

**Chinese Students and High Schools in California:  
A Cross-Cultural Perspective**

**A Professional Development Project for High School Teachers**

**By  
Devra Miller  
English Learners Coordinator  
San Mateo Union High School District  
San Mateo, California**

**Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad 2007  
China: Native and Foreign Language Instruction and Training**

**United States Department of Education  
National Committee on U.S.-China Relations  
Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China  
China Education Association for International Exchange**

*The slides and video clips for this presentation can be accessed at [http://chs.smuhds.org/china/china\\_project.html](http://chs.smuhds.org/china/china_project.html)  
Quicktime player is needed to play the video clips on a PC.*

### **Slide #1**

During the summer of 2007, I had the opportunity to visit China as part of the Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad: China Native and Foreign Language Instruction and Training. Over the course of four weeks, we visited numerous primary and secondary schools, universities, and technical and vocational institutes. We spoke to dozens of educators, students, and scholars regarding the Chinese educational system and reform movement. What follows is a presentation based on those experiences as well as follow-up research, interviews, and reflection over the months since my return.

The purpose of this presentation is to provide high school educators with some background on the Chinese educational system, both historical and contemporary. It also provides information on some of the current issues that are at the forefront of educational reform in China. Lastly, I hope that it gives a voice to some of the ideas and opinions of Chinese adolescents who are now students in California regarding their perspectives on the Chinese educational system. Please note that China is an enormous country with many regional variations. My comments come from my own observations, interviews, and research on the topic.

### **Slide #2**

Currently, there are approximately 105,000 K-12 students in California whose primary language is either Mandarin or Cantonese. These students represent nearly 2% of all students who have a primary language other than English in the state. This count does not include many others who speak other Chinese languages and dialects such as Chaozhou or Taiwanese. Additionally, in 2003 there were approximately 9,500 students enrolled in schools in California who had recently immigrated from China. Obviously, certain schools and districts are the home to large numbers of Chinese students where they may represent the majority of students who have a primary language other than English such as the Fremont Union High School District in the Silicon Valley or Mills High School in the San Mateo Union High School District.

Source: California Department of Education, <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

### **Slide #3**

To effectively serve these students and their families, it is imperative that their teachers have a sophisticated understanding of the Chinese educational system. The expectations of both students and their parents are largely based on their school experiences in China. These expectations come from the traditional role that education plays in China as well as the more recent experiences of our Chinese students' parents, who came of age during a time of unprecedented change. The strengths and challenges that Chinese students bring to their school experience in California are largely the result of the Chinese educational system.

### **Slide #4**

This presentation is divided into four parts. First we will look at the historical legacies that have significantly impacted current education in China. These include a brief examination of

education in Imperial China and pre-revolutionary China (pre-1949); then a look at education under the Chinese Communist Party, especially focusing on the period between 1966 and 1976, known as the Cultural Revolution. Finally we will look at the period ushered in by Deng Xiaoping and some of the contemporary reform initiatives.

The next section provides a look at how high schools in China are organized from both the students' and the teachers' perspective. It also examines some of the challenges that currently confront Chinese high schools and how schools are attempting to address those.

The third section examines some of the issues that Chinese students bring to schools when they come to California including English language acquisition, assessment, and the college application process.

Interspersed in these sections, we will hear from some Chinese students who offer their reflections on their schooling both in China and in California.

#### **Slide #5**

It's impossible to understand contemporary Chinese education without examining its precursors. These form the backdrop to both the current structure of the educational system as well as its strengths and challenges. Whereas a comprehensive look at the history of Chinese education is beyond the purview of this presentation, we will take a brief look at three of its historical periods: Imperial China, the Cultural Revolution and the post-1976 period.

#### **Slide #6**

Fundamental to the current system is how education was organized and conducted in Imperial China.

#### **Slide #7**

China has one of the world's oldest educational systems, begun in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., as a way to train state officials. These schools were limited to the sons of the aristocracy and teachers were employed by the central government (Niu, p. 73). From its inception, Chinese education was only for the elite and was based primarily on the interests and needs of the State. Its main purpose was to produce a scholarly class, which could be entrusted with the running of the government. It was presumed that this class "encompassed both moral and intellectual superiority, thereby justifying their political power, higher social status, and associated economic privileges." (Ibid.) During the Han dynasty, the teachings and philosophy of Confucius became the principal doctrine of the Chinese educational system. His philosophy reflected the priorities of both the Chinese state and society.

#### **Slide #8**

According to Confucius' teachings, and their interpretation by his disciple, Mencius, there are five fundamental relationships which define society: between father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, emperor and minister, and friend and friend. Implicit in these relationships are sets of mutual obligations that come from specific roles. These roles are hierarchical and are meant to define an orderly society.

Confucius is mostly known for his moral teachings. He taught that respect for authority is a moral obligation demonstrated by obedience to superiors. Also fundamental to the Confucian world view is the belief that individuals have a responsibility to the family and community; those interests come before the individual's. Confucius believed that self-discipline, self-restraint and study were virtues, with the ultimate goal of universal harmony.

### **Slide #9**

The Chinese system of education became more formalized in 580 A.D. when the State began to administer its first standardized test. The Imperial Examination was the method used by the Imperial bureaucracy to select its state officials, akin to today's civil service exam. Each administrative level had its own exam ranging from a low level county test to the highest level for palace officials administered directly by the emperor himself. Students had to begin at the first rung, and each test became increasingly more difficult. The test for palace officials lasted up to 72 hours. Students were confined to small cubicles in which suicide and madness were not unknown consequences.

The exam was based on the Confucian classics. To prepare for the exam, candidates not only had to memorize Confucius' principal texts, but also commentaries on those works by major scholars. The format for the test was the eight-legged essay. Candidates had to strictly follow this prescribed format which "had a complex set of rules, including a requirement of four pairs of antithetic and parallel sentences in the middle of the essay, from which the term 'eight-legged' was derived." (Niu, p.75) Form trumped content, and the success of the candidate was based on his ability to memorize and adhere to the strict rules governing Chinese rhetoric. Creativity and innovation were discouraged in this system.

### **Slide #10**

Contemporary Chinese education has firm roots in its imperial predecessor. The system is test-driven and students rely on their memorization of texts and teacher lectures. Because of large class sizes, instruction is teacher-centered and students occupy a passive role in the classroom. Students are ranked from best to worst and are frequently reminded of their position. The ranking system discourages students from answering questions that they are not completely sure of. As a result, independent thinking and creativity are discouraged.

Like the days of the Imperial Exam, Chinese education continues to be elite-oriented. Only the most competent students are allowed to pursue their education at the higher levels after passing extremely competitive exams. Those who flounder will not be permitted to continue. For example, since high school is not compulsory in China, those students who do not score high enough on entrance exams will have fewer choices as to which high school they can attend and may have to pay higher fees.

### **Slide #11**

The triumph of the Communist Party in 1949 led to the establishment of the People's Republic. It also led to changes in the Chinese educational system. For the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese government had increasingly looked to the west for educational models. With the establishment of the PRC, Chinese educational authorities began to follow the Soviet model. Like traditional Chinese education, the Soviet system was highly centralized and knowledge

based. Chinese schools became centrally controlled with a national curriculum and State produced textbooks. There was no contradiction between the ruling party's notion of how education should be delivered and the Imperial system. Teachers were the sole authority within a classroom and students were discouraged from thinking independently.

In 1952, the new government created the National College Entrance Exam or gaokao. The gaokao is a descendent of the Imperial Exam, the sole factor in determining college eligibility. Also, like its predecessor, there are quotas for each province to ensure proportional representation at the universities. We will take a closer look at the gaokao later.

### **Slide #12**

A critical moment in the history of China began in 1966 with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. As in so many aspects of Chinese life, authorities enacted extreme measures regarding education. Universities were closed and purged of anything considered western or traditional. Books were burned or banned; teachers lost their jobs, and were often arrested. When universities reopened, admission was based on the student's political affiliation and his/her family's background. High school and college-aged students were sent to the countryside to work along side of peasants or were placed in factories to assist workers. The only instruction that these worker-peasant-soldier students received was through missives from the government-controlled press. Students were largely left to their own devices when it came to studying anything else.

The legacy of the Cultural Revolution and its impact on Chinese education is still deeply present. Many of today's parents were school-aged during the 1960s and 70s and still recall the challenges of receiving a quality education. Many were denied access to high schools and universities because of their families' political affiliations. For those who did attend, their experience was often chaotic at best. The current generation of parents clearly remembers this period in Chinese history, contributing to their obsession with their children's education.

### **Slide #13**

The Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao in 1976. In 1977, Deng Xioping began to consolidate power and ushered in a new period to China, including its educational system. Universities reopened in 1977 and China began, once again, to look toward the west. In 1986, China passed its first ever Compulsory Education Act mandating nine years of school attendance beginning at age six.

### **Slide #14**

Currently approximately 98.8% of all children complete primary school and 94.1% complete the full nine years of compulsory education. In addition, about 48% of students finish high school and of these, 20% enroll in universities. (O'Brian, Lecture 6/19/07)

### **Slide #15**

In addition to mandating nine years of education, the Central Committee of the Communist Party determined that local governments should be responsible for basic education. This began a major shift in Chinese education policy including the decentralization of curriculum standards; ability of local entities to set school fees; and the publication of textbooks by provinces,

municipalities and schools. But a national survey conducted in 1996 showed that few inroads had been made into instructional practices. Students were under enormous pressure to perform well on tests, often studying 15 hours a day, six days per week. Teachers were also subjected to similar stress since their students' performance on local and national tests determined the status of their schools and often the amounts of their paychecks. Also, in 2001, an international study of educational achievement in 21 countries found that whereas Chinese students were top in mathematical calculations, they were fifth from the bottom in creativity (Yunhuo, Lecture 6/22/07). The "stuffed-duck" approach of education, which focuses on knowledge transfer through rote memorization, had to be reformed to stimulate curiosity, critical thinking and innovation. Thus, the State Council embarked on a process of reform that would propel Chinese students into the information revolution as innovators in the globalized economy. In As Ann Hulbert stated in her article, "Re-education", "Even as American educators seek to emulate Asian pedagogy - a test-centered ethos and a rigorous focus on math, science and engineering - Chinese educators are trying to blend a Western emphasis on critical thinking, versatility and leadership into their own traditions." (New York Times Magazine, 4/1/07).

### **Slide #16**

How have Chinese schools changed after six years of reform? What is a typical high school like in 2007? What do Chinese students think about their school experiences? Let's have a look.

### **Slide #17**

If we look at an example of a daily schedule for high school students, not much has changed since 1976. Students still study between 10 and 14 hours per day (with breaks for lunch and dinner, both of which are often taken at school). Some students have opportunities to engage in afternoon club activities, but these are highly structured and often competitive, such as sports teams, robotics, and acrobatics. After dinner, students are expected to attend evening student session similar to our study halls. These are supervised by teachers who are assigned on a rotating basis each week. Even though Saturday morning classes have been officially abolished, they are still routine in much of the southern and western part of the country. In addition, teachers often provide individualized tutoring in the afternoons for struggling students.

### **Slide #18**

According to Rocco, a senior at a high school in California, grades are the primary focus of Chinese students. There is little life beyond the classroom. He says, (*play video clip #07*). Top grades are essential for students to remain in their teachers' and parents' good stead. But also, the hyper focus on grades creates a prevailing conformity. Students cannot pursue interests outside of the classroom.

### **Slide #19**

The Educational Reform of 2001 tried to address some of these concerns. The Ministry of Education mandated that Senior Secondary or high school students take eight subjects: math, integrated science, PE and health, Chinese literature and language, and humanities and society, a social sciences class. New to the curriculum are mandated hours for technology, community service, fine arts, and project based learning entitled comprehensive projects. Schools can determine electives and specialize in a particular area such as science and technology or foreign

language. Also, students are now required to have fewer credits to receive their diploma, down to 144 from 189 (Yunhuo, Ibid.).

### **Slide #20**

However, if we look at a typical high school schedule in today's Chinese schools, class schedules follow their pre-reform predecessors. Students typically take 10 to 12 subjects; the most common ones are: English, Politics, Biology, P.E., Chemistry, History, Physics, Geography, and Chinese literature and language.

### **Slide #21**

Xixi, now a high school senior in California, completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade in China and is all too aware of the demands of the Chinese high school schedule. In fact, one of her favorite aspects of school in California is the relative freedom her current schedule gives her. She says, (*play video clip #02*).

### **Slide #22**

Another interesting aspect to the Chinese student's school schedule is what we refer to in English as Homeroom. However, the Chinese version of Homeroom is more akin to our advisories. A homeroom teacher is responsible for a group of student's academic progress and also deals with disciplinary issues. This teacher typically follows the same group of students throughout their duration at a particular school and acts as a liaison between teachers and the student's family. In rural areas, homeroom teachers make house visits at least once a year. In urban areas, they meet with parents on Saturdays in individual or group meetings. Additionally, students may meet at the homeroom teacher's house on Sundays for tutoring or homework help.

### **Slide #23**

The homeroom class in China has another important component. In California we take for granted the daily routine of bells and students who move from class to class. In Chinese schools students remain in their "homeroom". Teachers are the ones who rotate classrooms depending on their schedules. In fact, one of the more challenging aspects for Chinese students in acclimating to schools in California is the constant movement. Winnie, now a junior in high school, comments on this difference. (*Play video clip #12.*)

### **Slide #24**

Since Chinese students remain in one classroom during the school, they also stay together as a cohort. This group of students often remains together as a single group throughout their time in a particular school. Winnie again comments. (*Play video clip #14.*)

### **Slide #25**

It's interesting to compare a Chinese teacher's work day to his/her counterpart in the United States. Chinese teachers typically work from 7:30 to 5:00 with assigned evening study supervision once a week. Classes are usually comprised of 50 to 70 students, although more prestigious schools will have fewer students. A teacher's actual classroom instruction time ranges between two to four 45 minute classes per day, which is significantly less than instruction time in the United States. However, Chinese teachers are expected to monitor students on a daily basis and provide individual tutoring if needed. Collaboration time is built into the teacher's day

and teachers work together to plan lessons, not independently, which is the norm in the United States. (Hu, “Professional Development of Secondary EFL Teachers: Lessons from China”). In addition, instructional departments are assigned to provide demonstration lessons at monthly municipal-wide professional development meetings.

### **Slide #26**

In China, a student’s grade is almost wholly determined by his/her performance on formative and summative tests. A preoccupation with tests and scores begins when a student enters primary school and continues into the job market. In fact, according to Pace University scholar, Wihua Niu, China is obsessed with testing. Students must pass grueling tests to enter into senior secondary schools and universities. Since senior secondary is not compulsory, Chinese students must pay tuition, and their fees are often based on their test scores. Students who test higher are charged lower fees. Also, admittance to “key” and other top ranking schools is determined by scores on the high school entrance exams.

### **Slide #27**

As a result, Chinese students are highly adept at test taking and test taking skills. They are trained from early on to memorize large amounts of information and can focus on academic work for long periods of time. Rocco gives his assessment of this situation. (*Play video clip #26.*)

### **Slide #28**

The recognition that test-taking skills are only one aspect of educational achievement has been the impetus for much of the current reform movement . “Chinese students can score highly on all tests yet may stumble in academic pursuits that require creative thinking and independent inquiry.” (Niu, op.cit. p70) Rocco again comments. (*Play video clip #13.*)

### **Slide #29**

The National College Entrance Exam or gaokao is the preeminent Chinese test and epitomizes the extreme consequences that exams can have on students. The successor to the Imperial Exam, the gaokao is a three-day long ordeal that tests students in four subject areas: Chinese language, math, and English, as well as another subject area selected by the student. The exam is the culmination of a student’s high school preparation. In fact, the entire senior year is a review for the exam; no new material is introduced. But preparation doesn’t end there. Since a student can only take the NCEE three times, many students opt to study for an additional year. A typical regimen consists of 10 hour days, seven days per week punctuated by mock tests to mark progress. Teachers keep in close contact with their former students to help them remain focused on the finish.

A student’s score on the NCEE is the sole criteria upon which college admittance is based. No consideration is given to grades, recommendations or extra curricular activities. In fact, not only does the NCEE score determine which university a student can attend, it is the single factor in deciding what career a student can pursue. Only the highest scorers can continue their studies in engineering, business, law, economics and English.

**Slide #30**

Rocco comments on the significance of the National College Entrance Exam and the lack of choice that it engenders. (*Play video clip #22.*)

**Slide #31**

Miko, a recently arrived student to California who went through 11<sup>th</sup> grade in China, describes how the simplest aspects of life are affected by the dictum to study. (*Play video clip #18.*)

**Slide #32**

Even though Miko's English is somewhat halting, it's impressive considering that I interviewed her within seven weeks of her arrival to the United States. Mandated English instruction begins in third grade in China and many students from urban areas start studying English in first grade. China's economic boom has elevated the status of English so that now it is critical for high level jobs and well paid employment. As mentioned earlier, English is one of the required subjects on the National College Entrance Exam, and only students with the best scores on the exam are permitted to study English at the university level.

**Slide #33**

The pervasiveness of English language instruction in Chinese schools is commendable, but effective instruction still faces many challenges. A shortage of qualified teachers limits the quality of instruction as does the lack of a wide selection of books. Teachers rely on the Internet for many of their instructional materials. Class sizes of 50 to 70 students are the norm effectively eliminating the possibility of utilizing a communicative approach. Teachers emphasize reading and writing so that even after seven or eight years of study, students struggle to speak. Since Chinese students are taught from early on that to make a mistake is a loss of face, they become risk adverse, which further impedes their acquisition of spoken English.

**Slide #34**

This becomes a barrier for Chinese students when they enter our schools. Xixi explains. (*Play video clip #08.*)

**Slide #35**

The ongoing educational reform movement in China also addresses English language instruction. The new curriculum emphasizes communicative approaches to instruction, particularly speaking and listening. Easy access to technology, such as the Internet and multimedia, facilitates teaching these skills. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences has been widely received in China, and his ideas have been incorporated into new English language textbooks as well as teacher education programs. Training programs for prospective English language teachers focus on all linguistic competencies and study abroad programs are widely available. Large numbers of Chinese English language teachers have visited Australia, England and the United States. However, implementation of these reforms is slow and is mostly limited to large urban areas in the eastern part of the country.

**Slide #36**

Chinese educators have made significant strides since the inception of their reform movement in 1993. The vast majority of Chinese children now have access to nine years of education as well

as to better quality textbooks and better trained teachers. But China faces serious challenges in its continuing reform efforts. Perhaps the single largest impediment is financial. China originally embarked on its reform movement without infusing more money into the educational system. Consequently, schools have been forced to finance needed reforms on their own. Even though education is supposed to be free, students are charged numerous fees for books, supplies, equipment, and facilities. Poor families often must face the choice between buying food and paying school fees.

Another limitation to implementing reform is the National College Entrance Exam. High school teachers do not focus on subject areas not covered on the exam. Also, since success on the exam is largely based on rote memorization of extensive amounts of material, other approaches to learning are viewed as frivolous. Creativity and critical thinking take a back burner.

As mentioned before, other serious challenges include large class size and teacher training. China's One-Child Policy has also had unintended consequences on school reform. Single offspring are now responsible for taking care of six adults as they enter into old-age: two parents and four grandparents. Today's Chinese youth are under enormous pressure to succeed so that they can provide for their elders. Families often discourage their children from veering from the traditional and are suspicious of reforms that cannot be immediately linked to economic gain.

Lastly, implementation of reform initiatives has been restricted to more affluent regions in China: urban areas and the eastern portion of the country. Change comes more slowly to the rural sector where the vast majority of school-aged children still live. The benefits of economic development have largely been confined to the heavily urbanized east and southern regions. School reform has made few inroads to the impoverished western part of China. Despite edicts and laws, the age-old dictum still is apropos in today's China: "Heaven is high and the emperor is a long ways away". Beijing can mandate shorter school days and no classes on Saturdays, but the old ways persist, especially when parents believe that their future and their child's future depend on passing the test.

### **Slide #37**

Chinese adolescents are caught in the collision between a newly globalized economy and the traditions that have structured education for millennia. "Study, study, study" is repeated over and over again when students are asked to describe their lives in China. Dating is discouraged as is pursuing any interest that does not ultimately lead to success on high school and college entrance exams. Whereas educators in California encourage students to read on their own, free reading is an unheard of luxury for Chinese youth. As only children, Chinese students feel enormous pressure to succeed so that they can provide for themselves and their aging parents and grandparents. Young people are discouraged from having jobs or even doing household chores since this will take time away from their studies.

### **Slide #38**

What about Chinese students in California? What challenges do they face? Often their first hurdle is how to make friends. They are perplexed by the complexity of social relations in their new schools. Negotiating race and language become keys to fitting in. Rocco explains. (*Play video clip #03.*)

**Slide #39**

Another challenge for Chinese students is negotiating the new expectations of high school in California and those of their parents. Chinese parents continue to pressure their children to get top grades so that they can rank first in their class and go to prestigious universities, thus guaranteeing a prosperous future. Parents are mystified by the many options for their children in California's schools: community service, clubs, and jobs, to name a few. But by and large Chinese students embrace the new freedom that high schools in California offer them. We hear again from Rocco. (*Play video clip #04.*)

**Slide #40**

Over and over Chinese high school students in California comment on how enjoyable school is without the pressures they confronted in China. They can pursue individual interests, relax, and have time to veg. While the college application process is intimidating to native born students in California, Chinese immigrants view it differently. Rocco explains. (*Play video clip #23.*)

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Chinese students in California high schools is how to pursue their dreams while negotiating family expectations and traditions. For those who have discovered how to meld together the best of what the two systems offer, their future is indeed bright.

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Photographs in slide numbers 5 and 37 by Virginia von Reichbauer.

Many thanks to the students and teachers of the San Mateo Union High School District and to Anne Whiteside and Dominic Bigue who offered endless assistance with the video clips. I am also indebted to my colleagues, friends, and hosts who were part of the Fulbright Delegation.