

**Q and A with Nancy Pine – *Educating Young Giants: What Kids Learn
(And Don't Learn) in China and America***

What do you see as the major differences between Chinese and American education?

The most obvious is that the Chinese students spend many more out-of-school hours on homework and perfecting their studies. This is coupled with the need to memorize what is in their textbooks. American students rarely need to memorize anything. Occasionally something for a test, but it doesn't need to be verbatim.

Inside the classroom, differences abound. In Chinese classrooms the rhythm is relentless. The teacher keeps the pace going at a fast clip throughout a lesson. My notes are peppered with comments about the speed of interactions and that there is no space, no time for misbehavior on the students' part. In American classrooms there is much more time for students to think, to try out an answer hesitantly, and to meet in small groups with the teacher.

Finally, at home American parents let their children try out things themselves. They try out using a recipe or learning to use skates or a bike with much less supervision than a Chinese parent would allow. I was at a playground in the U.S. with a Chinese colleague one day, and what he thought of as a dangerous activity (swinging from rings so that the child was a few feet above the ground) I thought of as normal.

You state early in the book that in China the view of childhood is to do well in school, while in the United States it is viewed as a time to accomplish many things, school being only one. Could you expand on that and also talk a little about why this is so?

In China there is a 2000-year tradition emphasizing the importance of doing well in school. Confucius's teachings about diligence, hard work, and study have lasted over the millennia and are engrained in people's lives and beliefs. On top of this tradition is the pressure for students to do well in high school and college entrance exams. Among the middle class this pressure drives family life. But it is also influential for those who are not aiming for college.

In the United States there are more opportunities to change course as students proceed through school. Families tend to think of childhood as being for more than study. School is important, but so are many other things. Sports dominate many children's lives--or church, or clubs of different kinds. It's a time to learn to swim or play a musical instrument. Sometimes American children practice these activities seriously, but often the activities are a way to try out new interests and have fun. Also, American children are expected to participate in household responsibilities, help to care for siblings, help to clean up and prepare meals. In contrast, Chinese children are often told that their primary job is to do well in school. Their parents and grandparents do the housework.

You devote a chapter in *Educating Young Giants* to our two different writing systems--Chinese and English. How do our languages affect student learning?

Learning Chinese characters requires much more concentration and focus on detail and on repetitive learning. Children learning to read and write in English need only to learn 26 relatively simple letters. They usually do this by the end of kindergarten. And once the American children learn that letters are associated with sounds, they can begin to read and write. They have the tools to unlock words. The Chinese, on the other hand, spend much more time memorizing how to write and recognize characters. As a result, Chinese children learn to focus on minute detail, spending long periods of time remembering and replicating characters with precision. Many characters differ by only one small detail. It's as though, in English, if you left the dot off the "i" in "island," the meaning would change to "elephant." It takes much longer to become fluent Chinese readers and writers. U.S. kids have more opportunities to focus on what they are reading and writing at an earlier age.

The media and other sources often criticize American schools heartily. What strengths do schools in the United States have?

Shuttling back and forth between American schools and Chinese schools, I have seen things here that I would never have seen if I were only here. Even in the most mediocre American lessons, students are encouraged to talk, to give ideas. I was in a school not too long ago watching a 4th grade lesson that was dictated by a strict and not very interesting reading program. Even so, the teacher was involving all the students—How would you define superstition? "It's when you walk under a ladder. It will bring bad luck," said one 4th grader. The teacher had another student add to that and another until they had produced a fuller answer. The teacher then had the students share the definition with a partner and give examples to each other. In a Chinese school, the children would have memorized the text at home so the first child to answer would be expected to give the right definition. No discussion, no adding of personal experience.

Also, in American schools it is not uncommon for a student to make a suggestion to the teacher or ask a question about doing an activity. Again, that would be unheard of in China. A new Chinese curriculum requires schools to become more student-centered, but 2000 years of tradition is hard to change.

Do you think American parents should try to become more like Chinese parents? More purposeful in having their children work harder?

This is complicated to answer because each parent is so different. My teaching experience in American schools has led me to believe that those parents who make sure their children focus on learning—not just do their homework, but get them to think about new ideas, and how to accomplish something—have children who bring to the classroom the questioning and enthusiasm that helps move them forward. Just doing three pages of division problems without thinking about how division is

used in real life, may make adequate test takers, but not thoughtful students or citizens.

People often ask me if they should get tutors. And my answer is, it depends. If your child is struggling in a subject and having trouble keeping up, then yes, a tutor who can help your child understand that subject could be helpful. If it is just to get them ahead of their peers or to be better test takers, then your money might be better spent on gymnastics or robotics or something more mind-bending.

You mention in the book that Chinese teachers teach only a few classes and work together in teachers' offices when they aren't teaching. That sounds very different from what happens in the United States. Can you explain this?

It takes a while to get used to that idea. The first time I realized this in China, I must have asked the elementary school teachers 3 or 4 times what they meant by their non-teaching time. When I taught elementary school in the United States – and this is still true – I worked from the beginning of the day to the end with almost no breaks. In U.S. high schools teachers usually have one period allotted to preparation, and they teach the rest of the day. The Chinese, however, usually teach only two or at most three 45-minute periods a day. The rest of their time is spent correcting papers, planning lessons together, developing teaching materials and observing and critiquing each others' lessons. Each school has a collaborative teacher group that meets weekly, plans together, observes and critiques each other's classes, and then does further planning. Although some U.S. schools struggle to find collaborative time for teachers to meet, the time is hard to find because teachers have responsibilities all day. When they do meet it is often devoted to bureaucratic tasks or analyzing test scores rather than developing professional skills to help each other improve teaching.

In addition, Chinese teachers in urban elementary and secondary schools usually teach just one subject. Chinese math teachers teach math; Chinese teachers teach Chinese; English teachers teach English. In contrast, U.S. high school teachers prepare several different lessons each day and elementary teachers in the United States teach all subjects—math, language arts, science (where it exists), social studies, PE, art (if it still exists), and so on.

Is there a difference in teacher preparation and teacher roles in the two countries?

The beginning of teacher preparation in colleges is similar in both countries. Teachers study child and adolescent psychology and learning development as well as age-appropriate teaching methods. The difference lies in emphasis. The Chinese teachers do a lot of observing of other teachers, not just during their student teaching but also during their first one or two years of teaching when they are mentored continuously. In the United States, by the end of their final college semester, student teachers are expected to take on a full teaching load with guidance from a master teacher. Then, once they are hired as teachers, they take full

responsibility of everything in their classrooms with very little mentoring from anyone. They need to learn to survive on their own from the beginning.

Teachers' roles are also very different—what I have called the difference between performance and improvisation. Chinese teachers learn to perform. Their lessons are polished and the delivery of material is very carefully planned for students to understand. But this means the teacher delivers the material and the students receive it. The students do not ask questions or make impromptu comments in class. In the long run this is what leads to Chinese students being very focused academically, but unable to ask questions or think beyond the box. The more casual, interactive American system is much more improvisational for the teachers as well as the students, and it produces students who are more likely to ask questions and to think independently. Chinese parents crave classroom opportunities for their children to ask questions and express their ideas.

You talk about the irony of how U.S. parents and educators want what the Chinese have, and that they want what we have. Can you expand on that?

Chinese parents and teachers crave the innovative, imaginative spirit of American students and their ability to discuss ideas, ask questions, and think outside the box. The irony is that we are removing many of the opportunities for innovation and creative thinking by focusing more and more on testing and practice for tests. Many elementary schools, for instance, have removed art, music, fieldtrips, and even science and a lot of social studies in order to add more test preparation, even though it is known that this narrowness limits students' abilities to learn thoroughly. Meanwhile, the Chinese are trying desperately to get rid of, or at least modify, the draconian exam system that forces all those bound for college and professional jobs to memorize text after text beginning in first grade in order to pass the exams. They find it unbelievable that we are increasing our efforts to take tests, while they are doing everything to get rid of tests and their limiting effect.

Realistically, what can we learn from the Chinese?

There are many things, but they require time and thought. We tend to like instant fixes to our problems, but that yields superficial fixes that don't last.

For instance, math and numbers have long been embedded in the everyday life of China. That is not true in the United States. Watching what they teach in math classes, beginning in first grade, and how they teach it could be very instructive. The Chinese teach very large concepts very early, not just ways to do figuring. They teach mathematics principles starting in kindergarten and first grade; we tend to teach what might be labeled "arithmetic." We often focus on how to do calculations rather than on helping students understand why you do a calculation the way you do and then becoming proficient at it. If we want to institute that type of teaching, it requires time for planning and for helping teachers accomplish this.

We would also do well to understand how Chinese teachers collaborate with each other and how they learn to critique each other. U.S. teachers, when they have

an occasional chance to observe each other, tend to be reluctant to critique fellow teachers; criticism is avoided for fear of offending one another.

We can also learn to persevere much more. It's okay if our students, and also our children at home, to groan some about how much they have to work. They can be pushed to accomplish more than they think they can do.

And of course, the lesson about testing too much is dramatically taught in China every day. We need substantive assessment, yes. But eternal testing and test practice of a limited range of information, no.

Do teachers and parents communicate in China?

There is not much two-way communication between parents and teachers in China, but plenty of one-way communication. Teachers often email parents several times a week, and sometimes several times a day—telling them homework assignments, how their child could do better, etc. I had dinner with the mother of a first grader not too long ago, and by 6 p.m. she had received one message from each of her daughter's teachers except the Chinese teacher, who had sent her three messages. However, parents can seldom visit classes, and there are almost no parent groups. It is very different from the U.S. Chinese teachers are not only respected for their knowledge, but also feared to some extent.

You write that Chinese classroom environment leaves no room for misbehavior, whereas the informality in American classrooms leaves plenty of room for it. Can we learn from the Chinese about discipline?

In some ways, yes, but in many ways, no. On the yes side: requiring our students to work a little harder from the beginning of schooling would, I think, be an excellent idea. To raise our expectations—not to an impossible level, but stretching our students to their fullest capacity. On the other hand, that absolute focus required of the Chinese students would be impossible—and undesirable—for our young people. Chinese teachers demand that their students stay focused on the teacher with no fiddling at all (no doodles, no twiddling of a bracelet, or wiggling); that would be impossible for U.S. children. They are raised to be more active. Also, the concentration on the teacher demanded of Chinese students does not allow the students to ever comment independently, to raise a question, or to go get a book from a backpack. – What keeps discipline positive in U.S. classrooms is to keep the students involved. That doesn't mean entertaining them, but keeping them challenged, keeping the curriculum moving. The curriculum that recently has had students focusing over and over on practicing for test taking is a sure way to not only kill their interest in learning, but also to open up spaces for discipline problems.

Do the Chinese aspire to have their children focus on learning the way the Tiger Mom book suggests?

No. Although there are demands Chinese parents' need to make in order for their children and adolescents to spend long hours completing homework, every

parent I have talked with since the Tiger Mom book was published has expressed frustration at that book. They found her method nearly abusive. As one mother of a teenager put it, “My mom raised me like the Tiger Mom raised her children, and my husband and I would never do that to our child....He needs to do his work, yes, but he also needs to enjoy himself.”

What do we both need to do better?

I have a long list! At the top is **experiential learning**. There is a wide world out there; students need to interact with it. They need to understand that what they are learning is connected to that world, and they need to have experiences using their knowledge to interact with it. This doesn't just mean collecting aluminum cans and bottles to recycle. It means doing things like interviewing the shopkeepers, the school bus driver, the mayor, a college professor, and finding out what they do and what skills it requires. What math skills? Writing skills? Students could then make a community booklet on or off line about the people and what they've learned from them. Experiential learning also means students communicating their concerns and ideas with people in local government, in Op Ed pages and blogs. These are just two ideas among thousands that schools could do to connect to the world beyond the classroom. They don't cost money, but they do require thinking beyond the textbook. I have a couple of examples in my book, but there are unlimited possibilities.

What about using technology?

Both countries are in what feels like the 19th century on computer use, even those who are urging the use of iPads. Technology is rarely an integral part of the curriculum, which it needs to be. One educator I interviewed who specializes in critical media literacy, pointed out that computers in most schools are being used like expensive crayons. I'd say this is true in China also.

Students also need to learn to be critical of what's on the internet. Today, in both countries, they know how to zip around computer games, text message, and more, but their ability to assess what is valuable or reliable information and what is trash is very limited.

**EDUCATING YOUNG GIANTS: WHAT KIDS LEARN (AND DON'T LEARN) IN
CHINA AND AMERICA by Nancy Pine
May 22, 2012. Published by Palgrave Macmillan.
Price: \$28.00 ~ ISBN 978-0-230-33907-1**

Nancy Pine, PhD, is an internationally known educator with 20 years of research and consulting experience in China. She is founder of the Bridging Cultures: U.S./China Program at Mount St. Mary's College, and has taught extensively in both China and the United States. She has won numerous awards, including a City of Los Angeles award for her cross-cultural efforts. Visit her online at <http://nancypine.com>.