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IDEAS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

Why American Students Need Chinese Schools

After putting her son in an elite state-run school in Shanghai, an American mother finds that the U.S. education system could learn a few things from China—most of all that teacher knows best



The author, Lenora Chu, with her husband, Rob Schmitz, and sons Landon, age 5, and Rainer, age 8. PHOTO: PATRICK WACK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

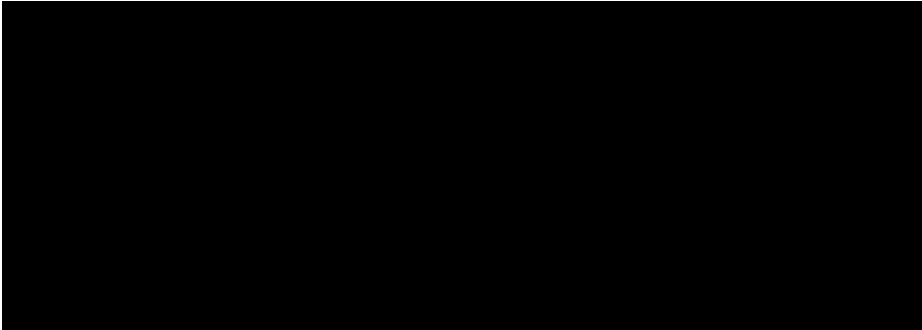
By *Lenora Chu*
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When my little boy was 3, his Chinese teacher forced a bite of fried egg into his mouth. At school. Without permission.

“She put it there,” my firstborn told me, lips forming an “O,” finger pointing past his teeth.

“Then what happened?” I prodded my son, who despises eggs.

— ADVERTISEMENT —





“I cried and spit it out,” he said.

“And?” I pressed.

“She did it again,” he said. In all, Teacher Chen pushed egg into my son’s mouth four times, and the last time, he swallowed.

We are Americans raising a family in Shanghai—China’s megacity of 26 million people—and the Chinese are known to pump out some of the world’s best students. When we realized that a few blocks from our new home was one of the best state-run schools, as far as elite urbanites are concerned, we decided to enroll our son. He would learn the world’s most spoken language. What was not to like?

Plenty, as it turned out. And it was only the first week of kindergarten.

The next day, I marched off to school to confront Teacher Chen about the egg episode, brash in my conviction about individual choice.

“We don’t use such methods of force in America,” I blurted in Mandarin, my son clutching my hand. (I was born and raised in America but grew up speaking Chinese at home.)

“Oh? How do you do it?” Teacher Chen challenged.

“We explain that egg eating is good for them, that the nutrients help build strong bones and teeth and helps with eyesight,” I said, trying to sound authoritative. “We motivate them to choose...we trust them with the decision.”

“Does it work?” Teacher Chen challenged.

In truth, no. I’d never been able to get my son to eat eggs. He’s a picky eater. Later, Teacher Chen pulled me aside for a lecture. “In front of the children, you should say, ‘Teacher is right, and Mom will do things the same way,’ OK?”

‘Many studies support the Chinese way of education.’

I nodded, slightly stunned. It was the voice of Confucius, who had staked his entire philosophy on the concept of top-down authority and bottom-

up obedience, giving direction to our lives.

Many studies support the Chinese way of education. Researchers have found that 6-year-old Chinese children trounce their American peers in early math skills, including geometry and logic. In the past decade, Shanghai teens twice took No. 1 in the world on a test called PISA, which assesses problem-solving skills, while American students landed

in the middle of the pack.

When young Chinese head abroad, the results are impressive. They are earning more spots at the world's top universities. The Ivy League enrolls eight times more Chinese undergraduates than a decade ago, according to the Institute of International Education, and the Chinese are helping to launch Silicon Valley startups in disproportionate numbers.

Yet, from my perch in Shanghai, I started out with some major objections to Chinese education. Force-feeding would get a teacher dragged into court in the U.S., the land of infant choice, free-form play and individualized everything. In China, children are also subjected to high-stakes testing at every turn, which keeps them bent over books from toddlerhood on.

I began to wonder: What price do the Chinese pay to produce their “smart” kids? And do we really have something to learn from this rigid, authoritarian form of schooling?



Students at Jinqiao Center Primary School in Shanghai. PHOTO: JOHANNES EISELE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

For five years now, I've parented a child inside China's school system and interviewed Chinese teachers, parents and students at all stages of education. I've discovered that there are indeed some Chinese “secrets” that work and are worth emulating. Most have to do with attitudes about education.

There are real upsides to a mentality of “teacher knows best.” As I worked through my anxieties about submitting to this kind of system, I began to observe that when parents fall in line with teachers, so do their children. This deference gives the teacher near-absolute command of her classroom. My son became so afraid of being late for class, missing school or otherwise disappointing his teacher, that he once raised a stink when I broached the possibility of missing a few school days for a family trip. He was 5.

Having the teacher as an unquestioned authority in the classroom gives students a leg up in subjects such as geometry and computer programming, which are more effectively taught through direct instruction (versus student-led discovery), according to a 2004 study of 112 third- and fourth-graders published in the journal *Psychological Science*. A 2014 study of more than 13,000 students in the journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* found that math-challenged first-graders learned more effectively when teachers demonstrated problem-solving procedures and followed up with repeated practice.

By contrast, Western teachers spend lots of time managing classroom behavior and crushing mini-revolts by students and parents alike. A Chinese teacher who arrived in the U.S. two decades ago recalled to me her surprise the first year she taught American kids. “I started out very controlling, but it didn't work at all. My students talked back!” says Sheen Zhang, who teaches Mandarin at a Minnesota high school. Parents sometimes complained when she assigned too much homework. A mother once asked

her to change the way she talked to her classwork-skipping daughter. “She wanted me to say, ‘You can do better!’ instead of ‘You didn’t finish this!’ ” exclaimed Ms. Zhang.

‘Chinese society grants teachers a social status on par with doctors.’

The
Chinese
parent
knows
that her
kid
deserves

whatever the teacher metes out, no questions asked. In other words, let the teacher do his or her job. As a result, educators in China enjoy an esteem that’s tops in the world: Half of Chinese would encourage their kids to become teachers, while less than a third of Americans and Brits would do the same, according to a 2013 study by the Varkey Foundation. Chinese society grants teachers a social status on par with doctors.

There are also educational advantages to the Chinese insistence on elevating the group over the needs of any individual child. The reason is simple: Classroom goals are better served if everyone charges forward at the same pace. No exceptions, no diversions.

My son suffered from asthma during the winter, but Teacher Chen denied my request to keep his rescue inhaler near the classroom—its use might be a distraction to his classmates. When I loudly protested, I was told I could transfer my son out of the school. In other words, no kid gets special treatment, and if I didn’t like it, I could get out. (Ultimately, I found a solution: a preventive steroid inhaler that I could administer at home.)

The school’s attitude is draconian. But Americans have arguably gone too far in the other direction, elevating the needs of individual students to the detriment of the group. Some parents think nothing of sending an unvaccinated child to school—ignoring community health—or petitioning to move school start times to accommodate sports schedules. Meanwhile, teacher friends tell me that they are spending more time dealing with “problem” students, often through intervention programs that whittle away teachers’ time with the rest of the class. Where should we draw the line?

Another bracing Chinese belief is that hard work trumps innate talent when it comes to academics. Equipped with flashcards and ready to practice, my son’s Chinese language teacher knows that he is capable of learning the 3,500 characters required for literacy. His primary school math teacher gives no child a free pass on triple-digit arithmetic and, in fact, stays after school to help laggards. China’s school system breeds a Chinese-style grit, which delivers the daily message that perseverance—not intelligence or ability—is key to success.

Studies show that this attitude gets kids farther in the classroom. Ethnic Asian youth are higher academic achievers in part because they believe in the connection between effort and achievement, while “white Americans tend to view cognitive abilities as...inborn,” according to a longitudinal study of more than 5,000 students published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2014. Chinese kids are used to struggling through difficult content, and they believe that success is within reach of anyone willing to work for it. This attitude gives policy makers in China great latitude when it comes to setting out and enforcing higher standards.

In the U.S., parents have often revolted as policy makers try to push through similar measures. In part, we are afraid that Johnny will feel bad about himself if he can’t make the grade. What if, instead, Johnny’s parents—and his teacher, too—believed that the boy could learn challenging math with enough dedicated effort?

Americans aren’t afraid to push their children when it comes to athletics. Here we believe that hard work and practice pay off, so we accept scores and rankings. Eyes glued

to scoreboards at a meet, we embrace numbers as a way to measure progress. A ninth-place finish in the 100-meter dash suggests to us that a plodding Johnny needs to train harder. It doesn't mean that he's inferior, nor do we worry much about his self-esteem.

My son has been in the Chinese school system now for five years. During that time, he has morphed into a proper little pupil who faithfully greets his teacher each morning—"Laoshi Zao! Good morning, teacher!"—and has developed an unbending respect for education. In primary school, I watched, a bit dazed, as he prepared his own backpack for school at 6 years old, slotting his English, Chinese and math books into his bag each morning along with six pencils that he sharpened himself.

When his homework books come home—parents in China are required to sign them daily to prove involvement—he brings them to us immediately. He began teaching his younger brother Mandarin, two small heads huddled over a picture book, naming animals. A little older now, he expertly performs timed drills in arithmetic, his pencil



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LITTLE SOLDIERS by Lenora Chu - Prologue


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traveling down the page, and he gains confidence from his success. He also eats eggs of his own free will.

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When I tell the story of my son's Chinese educational experience to American friends, they gasp. When they spend time with him,

they are surprised that he doesn't cower in the corner or obey commands like a Labrador retriever. My son is imaginative when he draws, and has a great sense of humor and a mean forehand in tennis. None of these qualities has slipped away, and I now share the Chinese belief that even very young kids are capable of developing a range of demanding talents.

Still, I must confess that I have been paralyzed by anxiety at times over the Chinese way, which demands fealty. Teacher Chen wasn't just authoritarian; she sometimes delivered very harsh punishments. Once, she isolated my young son and several classmates in an

'I have been paralyzed by anxiety at times over the Chinese way. '

empty
classroom
and
threatened
to demote
them after
they failed to

follow in “one-two” step during a physical exercise.

Her power was even more worrisome when coupled with the Communist Party’s political agenda. At 4, my son learned the lyrics to “The East Is Red,” extolling Chairman Mao. The following year, his teachers began running mock elections for class monitor, part of the grooming process to identify star students for eventual Party membership.

At the same time, China’s education landscape is littered with dropouts in a system that perpetuates an underclass: Children who fail to test into regular high schools would populate a city the size of London each year. Because of the high stakes, families sometimes take extreme measures, including cheating and bribery.

And there is no denying that the traditional Chinese classroom discourages the expression of new and original thought. I observed an art class where 28 toddlers were instructed to sketch exactly the same way, with errant drawings tacked to the wall to shame the deviants. “Rain falls from the sky to the ground and comes in little dots,” bellowed the teacher, as the children dutifully populated their pages. In this classroom, rain did not blow sideways or hurtle to the ground in sheets. There was no figurative rain, such as purple rain, nor did it rain tears or frogs, much less cats and dogs.

There are clear downsides to China’s desire to cultivate a nation of obedient patriots, and Americans naturally resist. We harbor a healthy mistrust of authority, and our freedom to raise a fuss is a right we should celebrate. It’s foundational to our national character.

But the skepticism we freely apply to our political leaders can be destructive when transferred to the men and women who stand at the front of our classrooms. Educational progress in the U.S. is hobbled by parental entitlement and by attitudes that detract from learning: We demand privileges for our children that have little to do with education and ask for report-card mercy when they can’t make the grade. As a society, we’re expecting more from our teachers while shouldering less responsibility at home.

From my years living in a very different country, I’ve learned that wonderful things can happen when we give our educators the respect and autonomy they deserve.

Sometimes, it is best when parents—and children—are simply obliged to do as they’re told.

This essay is adapted from Ms. Chu’s “Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve,” to be published on Sept. 19 by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins (which, like The Wall Street Journal, is owned by News Corp).

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