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Reflective Paper on Chinese Educational System

“As a system formally initiated by an emperor who seized the throne from his own boss, keju was first and foremost developed to prevent anyone else from repeating the emperor’s coup” (Zhao, 2014, p. 37).

Given that the Chinese started their high-stakes standardized testing for social control (Zhao, 2004), I wondered why the United States started our high-stakes system of mandated standardized assessments for students in public schools. We learned from Zhao that China’s first high stakes, competitive standardized tests started in the Sui dynasty (581-618) and tested Confucian texts in order to provide citizens from all “family lineage and economic conditions” (p. 39) an opportunity to earn a government job, which offered wealth and social status. No longer would the opportunities afforded by the tests be limited to those with a family heritage who could potentially seize control from the emperor.

Millennia passed before other countries started to use standardized testing, and it wasn’t until the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 that standardized testing became a high-stakes accountability measure in the United States; however, the road to the high stakes standardized testing we know today actually began in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson. The purpose of Title I under President Johnson and the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was to “close the skill gap in reading, writing and mathematics between children from low-income households who attend urban or rural school systems and children from the middle-class who attend suburban school systems” (Wikipedia, n.d.-b, Historical context). The NCLB reauthorization of ESEA changed the focus from equity to accountability for equity. Specifically, Title I under NCLB is designed “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., Laws & guidance: Statement of purpose).

This shift in purpose and a movement towards making the standardized tests high-stakes in the United States is strikingly similar to the keju tests in China. Specifically, the stated purpose for both systems was to level the playing field; however, in practice both systems significantly changed the culture of learning by having one test measure the value of and opportunities afforded by public education. Additionally, both the Chinese system (Zhao, 2014) and the system in the United States (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009) have set unrealistic goals motivated by politics and control.

This paper is designed to summarize my significant learning about the Chinese educational system, which is of great interest given the similarities to the United States and my desire to advocate for changes to our system in the United States. I will examine the Chinese educational system from the vantage points of strengths, challenges, and potential positive impact on education in the United States.

Strengths of the Chinese Educational System

One of the notable strengths of the Chinese educational system is its ability to get the entire population on board and stay on board with the stated educational goals. Zhao (2014) provided many examples of this, which is evidenced by but not limited to the amount of money parent's pay for tutoring and the hours that students put into preparing for the exams - sacrificing their childhood in the process. Another notable strength of the Chinese educational system is the universal respect the citizens have for teachers and the teaching profession (except, of course, during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution). China Education Center, Ltd. (n.d.) identifies some of the factors that go into cultivating teachers:

Teaching has historically been and remains today a highly respected profession in China. Teachers have strong preparation in their subject matter and prospective teachers spend a great deal of time observing the classrooms of experienced teachers, often in schools attached to their universities. Once teachers are employed in school, there is a system of induction and continuous professional development in which groups of teachers work together with master teachers on lesson plans and improvement (China education).

Support for the process of teaching and the components that go into being an effective teacher are clearly evident in China. It is interesting to note that all of this support for the teaching profession happens in an environment where there is an average of 37 students in primary classrooms and 54 students in a lower secondary (middle school) classrooms in China (OCED, 2012). In contrast, OECD reports that the average class size in the United States is 20 and 24 respectively. The larger class sizes in China seems to be counter-intuitive to showing support for teachers and the teaching profession; however, according to OCED, “while smaller classes are often perceived as enabling a higher quality of education, evidence on the impact of class size on student performance is mixed” (p. 62).

A strength related to China’s universal support for education is shown in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is an indicator of how countries value goods and services. Although China spends 4% of its GDP on education (China Education Center, Ltd., n.d., China education) and the United States spends a total of 5.2% of its GDP on education (Chantrill, n.d., Education spend), China’s GDP comes from the Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China, which helps to provide a national focus supporting public education. In contrast, the United States’ GDP is a combination of federal, state, and local funding, with the highest contribution coming from the local level at 3.1% and the smallest percentage coming from the federal level at 0.6% (Chantrill, n.d., Education spend). Such a high focus on the local level in the United States leaves room for disparity in philosophy and support between cities and communities, which we know to be true. That is not to say that the Ministry of Finance in China is equitably distributing funding to schools across the country or that local control over education is a bad thing; however, having that national support for education does send a universal message that education is valued.

Compulsory education is another variable, and is different in China than the United States. China’s compulsory education spans 9-years and includes students aged 6-15 (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). In the United States each state sets its own laws regarding compulsory education, and in Alaska compulsory education spans 11-years and includes students aged 5-16 (Alaska Statutes, n.d., 14.30.010). Compulsory education in China seems to be effective, as “99.7 percent of the population area of the country has achieved universal nine-year basic

education” (China Education Center, Ltd., n.d., China education), which is significant; however, it may not be a fair assessment since the percentage compares students in China who complete middle school and in the United States students who do not go on beyond the 11-years of compulsory education and graduate from high school are considered dropouts. The 9-years of China’s basic education only brings students to the high school level, which is not compulsory, not free, and not well rounded, as it focuses solely on preparation for the Gao Kao or National University Entrance Examinations. China has structured its 9-year compulsory education so as to ensure success of all students, and 91.6% of students are literate by age 15 (China Mike, n.d.). Regardless of the vast crevasse between the haves and have-nots in Chinese adults, the perception that China has a world-class, good educational system has value.

Given that there is national, universal support for education in China despite a singular focus on the high-stakes tests, and given what we learned from our class text (Zhao, 2014), it seems that the value of education in China comes down to perceptions. China is perceived as having a quality educational system and the United States is not; however, Zhao (2014) provided much evidence to present a case for a different focus on success than what is traditionally considered. To Haynes and Chalker (1997), having a population that has a high regard for education and for teachers are variables of a quality educational system:

In every country that delivers a world-class education, communities and parents exhibit a high regard for education, a healthy respect for teachers, and a holy regard for learning—all key ingredients in an ‘education ethic’ that creates positive expectations for student learning. Unfortunately, the United States lags badly in this area (p. 390).

According to Haynes and Chalker, China has a good system and the United States does not. Although this may be true in specifics (e.g., Program for International Student Assessment or PISA test scores), it is not true when considering the whole (e.g., only students who compete to continue beyond compulsory education are part of the PISA test pool in China, whereas all students are included the test pool in the United States). Having a universal perception both inside and outside of the country, justified or not, that China offers a good education is a strength of the Chinese educational system.

The biggest lesson I learned regarding the strength of the Chinese educational system is that China has the ability to create a national culture of support. It is interesting to note that although teacher preparation appears to be thorough, the system as a whole is not student-centered, and yet the perception is that the high-stakes system should be emulated.

Challenges of the Chinese Educational System

Many factors noted previously as strengths of the education system in China also have another story to tell. Most notably, the fact that most Chinese students end their formal education after compulsory education ends at age 15 should be alarming. China has 160 million students in compulsory education and only 8.2 million in high school (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). This reality is especially challenging any time comparisons are made between China and other countries that include all students in high school, as it is not a fair comparison. This challenge is two-fold. The first challenge is for China in that the majority of youth aged 15 begin their working life instead of having the rest of their teenage years to explore who they are and what they want out of life. The second part of the challenge is for the rest of the world who does not handpick the students who attend public high school, as it takes more than a news headline to explain the inequities.

Another challenge is that China's extreme focus on the high-stakes exams limits the opportunity for low-income and rural students to gain access to higher education, which is contrary to the original intent of keju. In recent history, students from all walks of life attended college; however, the more recent economic boom in China has "all but obliterated such diversity in the top tier of Chinese education" (Gao, 2014, SR6). Not only does the current education system in China limit educational opportunities for the bulk of the Chinese population, it also puts a stress on students and families at such a level as to alter lives (Zhao, 2014), which is a challenge that may prove to be insurmountable.

Chinese students who pass the examinations and can go to high school will do so because their parents pay for high school with tuition and tutors. Specifically, Goa (2014) describes the costs to parents:

Parents fork out tens of thousands of dollars under the guise of 'voluntary donations' to secure a slot for their children in elite schools. At top-ranked high schools, such as the one I attended in Beijing, these charges can reach \$130,000. Further advantage can be purchased by parents who can pay handsomely to hire teachers to offer extra tutoring to their children, a practice discouraged by the authorities but widespread in reality (SR6).

A challenge related to the high-stakes testing that dominates the China education system is the rote memorization necessary to pass the tests. High school education in China is not focused on inspiring a life-long love of learning, but rather on passing the tests at the expense of everything. "For ten years no one cares about you when you are studying in a cold room, but the entire world will know you as soon as you succeed" (Zhao, 2014, p. 39). The singular focus on the tests serves to homogenize students who master the prescribed content of a few subjects. As noted by Zhao, the high-stakes keju testing system "reinforces conservative thinking and homogeneity" (p. 42), which is a significant challenge to society. In the United States, even though we have added high-stakes testing in recent history, which has limited class offerings at the high school level, we still attempt to offer a well-rounded high school education that includes the arts and non-content specific instruction in social emotional learning, anti-bullying, digital citizenship, etc. in addition to the content included in the high-stakes test. For example, pre-NCLB Sitka High School used to have an entire department focused on personal finance, family and consumer science, and business applications; however, none of these teachers or classes remains today. We have begun to move towards the homogeneity China currently experiences; however, our systems do have different foci, and thus direct comparisons are often made and yet not relevant.

China has a long history of supporting unsupportable misrepresentations of facts (e.g., academic papers published, steel production) for the sake of national pride. As noted by Zhao (2014) the people rise to meet any and all challenges presented by the authorities, even if they have to fabricate the truth. Consequently, there is a fundamental flaw for the Chinese who focus on meeting the letter of the law, reality-based or not, but not the intent. To meet the intent of the law would require risk-taking, innovation, and creative thought,

which, as Zhao points out is not prevalent in China. The high-stakes testing system “results in a population with similar skills in a narrow spectrum of talents. But especially in today’s society, innovation and creativity are needed” (Zhao, 2014, p. 133). China may attempt to focus on innovation and creativity (e.g., number of patents issued); however, the system is incapable of accommodating innovation and creativity into the culture. Patents can be issued and consequently added to resumes, but that does not mean they are worthy patents that result from innovative or creative thought (Zhao, 2014).

The fact that high school in China is a highly selective and costly educational option is not readily available in the PISA data, for example. High school in China reminds me of Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Alaska. In Sitka our comprehensive high school is constantly compared to Mt. Edgecumbe; however, we serve all students, whereas they select their students through a very competitive process that involves highly motivated students who get sent home if they become a disciplinary problem. We are not even talking apples and oranges here, which are both fruits, but rather eggs and eggplant. There is a fundamental difference between a philosophy of education for all and that of handpicking students.

Zhao (2014) stated that keju turned from a “blessing to a curse” (p. 42). As noted in this discussion, the challenges to the system of education in China all revolve around their high-stakes testing system, and those challenges are so woven into the fiber of the Chinese culture that they may not be able to change even if directed to do so by the authorities.

Applied Summary Including Four Elements of Potential Positive Impact on Public Education in the United States

After reading about, researching, and examining the system of education in China, I have identified a few potential positive impacts that could help us in the United States:

1. The Chinese have an universal, unquestioned belief in the value of education including a belief in the connection between educational success and employment success despite the fact that relatively few people actually experience the success of earning a college degree and earning a subsequent stable and lucrative position in government due to the college degree. In the United States I hope we never get to a point where we hesitate to

question the value of anything; however, there is a point to be made about having a unified message of support for education that identifies the values we hold to be true in our system. Given that our educational system revolves around local control and local financial support for our schools, the message would have to be very high level and non-political, such as:

- a. A mind is a terrible thing to waste (still works!)
- b. A free, quality public education is a human right in the United States
- c. Education is first in our community

Public relations campaigns do work, as evidenced by the very costly ad campaigns so prevalent in our culture. For example, a 2015 Super Bowl ad cost between “\$4.4 million to \$4.5 million per 30-second spot” (O’Reilly and Lutz, 2015, February 1, paragraph 2). If there were a national campaign that inspired local action and support for public schools, we could advocate a positive vision to extend learning instead of defending why public education should exist and why it needs to be funded adequately.

2. The Chinese (and Americans) have an ability to be swayed through the use of rewards. Zhao (2014) shared the Coca-Cola story where opinion about the taste of Coca-Cola was changed when the company started giving out free balloons and chopsticks in China. In the United States we could use a fun and practical incentive to help sway the opinions about the value of a public education. Think about how many times people complete a survey because 1 or 2 in 1,000 will win an Amazon gift certificate. Even if the potential prize isn’t a full incentive to do something, the notice about the prize captivates your attention even if for a moment. For example, when the Alaska Society for Technology in Education (ASTE) started to advocate by sending letters of support to our Senators and Rep in DC regarding funding for EdTech during the annual conference, we added a raffle of an Apple Shuttle to the mix. The practice continues today although the prizes have changed with the times. Since that time, Alaska... sparsely populated Alaska... has ranked in the top 10 states who send letters of support for EdTech funding. I know this because I was the ASTE Advocacy Chair that designed the raffle and the advocacy booth at the conference. Although it sounds silly, prizes do sway public opinion.

3. China is a vast country made up of many regions that include both urban and rural areas; however, the *Shanghai Success* PISA story is touted as representing all of China; China has been able to highlight one urban success story in the most populous country in the world and have it represent all of China. In the United States we need to highlight our successes and have it represent the potential afforded by public education instead of having the media focus on a few cases where education has not been good (e.g., testing in Atlanta). Those few “bad” cases have been representing all of education in the United States, and we need to add another element to the mix by highlighting our successes like China has, and doing it at a high level. We need to change perceptions that “bad” schools and “bad” teachers are everywhere simply because there have been a few noteworthy cases. With the right story we might be able to highlight and tout our successes so as to share a message that adequate funding for schools helps to close the achievement gap for low-income students. Yet another need for a public relations focus.

4. China serves as an example of what not to do. Specifically, the United States is at a cusp, a potential point of no return. If we continue down the path of a singular focus on a high-stakes assessment then China shows us that we will systematically suppress individualism and creativity through an inappropriate focus on a limited aspect of accountability (e.g., standardized tests in a few subjects), and consequently people will learn to work the system (e.g., parents paying for tutoring, submitting for patents to pad applications to prestigious high schools), which will in reality create a greater disparity between the have and have-nots and will perpetuate a corrupt public education system where students are denied education and the happiness that comes with a livable wage simply because they were born into a family of low economic status. (That was a long sentence.) Public education in America is designed to be for all students especially those from low-economic situations. We need to refocus on the original ESEA authorization of 1965 that was part of President Johnson’s *War on Poverty*, and make sure that no child is actually left behind because of the high-stakes accountability associated with the current reauthorization of ESEA. There is current momentum to change, from both ends of the political spectrum, and we cannot miss this opportunity.

In summary, education in the United States is built around a student-centered approach to learning with current best practices focused on individualizing education, which makes our recent rush to embrace high-stakes testing even more absurd. We are not multi-millennia into our system of high-stakes testing like China is; however, if we want to change the system then we cannot wait to act.

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