

HUSH!

A STUDENT'S MEMOIR

BY WEI LIU

It's six in the evening. Having rushed home from school, I plunge into a love story by a Taiwanese writer who's popular in my hometown, Chongqing. I can indulge in the novel only until my parents return from work. For 30 stolen minutes, however, I can glimpse a world quite different from my own and consign my homework to limbo.

When the clock strikes the half-hour, I tear myself from the beautiful love story and hide the novel in my drawer. The dismaying memory of my recent math examination asserts itself—several pages left blank because they required mastery of formulas I find bewildering.

Even more vividly, I remember what my teacher wrote in my exercise book: "Do you have ears during my class?"

Do I have ears? Yes, I have. In her class, my ears hear all her passionate exhortations about the importance of her subject—math—and the usefulness of her formulas and the uselessness of my story-reading: "I heard some of you are reading novels. Still dreaming at this critical time. You idiots should bear in mind that math is your principal subject. The time you spend reading junk should be spent on formulas. If you don't master them, you won't get into college next year . . ."

How many hours a day must I spend on her formulas? Por-ing over them at night already consumes all the energy I gain from my supper. Now she wants to deprive me of the one spir-itually gratifying morsel in my overloaded day.

Math is not the only subject constricting my mind. In poli-tics—Marxism—our teacher requires us to begin each of our exam answers with fundamental principles, and often admon-ishes us, "Your own words don't count in your score. You'd better use the original wording from the textbook."

How can this be? I know that Marxism is considered a phi-losophy, but according to this teacher, it's composed of formu-las just like math. All right, I regurgitate from the textbook. This time there's an "F" on my politics exam.

In English I'm equally uneasy. Our teacher tells us to use a beginning, middle and concluding paragraph for each of our compositions, and to begin each composition with the word "nowadays." Even a subject that should be flexible is bound with a straightjacket.

My world is dominated by school subjects that torment my mind with their countless formulas. I wish I had an extra brain

to sacrifice for those formulas to abuse.

Our teachers make up their own formulas, too. Indeed, these formulas are laws, and if they don't control us, they make us outlaws. Whenever students are trapped by a teacher's ques-tions during class, the teacher ascribes our failure to our for-getting or misusing some formula.

"Do you have a head? I've emphasized this formula again and again! You fool, listen to me carefully! If you think you can enter college by teaching yourself, I'll use my hand as a pan to fry you a fish!" sputtered our math teacher, red-faced, one day. The wretched kid sat silently on his stool, face aflame and head drooping. Any response would only have triggered a new bar-rage from the teacher. None of the rest of us had the courage to make a peep.

At the time, I thought: towering on the platform, she looks like a sergeant at the edge of a glade trying to detect some criminals in the jungle. Yes, I bet she would be an excellent commander, imposing punishment without mercy. Cowering on our stools, we kids looked just like criminals hiding in the jungle. Hush! We're safe if we don't make a sound!

My world seems to be composed of formulas and laws, and populated by sergeants and criminals. In their zeal to mold our minds, our teachers would photocopy their formulas onto our brains if they could. I'm as afraid as anyone of failing my exams. Month by month, year by year, I see all our minds yield to those formulas.

Even so, I believe they are futile. Consider that comment : "Do you have ears?" To rebuke me, that math teacher is using language, and not just language, but rhetoric! A rhetorical question with metonymy! Can she use a cosine formula to blame me? Just when she most needs to bend my mind to her formula, she must resort to language, to the very rhetoric she often belittles in class. How useless her formula is! And how hollow and pretentious she is!

She says we are naïve and living in a dream world. How about herself? Month by month, year by year, she cherishes a dream of molding our minds through her formulas, while an array of arguments wait to impede her. But let's not awaken her. Hush! Let her enjoy her unending dream, which will never come true.