

Fulbright-Hays Curriculum Project: Teaching Chinese Students Strategies to Engage in an American Independent High School

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Established Goals: 1) to explicitly teach Chinese high school students some of the academic norms and classroom behaviors required for success at School One, an American independent high school located in Providence, RI.

Statement of the problem: Chinese enrollment in U.S. independent schools is surging, paralleling a trend at U.S. colleges and universities. At the secondary level, 23,795 Chinese students are enrolled in U.S. private high schools, up from 4,503 in 2008 (Millman, 2013), a significant surge. For some Chinese students, a U.S. education is associated with social status and prestige. For others, they value the emphasis on creativity and innovation associated with U.S. education. Third, some wish to bypass the extreme competition and test-based selectivity characteristic of every level of the Chinese education system. Lastly, most Chinese students enrolled in U.S. high schools are seeking to increase their chances of enrolling in a U.S. university by entering the U.S. education pipeline earlier. This last point is a significant one. The Chinese students are coming with the intention of long-term enrollment and eventual graduation from U.S. independent schools. They are not coming for a brief episode of cultural awareness. They may or may not be successful in persisting to graduation in the U.S., but that is their intent; re-entry into the Chinese high school system is complex and transferring credits is uncertain at best. But what happens when they arrive at U.S. independent high schools?

Chinese high school students arriving at U.S. high schools face formidable challenges, as is the case for almost all immigrants regardless of circumstances or country of origin. They need to adjust to a new language, geography and culture and need to learn new ways of handling many unfamiliar situations away from familiar supports. Beyond the more general adjustment challenges, however, they need to adjust to some very specific differences in educational context.

By all accounts, Chinese approaches to education are quite different than those found in many U.S. private schools. Chinese class sizes are generally large, with 50-80 students. Within the Chinese system, there is significant emphasis on rote memorization and correct answers. Repetitive drill can be the central teaching and learning strategy. Student progress through each level of the Chinese system hinges largely on exams, with higher stakes and more intense competition as students enter high school

Many U.S. private schools, by contrast, tout their small class sizes and individualized attention. While our dominant national pedagogy may be largely teacher centered and memorization driven, there is much more emphasis on student-centered approaches at independent schools. We generally prize seminar-style discussions, the production of original work, and analysis over mimesis. Self-expression, creativity, and exploration are built into the pedagogies of many U.S. independent schools. As a nation and as schools,

we tilt toward individualism more than conformity. Few if any of these elements are present within the Chinese system.

The contrasts between U.S and Chinese schools are even more marked at the school that I lead. Our class size average is 9 students; we emphasize creativity and original thinking, particularly in our strong visual arts program; we do not award letter or number grades at the end of each course, but rather require students to demonstrate that they earned class credit through a variety of holistic criteria. Our school has been enrolling a small number of students from Mainland China for four years as of this writing. While many have been quite successful in our school and have achieved their post-secondary goals, they nonetheless struggle to adapt to our school's norms and expectations. Our Chinese students have many new academic behaviors to learn, such as how to raise one's hand to offer an opinion rather than state a fact or how to track insights generated in a seminar discussion. Several Chinese students have had to learn U.S. norms of plagiarism; for them, copying great works is viewed as correct practice rather than intellectual dishonesty. In order to be successful, Chinese students have had to reveal their struggles so they can access available help. These admissions and expressions of struggle, however, seem to be unusually difficult and stigmatizing for our Chinese students.

To date, our approach to helping our Chinese students acclimate to new academic norms has been more naturalistic. We have hoped that exposure to new ways of teaching and learning, combined with strong individual advice-giving from school personnel (the international student coordinator, the students' advisors, and our ESL teacher) would spur some of the desired outcomes. While these strategies have been somewhat productive, we have come to feel that we need more explicit teaching and structured practice of the norms and classroom behaviors necessary for success at our high school and many like it. This curriculum project provides a structured introduction to U.S. classroom norms and ways of behaving that are rarely the target of direct instruction. Usually viewed as a means to an end, this curriculum explicitly identifies and teaches ways of interacting.

This curriculum's prompts and content focus on the inter-related topics of studying abroad, cultural difference, and comparative education. It draws explicit distinctions between U.S. and Chinese education as a way to help students develop more clarity about their experiences. It specifically includes many articles about China so that students can draw on their own knowledge base while practicing skills like discussion and participation.

Intended audience: This project is designed for Chinese students enrolled at an American independent high school. For the most part, these students are arriving with adequate, though far from fluent English skills. For the most part, they are from newly affluent families. Many have a strong interest in the visual arts. They intend to graduate from our high school and enroll in a U.S. four-year college or art school. They range in age from 15-18.

Note: This project assumes certain generalized behaviors typical of Chinese students enrolled at our school. However, we know that Chinese students, like any students,

exhibit a wide variety of temperaments, knowledge, and skill. We do not mean to stereotype Chinese students, but rather to address common challenges. Our staff members usually make adjustments based on the particular needs and differences of any enrolled students. Those students who arrive in the U.S. more adept at active participation, individual self expression, and acclimation to U.S. classroom expectations will be important role models and assistants to those who struggle more.

Structure: This curriculum will be embedded in a twice per week, 1 ½ hour English as a Second Language (ESL) class. The ESL class currently focuses on speaking and listening, vocabulary development, grammar, SAT and TOEFL preparation, as well as coaching/revision on particular academic tasks, such as essay writing and reading comprehension. This particular curriculum project focuses on the *underlying* or *surrounding* academic behaviors and norms necessary to succeed in a college preparatory high school. However, some of the activities built into this curriculum do address typical ESL priorities, such as the development of reading comprehension skills and vocabulary development. The focus of this project aims to make Chinese students more aware of the issues of individual opinion and self expression in the context of reading about educational and cultural differences. By making the “hidden” curriculum of American high school curriculum more explicit, this curriculum project will allow Chinese students to access the intended curriculum more effectively.

Note: The ESL class is not the only available support or structure to assist with orientation and adjustment to our high school. All newly enrolled students (American and Chinese) participate in a half-hour per week program called Essential Committee that outlines school rules, graduation requirements, school philosophy and available supports. In addition, our school employs an international student coordinator who helps orient Chinese students with life skills (banking, phones, transportation), liaises with host families on adjustment issues, and coordinates progress reporting to the students’ parents in China.

Essential Questions:

1. What are the ways that the Chinese elementary and high schools differ from the American educational experience?
2. What are some of the expectations that American teachers have for students that are different from Chinese teachers’ expectations? How do these differences affect you?
3. What do you need to learn and practice in order to show American teachers that you’re learning?

Performance Tasks

- Raising one’s hand in a classroom discussion
- Giving an answer that shows that you’re responding to what was said
- Giving an answer that includes your individual point of view
- Being able to explicitly describe differences and similarities in American and Chinese expectations for academic success

Classroom activities

Note: Several of these activities will be spread over two or three sessions of class time. In addition to the discussion questions and activities directly tied to this curriculum, the ESL teacher will also use these materials, particularly the written articles, for additional practice with reading comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary development.

1. Activity: Read (round robin style) section of *Brave Dragon* on the Chinese basketball team's practice style versus the American coach's style (30 minutes).

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the main differences between the two approaches? What are the benefits of the Chinese approach? What are the benefits of the American approach?
 - What will it take for the Chinese players to learn the American coach's style? What will it require of them?
 - How does this apply to success in an American high school and college?
2. Activity (will be repeated and practiced multiple days). Each student will draw at random TableTopic conversation card. The student will read the card aloud. Students will practice raising their hands to respond and will call on a classmate to answer the question. Each student will read a question, raise their hand to be called on, and respond to one question. At later sessions, students will be required to use the following stems in the response: "I disagree because..." or "I have a different idea..."

Sample questions:

- If you could spend the weekend in any city, which would you choose?
 - What's your most treasured object from childhood?
 - If you were to do volunteer work, what kind would you choose?
 - What's the difference between who you think you are and how others perceive you?
 - How would a woman president be different from a man?
3. Activity: Read article "What students in China have taught me about U.S. college admissions."
 - Do you agree with the author's claims about China and the *gaokao*? How similar is this to your experience or the experiences of people you know?
 - The author mentions several examples of cheating in China. Did this surprise you? What happens at School One if a student cheats on a test or copies someone else's work?
 - How do you think you are impacted by the Chinese emphasis on preparing for the *gaokao* and other tests?
 - What do American colleges look for that's different than grades or test scores?
 - What opportunities do Chinese students studying in U.S. high schools have that are different from Chinese students applying to U.S. colleges directly from China?

4. Activity: Read and discuss article: “A freshman year, far from home” (article will be read and discussed over two to three sessions).

Discussion questions:

- What are some of Yan’s struggles? What helps her make progress?
- What should Yan, Mengshi and Jianwei do to improve their English?
- What are some ways that Yan, Mengshi, and Jianwei made friends? What are some things you could do to connect with American students?
- Jianwei points out that American students often have more hobbies and have spent less time studying than Chinese students. Do you agree with her observation?
- What are some of the ways that Yan, Mengshi and Jianwei have changed by the end of their freshman year? How do you think you are changing as a result of being in America?

5. Activity: Screen Study Abroad Film (30 minutes). Discussion questions:

- What part of the film did you relate to?
- What parts of the film surprised you?
- Did these students’ stories remind you of Yan, Mengshi and Jianwei’s stories? What were some of the similarities and differences?
- What is “networking”? Why was it so important for success? What skills do you need in order to network? How are those skills similar to or different from what you need to do to succeed at School One?

6. Activity: Role play the interview segment at the end of the video. Task each student with being the interviewer and interviewee. Ask and answer the question: What is the most difficult part of studying abroad? (Each student must respond with two minutes worth of responses to the question.) The ESL teacher will take video of the interchanges.

7. Activity: Read aloud and discuss article: “Class consciousness.” (Reading and discussion to run over three to four sessions).

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the things that are part of being educated in the Waldorf philosophy? Do you see any similarities or differences at School One?
- What are some of the ways that pressure hurts and helps students in the Chinese education system?
- What kinds of discipline have you experienced or seen in your own schools in China?
- What did you think of the Chengdu Waldorf school? Would you have wanted to attend a school like that? Why or why not?

8. Activity: Read aloud article (round robin style): “Teaching the Common Core in China.” (Reading and discussion to be held over two sessions). Discussion questions:

- What are some similarities between this teacher’s experiences and the article about Waldorf education in China?
 - Why do some of the Chinese parents object to Mr. Metz’s approach to teaching?
 - According to Mr. Metz, what are some differences between the Chinese and American ideas about “cheating” or “copying” work? How does this apply to you in America?
 - How do you define “thinking independently”? What would make it easier for you to think independently at a U.S. school?
9. Activity (held over three to four sessions): Read aloud blog piece: “Turning American: Pitfalls of U.S. high schools for Chinese students.” Read aloud: “How China’s new love affair with U.S. private schools in changing them both.”
10. Activity: Students are grouped in pairs. Each pair has to debate one of the following propositions, with one student arguing in favor and the one opposed:
- China’s education system is too rigid.
 - Some Chinese students are “coddled” and “materialistic.”
 - Chinese and American students are more similar than different.
 - Chinese students should participate in extra curricular activities and sports.
- After students have had five minutes to prepare their major points, each pair does their debate in front of the ESL class.
11. Activity: Screen “The Daydreaming Bunny” video (20 minutes). Discussion questions:
- Do you think Xiatong would have succeed with her gallery show without her best friend? What does her friend do that helps her? How could you get this kind of help at School One?
 - What does Xiatong’s mother think about her dream of becoming an artist and getting a graduate degree in the United States? Do you think her mother’s feelings are typical of Chinese parents?
 - In both this video and the Study Abroad video, the Chinese students encounter crime in New York. What do you think you would do if you experienced what they did? What are some “do’s” and “don’t’s” to keep yourself safer in a new environment?

Culminating project:

Students will select one of the following topics or formats for a final project:

- Develop a Powerpoint presentation showing some key differences between Chinese and American high school education. Rehearse the Powerpoint in ESL class. Present the PowerPoint to your advising group and come up with a few discussion questions for them.
- Create a video, much like the one after the credits in the video Study Abroad, where you interview students, American or Chinese, about some aspect of education or culture. You will craft the interview questions and then interview and videotape four to five students. You will share your video at General Meeting.

- Develop a rating system to evaluate class participation. The rating system has to list various dimension of “quality” and provide a way to “score” the effectiveness of the discussion. Practice using your rating system in one class and then present the results to your advising group.
- Write a two to three page essay on the following topic. Why I prefer (the American or Chinese) approach to education. Make sure to use concrete examples and make your own point of view clear to the reader.

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