Critical Issues Confronting China:

Lessons from China: The World's Largest Education System

Lenora Chu, Christian Science Monitor

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Having lived in Shanghai for nine years, where her son attended a local Chinese public school, Lenora Chu, international correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor, combined her first-hand parental experiences with her journalist's instinct and research into her 2017 book, Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve. She considered culture to be a major explanation for many visible differences between the Chinese and the American education systems and discussed the strengths and challenges of each system.

Being an American-born Chinese, she grew up in a stereotypical Chinese American family in Houston, with science Ph.D. parents. Both her sister and her had to learn musical instruments from a young age. She recalled that she couldn't get her favorite pet because at age 11 she placed second in a piano competition, and 16 years after her graduation her father touted her Stanford and Columbia degrees, as well as her SAT scores at her wedding. This background helped hone her insight into culture as an explainer for the Chinese attitude toward education.

For children to do well in school is of paramount importance to Chinese parents. According to the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results in 2010 and 2013, 15-year-old students in Shanghai ranked number one in math, reading, and science. While Thomas Friedman explored the “secret” of Chinese education in his New York Times column, others countered that this ranking did not mean Chinese education was the best for a number of reasons. First, Shanghai is not representative of the entire China. Second, Shanghai students also did many more hours of homework each week than students in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, whose scores were only slightly lower.

More importantly, many people questioned whether the Chinese education system killed creativity by overly emphasizing rote learning and the authoritarian nature of the classroom. Through a picture of her son's kindergarten class in morning exercises and excerpts of WeChat conversations between parents and teachers, Chu illustrated the remarkable degree of uniformity and conformity in a school community where the teacher knows best and is unambiguously the authority. Chu contrasted this with the American education system where children are encouraged to be different and to be the best of their individual selves.

Chu asked: “What do we mean by creativity? And how to achieve it?” She interpreted “creativity” to mean: to produce something new and original, which also has value. She distilled
three conditions for becoming creative. First, a creative person must have ample knowledge or expertise in a specific domain. Secondly, he or she must have original thinking in examining something that other people have studied before. Finally, he or she must have genuine curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Steve Jobs’ words, “Stay hungry and stay foolish,” are often quoted to refer to this kind of intrinsic motivation.

Chu used this framework to demonstrate that the American and Chinese cultures emphasize different parts of the practice of creativity, while in reality all three parts are needed to be creative. Generally speaking, American education doesn’t emphasize enough the importance of the mastery of knowledge in certain fields, whereas the Chinese generally neglect the latter two conditions. She reported that the Chinese have become aware of their weaknesses and are determined to promote innovations, albeit in an authoritarian way. Huawei’s workaholic culture epitomizes Chinese diligence and forbearance for hard work. China’s single-minded pursuit of technological innovations has prompted the question: “Will the next Steve Jobs come from China?”

For those 18 million newborn Chinese babies each year, the education system functions as a ruthless sorting mechanism to place young people into different paths. A large portion of students are shed at the end of Grade 9 and Grade 12 respectively through examinations and enter into blue-collar labor force, vocational schools, or other options. Because Chinese students generally have fewer options than their American counterparts, more is at stake in these exams, hence more heightened anxiety.

Chinese educators have realized the shortcomings of this test-driven system. It neglects many useful abilities: networking and social skills, friendship, leadership, independent thinking, creativity, etc. These educators then try to make exams less important, foster an environment for independent thinking, encourage free play, and limit homework in kindergarten and lower grades. However, Chu did not expect Chinese parents’ behavior to change any time soon. As the Chinese education authorities have tried other ways to select for colleges, such as, reference letters and community service, they have found that influence, often bought, can enter the equation. Furthermore, how can Chinese schools foster independent and critical thinking skills, while also pushing a political curriculum in schools? Chu questioned whether China can really succeed in encouraging critical thinking in mathematics and natural sciences, while suppressing critical thinking in humanity or social sciences fields.

Even so, there are many good aspects of Chinese culture that are worth learning. Chu identified some of these “best practices.” For example, the Chinese presume that to learn and to achieve require struggle. They believe academic performance is not a result of genetics or any innate talent, but a consistent effort to challenge oneself. In addition, Chinese parents believe that mathematics is fundamental and important. Informal math education starts at home in Chinese families, whereas Western families tend to focus only on early literacy. Finally, Chinese culture reveres teachers and education in general.

In conclusion, Chu called for more people-to-people exchanges between the U.S. and China.
Whereas there are about three million Chinese students studying in the U.S. at any given time, only about 15,000 American students are studying in China at any given time. Chu was concerned that leaders of all spheres in the U.S. could make ill-informed decisions regarding China as a result of this knowledge pipeline flowing mostly one way.