

from our viewpoint...

Is Columbus Day really a holiday?

Monday is the holiday recognizing Columbus as the discoverer of the New World.

Would the world change much if we didn't have Columbus Day as a legal holiday?

The only people who observe Columbus Day are court-houses, post offices, banks and lawyers.

School children used to get Columbus Day off, but in our day of political correctness, it isn't even called just Columbus Day in some schools. It's Discoverers Day.

Many area schools are not observing the holiday; others have a teacher training day.

If this holiday is optional, why celebrate it at all?

Scientific discoveries have placed the Vikings in North America long before Columbus, and what about the Native Americans?

Mongols from Siberia were thought to have crossed the Bering Straits, leaving the Eskimos and other tribes as their descendants.

So why don't they get the credit for discovering North America?

Some argue that Columbus' voyage was the beginning of uninterrupted contact between the New World and Europe.

History, like science, does not stay solid as bedrock. There seems to be much rewriting as new things are discovered.

Was Columbus heroic or deranged?

Would you get into a rather small wooden ship and sail toward the unknown?

Uncertain if there were enough landfalls to resupply your water and food supplies?

Sailors of that period had poorly preserved food supplies.

They also had troubles from vitamin deficiencies.

Did Columbus bring European diseases such as small-pox, plague and tuberculosis with him?

We have read in history that some sea captains of that day were tyrants.

You have to wonder what Columbus was like?

— Pat Schiefen

Letter Policy

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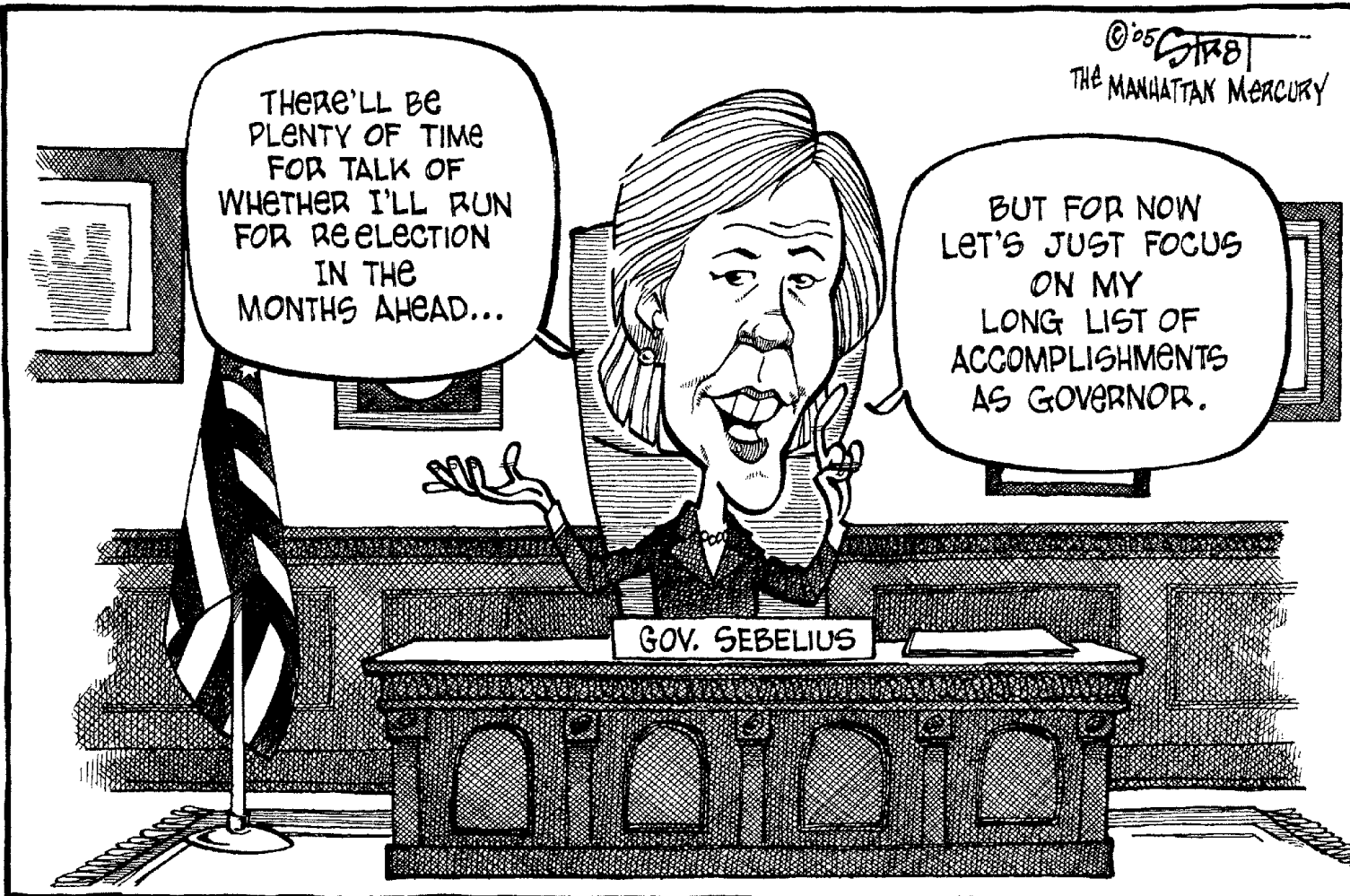
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Chinese schools have their differences

Letters from China

By Darin Curts and Kati (Amos) Curts
Darin and Kati (Amos) Curts are serving as WorldTeach volunteers in the People's Republic of China. WorldTeach, an organization affiliated with Harvard University and which has an agreement with the Hunan Provincial Department of Education and Foreign Affairs, places volunteers as English teachers throughout the Hunan Province. Darin and Kati are teaching in Yueyang, Hunan, PRC, at Yueyang Ba Zhong (Yueyang #8 Middle School) for one year.

Nimen Hao (Hello Everyone)!

We've now been residents of the People's Republic of China for two months and have four weeks of teaching behind us. We began classes on September 1st and have been busy teaching Conversational English to 19 classes of 75 teenagers per week. As long-time students and first-time teachers, we have been observing the many differences and similarities between the education systems of China and the U.S.

The largest similarity is the fact that all schools are not equal in the country, province, or even city. Within the Hunan province students have 12 years of education, but only nine are compulsory. The last three years are considered high school and not all students are even given the chance to attend. Chinese students undergo a rigorous system of examinations after completing three years as Junior students. The tests determine if, and often where, the students are allowed to attend the three years as a Senior in high school, and the same happens before entering college. These examinations place a lot of pressure on students to do well and nearly everything they study is directly connected to questions on the exams.

Student life is much like that of a heavily structured and closely monitored college student. After rising early and eating breakfast, the students attend classes from 7:30 a.m. until noon. After lunch and a short rest, classes start again at 3:00 and run until 6:00 p.m. Classes are 45 minutes and normally have a 15-20 minute break between, when students grab snacks, run around, or play sports. Some students have extra evening classes, but most are scheduled for "self-study". Additionally, students attend supplementary classes on Saturdays and Sundays.

Before entering a classroom, we had a mental image of what our students would be like. Our naïve expectations placed us on pedestals in front of smiling, attentive, eager faces. Many stereotypes describe a Chinese student as reserved, meticulous, motivated, and respectful.



We're at Jinshan Dao (Jinshan Island), the largest and most popular island in the Dongting Lake. Jinshan Dao is famous for the legendary yinzen cha (Silver Needle Tea) which has been demanded by emperors of many dynasties as a gift of respect. When added to hot water, the tea leaves stick straight up like tiny needles.

Most of these attributes are accurate to a point, but the truth is that our students are teenagers and an ocean doesn't separate the attitudes in that demographic.

Many are intensely interested in the class and eager to practice their English with a native speaker. There are usually a few students who know all the answers and want to share them. To counter the enthusiastic, it only seems fair we should have an equal number of apathetic. However, the majority of the students are the decisive "swing students." These students can be used to gauge the success or failure of a class. As the murmur of voices in the class escalates to a dull roar, we can be sure they are becoming restless. The appearance of mp3 players and cell phones is a sign that our

lesson plan has failed to engage the students or is too difficult to understand.

Our class is different than all the others. We are foreigners and teach in foreign ways. Oral English is not currently on the students' examinations, and although we do give grades, they are mainly used for classroom management and are not kept on the students' records. With all the stresses and pressure the students face, we approach our class as a fun way for students to being using the extensive vocabulary and grammar skills they often already have. We look forward to each class since often is as much a learning experience for us as it is for our students.

Zaijian!

Darin and Kati Curts

where to write

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