

China's Achilles Heel: Education System

Junheng Li, *Forbes*, December 1, 2012

As China's once-in-a-decade leadership reshuffle has renewed hopes for reform, few are focusing on an aspect of state policy with the profoundest implications for China's labor productivity and economic advancement: its education system.

Contra the popular view that China's rise has something to do with the ability of Chinese kids outcompete American ones in standardized tests, I believe that the continuing emphasis on ideology in the humanities is China's biggest Achilles heel. Moving up the global value chain is impossible without a dramatic overhaul of its current education system.

Education for Ideology, Not for Enlightening

Instead of cultivating independent minds, education is first and foremost a device for enforcing Party ideology to the young and impressionable minds. I was reminded of this by the recent news story of five poor boys in Guizhou who accidentally suffocated themselves as they lit a fire in a dumpster to keep warm, kicking up widespread comparisons in the Chinese blogosphere to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl," which is still taught in Chinese schools.

I learned this story in my grade school in China. Reading about the Guizhou tragedy, my mind rushed back to the key "lessons" from the story, which we were told to memorize for the final exam. Specifically, it was about the brutality and selfishness of capitalist society such that the protagonist's very life depended exclusively on her commercial enterprise, and that capitalist class divisions promoted exploitation of poor workers like the little girl.

In terms of didactic story-telling in school, little has changed. Consider that this other story recently went viral throughout the Chinese blogosphere: an (as far as I can tell, apocryphal) account of the teaching of the Cinderella fairy tale in a Chinese first-grade classroom. After reading the Cinderella fairy tale aloud, instead of encouraging students to speak up their reactions, the teacher went on reading out the official "meaning" of the tale, signaling that it would be tested on the coming exam. The students took dictation, scrawling furious notes. This involved a lesson reflecting class struggles in the capitalistic world, with the stepmother symbolizing the selfish, heartless, evil ruling class and Cinderella standing for the innocent, loving, and impoverished working class.

One student raised his hand and asked, "Everything but the glass slipper had reverted to their original forms. What does that mean?"

The teacher dismissed the question out of hand. "It won't be on the exam. Don't get distracted by minor point."

Private Schools as an Alternative

I recently spoke with a senior executive in China's private education industry about this phenomenon.

"The government worries that without the building of universal communist ideology, their control over the society will be significantly weakened," she said. "Therefore, textbooks are heavily indoctrinated to serve the Party's ideology."

A mother of two kids in their teens, she cited this was a large factor influencing her choice to switch her children out of local schools controlled by the Chinese education bureaus to privately run international schools – an increasingly desirable option for Chinese parents who can afford it.

However, she also does not idealize the American system.

"Chinese schools excel in knowledge-based teaching. For some subjects during the early stages of schooling, this is very important," she said. "However, Chinese schools pale miserably in comparison to a liberal arts approach adopted by most private schools when it comes to teaching *how* to learn, not just *what* to learn. And private schools emphasize collaboration."

Her last point is critical. The current "gaokao" system – the country-wide college entrance exam that is almost the sole factor determining a student's college placement – has created a cutthroat competitive learning environment. For many years leading into the "gaokao", students are constantly tested and ranked on a narrow set of subjects, giving rise to incessant backstabbing and bitter competition. This has engendered a society bent on self-promotion, lacking almost entirely in any communitarian values that extend beyond the immediate family. This potent legacy persists into one's adult life: suspicious zero-sum ethos pervades every work environment, limiting the potential of most collaboration.

So should "gaokao" be replaced by other means of selection such as essay writing? The executive offered her insights, "Any subjective standard will result in more unfairness in the society. I cannot think of more objective standards than tests. The question really should be what to test."

Or perhaps what needs to be challenged is the definition of "good student." If China can learn to part with its reliance on hard-and-fast answers to complex situations (re: the Cinderella story), then its future workers will be more equipped to deal with real-life situations in an increasingly global economy.

Brutal Costs to the Economy

Given the \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year price tag –let alone the foreign passport requirement – the more balanced liberal arts education offered by the international schools hardly provides a practical solution to the backward Chinese education system. But as China gets richer, international schools have already become the hot ticket to guaranteeing a promising future for one's child.

But the costs to the Chinese economy are considerable in more ways than one. The sky-high tuition fees and passport-earning overseas investments could be instead used to fuel the much-needed domestic consumption. The long-term consequences are more formidable. As the graduates from international schools follow their educational path abroad to further pursue education in a more liberal western world – after all, few would be able to test into the top-tier of Chinese universities once they have step outside the system – many of them stay overseas to join the workforce upon graduation. At home, meanwhile, the children who have risen from the Chinese schools to the top universities in China – an achievement that paves the way to the top jobs – are likely to be the yes-men with uncannily good memories and little mental flexibility.

Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, and the other new leaders must grasp the grave problems existing in China's education system, and most importantly, in the very values the Party champions. As they consider the reforms that will secure the means of future growth, they would do well to address the eroding quality of any country's most powerful resource: the human mind.

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