



East Meets West: A Comparative Analysis of The Chinese and American Education

Systems

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Abstract

This essay aims to engage in a comparative analysis of the education systems in China and the United States, with a particular focus on their different characteristics, success rates in terms of student outcomes, and global impact. Using the oral history technique the analysis focuses on the personal experiences of students, parents, and educators who possess deep experience in both systems. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and secondary research, it provides a comprehensive overview of the two systems from first-hand experiences, highlighting their impact on students' lives and educational careers. The paper underscores the Chinese system's emphasis on rigorous academic standards and a collective approach, influenced by historical testing practices such as Keju, the first standardized exam in Chinese history. In contrast, the United States system is characterized by an emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and a holistic approach, rooted in the German system and the country's diversity. Throughout, the essay both broaches and elaborates on themes such as individualism versus collectivism, the role of standardized testing, creativity, critical thinking, and teacher-student relationships. It will also discuss areas of commendation and criticism within each system from different perspectives, reflecting on each nation's sociocultural influence.

Introduction

Despite the globalism and interconnectedness that characterize the modern world, education protocols, and systems vary widely from country to country, being that historical, cultural, and socioeconomic value systems shaped them. These factors often lead to various outcomes in terms of students' opportunities, performance, and quality of education and educational experiences.

Beyond the confines of structured curriculum and textbooks, the way students learn and teachers teach deeply reflects the intricacies of a nation's identity. Education reflects not just the aspirations a society holds for its younger generations but also the norms, values, and historical context that have shaped the nation over centuries. Education is experience embedded with stories, challenges, hopes, and dreams; the true meaning of an education system emerges in the minute details of these stories. No two education systems are alike, yet their purposes converge to a common end— preparing the younger generation for a better future. This paper aims to take advantage of the orally recounted educational experiences of people involved in and affected by two of the world's most influential nations: China and the United States. By

doing so, the paper seeks not to debate whether one education system is superior to the other but to illuminate the reality of the students' educational journey in these two most powerful nations. From a busy classroom in Beijing to vibrant debates in New York, from the stringent schedules of a Chinese school day to the diverse extracurriculars of an American high school, this exploration is as much about understanding the mechanics of education systems as it is about getting to know the "lived experience" of each system. Through interviews and narratives, this paper will take the reader on a journey through the classrooms of China and the United States and into the lives and minds of students in those classrooms. Through interviews with educators, parents, and students from both countries immersed in either or both education systems, this research aims to provide a neutral, comprehensive portrayal of the values, experiences, and realities of a student's day-to-day life in both systems.

Background Information and Historical Comparisons

China's education system has held immense importance to the Chinese community to the influence of Confucianism, which places a high value on learning and wisdom. During the Tang dynasty, Keju, or imperial examinations, were the primary method of social mobility for centuries (Asia for Educators). These examinations assessed individuals on academic knowledge and gauged their moral character and alignment with Confucian principles. The rigorous nature of these tests set a precedent for the Chinese emphasis on examination and academic competition. However, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the education system experienced significant reforms, transitioning to a more socialist model (Qian and Verhoeven). Today, the Chinese system is widely known for its high stakes and rigorous examinations (Shieh), especially the GaoKao, the college entrance exam in China, much like how the SAT or ACT are used in the U.S. People believe that GaoKao can determine a student's future career and life. As this paper demonstrates, this drive for education excellence often leads to immense pressure on students, with many students dedicating countless hours to preparation and competition (Heinz).

The United States is a country forged by immigration, and its education system has evolved through industrialization, social reforms, and waves of newcomers. In early settler-colonial times, education in America was private and religious, with settlers aiming to educate their children within the confines of their belief systems (Kober and Rentner). Schools and colleges, like Harvard College were established as divinity schools and funded by churches and religious groups. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, the concept of public education began to emerge alongside waves of German immigrants. With the country's expansion and influx of various cultures, there was a pressing need for a unified system (Fike). In addition to expansion and the influence of Germany, the advent of the Industrial Revolution created significant demand for a more educated and technically skilled workforce (Miller).

Through public education, the U.S., aimed to provide an accessible and standardized education for all people, regardless of their background or social status. As the public system evolved in the U.S., educators ultimately landed on a more holistic approach to students' development, promoting critical thinking and creativity, and encouraging students not just to memorize facts but also to understand and question them. This style of education aligns with the American emphasis on individualism and personal expression.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, data collection occurred via semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring that all intended topics are discussed. A total of 12 interviews were conducted: eight participants were from China, four were from the U.S., and six had lived in both countries and experienced both education systems. Participants varied in age, from high school students to parents and educators. In addition to the interviews, this paper reviewed available government publications, news articles, and research essays from other educators on the subject.

To ensure depth and variety, this essay selected participants intentionally to represent a variety of experiences and perspectives. For example, among the educators interviewed, one was an American teacher working in a private high school in the U.S., while another was a public school math instructor from China.

The parents interviewed for the study also came from diverse backgrounds and mindsets. One was a Chinese parent who had immigrated to the U.S., offering unique insights into both nations' experiences and expectations. Another parent was American, providing an outsider's perspective on the Chinese educational system. A Chinese parent who is currently living in China was also interviewed.

During the interview process, four students who are now or have experienced the educational system in both countries were interviewed. The first student is in the eleventh grade in a U.S. private high school and was born and raised in the U.S. The second student interviewed is a first-generation immigrant who experienced public education in China until the age of twelve, then transferred to the U.S. and is currently attending a public school. The third interviewee is a former student who experienced the GaoKao, attended college in China, and then applied to the U.S. for graduate school. The fourth interviewee is a former student who experienced the Chinese educational system and GaoKao, as well as the reformation of the Chinese educational system.

The completed interviews were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes and notable differences and similarities between the two systems. By detailing the interview notes and analysis, this paper aims to shed light on the underlying factors that shape students' life in both countries.

Individualism and Collectivism

When asked about the U.S. educational system, interviewees emphasized that individuality aims to help students develop into more well rounded individuals by incorporating critical thinking and other essential skills. One U.S. high school student emphasized, "Our education system encourages unique perspectives and individual options" (Chang). Conversely, the collective mindset dominated the discussion for those who grew up in Chinese society. One parent pointed out, "Our education system promotes a sense of community, placing value on shared successes" (Chang). Moreover, interviewees spoke of the fact that the individualistic approach in the U.S. allows students to express their unique talents and interests through their particular lenses and perspectives (Yang and Congzhou). Students are often motivated to think critically and outside the box, challenge the status quo, and express their personal beliefs without fear of judgment or repercussions. On the other hand, the collective approach in China encourages students to prioritize harmony, unity, and mutual respect.

The Role of Standardized Testing

In the United States, standardized tests, although very common, are not the sole determinants of academic achievements and are rather only one of many tools used to determine a student's academic excellence and future track. An educator from a U.S. private high school notes, "Assessment methods are diverse; not just reliant on standardized tests" (Chang and Yang). However, given more than a thousand years of emphasis on standardized tests in the country, Chinese respondents highlighted the significance of the GaoKao. A former Chinese student shares, "The GaoKao encapsulates our academic journey, it's more than an exam— it determines our future and even jobs that can be offered to us" (Chang and Song). On the other hand, standardized tests in the U.S., such as the SAT or ACT, offer a snapshot of a student's academic capabilities but are often supplemented with other factors such as extracurriculars, essays, and GPA during the college application process. Some colleges have maintained an optional test policy after COVID, believing that one singular test is not an accurate measure of students' performance (Heubeck). In contrast, China's GaoKao system holds immense weight, often deciding the future of a student's entire academic and professional career. The pressure associated with this single exam is enormous. Failing the exam means there will be limited resources or jobs for them to apply for in the future since the competition is so intense. Interviewees spent significant time describing the stress students face at a young age to prepare for these standardized tests.

Critical Thinking

American interviewees frequently underscored the importance of extracurricular activities during the interview process. "My involvement in soccer is valued similarly to my academic subjects" (Chang), a high school student from the U.S. noted. In contrast, the core focus for many Chinese students in their academic careers is to achieve academic success. As one teacher shares, "Our pursuit is primarily academic excellence, often demanding extra hours of study from students" (Chang and Sun). The same teacher emphasizes that holistic education in the U.S., where students are measured by their academic performance and involvement in various extracurricular activities, nurtures their overall development in creativity and social skills. On the other hand, the Chinese system, being more exam-centric (Yasmin et al.), prioritizes academic success over other goals. Maintaining this structure can sometimes overshadow the development of other essential skills, such as creativity and critical thinking. The teacher also emphasized the importance of such skills for students' future success in their careers after completing their education.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Based on the interviews, American feedback indicated a more collegial relationship between the students and educators. A U.S. respondent who is currently applying for college highlighted, "My interactions with my teachers are often extended beyond the academic area" (Chang). In China, however, interviewees painted a picture of structure and reverence. As one parent underlines, "Our children are instilled with deep respect for their teachers— it's been embedded in our culture for thousands of years" (Chang and Zhang). In the U.S., it's more common for students to view their teachers as mentors in academics and life; some students might even consider their teachers as good friends or role models. The same U.S. respondent mentioned that open dialogues, debates, and conversations frequently happen between students and teachers. This fosters an environment where teachers can get to know their students better to support their success. It also allows students to feel more comfortable

expressing their doubts and concerns. In Chinese classrooms, the dynamic is more formal, as a college classroom might be, due to the influence of Confucian values such as filial piety and social harmony (Bear et al.). As the Chinese parent stated before, teachers are highly respected by their students, and they emphasize discipline and adherence to traditional classroom norms. This is exacerbated by the larger number of students per class in China, since the overall population is so large, leading to an unbalanced ratio of students and teachers. The atmosphere allows the development of discipline within the classroom but can also sometimes limit open communication between teacher and student that can truly help the student's development (Wu).

Areas of Commendation

Drawing on the reflection and observations provided by the interviews and secondary research, this section aims to shed light on the commendable aspects of both the Chinese and the U.S. education system. In the U.S. education system, individuality and personal growth emerge as themes as critical just as academic excellence. As one U.S. high school student highlights, "Our system encourages us to share unique perspectives and honor our individual thoughts" (Chang). This perspective underscores that the system emphasizes overall student development. Furthermore, the same student stated that the holistic approach to student assessment in the U.S. encourages a diversified skill set, which can be further used or developed as they begin their working career.

Several interviewees spoke about a typical Chinese school's discipline and rigorous standards. The collective mindset was often criticized as a hallmark of the Chinese pedagogical method. But in reality, having a collective mindset can be a better way to educate students when the population of students per grade is many times more than the number of students per class in the U.S. One Chinese parent pointed out, "Our education system promotes a sense of community, placing value on success. If everyone talks in the class and there is no discipline, how can the teacher possibly cover the materials in a forty-minute block? Also, we all know that extracurriculars are important for the overall development of children, but not all families can afford them. If not everyone can afford the program, how will it be equal for all students across China to go to college" (Chang and Sun). Most parents in China believe discipline and high expectations can better prepare students for rigorous exams, future professions, and future academic pursuits. Additionally, the consistency of the Chinese system with its centralized tests, ensures that every student, regardless of where they are located in China, receives a comparable quality of education. This can be a driving factor behind the dedication and competitiveness seen among Chinese students across the country.

Parents also focused with particular acuity on standardized testing and its impact on young students. From an American perspective, while relevant, educational advancement relies on a multifaceted quantity of activities and resume items, rather than entirely on standardized tests. An educator from a U.S. private high school emphasized, "Assessment methods are diverse; we don't just rely on standardized tests" (Chang and Yang). However, the sometimes unmeasurable diversity of input variables for U.S. achievement can sometimes lead to concerns regarding consistency and fairness. China's GaoKao stands as a singular and definitive test that students spend years preparing for. While this test holds immense pressure, it offers clarity and fairness. Students know precisely what is expected of them, and the results offer a straightforward measurement for colleges to admit students. Though this rigidity can sometimes cause lack of creativity and critical thinking, it might best suit the current social status of China

as a whole, and provide a measure of fairness and consistency that is lacking in the U.S. system.

Looking at the data, the average class size in the U.S. is twenty-four students (*National teacher and principal survey (NTPS)*) and the average in China is between forty and sixty (*The Chinese Educational System*). It becomes immediately evident why it is significantly harder for teachers to spend time checking on individual students in the Chinese system. The smaller class size in the U.S. allows teachers to further foster their relationships with students and ensure overall student development.

In analyzing the narrative drawn from the interviews, it becomes clear that no education system, regardless of its strengths and weaknesses, is superior to any other; people simply have different opinions and perspectives on each system. Both the Chinese and the U.S. education systems, despite their commendations, come with a set of concerns as expressed by their respective societies. However, in understanding the strengths of each system, there can be opportunities for each to learn from the other and evolve towards a more holistic and inclusive system for students to embrace themselves and develop. While keeping in mind that no system can be perfect, it is valuable to stay open to the possibilities embedded in intellectual exchange and evolution between systems.

Challenges and Criticisms

One of the primary criticisms of the U.S. education system revolves around the disparities in educational resources based on socioeconomic status and a student's specific school district. Students in wealthy districts are often capable of receiving more advanced courses, extracurriculars, teacher's resources, and educational technologies than those in underfunded districts (Brian D). A report by the National Association of Educational Progress (*National teacher and principal survey (NTPS)*) reported that there was a significant achievement gap between students from low and high-income families. Based on their data, this disparity intensifies social inequalities and challenges the very notion of the American Dream, where every individual supposedly has an equal opportunity for future success and happiness.

Another critique of the U.S. system is the overemphasis on athletics in many American schools, which sometimes can divert resources from academic achievement. While sports can foster teamwork and discipline, the imbalance can prevent an institution from fulfilling its primary academic mission (Wretman). The article "Massive Spending Gap Between Athletes and Academics" (Callow) shows that athletic programs consume a disproportionate amount of funding than other programs that are in need of the funding.

On the Chinese front, the rigorous focus on standardized testing, especially the GaoKao, is often criticized for the amount of pressure it places on the student.. Students might spend years of their life preparing for a single exam, potentially limiting their capabilities of developing creativity and deterring deeper or conceptual understanding of subjects. An article called "Learning in China" (*Learning in China*) highlights the Chinese education system's emphasis on memorization due to historical influences and mindsets, and explains how it does not necessarily equip students with essential skills required for the 21st century.

Moreover, the collective mindset fostered by the Chinese education system, while encouraging unity, can sometimes suppress individual expression and diverse voices in the classroom, allowing fewer teacher-student interactions. According to Jin Li, in "Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West" (Li), this lack of discourse can eventually lead to students feeling unprepared to deal with challenges in the real world. The Chinese approach is

not just a pedagogical choice; it is a reflection of a broader cultural value system that can be traced back to the sixth century. This historical and cultural demand to prioritize community and harmony over individuality, causes Chinese students, in turn, to focus more on a collective mindset rather than individuality.

It is crucial, however, to emphasize these criticisms in light of each country's unique social conditions (*Education and socioeconomic status factsheet*). The U.S., being the most developed country in the world, places an emphasis on individuality and creativity, which naturally leads towards an education system that promotes these values. While China, a developing country, seeks to develop students into future workers, and thus has an education system that emphasizes harmony, respect for the elderly, and collectivism via standardized testing. China sees education as a way to enhance the economy and the global status of the Chinese state.

While both systems have their strengths and weaknesses, understanding the sociocultural and economic impacts society has on the education systems will provide a better lens through which to understand the changes they each face and potential pathways for reform.

What Each System Can Learn From the Other

Chinese schools are well-known for their disciplined approach, which significantly contributes to their students' success. In the United States, more emphasis could be put on structured classroom management and regular and focused study habits for students. Having a disciplined approach could help to minimize distractions and encourage students to concentrate on their studies. Incorporating an appropriate amount of passive learning strategies based on scientific research allows students to have a deeper understanding of materials and better prepare them for standardized examinations (Michel et al.). As a U.S. respondent mentions, "Teaching a second language in high school for many years, I find that using passive learning strategies such as memorization, testing, note taking, presentation, and lecture can better enhance student's understanding on the subject" (Chang and Yang). The same respondent also highlights the fact that it is not about being excessively strict but rather creating an environment where students can prioritize their educational activities while valuing the importance of critical thinking. This disciplined methodology has been shown to improve academic outcomes in various studies such as "Comparing Chinese and Western classroom learning environment research: a bibliometric analysis and visualization" (Cai et al.). The respondent's own teaching experience also underscores the potential value of such an approach.

The structured nature of the Chinese curriculum allows uniformity in educational standards across the country, making access to future educational and professional opportunities more equitable for all students. This could be beneficial in the U.S., especially for addressing educational disparities. Having a more uniform curriculum across states could ensure all students, regardless of location and socioeconomic status, have the same opportunities for high-quality education. This approach can help to minimize the achievement gap between different schools, where resources are often inequitably distributed.

In China, there tends to be less creativity and exploratory learning methods such as those practiced in the U.S. The Chinese system could benefit from including more creative activities such as integrated arts, music, and other subjects into student's daily curriculum, and encouraging more project and research-based learning to promote and stimulate creative

thinking. Eventually these methods might allow students to achieve a better academic balance and develop into more well-rounded thinkers and learners.

The immense pressure and the high-stakes GaoKao exam can be overwhelming for students. China might also benefit from adapting some U.S. strategies, such as multiple assessment methods, instead of evaluating students' academic performance based on one test. Colleges and teachers can evaluate students' performance based on classwork, projects, athletic performance, and extracurricular achievements, which can help reduce pressure and improve mental health (Tahira). Incorporating a more holistic approach to education that recognizes the importance of creativity and other essential skills beyond academic achievements provides students with a more balanced education and better preparation for the future. The aforementioned improvements would not only alleviate stress and improve mental health, but also foster better overall student development (Zuo).

Conclusion

Examining different voices and experiences from various participants, ranging from students and parents to educators, offers an insightful commentary on the U.S. and Chinese education systems. We've noted that the Chinese education system supports a rigorous academic curriculum and standardized testing, while incorporating a collective belief in academic excellence. This approach creates a focused learning environment, even as it sacrifices student creativity and critical thinking development; it also has deep roots in the country's historical and cultural value systems. The United States' education system, on the other hand, emphasizes creativity and a holistic approach to education. It offers more flexible and discourse-driven learning experiences for students to develop in a well-rounded way; it encourages them to think for themselves and question the status quo. The U.S. system, however, may struggle with issues relating to resource and achievement inequality, as well as the proper balancing of academic performance and extracurricular activities.

Both systems have their challenges and successes. Students within the Chinese system tend to grapple with the immense pressure of standardized tests and the need for prioritizing creativity and critical thinking skills to better prepare students for the real world, instead of just focusing on what the textbook teaches. Still, the U.S. struggles with disparities in educational resources and the balance between athletic performance and academic achievement.

An important aspect of this research is to shed light on what each system can learn from the other. Understanding each system's strengths and weaknesses generates an opportunity for mutual learning and improvement. Beyond incorporating discipline and standardized testing, the U.S. can encourage students to perform better in testing and academic achievement. In the meantime, China can emphasize critical thinking and other essential skills that apply to real world situations and prepare students for the future.

The research aims to illustrate that education is not just a system but a reflection of a country's social values. I hope to have depicted what life is like as a student via firsthand experiences and secondary sources. By embracing the best from both systems, there is potential for further development and reformation that allows not only academic success but better prepares students for the complexities of modern society.

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