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# Education in China: Comparing a Country's Curricula to its Culture

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Before embarking on my adventure to the other side of the world with my Arcadian classmates, I had already accumulated a curiosity for the education system in China and how it might interact with the culture of that country. Befriending students from Xi'an University, touring their campus, attending a lecture in the library's American Culture Center, talking with faculty members of the nearby Training School, and doing some follow-up readings after I returned to the U.S. has given me the chance to evaluate this dynamic. My experiences in China and my supplementary research have helped illuminate the relationship between the values taught in school and the values held in a culture. The curriculum and subject emphasis in schools, combined with its testing standards and classroom experience, define a student's experience. The Chinese cultural presence on teaching and learning is also noteworthy. Lastly, international influence is a two-way street, where Western models are adapted by schools in China and the U.S.A. is under pressure to compete with the test scores of the Chinese.

The education system in China is partially characterized by what it emphasizes in its curriculum. In the most traditional instances, schools demand students to retain the details of the dynasties in China's vast history. In secondary school, many children do not take art or music classes unless they intended on majoring in those subjects in college; these individuals were referred to as "special students" who often scored lower than average on the big university entrance exam, the Gaokao. The four main subjects taught in Chinese high schools are English, Mathematics, Chinese, and Humanities or Science. The students were expected to learn by memorizing lots of factual information, and if pupils misbehaved, they were physically punished.

Additionally, students are often taught only what they will see on the Gaokao, so studying is focused and limited to the material that will appear on the exam. Such great emphasis is placed on the Gaokao because it determines if a high school student can continue their education through admittance to a university. The exam has historical roots, and students are judged according to their score. New-trend teachers criticize that students should also be assessed by their means of applying their skills, not just the results of an exam.

In the classroom, students attentively listened to their teachers and rarely asked questions, which differs from the learning environment in the U.S. This arrangement – Chinese students silently and diligently absorbing the instructions of the teacher – enforces stability rather than promoting generativity. Class size was usually large, and each high school student was required to wear a gender-neutral bulky uniform; the philosophy behind this androgynous attire was to discourage students from becoming attracted to someone else because a relationship would be a distraction from studies. Overall, the curriculum, emphasis on the Gaokao, and classroom environment characterize education in China.

The Chinese education system also reflects the cultural values that the country holds. A collectivist culture like China promotes conformity and the protection of the status quo. The classroom dynamics in China reflect an emphasis on social harmony, where children will be educated in a way that will inspire them to be involved citizens in adulthood. The traditional classroom scene involves an authoritarian instructor and students who are silent, behaved, diligent listeners; the lack of question-asking affirms that the education system promotes stability and conformity above innovation and change.

Furthermore, the Chinese believe that with enough dedication, academic excellence is a possibility for all. Where Americans usually think of intelligence as an innate characteristic, the Chinese emphasize effort. Building off the

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notion of hard work, students of Chinese families feel a moral obligation to succeed. In line with Confucian philosophy of loyalty and obedience, students exert themselves out of a sense of duty. As a result, they study for long hours and often forgo the leisure activities and extracurricular commitments of American schoolchildren.

In addition, parents play a key role in their children's educational performance and continuation. First of all, Asian parents are more likely to devote more hours helping their children with homework than American parents. Second, Chinese parents must support their children as they attend high school and college; if parents are unable to pay the tuition, they are put to shame. While many American high school students and collegians take out loans and get jobs to support themselves independently, Chinese students rely heavily on their parents as they focus primarily on their studies.

The interconnectedness between education and culture is circular and complex, since it is difficult to identify the forces of causation and the actual consequences. A culture may influence which values and standards are set within an education system, and then the children – once they have grown up into active citizens in their communities – will set the cultural norms and expectations for how they desire their children to be educated. People are shaped by culture just as culture is shaped by people. This relationship has an important role in education, the institution where individuals are instilled with knowledge and values early in their lives.

The experiences of Chinese schoolchildren and the connection between education and culture are comparable to the norms of the United States. International influence is mutual, so while differences in culture exist, the cultural dynamics of China and the U.S. are intertwined.

The contemporary Chinese education system is actually borrowed from the United States. Indicators of this influence were present in a courtyard on the Xi'an University campus, where six bronze busts, serving as sentinels lining both sides of a walkway, honored the contribution of Eastern and Western thinkers. On one side stood the busts of Buddha, Confucius, and Cai Yuanpei (an educational leader), and they were all facing the opposing row which consisted of Plato, Aristotle, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (a Prussian philosopher). The sculptures symbolized how cultures draw from other cultures and how they can come together in the institution of education. Additionally, schools in China are attempting to integrate Western practicality with a Chinese foundation. While seeking to maintain their national identity by having Chinese-centered education, teachers are also adopting the methods of Western nations. The teaching of English is widespread, since it is not only one of the four main classes in high school, but also a popular college major studied by university students who are so eager to practice their skills.

In addition to evidence of a culturally combined curriculum, the approaches of Chinese teachers and professors are also changing. The style of instruction is becoming less traditional for new-trend faculty members. Some professors such as Rachel, who lectured in the American Cultural Center of Xi'an University, allow students to refer to them in friendly informality (e.g., "Sister Rachel") rather than with a proper title. Young teachers are also less likely to use corporeal punishment as a method of discipline. Rather than just expecting students to silently absorb lessons, teachers are now probing for feedback on what they could do to make class more interesting while encouraging student participation. These teachers show distaste for the historical Gaokao examination, where so much of student assessment lies on a mere score. These liberal shifts away from traditional Chinese educational practices are redolent of modern Western methods, and they will undoubtedly impact the overall culture as schoolchildren carry their experiences with them into adulthood.

While the United States and other Western nations model a new way to run a classroom, China and its neighboring countries are also putting pressure on the American school system. The results of international test scores have

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shown a considerable performance gap, where American schoolchildren are lagging behind most Asian nations. In an Average Math Achievement Score study in which 15-year-olds were tested, students of Hong Kong averaged a score of 547 and students of Macao averaged a score of 525. These Chinese children performed higher than American 15-year-olds, who averaged a score of 474. This study was conducted in 2006 through the Program for International Student Assessment; the 166 American schools that participated included both public and private institutions, totaling 5,611 15-year-olds that were tested in the U.S. The outcomes of such comparisons strengthen the call for school reform in the United States. The results also spur an evaluation of the academic discipline – or lack thereof – shown by American schoolchildren in comparison to their diligent Chinese age-mates, and what that might mean for the future of each nation.

Journeying to the other side of the world has fed fascination for cultural differences and interconnectedness. In the domain of education, China has a curriculum that reflects its societal values. The areas of study, emphasis on high exam performance, and rigid classroom dynamics characterize the experiences of Chinese school children. The collectivist ideal of promoting social harmony, the cultural expectation of persistence, and the parental support students receive is evident in the nature of China's schooling. International influence is also present, such as the American education system model and more liberalized new-trend teachers. The United States is also assessing the student performance of American children to compare to China's superior test scores. Overall, the connection between curriculum and culture, set on an international stage, is a complex dynamic. How school children experience the lessons and receive their country's values can dictate the course of the future, not just for their homeland, but for the world.

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