met several graduate students and faculty who had graduated from NTU or taken classes at the Stanford Center; without exception, they had fond memories of and warm praises for NTU as “a Mecca of advanced learning,” and recommended strongly that I go there to work on my dissertation.

University of Hawaii

At the University of Hawaii, I studied Comparative and Chinese Philosophy. In my free time, I read Chinese history and literature. And, I attended classes in Classical Chinese for five years. During that period, friends from Taiwan and Hong Kong introduced me to their cultures, lifestyles and, importantly, cuisines. Also, several of my American friends were deeply interested in Chinese, Japanese and Hawaiian culture, and we sometimes visited Chinatown or Little Tokyo where we enjoyed browsing in the cultural shops and book stores and, of course, dining in the restaurants. Also, the Honolulu Art Academy and the Bishop Museum had interesting collections. Later, I felt moved to learn that Dr. Sun Yat-sen, father of the ROC, had spent some year in Hawaii.

During my last years in Hawaii, Taiwanese and American friends regaled me with fascinating stories about Taiwan. They stressed Taiwan’s rich, diverse culture, its free lifestyle, its lovely scenery and great

food, and especially its warm, friendly people. (I felt moved by their accounts of Taiwan’s aborigines. We in modern society have much to learn from the aborigines who live in touch with nature.) Back at that time, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing in Mainland China, fueling xenophobic hysteria; I could not study traditional Chinese philosophy there. Fortunately, in 1980, I received a grant from the Pacific Cultural Foundation in Taipei to come and work on my dissertation in Taiwan. Upon arrival in early August 1980, I signed on as an instructor at the NTU Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures -- and the rest is history.

NTU in 1980

NTU looked very different in the summer of 1980 than it does today. The Freshman Building was the newest structure on a stately campus dominated by the original “quad.” Entering NTU’s Main Gate and walking down Palm Tree Boulevard, I saw the elegant old colonial era buildings; the only cars were an occasional taxi. With tall grass all around, the campus had a pastoral quality; I almost expected to see a shepherd playing a flute and leading his flock. (Soon afterwards, I came across a real farming village behind the campus, and from my dormitory window I could hear hogs and chickens, including cocks crowing at sunrise!) That summer, the campus was devoid of students, and the offices kept only morning hours. It seemed quite peaceful, idyllic and civilized to me. Nowadays, even during the summer vacation, the well-manicured NTU campus is bristling with insistent car traffic and filled with legions of students and visitors.

This fervent activity is well and good, but I do miss the tranquility of summer here in the old days. Teachers as well as students need this tranquility, not only to prepare classes and conduct research, but to refresh our spirit!

Faculty Relations Past and Present

The pace of faculty and student life at NTU accelerated continuously during the past thirty years. Like my colleagues, I have been caught up in the drive to research and publish--while still offering meaningful classes. This retrospect stirs memories of a very different lifestyle thirty years ago at NTU. Back in 1980, there were few if any PCs, and the teaching facilities were primitive. The faculty lounges were not air-conditioned, though trusty Tatung fans delivered cool breezes-- and sticky dust-- in the sweltering heat. Despite the barebones facilities, colleagues and students were down-to earth, warm and friendly. The lounges were often enlivened with tales and insights and advice shared by local and foreign faculty. For me, nearly every encounter in the faculty lounge—usually the 5th floor lounge in the Freshman Building—was either a learning experience that aided my acculturation to life in Taiwan or an opportunity for me to share insights about American life and culture with local colleagues.

Nowadays, such conversations happen less often, as busy NTU colleagues scurry back and forth between their classes, offices and meetings. We barely find time for simple greetings, not to mention longer discussions, which tend to be reserved for those serious Department issues (that usually vanish overnight). We find little time for sharing and learning together, not to mention just “getting together.”

Faculty - Student Relations Past and Present

The classroom situation is similar. Thirty years ago, teacher student relations were relatively warm and hearty. For example, I recall taking my students on

several class outings 25 or 30 years ago, usually it was English conversation students. They were eager to show me places like Tamsui and to Hsin Peitou on the old Tamsui Railway Line. I recall seeing another teacher on a bus stop in Kungkuan one cold Saturday, taking her freshman to Wulai! In those days, the students spoke with pride and enthusiasm about their hometowns around Taiwan. They even brought photographs and local delicacies to the class! Overseas students also liked to share stories about local customs in Southeast Asia. A few students, especially in the evening division, still felt a sense of identification with their hometowns. Two years ago, a female student wrote sensitive compositions about her rural hometown in Yunlin, and a young man from Chingmen wrote vivid stories about the unique lifestyle and customs in Chingmen.



With my NTU student Benson. He wrote and directed the DFLL graduation drama.

Nowadays, however, most students and teachers are busier, so we seldom find a time to get together. Once in a while, we arrange a meal, if we are lucky. Also, students tend to have a weaker identification with their hometowns, and their conversations now have a more personal or subjective quality. The photographs they share in class tend to reflect their foreign travel experiences more than their hometowns.

There are several reasons for this. Thirty years ago, the hometowns were beautiful, quiet country towns, surrounded by green farmers' fields. Road traffic was lighter so that the students had adventures playing outdoors and riding bikes around their towns and the surrounding countryside. In the decades since, the town roads were widened and many of the charming old traditional buildings were torn down and replaced by nondescript cement buildings. Additionally, nowadays, not only do more cars and motorcycles ply the town roads; huge gravel trucks roar through the towns, bringing serious pollution and risk of injury or even death. Another reason is that the students' thoughts are increasingly filled with the unreal world of the Internet rather than with the real world of Nature, face-to-face interaction, local culture, etc. Like their city cousins, country children spend their free time online playing games or exploring strange websites. Less often do they go out together to explore nature or play sports. In fact, many of them dream of moving to the big city where "they can get the latest information."

City and Country

When I hear these words, I often think to myself, "Very little of this so-called latest information is significant; little of it is related to the necessities of life and intellect. Rarely is it urgent or, in Henry David Thoreau's words, 'pertinent.' Real life experiences, real life engagements with people and affairs are more important." My childhood was divided between the city (Chicago) and the countryside (Minnesota). I recall having more information when I stayed on my grandparents' farm in Minnesota because they read widely and followed current affairs and because I had time to watch the evening news and read the papers and magazines. Also, there were two colleges near our farm in Minnesota, so I really had access to the latest books and information there. In Chicago, there was less time to read and think, and I followed the trends like my friends and classmates. Thus, I always smile when I hear big city students (and faculty) claim they have better access to information. I learned more about life

and nature, even about national and world events, in the countryside than I did in the city. Ironically, I often found that my grandparents on the farm had a better grasp of politics and international affairs than did my teachers.

I admit, however, that today's students with their personal computers are more active in seeking knowledge and more outspoken in the classroom. They want their classes to be more student-centered and interactive. Moreover, they want the teachers to give them space to concentrate on the topics that interest them. This is a wonderful trend, though a balance must be struck between the need for teachers to give expert information and views and the thirst of students to explore the data and facts and formulate their own views. From the perspective that one attends college mostly to learn how to learn and to commence a lifetime of personal learning, it is wonderful that students have more opportunity to go deeper into the topics that really interest them. The caveat is that students need to research diligently, think independently and, above all, avoid plagiarism. At the same time, they need to remain committed to accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity. Otherwise, what is the point of a university education?

Although, there is some distance between teachers and students nowadays, I find that when students feel a personal affinity with a certain teacher and they are interested in that teacher's field, they make efforts to have more contact with the teacher. During the past



With my wife Shiu-hung Thompson and my dog Chipper Thompson outside the NTU sports dome.

decade, I noted that several students who performed well in my classes and enjoyed good rapport with me tended to keep in touch with me by email or postcards. They sometimes asked for advice regarding their advanced studies and occasionally asked to get together just to talk freely and share experiences and views. These contacts have been meaningful to me. A number of these students are now finishing their doctorates overseas.

Enriching Faculty and Student Relations

Occasionally, I wonder if there is a way to enrich the relations among faculty and between teachers and students. The problem is made difficult because younger faculty members are not even aware that this is a problem. They take the status quo, the current situation of scurrying between classes and offices, for granted. Moreover, under the school's publish-or-perish system, faculty members, especially the new arrivals, never feel relaxed and able to enjoy social occasions. Also, some of the younger faculty stress being "professionals" with expertise limited to a narrow spectrum, and thus little interest in their colleague's fields. In some cases, their "professionalism" inclines them to treat students as clients or consumers, with whom to have limited, perhaps "clocked" contact.

What can be done? As a university and graduate student in the United States, I saw that, once or twice each semester, departments held "socials" for faculty members to relax together and chat over cocktails. Those departments were small, so the faculty could meet in each other's homes in turn. Departments at NTU tend to be too large to meet at colleague's homes, but they could rent a room at a restaurant or at the NTU Student Activity Center for such occasions once or twice a year. About fifteen years ago, my Department at NTU arranged several faculty trips to scenic spots around Taiwan, such in Nantou County. Once we flew to Penghu. Through such activities, we saw each other's families, chatted casually and became closer. When I run into those colleagues now, we still share memories of those activities.

As to improved communication with, and among, our students, perhaps each college or department could set up a lounge with sofas, media, reading materials, etc.; but, with no computers provided, for they would defeat the purpose of the lounge. The lounge would be for students of the department to get together; but, faculty would be expected to drop in once in a while to chat with students and get to know their needs, problems and suggestions.



From my daughter Sherry's graduation from Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona last December.

Working at NTU has been an enriching and fulfilling experience. If I were given the chance to start over, I would still choose to teach at NTU. Besides working with eminent colleagues and gifted students, I felt privileged to participate in NTU's effort to become a top university in the world! And, I look forward to joining NTU's Centennial Celebrations on November 15, 2028! 🎉 (本期本文策畫／外文系江文瑜教授)