

A Cross-National Examination of Chinese and U.S. Classroom Culture

Author: Ai Zhang

Affiliation: Syracuse University

Contact Information: aizhang79@gmail.com

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Abstract: The virtue of education has always been sought after across the world. With successes and failures, education initiates a difference and makes the difference real. This paper digs into similarities and differences of classroom culture (before college level) between the United States and China. Primarily owing to my personal attachment to Chinese education, this essay is a narrative basis infused with theories and supported by research data. Acknowledging common ground and identifying differences between the US and Chinese education, two key objectives are proposed to achieve. The first is to help both the Americans and Chinese have better knowledge of merits and shortcomings of their own and the other's educational systems. The second purpose drives to implementations of how could each country best learn from the other without losing their own virtues and therefore most effectively enhance students' academic performances at home and abroad by shedding lights on implications from the comparison.

As a native Chinese spent roughly nineteen years at school, I have been equipped with the greatest cultural values to understand and decipher all these hidden philosophies that underpin Chinese education. In addition, my current experiences at the United States attribute substantial inputs to make this cross-national comparison plausible and help actualize these embedded cultural and social values onto surface. This bicultural learning background sort of enables me a relatively objective standpoint to examine classroom practices, and more or less cultivates me a holistic understanding of both the Western and Chinese education. Not only have my initial misconceptions been eliminated gradually but also have my naive understandings of both countries deepened in profound ways. Based on my personal knowledge of and contact with both the Chinese and Western education, the following begins with a cross-cultural comparison and then expands to education reform in a larger socio-cultural context applicable to both the United States and China.

Physical Arrangement

School setting

The arrangement for both the classroom and teacher offices in China is dramatically different than that of the United States. In China, because of its huge 1.3 billion populations, space is simply unaffordable to waste and has ranked as the first priority and must be economically utilized. This is basically why China has large-size classes. A regular class holds up to 40 to 50 students. Additionally, classrooms of the same grade are adjacent to each other and are arranged into a straight line so as to maximize space usage. Literally, classrooms are in a wall-to-wall distance. No lawns or walls or any kind of physical constructions are installed in between. It takes at most 30

seconds to walk from one classroom to the other. Within the classroom, desks and chairs are neatly arranged into horizontal rows and vertical lines with half-arm distance between two lines. This works very well for a social environment that emphasizes on conformity.

To speak of teacher offices, standing in sharp contrast to the private ones at the United States, teachers in China share the same room regardless of which subjects they are teaching. Inside the same office, there are no walls or cubes but desks, and teachers thereby are purely separated by these tables. Each one has a reasonable-sized working desk to keep all of his or her teaching materials and necessary facilities. This open setting encourages and facilitates free dialogues among teachers so that they can easily and freely share their teaching stories and resources. At the same time, it demystifies hierarchies across academia, and eases out misconceptions and barriers among various departments. As it is noted by Hansen and Childs (1998), “teachers can easily meet each other during recess time and do not feel isolated as much as American high school teachers.” Here is an anecdote that coincides with this point. The story is about a Chinese teacher visiting the United States to teach Chinese culture and language. The American host-family generously provided the Chinese teacher with a private bedroom and other necessities from the American family’s common sense. Surprisingly, it is to the host family’s great disappointment that the Chinese teacher felt so uncomfortable with these offerings. As the host lady reported, “for us, this seems essential, but for the Chinese teacher, this personal space can result in isolation and loneliness” (Diana, 1996). Stigler and Stevenson (1992) additionally reinforce that American teachers face a feeling of “isolation” in their profession. They argue that lack of an established national curriculum

or large “teachers rooms” where teachers can convene and exchange ideas and advice are contributing to the physical and emotional isolation.

Role Defining

Role as a Student

Academically, not a small number of writings has emphasized that Asian students and Chinese in particular are more reverential, less-disputatious, and more memory-oriented (Redding, 1980). Truly indeed, compared with American students, Chinese are more passive and obedient, and they seldom ask questions openly in class. On the bright side, they are also more diligent and possess excellent powers of concentration. Perhaps one of the most noticeable characteristics is that Chinese students are all inclined to obviate direct disagreement and confrontation in the classroom. This point is perfectly illustrated by Edmund (2000) that “[Chinese students’ politeness] has led to a certain reticence, even fear, of openly challenging or even discussing equivocal points and issues that could offend teachers or prejudice student advantage. Such reticence is compounded by a strong cultural sense of “face”--a desire not to be embarrassed, or to embarrass others, publicly”. Face saving has been passed down since Confucians time and it has been maintained till today. The reality is that students speak out in class only if they know the right answer, otherwise, they would be scared to death by losing their face or failing to save others’ face.

In the traditional Chinese learning environment, the teacher is the “know-all” and the sole source of “correct” knowledge, although this belief has been widely criticized at the contemporary era (Yun, 1994). Chinese teachers claim to be the ultimate authoritative voice. As a result, students would definitely be surprised if they hear that their teacher

says, “I don’t know or I am sorry or I am wrong”, because they are used to expecting their teacher to be the “knowable”. Here goes the Chinese notion that “wisdom is learnable by rote directly from acknowledged masters” (Cragg, 1954). My current learning experiences at the United States couldn’t help better reinforce this argument. Although two semesters have past by since my arrival at America, I still feel uncomfortable to speak up in class and I’ve never dared to challenge my peers, let alone the wisdom (professors), in that face-saving and showing respect to others have always been at the top of my mind, so much so that I simply couldn’t get rid of it before I speak, however hard I try. I am just not used to that. Whereas conformity is regarded in China, different ideas are so encouraged and supported and welcomed by both teachers and students in American classrooms.

Note-taking is another typical Chinese learning style. Since most classes are taken in the format of lecturing, students are so much used to taking notes and writing down whatever their teacher says and memorize everything on the notebook after class. Myself as a typical and traditional Chinese student, I feel I am the only person in my class take the most notes during a class compared with the rest of my American classmates. I would feel very uncomfortable if I write down little notes, since Chinese students tend to believe that how much you write down on your book equals to how much you master. My years learning experiences in China have trained me to be that way and it has become part of my learning habit.

Socially, students in China are organized very cohesively through a special home room classroom. Ever since the first day that school starts, students are grouped randomly in home room classes. Throughout their three-year-study, students stay as the same group

peers and a regular classroom is assigned to each home room class. Teachers are the ones who travel between classes to give lectures. Between periods of two classes, there is a ten-minute-break, and all the students are forced to play at the open playground to gear up for the next class. The home class serves as residential place for students at school since all students literally spend a far great amount of time at school than at home. Such a home room classroom creates and builds up a sense of community and over years, kids develop very close and genuine relations among each other. Apart from this, students' sense of community is reinforced through their participation in a variety of campus-wide activities such as sports, musical play, cultural festivals, etc.. The reason is that students who take part in these games are elected on behalf of the whole home class instead of themselves. If the student wins, it is the entire class's honor. If the student loses, the class bears the equal responsibility to share the burden and cheer that particular student up. Far more values are given to the community or class as a whole than to individuals per se.

Apart from individual students, instructors also play a key role in enhancing that connectedness and interdependentness and thereby sustain this sense of community for years. In China, each home room is appointed with a particular school room teacher that will accompany the home class for three years or longer. The home room teacher functions as a mother that takes great care of his or her students' academic as well as social lives. It is to a majority of Chinese parents' common belief that their kids' overall performance academically, psychologically, and socially hinge up teachers' ability to supervise. In most cases, teachers are always the first person to contact if anything urgent happens to the students. In addition, home class teachers are required to conduct a home visit to every home room student's house at least once a year. A home room teacher

assumes dual responsibilities for a student's overall academic and behavioral performance in school (Liu & Barnhart, 1999). In the short run, this home room practice provides students with a sense of belonging in the school, and that sense of bonding grows stronger and stronger over years. In the long run, it lays a solid foundation to maintain and nourish this genuine friendship for their future collaboration. Resulting from such a close contact with students and parents, students' lives are under strict supervision, which makes it almost impossible to not behave within and without school. Students are forced to be on the right track by this relatively transparent triangular teacher-parents-students relation. Compared with American counterparts, Chinese kids simply don't have the mind set to claim either privacy or personal freedom. These terms are not their vocabulary.

As a Teacher

Teachers have been shouldered the most responsibility to take care of their students since the very first day of class. Students have a total reliance upon their teachers. "A student's overall development is taken into consideration from the day of elementary school entrance through the high school senior year" (Jane, 2001). The overall education for children to become well-rounded persons in the future starts since the first day that a kid enters into school. Instructors receive the highest respect from not only their students but parents as well. Never and ever could students address their teachers directly by their given names. This is strictly against the campus law. Proper titles must come first before the last name. Besides, it has been an age-long practice that students stand up and bow to their teacher before a class starts. In China, September 10th is selected as the National Teacher's Day to honor teachers nation-wide. On that day, all

students are expected to do something for their teachers as a way to show their appreciation. In line with the above mentioned home room class, home teachers are additionally dutiful to maintain a caring and loving community where all students know and care about each other as people, talk and listen to one another respectfully, and most importantly, are bonded together by strongly shared class norms as to respect, love, help, and unite. Hatano and Inagaki (1998) make it clear that “such classroom culture is crucial for students to learn from other students’ mistakes made in class”. This corresponds to a research done by Mc Adams (1993). He compared senior high school kids among China, France, and Japan, and concluded that Chinese student daily behaviors are more self-controlled with peer coordination, and the campus is less supervised by adults. Speaking for myself as an individual spent nineteen years in Chinese schools, I benefited so much from this community building and peer relations, and such an exceptional life supervised by public eyes and social pressures. What I’ve learned from my peers is no less than that from my teachers.

Pedagogical Method

Classroom Instruction

China has a centralized educational system that has led schools to become very structured institutions. These systems have decades of history dating back to the ancient civilization. Classes are basically one-way communication, with lecturing and questions specifically directed toward selected students. In line with Chinese education, the most important goal for students is to grasp the basic knowledge and skills which can lay a solid foundation for their future study especially in the field of science such as mathematics. To some extent, this strong emphasis on basic skills substantially benefits

Chinese students compared with their counterparts in the Western world. One Chinese visiting Professor at the American primary school notices that “quite often [American] students calculate by using their fingers, [and] even some 5th-grade students make frequent mistakes when doing simple calculation” (Education Reform in China, 2002). Then, he adds further that Chinese students at the same grade are much better at this point, because of their solid foundation and basic skills in that area. There is a very popular saying held to be true for centuries by Chinese people. It claims that mastery in Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry makes one easily sweep throughout the world. Another predominant education philosophy in China is that the primary purpose for students at young age is to learn the knowledge that has been discovered, instead of facilitating or coaching them to discover knowledge by themselves. In the United States, education is designed to cultivate students’ ability to do and conduct researches even when they are very young, whereas in China, students have no time for doing that. It is until undergraduate level that they could finally have a chance to conduct their own researches.

The lecturing format in addition to the previously mentioned large class size make students become note-taking machines that severally undermines their creativity and imagination to a great level. In the classroom, interrupting professors is considered very rude and remains as a tacit taboo that nobody ever dares to transgress. It is no wonder that some western professors would feel irritated to teach Chinese students in China. Maley laments that "large numbers of foreign teachers [as educators] return from China with dampened enthusiasm, feelings of disappointment and in some cases bitterness and

rancor" (1990:103). This is very likely to be the case for someone without any basic understanding or knowledge of Chinese classroom culture and education.

Keeping a close watch of students is a golden rule for teachers to seek after all over China. This is especially obvious for primary and secondary education, for most Chinese people believe that kids at this age are too young to behave well and choose wisely without proper instructions. Students have little leeway to do whatever they like. From the headmaster to the vice-Principal and to home class teachers, everyone has a say in supervising students and teaching them what should and shouldn't be done. As a matter of fact, to make sure that students have been best disciplined, a great number of school regulations and principles are implemented to assist in achieving that goal. For instance, most students are required to wear school uniforms and some Ivy League schools in China even require a certain length for hairs and nails, and make-up is definitely forbidden. In every classroom, a slice of hole is there on the rear door for teachers to constantly supervise their students. Parents have always expressed with gratitude that these seemingly cruel regulations will for sure be beneficial to their children in the long run since students could fully concentrate on their school work without being distracted by any material or worldly temptations.

Curriculum

Because of the centralized educational system, without any exaggeration, even the most restrictive curriculum in the U.S. is more flexible than that of the most flexible one in China. The Ministry of Education designs a basic framework for curriculum nationally and will be exactly followed nation-wide for at least twenty years. Teachers all share the same syllabus across China and they have no rights to select their textbooks. Students are

not allowed to either select what they are most interested in or what areas they are really talented for. What's even worse, within the limited options, parents instead of students play a key role in deciding what courses to register or which major to stay with. Most of the time, practical and pragmatic motifs in favor of careers and money-making are heavily weighted over other preferences. Intellectual enrichment is subordinated to secondary importance.

Furthermore, because of the adaptation to strict academic requirements, students have no choice but work super hard so as to realize their or their parents' dreams. Students would feel very guilty if they are not working hard. China has the age-long National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE) and it has always been the solid goal for every single Chinese student to strive for (Feng, 1999). Over the past several decades, owing to a sharp increase in competitiveness resulting from an overflow of rural populations, students all over China have to work twice harder than their counterparts' years ago to achieve the same economic and social wellbeing. All these for no doubt at all contribute to a longer schooling in China. Students spend 240 days per year compared with 180 days in American schools (McAdams, 1993). Besides that, each single school day is longer than that of the United States (Jane, 2001). In light of the instructional hours per year, China enjoys the longest period as 1177 hours compared with 1014 in America (Chalker & Haynes, 1994). As Jane notes, "Schooling is a full day commitment for a student from 8:00 a.m. to five or 6 p.m.." Additionally, for most schools in China, a 30-minute morning review session is scheduled prior to the first eight o'clock class, and attendance is mandatory. Moreover, everyday morning, students are required to take part in unified stretching-out exercises on the open playground for forty minutes. Because of

this intensive full-day schedule, there is a one-hour lunch break every day and students are required to exit classrooms in order to receive enough sunlight and rest so as to be refreshed for the afternoon. Sometimes, classrooms are locked and students are forced to leave. The reason is that students worried so much about their studies that they are reluctant to take a break because it wastes their precious time. As a result, lock the classroom is the only way to assure that “free time”. Sometimes when the problem becomes extremely serious, that is, a majority of students replace break time with extra hour studies, supervisors will be hired to make sure that the recharge time is there. Jane (2001) perfectly summarizes that this kind of “free time” helps students to learn self control and behave under public or peer pressure.

All in all, Chinese kids spend far more hours at school than at home and other kids outside China. “Being in school and working on school activities, academically and socially, are viewed as a student's full time responsibility. ... The spirit of working diligently and taking responsibility for the assumed commitment are fostered in the process of such schooling” (Jane, 2001). Throughout the whole academic year, lots of activities will take place such as sports, cultural festival, concert, fun club, etc. All students are required to attend these activities and explore them to their fullest potentials. Students are encouraged to try their best to win honor for their home class. These activities in addition to the extensive academic schedule consume students' spare time and use up their energy. Chinese students simply don't have the luck as American kids to enjoy social life for fun nor the luxury to earn any extra pocket money. Their whole day is dedicated to schooling and extracurricular activities. It is simply and humanly impossible to be not exhausted by the end of the day. China's one-child policy further

pressures these kids since they bear upon the sole burden to realize their parents' dreams and hopes and to prosper in all aspects of life. Understandably, education becomes the most accessible and achievable way to equalize children a chance to an elite position and bright future. All these mean that apart from the officially coded 240 school days, students throughout China, with rare exception, either go to extra classes or hire private tutors during the weekends to both catch up and go ahead.

Implications & Implementation

Over the past several years, volumes of comparative researches have been written in light of education. Ever since the end of 1980s, along with China's booming economy, cross-national examinations comparing students' academic performances between the Western and Asian educational system have been increasing in number and in scope, with research particularly focusing on math and science education (Sawako, 2000). "Such studies have consistently found Asian children's performance in mathematics to be markedly higher than that of students in the West" (Sawako, 2000). All these make it salient that Chinese educational system is not without merits. Among all of these researches done, Harold Stevenson's team has become the pioneers in this field because of the magnetite of their study. Based on their findings, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) proposed recommendations for change in the educational system of the United States, and they have a book entitled *The Learning Gap* regarding this. The authors states that:

Having compared teaching, parenting, learning, and academic achievement in several very different cultures, we found the most exciting revelations not in what we discovered in Asia, but in what was revealed in the United States. ... Many aspects of American education began to seem strange when

we viewed them through lenses altered by our Asian experience. We have experienced the thrill - and the distress - of discovering new attributes of our culture.

What they strongly recommend is to change the U.S. schools from structures such as decreasing teaching load, increasing class size to reinvigorating traditional American social beliefs such as the value of education, and the belief in the success of effort and hard working.

All in all, the point is that both countries need to learn from the other as much as possible. United States needs to learn the traditional merits reside in Chinese education. By the same token, China needs to learn the creativity and flexibility from the United States with great endeavor. This is by and large, a mutual learning process. Given the important role that education plays in bettering a nation at large, it deserves our effort and energy to invest in. Innovation and reform within the contemporary era are certainly a must especially for the developing country China. If education aims to eliminate fears when one enters into the real world and if the real world is becoming more and more interrelated and interdependent between one and another, it is crucial that students are allowed for the opportunity to be exposed to the comparatively more beneficial educational systems abroad. For sure, a number of challenges are in front of us. For school in the United States, they have to be aware of the transferability of Chinese education due to its deeply embedded socio-cultural context. For schools in China, their imperative task is to make a balance between maintaining its merits of the traditional education and integrating properly with the new models introduced from the United States. Without losing the traditional virtues that Chinese education has been relied upon

for three-thousand years such as respect, discipline, diligence, and the spirit of cohesiveness and sense of community, at the same time, properly incorporating the good facets from western models such as innovation and flexibility and creativity, Chinese education is going to prosper.

Fortunately, education reform and impressive progress are occurring in China. A variety of nation-wide educational reforms has become the central cultural and political policy. What's more, "these reforms are comprehensive and involve the full range of educational experiences from kindergarten through university graduate studies" (Ian, 2002). According to Professor Aibi Chen (2002) who is the Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the Department of Educational Administration, Beijing Institute of Education in China, she has noted that "China now is in the process of a profound reform...trying to change from what [is called] examination-oriented education to quality-oriented education, the intention of which is to develop students in an all-round way and focus on cultivating students' creativity and practical ability". This is indeed the urgent reform for China to initiate. Replacing rigidity with flexibility and new curriculum that emphasize more on humanities and social science, which areas are not only lagging far behind the western education but as a matter of fact, is strikingly undeveloped in China. The Canadian professor Ian (2002) neatly summarizes two general types of Chinese graduate students in Canada. One group is "those students oriented towards natural science who are able to progress rapidly in their research, without much pausing or stumbling." The second group is "humanities and social sciences oriented students who are weighted down by the system of deference to authority, both dead and alive, which governs their success or failure in their programs in China". Ian (2002) further

notes that for those belong to the second group, they are experiencing a hardship to transit to the “ways of the humanities and social science here in the West, not necessarily happily”. This backwardness in humanities and social science for graduate students in the Western world by no means is surprising for us Chinese people. However, it has to be noted that Chinese students are trained to be that way, not born to be that way. They are accustomed to passivity, note-taking, listening, and memorizing. As a result, these all strengthen the point that Chinese education needs to transform from teacher-centered to student-centered and help students be more self-directed.

Finally, it goes without saying that China and the United States are, either willingly or reluctantly, involved into this global race marked by multiculturalism and internationalization. All these strengthen the need to cultivate talents with global soul and compelling skills and comparative advantages that allow them to prosper in the future. By singling out priorities and legacies, this cross-cultural comparison hopefully could shed light on exploration of educational approaches to better facilitate Chinese children to smoothly transit to education reform without losing their virtues, at the same time, Americans become more appreciative of what they have and have a clearer sense of Chinese education and better understand their Chinese peers studying abroad.

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