

## J. WILLIAM CONGER—AN INSPIRATION TO CHINA'S FUTURE TRIAL LAWYERS

Lee F. Peoples\*

Oklahoma City University School of Law began developing an innovative non-degree Certificate Program in American Law for Chinese law students in 2006.<sup>1</sup> We decided that a week-long introduction to American trial practice capped off with a one-day mock trial would be a worthwhile component of the program and that Professor Conger was the perfect person to teach it. Bill joyfully accepted this challenge and brought Dean Couch, at the time Magistrate Judge Couch, into the program to co-teach and judge the students' mock trials.

Bill was a true pioneer in taking on this part of the program. The traditional model used for trials in the Chinese legal system is the civil law inquisitorial model where the judge, and not the lawyer as in the United States, collects and prepares the evidence for trial.<sup>2</sup> Criminal trials in China recently began adopting elements of the common law adversarial process, including the accused's right to confront witnesses and present rebuttal evidence.<sup>3</sup>

In only a few short days of class, Bill prepared students with no background in the common law adversarial trial system for a full day mock trial. The Chinese students typically ranged in age from seventeen to twenty one and had varying levels of English proficiency. In class he pushed the students to work with new and complicated legal concepts

---

\* Professor of Law Library Science and Law Library Director, Oklahoma City University.

1. I had the pleasure of serving as Program Director for the Certificate Program in American Law from 2007 to 2010.

2. Robert Lancaster & Ding Xiangshun, *Addressing the Emergence of Advocacy in the Chinese Criminal Justice System: A Collaboration Between a U.S. and a Chinese Law School*, 30 FORDHAM INT'L L.J. 356, 359 (2007). See WEI LUO, THE CIVIL PROCEDURE LAW AND COURT RULES OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (2006) for further information on civil trials in China.

3. Lancaster & Xiangshun, *supra* note 2, at 362.

and helped them with their English.

After each morning's class, Bill ate lunch with the students in the cafeteria and returned to his office to catch up on his hectic duties as University General Counsel. But he would frequently spend several hours each afternoon with students who stopped by for help preparing for the next day's class.

As the mock trial drew closer, the students became even more committed to living up to Bill's high expectations for them. These students were young, and many were away from home for the first time. Their mock trial was held at the conclusion of the program. The following day, the students departed for a week-long vacation in the United States before returning to China. If you didn't know Bill you might expect the students to slack off and turn their minds to their upcoming vacation. In reality, the students worked harder than ever preparing for the mock trial. Many worked through the night. Bill's teaching and the students' hard work always paid off. When asked about the performance of the students Bill remarked "I didn't know whether I was asking too much of them to actually put them in a trial setting where they played the roles of lawyers, they played the roles of witnesses, and they did it, and they did an outstanding job."<sup>4</sup>

News about Professor Conger's introduction to American trial practice course quickly spread among Chinese law schools. Dean Larry Hellman traveled extensively in China promoting the program at numerous law schools. He reported that students would frequently inquire whether Professor Conger was scheduled to teach before signing up for the program.

Bill's success with the Chinese students comes as no surprise. They saw the same things in him that all of his American students and colleagues saw: a strong commitment to the values of the American legal profession, a joyful spirit, and a unique personal style. His zeal for life and the law translated across oceans, cultures, and generations.

---

4. Certificate in American Law Program Promotional Video (Oklahoma City University 2007) (on file with author).



Bill and one of his Chinese exchange students enjoying coffee after lunch at Hartzog Conger Cason & Neville. Summer, 2007.



Bill showing off the city during a tour of his firm.



A familiar sight: Bill mentoring one of his students.