

## Great Test Scores, Bad Schools: A Cautionary Tale From China

Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty is a footnote in Chinese history. He ruled from 604 to 617 and nearly bankrupted the empire with futile military campaigns against Korea. But in 605, he created an institution that would rival gun power on the list of China's enduring contributions to human history. To sort the multitudes of men seeking civil service jobs, Yang implemented the Imperial Examination System, the first documented standardized test in human history.

Most nations now administer standardized tests – for adult job seekers and young students alike – but the Chinese remain the world's pre-eminent practitioners. The nation's national college entrance exam, known as the Gaokao, lasts for nine hours. Streets near test sites are often closed to traffic. Nearby construction is halted. Parents rent hotel rooms for their children near the test site and stand vigil outside during the test to deliver food and offer encouragement. In the weeks and months prior to the test, students respond with almost super-human feats of studying endurance, many using virtually every waking minute to prepare.

I've seen the intensity of China's work ethic first-hand as part-time Director of College Counseling for the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at High School Affiliated to Nanjing Normal University (HSANNU), the first in the nation created after China's education ministry approved IB for its citizens in 2006. The 120 students in the program learn entirely in English and are a small subset of the 5,000 enrolled at HSANNU, an elite "National Key School."

As more Chinese students set their sights on the English-speaking world, Americans are getting a first-hand look at their test-taking prowess. Students in my IB program are weaker than average by HSANNU standards (the IB is still largely unknown in China), but they do just fine on American standardized tests. The SAT Math is so easy for them that they can hardly contain a smile. One student told me that the Chinese SAT tutors generally ignore it because, as one of them told a group of students, "any Chinese should be able to get an 800 on the math." In making my rounds as college counselor, I once overheard two math teachers talking wistfully about the weakness of a particular student, only to find out later that she scored 730 on the SAT math. Among the 29 students in our graduating class, the lowest math score was 690. The Critical Reading and Writing sections are more challenging for obvious reasons, but with a few months of intense preparation, students can usually crack 600 and occasionally 700.

In a 2008 article headlined "U.S. Colleges Bask in Surge of Interest Among Chinese," the Washington Post described "ever-growing stacks of applications from students with outstanding test scores, terrific grades and rigorous academic preparation." An admissions officer from University of Virginia, barely able to contain his enthusiasm, described China as "this perfect, beautiful island of people who are immensely motivated, going to great high schools."

With 1.2 billion people in China, and several billion more in the rest of Asia, it is easy to understand fears that the Asian colossus will soon dwarf the puny United States of America. Thomas Friedman has proclaimed a flat world, in which everyone can compete on a roughly level playing field, and education analysts are nervously eyeing Asian dominance on international assessments such as the Test of International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). Unless the U.S. can raise its test scores, the theory goes, we are destined to be a footnote to Asia's dominance of the twenty-first century. But before panic descends, a reality check is in order. It is undeniable that some element in the genetic and cultural inheritance of China, and probably of Asia in general, enables high performance on standardized tests. But the correlation of Asia's test scores to the world beyond is dubious at best. The academic ability so

universal in China and East Asia could not have developed overnight. Yet it has been the West, with its weaker quantitative skills as measured by tests, which has pioneered virtually every major technological innovation in recent centuries, including those which have created Friedman's flat world. How could East Asia, with such formidable abilities, have remained so static for so long? Communism is a relatively recent phenomenon that has infected only China among Asian nations. But Asian prowess on standardized tests dates to 605. Is there any doubt that Asians would have been dominant on international standardized tests, had they existed, in the 1700s and 1800s, when Westerners were creating the modern world? What accounts for the massive failure of correlation between economic development of the West and test-taking ability of the East?

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In her more irreverent moments, my colleague Gong Yan refers to Chinese students as "test-taking robots." Gong Yan was an English teacher and 25-year veteran of the Chinese education system when she stepped forward to lead HSANNU's first-in-the-nation IB program. She speaks of pioneering "a new way for China" in which critical thinking earns a foothold alongside formulaic problem-solving and endless test preparation.

It will take some doing. To Western eyes, the typical Chinese classroom is a dreary place. Teachers drone in the front of classrooms often packed with 50 students or more. When called upon, students stand at their desks to offer answers or recite quotations. Classroom discussions and hands-on activities are all-but non-existent. The curriculum is the same everywhere, all students take the same courses, and the school day is typically 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Chinese students are capable of feats of concentration that boggle the mind of an American, and they are superb with problems that have clearly-defined parameters. But tasks that are more amorphous, or do not have an obvious right answer, can be befuddling. In the academic realm, the notion of having a personal point of view is often elusive, and plagiarism is a pervasive problem. In the college process, students struggle mightily with the personal statement. Like all of their peers, they have worked hard in response to adult prompting. But few have much experience making real choices, pursuing interests, or defining a task and then completing it.

Americans often imagine the Chinese to be addled by communism and blindly obedient to authority figures. In my experience, the Chinese are actually much more distrustful of official pronouncements than are Americans. Their impulse is to smile politely and then use back channels to find out the real story. The true drivers of Chinese society are homogeneity and competition, and nowhere is the striving more intense than in secondary schools. Schools prepare students for tests, which sort them for college attendance and beyond. Nothing in the experience of Chinese students encourages them to think critically, except in the narrow confines of testing. The competition for places subsumes all else, and the musings of individual minds do not count for much.

With all the focus on college admission, actual college attendance is an anti-climax. Even the best Chinese universities are dreary places. I remember walking past Nanjing Normal University one morning and seeing dozens of students with their noses no more than a foot from their books, advancing slowly toward an examination hall, hoping to absorb one last bit of information before the test. Chinese applications to U.S. universities are surging, in part, because the savviest parents do not want to put their children through the ordeal of attending a Chinese university.

Though many Chinese are desperate for Western education, the U.S. seems intent on replicating China's test-driven model. The zeal for testing is particularly strong in the public sector, where superintendents and principals are evaluated mainly on their ability to raise the scores. A "Texas miracle" helped give us the No Child Left Behind Act, which put the federal government in the business of raising scores for the first time. Only if we can raise our test scores to rival those of Asia, the competitiveness experts tell us, will we have a fighting chance of maintaining our global competitiveness.

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If standardized test scores paint a rosy picture of China's education system, they do the same for American independent schools. By every quantifiable metric, and many that are not quantifiable, U.S. independent schools stand second to none in the world. But behind the high test scores and college acceptances, there is a clear sense of unease. Disquiet emanates mainly from the upper grades, where students are stressed, teachers feel out of control, and learning is rarely done for its own sake.

The realization is dawning that two core missions of independent schools, once thought to be synonymous, are in conflict: preparing students for college, and teaching them how to learn. The former has come to mean steeling students for an increasingly competitive national sorting process. Students take standardized tests and participate in a standardized curriculum, the College Board's Advanced Placement Program, which ranks them in every subject on a 1-5 scale. Students must master a particular body of knowledge. Classroom discussions and hands-on activities can be inserted, but only as part of a narrative dictated by the material on the test. Students have no real choice among which courses to take, but only the false choice of more rigorous (AP) versus less rigorous (not AP). Disciplines that are more effective sorters of students, such as math, are highly valued. Disciplines in which sorting is more problematic, such as the arts, are de-valued.

There was a time when educators believed that sorting students was the same as educating them, but reams of research have proven otherwise. No single volume has been more crucial to our collective understanding than "How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School," a synthesis of more than 1,000 pieces of scholarship. The act of learning, it turns out, is a connection made by the student brain, within the brain, rather than one imported from elsewhere. When learners are active in configuring their own knowledge – as when they design a project or pursue an interest – the connections are deeper and more durable. When students import knowledge in a configuration formed elsewhere, no matter how logical that configuration may be, they are less likely to retain that knowledge for any length of time. Meaningful learning cannot be standardized because it is created within unique brains.

In recent years, many schools have sharpened their mission statements to include direct mention of life-long learning. In such schools, it would be interesting to find out how their graduating seniors have experienced that mission. Would these students identify love of learning as a core value of the school? Or would they have experienced an environment in which academic skills are used to sort students by ability, and in which education is an endurance test over which they have little control?

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On a recent afternoon, I was looking over the shoulder of "Li Li" (780 W, 620 CR, 750 M) as she browsed Xiaonei.com, the Chinese version of Facebook. "Everything in China is copied from America," she sighed.

China's lack of innovation weighs heavily on the minds of well-educated Chinese. As a nation, China is second to none in its enthusiasm for technology. Yet as one young Chinese pointed out to me, the nation has never produced a Noble prize winner. By the millions, Chinese students work feverishly to hone their quantitative skills in preparation for standardized exams, but their collective striving has limited relevance for the real world. They can complete projects at the direction of others, or copy processes from elsewhere, but they have little sense of themselves as creators or meaning makers. The only meaning they know is the test.

The introduction of International Baccalaureate at HSANNU has brought class discussion, questioning of cultural assumptions, the introduction of activities, and a project called the Extended Essay. Interaction and activity do not come naturally to Chinese students, but they work at it with good cheer. Fortunately for them, the final evaluation is a set of standardized tests.

IB has the potential to be a significant step for China toward more interactive and student-centered learning, at least for a tiny fraction of its students. On this side of the Pacific, a growing number of independent schools are going further as they reconsider use of our nation's most prominent test-based curriculum, the College Board's Advanced Placement Program. But AP has served schools well for 30 years, and letting go of it is a daunting proposition. Independent school communities tend to be strongly invested in the sorting function of AP tests and the resulting credentials for college admission. Students who have spent their school careers excelling at tests often do not react favorably to new methods with a more nebulous bottom line. And there is no denying that AP reflects the content of many introductory college courses.

Some schools have made a clean break from AP and designed new advanced courses that give students more control of the learning process. Among the trends at such schools: thematic advanced courses rather than surveys, more off-campus learning, projects instead of exams, longer class periods, less teacher talk, more student activity, and a move toward trimesters, which give schools more flexibility in scheduling and students more choice in what to learn. Other schools have pursued a more moderate path, dropping the AP syllabus but maintaining a commitment to preparing students for AP exams. Still others have moved away from AP in selected subjects, or are retaining AP but searching for ways to offer more student-centered learning.

China's experience illustrates the perils of single-minded focus on standardized tests. As the global village gets smaller, the pressure on schools to act as sorters of students can only increase. Schools cannot ignore the desire of governments for accountability, or the need of students for markers of distinction as they graduate. But educators must not allow sorting pressures to overwhelm the learning process. If independent schools do not lean against school-as-test-prep, and in favor of learning as a student-centered process, the future of our learning communities will be greatly diminished.

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