

FEATURE

Reflections

Teaching Adventures in Cambodia, Taiwan, and Japan

By Florence Jue

Cambodia (1957-59)

In the early years of the Foreign Service, the spouse of a diplomat was prohibited from earning a paycheck overseas, but could only volunteer for local charitable activities, to teach, and to assist with embassy's representational functions. This tradition is now long gone, partly due to the demand for equal opportunity, and partly for gradual recognition of the inequality by the government as it moved forward the 21st century. When I accompanied my husband Stanton to his first overseas post in Cambodia, I was recruited early on to teach English at a local school because I happened to hold a Teaching Certificate from UC/Berkeley. I was surprised to learn that it was an agricultural college for government officials which was located not in the capital but at a rural area nearly an hour from Phnom Penh. This was a challenge of the unknown and wonder; I did not know what to expect.

The school, I was informed, was an institute to train young government officials in



various agricultural sectors for the country's development. It was located southwest of Phnom Penh, the capital, approximately 45 minutes by

ferry boat, across the mighty Mekong River near the junction of the Tonle Sap River and then by jeep. An unusual aspect of the Tonle Sap was that it flows in two directions with a portion forming a lake. During the dry season it drains into a lake, one of the largest in Southeast Asia, and during the rainy season it expands into the Mekong.

A few times a week I took the local ferry, riding across the Mekong along with the chickens and the other barnyard population. The school jeep waiting for me was always on time and the Cambodian driver always welcomed me with the friendliest smile. Then we bounced along the unpaved dirt roads, colorful with the sights, sounds and smells of the exotic, tropical, rural countryside dotted with vendors lining the road selling local fruits and vegetables, cooking wares, roadside snacks and other street foods and huge ceramic storage jars serving as village walls, while we slowed down or swerved to avoid the barnyard animals and the children playing about.

Upon arriving at the school I was escorted to a simple outdoor porch type classroom. About 25-30 students in their early 20's waited eagerly to learn conversational English. They attacked the elementary and basic phrases with great enthusiasm and gusto, drawing large crowds to the classroom. It was a pleasure to see such interest and motivation. A Khmer language magazine carried a story of my work as the "American Ferry Boat Teacher from California." How can one forget such a unique experience! I was told that some of the students with enough English proficiency were sent to the United States and the Philippines for advanced training. But I never heard from them nor learned of their prospects, for, alas, this was long before

the era of the Killing Fields and who knows what had happened to them since then.

When the principal of the American Community School left for another post, I was asked to take over as principal where I also taught the 7th and 8th grades. This was a vastly different environment in contrast to that of the Cambodian agriculture school.

Taiwan (1959-62)

At our second post, Taipei, I was asked again to teach English at a local school. To my surprise and pleasure, I was to teach at the Taipei First Girls High School, the premier girls school with the brightest students on the island of Taiwan.

The experience at this school was sheer delight. Each time I stepped into the classroom of



about 30 students, the girls dressed in green school uniform and hair all trimmed just beneath the ears, promptly stood up at attention and in unison sang out, "Good morning, Mrs. Jue." And not until I gave permission did

they all sit down. (30 some years later, on a return visit, I discovered the girls at the First Girls School were still wearing the same green uniforms and the same short haircut!) Together we practiced, conversed and repeated the essential phrases. One day, they

asked me to give each of them an American name. Effort was made to match each of the Chinese names with an American name – either phonetically or by meaning such as Judy, Mary, Lily – and they all embraced their new names with great delight.

As the school year came to a close, the girls discovered my fondness for Jiaotze (steamed dumplings). Immediately, they offered to come to our house and prepare homemade Jiaotze. When they arrived at our Jen Ai Road 4th Section home, they brought flour, vegetables, meat, rolling pins and boards, steam baskets and some, their mothers! Yes, mothers know how to fashion those delicious dumplings, not the young scholars.

Japan (1962-65)

Tokyo, our third overseas post, unlike Phnom Penh and Taipei, was a large hustling and bustling metropolis. The embassy was also one of the largest in the world, headed by Edwin O. Reischauer, a renowned Harvard scholar in Japanese history and culture. The embassy had a unique connection with the famed Nishimachi International School in Tokyo, as the founders of the school were Tane Matsukata and her sister Haru Matsukata Reischauer, the ambassador's wife.

Nishimachi, then, was a relatively small private school, which later expanded into grades K to 9 for children from multi-cultural and multi-lingual families and families who had spent time



Teaching at the Cambodian Ecole D'Agriculture at Prek Leap outside of the capital of Phnom Penh circa 1957.

overseas and wanted their children to maintain their international life styles. Nishimachi School founded in 1949 by the Matsukata sisters had a clear philosophy and identity: that was “to learn, to live, and to study together, yet still keep a special identity.” And in addition, the students were encouraged to learn a second language and to grow beyond a single culture. I was naturally attracted to its noble purpose and ideals when I was asked to teach English there. I had a special class of about 20 students at middle school level. We practiced both conversational and written English, toured local cultural sites such as Kamakura, visited American homes, etc. Often they came to our home in Harris House in the Akasaka district and visited and played with our two-year old daughter Patricia.

One autumn day in 2010, a Noriko in Tokyo emailed Patricia, asking if she was the Patricia Jue who lived in Tokyo when she was a

baby and her mother Florence Jue taught at Nishimachi! Apparently, Noriko, one of my former students found Patricia either on Face Book or Google, looked up her email on the Colgate University faculty directory and sent her an email asking if she was Mrs. Jue’s daughter. Patricia confirmed this with me and nearly half a century later I reconnected with one of my Nishimachi students from Japan. This truly was an astounding moment, resurrecting memories of a memorable experience in Japan.

Certainly, many foreign-service spouses living abroad, now or then, have shared these same experiences in one way or another. In retrospect, my time with the students in each of the three countries enriched my life and outlook tremendously. I hope my students of those many years ago look upon their experience with me in the same light.

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At the height of the Cold War, Florence Jue accompanied her husband, Stanton, to Foreign Service assignments in Southeast Asia where her husband was named first Chinese Affairs Officer in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Then she accompanied Stanton to assignments in Taipei, Tokyo, Saigon (safe-haven in Bangkok), Seoul, and Canberra. In retirement, she stayed in D.C. volunteering at the Freer/Sackler Galleries, the Kennedy Center, and WH Correspondence Office during Clinton and Obama administrations.

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