The Good, Bad, and Ugly Stories of Chinese Education, Yet They Are Not the Whole Story

Who's afraid of the big bad dragon? Why China has the best (and worst) education system in the world. Yong Zhao. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014. 272pp., (hardcover), \$26.95, ISBN: 978-1-118-48713-6.

This entertaining and provocative book was published in 2014 by Jossey-Bass. Before I offer my critique on its content and thesis, I would like to share a piece of information that I recently learnt: The author, Dr. Yong Zhao (who holds a presidential chair and a professorship at the University of Oregon's College of Education), is ranked 9th in the 2015 RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings. The rankings recognize university-based scholars in the US who contributed most substantially to public debates about education in the previous year. In this book, with its vivid stories and compelling data, Dr. Zhao offers a fascinating tour of Chinese education, and a nuanced analysis that reveals the secrets that make it both “the best and worst” in the world.

This thoughtful book—though not lengthy—is divided into eight chapters, plus an introduction. It unfolds against the backdrop that Shanghai students topped the triennial tests of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in both 2009 and 2012, and Chinese education has become attractive to some education researchers and policymakers in the US. Many of the reforms taking hold in schools there, including a greater emphasis on standardized testing and the increasing importance of core subjects like reading and math, essentially echo the Chinese experience. In the first two chapters, namely “Fooling China, Fooling the World: Illusions of Excellence” and “The Emperors' Game: A Perfect Machine for Homogenization,” the author chronicles China's long history of testing from the imperial exam system (*keju*) up to today's *gaokao*, the all-important university entrance exam, asserting that the spirit of education in China today flows precisely from the *keju*. The imperial exam system functioned to select government officials, and rewarded obedience, conformity, compliance, respect for order, and homogeneous thinking. Thus, Chinese education is authoritarian in nature, and helps produce good test scores that are typically

achieved by rote memorization and hard work, but not a citizenry of diverse, creative and innovative talent.

The following three chapters (Chapter 3 “Governance without Governing: The Retreat of Authoritarianism and China’s Economic Boom,” Chapter 4 “Hesitant Learner: The Struggle of Halfway Westernization,” and Chapter 5 “Fooling the Emperor: The Truth about China’s Capacity for Innovation”) illustrate the point that China’s remarkable economic growth over the past three decades is not owed to its success in education, but rather to the opening up of its markets to foreign capital and Western technology, and to sending Chinese students to Western universities. To maintain its economic growth, China needs technological innovation, which will not likely happen unless China abandons its exam-oriented education system. Otherwise, such academic misconduct as plagiarism and fraud in research publications and “junk patents” are likely to be seen more and more in China, which will further jeopardize the nation’s capacity for innovation.

Chapters 6 and 7 are titled respectively “Hell to Heaven: The Making of the World’s Best and Worst Education” and “The Witch That Cannot Be Killed: Educational Reforms and Setbacks.” They continue with the discussion of such problems with China’s exam-oriented education as relying on rote memorization and mechanical drills as the primary approach, and using test scores as the primary or only criterion to evaluate students. Understandably, these practices hurt their motivation and enthusiasm, squelch their creativity, and impede their overall development. Some of these problems are rooted in the *keju* tradition and have persisted for over 1,000 years, like “witches,” to use the author’s own words. What has caused these problems to be perpetuated is the continuing authoritarian regime where the government dictates the curriculum and assessment.

Consequently, the author gives a warning in the last chapter under the title “The Naked Emperor: Chinese Lessons for What Not to Do.” He states that China’s authoritarian type of education might be seen as a perfect incarnation of excellence in education being defined through an outdated paradigm, which stresses uniformity, consistency, standardization, competition, and data-driven practices. Thus Chinese education cannot serve as a model for the US and elsewhere, since it promotes a “poisonous pedagogy” (p. 183), and “stifles creativity, smothers curiosity, suppresses individuality, ruins children’s health, distresses students and parents, corrupts teachers and leaders, and perpetuates

social injustice and inequity” (p. 187). By the same token, the author devotes considerable space in this chapter to challenging the credibility of PISA, citing some of PISA’s technical flaws, and questioning its validity for measuring students’ ability to live in the modern world as well its reliability in terms of assessing the quality of entire education systems. In particular, he asserts that PISA only proves that Shanghai students achieved the highest scores in math, reading, and science in 2009 and 2012, but provides no direct evidence that Chinese students perform better in other ability/skill areas that an educational system should cultivate, let alone that China should be taken as the world’s model of educational excellence.

I share the author’s viewpoints entirely on three counts. First, to unpack the myth of Chinese education requires an exploration of its philosophies, beliefs, values, and normative positions. In that regard, a pioneer in the field of comparative education Sir Michael Sadler made the point more than 100 years ago that things outside the school matter even more than things inside the school. Nicholas Hans (who is perhaps the greatest comparativist of the 20th century) further advised us to embed comparative studies in an understanding of educational tradition and national character. Dr. Zhao is thus right to delve into history from ancient China to the present. Against this historical narrative backdrop, he argues that today’s education system in China bears the genetic imprint of an authoritarian Chinese culture. Second, China’s top-ranking PISA scores should indeed not be mistaken as evidence of the superiority of its education system. It is an ungrounded great leap forward to liken the highest PISA score in three subjects to the best education system in the world. Last but not least, the enduring tight political control over education in China (or excessive stress on its political function) presents a major hindrance to its transformation. This holds true not only for the K-12 sector but also for postsecondary institutions, if not more so.

There are a few other places where I do not necessarily agree with the author. First and foremost, Chinese education is neither the best nor the worst in the world (as is the case also for US education). Rather, it worked well in the past with China’s agenda of socialist construction and industrialization right up to the 1990s, when the country started switching to and favoring a market economy. An economist once employed two statistical concepts to compare education in China and the US: The former enjoys a high mean, while the latter triumphs in terms of a large variance. A high mean often indicates efficiency and effectiveness, and

the *gaokao* in question serves precisely to secure such a high mean, despite some of its drawbacks. For a nation that suffers from an extreme scarcity of resources (especially in relation to its massive population) and has been keen to become industrialized, this high-mean approach might be a practical option, while the large-variance model appears to be a luxury that may be more affordable for post-industrialized countries. Nevertheless, now that China has become the world's second largest economy and is seeking to upgrade its economy, the old model is more and more problematic. This logic should make possible a good grip on the paradox that the author describes in Chapter 6: While many Western observers envy China's PISA scores, the Chinese are now working hard to dismantle the factors responsible for that success (p. 122).

Second and by the same token, Chinese education is entitled to claim a certain degree of success. A simple fact is that PISA is a Western-centric learning assessment program. Arguably, without having any default advantage, Chinese students are proving their outstanding abilities in math, reading, and science through their top-ranking performance in PISA, as long as no one can completely discredit PISA. While the author associates Chinese students' performance with what he depicts as a "poisonous pedagogy" (requiring an excessive workload and repetition, something that is true to a degree), I argue that a sense of discipline and hard effort contributes to that success as well. Take math for example. It is difficult for most students in the West and China. In the West, I have seen too many students say too easily and without any embarrassment: "I am not good at math." This is rare in China (as well as in other Confucian heritage societies). Chinese students know they have no excuse to say such a thing before they commit themselves to hard work on math (put another way, to fully explore their potential). The authoritarian culture may be responsible in some ways for this sense of discipline and willingness to put forward hard effort. In this sense, authoritarianism could claim some credit, as long as it is detached from exercising political control. Western students often take advantage of the freedom they have and choose subjects of interest, yet math is not only a core subject of knowledge but also an essential training in abstract reasoning, if you believe Plato and Socrates.

Third, there seems to be a paradox in the main argument in this book. The author obviously places a lot of faith in historical and cultural determinism, when arguing the presence of "witches" that live inside Chinese education. If so, the US policymakers and educators should not worry about the possibility of

abandoning their historic values of cultivating diversity and individuality, or being corrupted by authoritarian standards and tests. Indeed, there is slim chance that China's authoritarian type of education could take root in the US soil. Instead, I believe that it is the utilitarian aspects of China's authoritarian approach that appeal to some educational reformers in the US. In that sense, there may be some common ground between the US-style neoliberalism and the Chinese-style authoritarianism. It is this possibility that the US education researchers and practitioners should be alerted to.

Finally, I cannot easily appreciate the classic realist conceptualization of international educational relations that drives the logic in this book. Throughout the volume, the author discusses the Chinese and the US education models in a dichotomous manner, i.e., to endorse either the Chinese or the US practices. Interestingly, while the author denounces excessive competition within an education system, he seems to be advocating the game of "Player Killing (PK)" between education systems. If we adopt this mentality, it might not be realistically possible to fulfill the author's wish expressed at the very end of this book: To invent one education model "that will meet the needs of a global future" (p. 189). This future model cannot grow out of someone's invention or imagination. Rather, in an era of globalization, it needs to be built upon a wide array of human experiences. For this reason, we must develop a kind of listening mentality, i.e., the readiness to listen to the narrative of the other, and to learn the lessons that are discovered in distinctive threads of human culture and tradition. At this point, let me be clear: I do not mean to offer any counter argument in this short review essay. What I really want is to push the author and any reader of this book to think beyond the PK game between the Chinese and the US approaches to education, and raise this discourse to an awareness of the fact that global issues require global solutions. This should be the genuine reason that we invest in programs like PISA.

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