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A Socio-Political Education: One American Teacher's Musings on Teaching English in  
China

Heather Brown

It's November, and though I am in my 5th year as a university educator, I am only in my 3rd month as a foreign teacher of English at a university in rural China. As I sit here writing my students are engaging in group work to prepare for a presentation they will be giving in class next week. I'll get up in a moment and circulate, helping students practice the pronunciation of a word here, listening to their lovely, often creative English there. I've learned so much in my short time here. I'm a more patient, generous teacher than I was only a few months ago. I've also learned that some of the things I take for granted with young undergrads in America - that they will be late, skip, make every excuse in the book to get out of work and still pass - does not, in fact, have to be the rule. That difference is really at the heart of what you are about to read.

The Chinese education system still has much growing up to do. This need - according to the brief observation of this foreigner - is the result of two phenomena: First, a huge infusion of students flooded the schools at the end of the Cultural Revolution - around the beginning of the 1980s - after the schools were reopened and a large number of students were brought back to their homes from the countryside. Second, the incredibly fast economic boom that has hit China in the past few decades has allowed more children than ever in the history of China to be able to afford to attend school. It is outside the scope of this essay to give more than a surface report on these two life-altering events in the lives of modern Chinese people; however, I will say this: the Chinese students I have had and continue to have the honor to teach are heirs to a culture that has survived many centuries of innovation, war, and rebirth. China is now experiencing growing pains as she works toward her goal of becoming

not only a modern and relevant developed country, but one that stands among the world powers. Some of the challenges China faces in this process find themselves most clearly expressed in weaknesses of her education system.

The rest of this essay will cover two areas expectations of students and the testing systems in both countries. The latter will be presented as a snapshot, symptomatic of the wider educational climate. Citing personal experiences with the students I have taught over the last semester, I will paint a picture of the way the “other half” thinks about education and what that has taught me about the system to which I will eventually return home.

I want to make clear before I expound on these ideas that my use of the term “weakness” is by no means to be interpreted as “things the Chinese education system doesn’t do as well as our amazing perfect American system” or worse, “things the Chinese education system does that annoy me personally.” This essay is meant to be read in the context detailed in the above introduction. When we look at these problems in the Chinese education system, they should throw two things into sharp relief: first, ways to better understand and contextualize a culture that is completely foreign to many Western academics; and, second, a new way of looking at our own system.

It’s always easier to see and critique the faults in a system not our own, but those of us who willingly dwell in the ivory tower know that loud denunciations of the other are more often than not thinly disguised fear of that other. In the spirit of full disclosure of my own biases, I’d like to acknowledge that I have strong reservations about the American standardized testing system. I am not at all sure that it does what it purports to do; that is, make certain that students have internalized basic sets of information before they can move on to the next academic step. My own tortured experiences with the SAT and GRE - most especially the math sections - have proven

to me that, if nothing else, are only capable of testing a narrow range of a given student's true abilities.

The Chinese, interestingly enough, have similar problems. Their testing system is grueling and rigorous, and getting into not only the school but also the major of your choice depends almost solely on your scores. Students spend the majority of their high school careers studying for the college entrance exam, and cases of suicide resulting from test-related stress have become so prevalent that it has caused the government to consider adding additional criteria to the college admission process. As mentioned above, student ranks are swelling in ever greater numbers. In 2010, for example, roughly 3.5 million students were denied university spots simply because there was not enough room (Johnson).

The drive that pushes students to the point of suicide right before a test is but one small symptom of what is probably simultaneously China's greatest strength and worst weakness, and incidentally the thing that has taught me the most about myself as an educator and the students I serve. Chinese culture pushes its students to the limits of their endurance, and it is that single-minded focus that has begun to reshape my own perception of education.

At this point, I'd like to address a common stereotype many Americans harbor about the Asian academic community at large. There have been many grumblings in and around the Western academic community that Asian parents - particularly Chinese and Japanese - turn their children into mathematic, scientific, or musical automatons. I have found that many of my students and friends in China bear out this stereotype to an extent, but I believe the stereotype needs nuancing.

My first day of class perfectly highlighted the positive ramifications of the Chinese system. I got to class over half an hour early, looking forward to a few

minutes of quiet to make peace with the chalkboard and get ready to start class. When I got there, not only were *almost all* of my students there, but they were practicing their oral English by reading aloud from their textbooks. I was floored. More than one person had told me that Chinese students would impress me with their dedication, but getting to class before 7:30 a.m. was not something I expected.

A student, though not my own, named Scarlett, a junior this year at Hunan Normal University, is arguably one of the top two English speakers in the entire university. This has allowed us to have some truly illuminating discussions about the places where our two cultures conflict and overlap. Once when we were discussing the madness of studying for finals, she made a very interesting comment that has bearing on my topic. She said that Chinese students are taught that they can be perfect. I found this surprising, both from the perspective of a former student and as a teacher. Coming as I did from the “we love you as long as you do your best” perspective that is so common among American parents and teachers, such an expectation is almost offensive, but it’s one that is spoon-fed to Chinese students from infancy.

I wish I had known this when I started teaching in China. One instance from the beginning of the semester that illustrates the disconnect between American and Chinese classroom expectations occurred during a lesson I was doing on plagiarism. I asked them to re-write an English paragraph from their textbook in their own words and turn it in at the end of class. We ran out of time, and I asked them to turn it in, assuring them that they would not be penalized for not copying the whole paragraph. Some of the class refused to turn it in, smiling at me as I walked by asking for it and pretending not to understand what I wanted so they could keep writing.

I was understandably upset by this, and went to talk to one of the Chinese English teachers, YANG Lei. He said that this was a completely normal reaction based

on what they have been taught in school. They are taught that they are never done. Once they finish an assignment, they should reread and rework until the last possible moment. Not finishing is simply not an option.

Reflecting on this, I started to see what a difference such drive can make in the lives of students. What might American students be capable of if all of them were pushed to the limits of their potential as a matter of course? Chinese students are all expected to be at the top of their class. This is, of course, mathematically impossible; and yet we don't see them divided into remedial, mainstream, and advanced classes like we do to students in the US system. It seems that unequivocal high expectations might level the playing field among American low-performing students. Of course there will always be the important caveats about disabled or developmentally delayed students, and I am not suggesting that we disenfranchise them. I am, however, suggesting that our system does some coddling where the opposite is needed.

Of course, it's easy to say that we should expect more of our students without offering at least some small suggestion as to what that looks like in practical, visceral form. And my perfectly honest answer is that I don't know. I can, however, share a few thoughts about how my own American classroom will change. First, a new understanding of standards will inform how I deal with unmotivated students. As I mentioned in the introduction, those of us who toil in the mines of undergrad English education come to expect a fair level of apathy from many of our students. Now that I have seen what a culture of innate high expectations looks like, I plan to create a classroom environment where such apathy simply cannot survive. Before I came to China, I was already an advocate for student-directed, group-work centric learning. The maxim that students learn as much from each other in a successful classroom as from the teacher is certainly true. When I get home, I hope to take this classroom

dynamic and extend it such that it targets the motivationally challenged students. If I can get them excited about teaching each other, learning from each other, and competing with each other like my Chinese students do, I will have gone a long way toward catching the students who all too often fall through the cracks.

Most of my Chinese students have grown up in classrooms that practice the time-honored teaching theory of “duck-feeding.” This is what Chinese students call the practice of memorization and regurgitation. I decided to go another way, and having watched these students blossom in a dynamic, group work-focused classroom, I am more convinced than ever that the best case scenario for students in any English classroom, be it native, ESL, or EFL is student-directed and teacher-facilitated work.

If I could create a fusion dish of the Chinese and American schools systems, I would bring student-driven teaching practices and the prolific use of media from America, and take the dedication and drive from China. In some ways, looking at these two school systems is like an examination of the old world and the new. My students are very proud of how old their country and culture are, and will often go to great lengths to bring those facts into a conversation or assignments. The relative newness and the resultant modern perspective that the American system brings, when married to the age and strength of the Chinese system, might make for the perfect recipe for an effective school system.

The above reflections are still ongoing. China teaches me new things every day. For now, however, if I were to say one thing I will take away from China as an educator, it is a change in what it means to empathize. The students with whom I currently interact on a day-to-day basis are doing something I could not do: taking a college level class completely in a foreign language. It’s deeply humbling to walk into class every morning with that awareness. When I get home, one of my goals is to

remember that not all students are good at reading and writing. When they look at me, and see someone to whom those skills have always come easy, I want to remember how I felt looking at my Chinese students, doing what I would consider the impossible. Therefore, the students I encounter in the future will have an interesting hybrid of a teacher who expects perfection, and yet is deeply empathetic to limitations.

#### Work Cited

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