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Challenges and Opportunities at Kunshan's Newest International School

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Teaching Kunshan's Kids

An Interview with CISK Teacher Megan Banerjee

by Virgil Adams

Megan Banerjee has taught kindergarten students in the U.S. and at the Kunshan International and Canadian International schools in Kunshan. In many ways, she's the "gateway" to international education in Kunshan – for many parents, Megan's class sets their expectations for an international education in the city and gets their kids accustomed to what an international approach can offer.

I met with Megan to hear about the joys and challenges of teaching young kids, and of education in China and the U.S. in general.

KEA: Megan, can you tell me about yourself? What got you interested in education?

Megan: I grew up in a small farming community in Indiana. When I was little, my best friend wanted to be a teacher and I thought it would be fun, too. My earliest memory was teaching my stuffed animals, and I've always loved teaching. I didn't take it seriously, though, until high school when I was in an elective class geared to education.

In that class, I was working with a young boy of about five years old. One day, he was crying and frustrated with his class, and I realized that just teaching wasn't enough to help kids, that you have to be there for the whole child. That led me to pursue a degree in education in college.

Since then, I've worked in many areas. I helped teens that were in gangs, worked at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis and enjoyed working with young kids with difficult home lives in the US. Later, I went to Germany and visited classrooms there, and also visited India. Those experiences got me interested in international education.

KEA: And how did you get to Kunshan?

Megan: I had thought of teaching in China for a long time. It's a difficult environment for teachers in the US, and the economy is still weak there. My husband was interested in China as well, and he was offered a job here, so we decided to come here and try it out.

Originally, we visited Suzhou and Kunshan, but we liked Kunshan more. That was about a year ago, and we've been here since.

KEA: What was it about Kunshan that you liked?

Megan: At first it was just the convenience to where we worked. My husband works in Kunshan, and I started working at KSIS not long after we arrived in China. But now we like the pace of the city, the people here, and the quality of life.

KEA: What was your first impression of Kunshan?

Megan: I remember thinking that the women here were dressed beautifully, and that the driving was crazy. I was surprised by these things because before coming here I had a "National Geographic" image of the country and people – when I told my parents I was going to live in China, they thought I'd be living in some slum, but it's not like that at all: we have a driver at our disposal, we moved to a fully furnished nice apartment, and there are obviously many modern conveniences here.

The other thing I remember well was being surprised that there weren't many Chinese that speak English here. I assumed that more Chinese would speak English.

KEA: Was it hard to adapt to life in Kunshan?

Megan: I think that my experiences in other countries absolutely helped me here. I go to India for a month at a time, and the drivers there are crazy, too, so that aspect of life here wasn't as shocking to me as it is to many Americans.

There are many other things – street food, hospitals, and classroom environments -- that were easier for me to accept and adapt to because I've spent time in other countries

The main difficulty came in communicating with people: it was hard to get around with taxis, for example, and I couldn't find a map in English.

I never had a moment when I thought it was too much and was thinking of leaving, but one big reason for that is that my husband is here with me.

KEA: Let me turn the discussion to education. The Western approach is very different from the Chinese one. What, in your opinion, is a good curriculum and approach for a young child?

Megan: I think that every teacher has his or her own style, and -- as long as they're committed to the child or children -- different styles can work.

I tailor my lessons to be at the level of the children. In my class, I have a Chinese child that needs to speak English, so one approach I'm using is rote memorization of words; once she has the basics down, we can progress to games and other approaches. So I'm using a combination of the "Chinese" and the "Western" approaches to teach this student.

Generally, I use a combination of Chinese-style homework, but also some in-class activities in which the child is responsible for his or her own learning, with the teacher providing direction and interaction.

KEA: What do you think of the Chinese curriculum?

Megan: I haven't really seen the Chinese curriculum taught. The English curriculum I was given to teach at KSIS was done by a Chinese publisher, but I didn't' think it was adequate because it didn't teach phonics and other important things. I kind of like a mix of approaches and curriculum.

KEA: You've taught in both the U.S. and China – what do you find the major differences to be?

Megan: Some of the differrences I've experienced may be unique: in the U.S., I was working in inner-city schools with troubled youth, while here I'm at private schools with many high achievers.

Here, I've seen classrooms that are set up sparsely, and school administrations in China can be too focused on cost effectiveness. It's a matter of resources – many schools in China don't put a high emphasis on facilities.

I also find that the push for education is different between the two countries. In the U.S., there were parents that weren't very involved with their kids' education. Here, it's the opposite: some parents are too involved and too worried about what's going on in the classroom; they want to constantly audit the work of the teacher.

The style of learning is also different: I believe that rote learning is good and necessary, but often if a kid makes a mistake here he or she has to go in front of everyone to fix it. In the West, that wouldn't happen because it hurts the confidence of the child. Here, it works because the kids react differently to it.

KEA: Other differences?

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Megan: Of course, there are many other differences: it's harder to get older students in China to work together in a group, and there aren't many group-based activities here. Extracurricular activities are also different: in the U.S., most kids play or are part of a sports team; here, the kids are going to tutoring classes, music lessons or other less physical things.

In high school here, I'd teach students something and ask the kids a question, and no one would say anything – that might be a face thing. Getting Chinese to relax and just enjoy themselves in group activities is tough – I think that's why so many group activities, even amongst adult Chinese, are so structured and regimented here.

KEA: The pressure on kids from their parents in Asia is notorious – I saw that a lot when I taught in Japan. What's your view on that?

Megan: At the end of the day, Asian parents really want their kids to be successful. They'll do everything to insure their kids have a better life. In the West, parents want what's best for their kids, of course, but there's not so much pressure on the child to excel – parents want to insure that the child is happy and gets some choice in what they'll do.

In my personal experience here, I've never had any problem with parents. I like to communicate with them weekly, and that helps. I find I get a lot of respect from parents, and I think that teachers in general get treated more respectfully here than they do in the U.S.

KEA: Have you adapted your approach to education since coming here?

Megan: I think I have changed a lot. In a lot of cases, I'm more direct with my teaching – i.e. having kids repeat after me when I'm teaching them English, for example; this forces the kids to participate and talk with me directly.

I put in a lot of things into the classroom to help the kids, like pictures and flash cards. I'm studying Chinese and trying to find ways to implement the Chinese culture into all of the curriculum, not just for things like Chinese holidays.

KEA: Do you think the weak economy in the West and the strong one here has a big impact on education?

Megan: The last school I taught at in the U.S. did really well with our budget, and we were able to get smart boards in all the classrooms the year I left. In the Midwest, the economy definitely impacted the teachers – we were all afraid of losing our jobs. Here, you don't have all the resources you do in the U.S., but there isn't as much fear of job security amongst teachers.

Many schools in the West have had to eliminate programs in art, music and sports. I think that components of all those things should be incorporated in kids' educations, and they help kids be more creative and gives them a welcome break from the more rigorous and demanding stuff. I think that China's strong economy means that programs like those are still available in schools here, and that's very positive.

KEA: What about the behavior of kids here vs. in the West?

Megan: When I taught 6th grade in the U.S. I think I saw a lot more defiance than what you see in classrooms in China. Here, the problems are things like cell phones use in the classroom or kids being lazy.

One very nice thing about the system here is that the relationship between the teachers and students is very strong. Oftentimes, the students and their families keep in touch with the teacher long after the student's has left a teacher's class.

Overall, I think that students are more respectful towards teachers here.

KEA: Do you see big differences in the approach to disciplining kids at school?

Megan: I've seen people with the attitude that it's ok to rough kids up a little in the classroom. In the U.S., there's a very definite "no-touch" policy. Here, if a teacher tugs on a child's arm or poke them on the forehead, that's viewed as ok. In China, lighter physical punishments are viewed as acceptable, and a way to keep kids scared of their teachers and willing to listen.

I don't practice any kind of physical discipline on kids in my classes, but I can understand teachers who take that approach in order to maintain authority in the classroom.

The biggest problems I see in classrooms here have to do with laziness and boredom. When kids are bored, they're more apt to act out, so part of the job of the teacher is to make sure the kids are engaged in the classroom. That in itself can prevent a lot of problems.

KEA: What's a "great kid" for you, and what's a "problem student"?

Megan: A great kid is one that the teacher never has to worry about – they do their work, they participate, and they're engaged. A tough kid is harder to define. I think of a student that I could never reach. It makes me wonder if I could have done something better, or if other people in the child's life could have done something better.

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KEA: Can you tell right away who's going to be trouble and who's going to be a star?

Megan: As teachers, we have that ideology and think we can, but often those things change and we're wrong. Sometimes a student starts out as tough for the teacher but they change. I had a student that was messing up in some classes and having trouble with his teachers, but I called his parents and they got involved. We all worked together to help him and it worked. That's an example of a great success story.

KEA: What's a good parent, from a teacher's standpoint? What's a difficult parent?

Megan: A good parent is someone that does more than just drop their kid off at school; they also help their child at home and really wants what's best for him or her. A tough parent is someone that just doesn't care. A teacher is only there with the child for a fraction of their lives, but a parent is the teacher they'll have the rest of their lives.

Sometimes I have to shift from being the child's teacher to being the parent's teacher – they ask how they can get their kids to stop playing with the cell phone so much, or something like that. I've had good luck with parents in China. The worst I've got here was a parent that complained that I wasn't giving enough homework – something you'd never hear in the US.

KEA: Megan, what are your views of international education in Kunshan?

Megan: I think it's great that Kunshan has something to offer foreigners that want their kids to be surrounded by the Chinese culture, as well as a place to go if they want a Western environment.

The problem I see isn't in the schools, necessarily, but in the infrastructure around them. For example, finding good expat housing near the international schools here is very tough. Expat mothers don't have their own transportation a lot of times and can't live near the international schools, so they go to Suzhou instead.

There are also things that Kunshan should have that parents could be proud of and we could show off. Last year, the Lamborghini Hotel in Kunshan had a children's choir come in and sing Christmas carols. That choir had to be bused in from Suzhou because the KSIS doesn't have something like that, and that's a shame.

KEA: What advice you would give to a foreign teacher thinking of coming here?

Megan: Do your research – on the school, on the area, on your housing and everything else that's going to be part of your life here. Many people will come here and realize this isn't what they expected before moving here. . But I think that if you're open minded and realize that no matter where you go, your first few weeks are going to be really hard because you're in a foreign country, you'll cope better.

Once you're here, you should go out of your way to get to know people. You'll learn more about the culture through the people you meet here than almost any other way.

Most importantly, I think people in China are very sweet, and if you need something, they will help you.

KEA: What do you like most about CISK, and what would you like to see done differently?

Megan: I'm happy to see that in Kunshan there is an international school with a complete English curriculum and certified teachers that gives people here a choice of a more Westernized education. I enjoy that we're a small school where everyone knows everyone else.

In terms of things I'd like to see done differently, I think that faster decision-making would be nice, and having more students would make things better. I'd really like to see the School reach out more to the community. When you hear "Kunshan", you should

s very tight here. s like going into makes Kunshan

think "CISK", and we need to build to that point. We should be active participants in the community.

I am an American teacher, but I feel like that here I can help build and create something for the community. I think the idea that I could make a difference at CISK was the biggest factor for me moving to a new school. It was a scary step, but I wouldn't change a thing.

KEA: Who in the School do you work closely with? What makes a good boss?

Megan: I work very closely with my teaching staff. It is very important to communicate and train our Chinese staff about Western-style teaching. Typically, the boss is the principal, and there are different styles. The one I like the most is the one that trusts their teacher and that is there to guide them. He or she stops in to get to know my students, gets to know how I teach, listens to my ideas and offers suggestions to me.

KEA: Are there difference between bosses here and the U.S.?

Megan: In the US, there is a certain standard we have to perform to. Here, there is no standard that shows whether or not the teacher is doing well. There's not as much emphasis put on teacher evaluations here. In the U.S., I was evaluated four times a year, and the principal would have radom walk bys and take notes; here, it's scheduled and infrequent.

KEA: How about the teachers? Do the foreign teachers interact well with the Chinese staff and the other teachers?

Megan: Yes. Usually, though, interaction is just a matter of the staff helping you translate or communicate. There's no teacher's lounge where teachers can socialize and get to know each other. In Western schools we don't have separate rooms for teacher's offices, but you have those here.

KEA: What do you do for fun?

Megan: My husband and I have a list of favorite places we go to: Royal Thai for great Thai food, Yan Weh (a Korean BBQ restaurant), and we really like Leckers Restaurant. Of course, we love the Oasis and we're sad we don't live near it any longer. We also like to go swimming at the Lamborghini Hotel. I also like to get massages, and there are some very good spas in Kunshan.

I like that the expat community is very tight here. Going to a restaurant or bar is like going into Cheers -- you know everyone. It makes Kunshan feel like home for many of us.

KEA: What do you not like about Kunshan?

Megan: Transportation here is a big issue – it can take an hour to get downtown in rush hour, and we really need a lot more taxis. A subway would make life a lot easier, also.

I wish there were some local shops where we could buy Western foods – finding foods you like here can be a struggle.

Housing's also a problem. There's not a lot of expat-standard housing here, so in winter you're always cold because the apartment buildings don't have any insulation and the heaters are never strong enough.

KEA: What are your future plans?

Megan: I really want to stay with CISK until it's up and running with a lot of students. Afterwards, we might move to a different country or go home or to India.

I really like Kunshan and I don't want to go back to the States, at least not yet. There's something unique and special about saying "I lived in China", and I enjoy my experience here.

I'm learning the language now, and the opportunities here have been amazing: I went to an American Chamber of Commerce meeting the other day and met the governor of Nebraska and his wife sought me out to say hi because she's a teacher.

At some point in the future I would really like to get my Master's Degree, but for now I've very happy in China.