The Myth of Chinese Super Schools

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Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World
by Yong Zhao
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Carlos Barria/Reuters

A boy watching pro-democracy demonstrators from a school bus near a protest site in Hong Kong, October 2014

On December 3, 2013, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced yet again that American students were doing terribly when tested, in comparison to students in sixty-one other countries and a few cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong. Duncan presided over the release of the latest international assessment of student

performance in reading, science, and mathematics (called the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA), and Shanghai led the nations of the world in all three categories.

Duncan and other policymakers professed shock and anguish at the results, according to which American students were average at best, nowhere near the top. Duncan said that Americans had to face the brutal fact that the performance of our students was "mediocre" and that our schools were trapped in "educational stagnation."

He had used virtually the same rhetoric in 2010, when the previous PISA results were released. Despite the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, which mandated that every child in every school in grades 3–8 would be proficient in math and reading by 2014, and despite the Obama administration's $4.35 billion Race to the Top program, the scores of American fifteen-year-old students on these international tests were nearly unchanged since 2000. Both NCLB and Race to the Top assumed that a steady diet of testing and accountability, of carrots for high scores and sticks for low scores, would provide an incentive for students and teachers to try harder and get higher test scores. But clearly, this strategy was not working. In his public remarks, however, Duncan could not admit that carrots and sticks don't produce better education or even higher test scores. Instead, he blamed teachers and parents for failing to have high expectations.

Duncan, President Obama, and legislators looked longingly at Shanghai's stellar results and wondered why American students could not surpass them. Why can't we be like the Chinese?, they wondered. Why should we be number twenty-nine in the world in mathematics when Shanghai is number one? Why are our scores below those of Estonia, Poland, Ireland, and so many other nations? Duncan was sure that the scores on international tests were proof that we were falling behind the rest of the world and that they predicted economic disaster for the United States. What Duncan could not admit was that, after a dozen years, the Bush–Obama strategy of testing and punishing teachers and schools had failed.

One response of the Obama administration was to support an initiative called the Common Core standards, which set demands so high for students in every grade from kindergarten to senior year that most of those who have taken the tests associated with the standards have failed them. In New York State, for example, nearly 70 percent of students failed to reach "proficient" in reading, including 95 percent of students with disabilities, 97 percent of English-as-a-second-language

learners, and more than 80 percent of black and Hispanic students.

Although the federal government is barred by law from influencing or controlling curriculum or instruction, the Common Core tests are federally funded. Tests, without doubt, influence and control curriculum and instruction. The Common Core standards are a gamble, because no one knows if they will raise test scores or even if they will improve education. But what they will certainly do is require many tens of billions in new spending on technology, because the new federal tests will be delivered online, meaning that every school district must have new computers, new bandwidth, and training for staff to use the new technology. No surprise: the testing industry (dominated by the British corporation Pearson) and the technology industry love the new standards. However, recent polls show that a growing majority of parents and teachers oppose the Common Core standards; they have become a political lightning-rod, drawing fire from those on the right who see them as federal evisceration of local control and from those on the left who dislike standardization and loss of professional autonomy.

Policymakers and legislators are convinced that the best way to raise test scores is to administer more standardized tests and to make them harder to pass. This love affair with testing had its origins in 1983, when a national commission on education released a report called “A Nation at Risk.”

President Ronald Reagan had hoped his commission would recommend vouchers and school prayers, but that did not happen. Instead, the report recommended a stronger curriculum, higher graduation requirements, more teacher pay, and longer school hours, as well as standards and testing at transitional points, like high school graduation. The main effect of the report was caused by its alarmist rhetoric, which launched a three-decade-plus obsession with the idea that American public schools are failing and that the way to fix them is to raise test scores.

The report warned that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” It said ominously, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” But no, we did it to ourselves. We were careless. “We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.” The commission complained that on nineteen different international academic tests, completed a decade earlier, American students never placed first or second, and were last on seven occasions.

This academic "disarmament," the commission believed, was undercutting our industrial might. Other nations were overtaking us. The Japanese were making automobiles more efficiently, and their government was subsidizing their development and export. South Koreans had built the world's most efficient steel mill. German products were replacing American machine tools. In the thirty years since "A Nation at Risk," American students have typically scored no better than average—and sometimes worse—on the international tests.

It is worth noting that American students have never received high scores on international tests. On the first such test, a test of mathematics in 1964, senior year students in the US scored last of twelve nations, and eighth-grade students scored next to last. But in the following fifty years, the US outperformed the other eleven nations by every measure, whether economic productivity, military might, technological innovation, or democratic institutions. This raises the question of whether the scores of fifteen-year-old students on international tests predict anything of importance or whether they reflect that our students lack motivation to do their best when taking a test that doesn't count toward their grade or graduation.

Nonetheless, the militaristic rhetoric of "A Nation at Risk" created a sense of crisis. States convened study groups, task forces, and committees to devise plans to confront this threat to the nation. All agreed that students needed more testing, and the public schools needed new accountability measures to prove their worth. States adopted new tests for promotion and graduation, and stronger graduation requirements. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush convened a summit of the nation's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia, to set national education goals for the year 2000. The governors and the Bush administration adopted six national goals. By the year 2000, for example, students in the US would be first in the world in mathematics and science; by the year 2000, all children would start school ready to learn.

The federal government actually had limited means of bringing any of the goals to fruition, since education was traditionally a state and local function, and the federal portion of funding was typically about 10 percent. What the federal government did have was a testing program called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which monitored achievement regionally; in 1992, in response to demands by governors, mainly in the South, the NAEP began reporting test scores not just by region, but by state. Anyone who wanted to know how students in Mississippi compared to students in Maine or Oregon could look at NAEP scores and find out.

There was no educational problem, it seemed, that could not be cured by more testing.

A few critics questioned the testing craze and wondered whether there was any crisis at all. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle belittled the claims of the politicians and pundits in *The Manufactured Crisis* (1995). Gerald Bracey wrote numerous columns and several books debunking the crisis talk. What did the test scores of high school students have to do with the growth of the Japanese automobile industry? Why blame high school students for the American automakers who continued to produce gas-guzzlers even after the oil-producing nations formed a cartel in the late 1970s to drive up the price of fuel? How could any of the industrial shifts to which the commission pointed be blamed on elementary and secondary teachers and students? Why hold them accountable for the outsourcing of manufacturing to low-wage countries in Latin America and Asia (with lower test scores than ours)? When the US economy improved, would any of the politicians thank the schools? Of course not.

No matter. The demand for test scores became insatiable. Starting with President George H.W. Bush in 1988, every president wanted to be remembered as "the education president." His plan was called America 2000, and its purpose was to encourage the American people to strive to reach the national goals set by the governors at Charlottesville. Stymied by a Democratic Congress, Bush was unable to pass any legislation, and America 2000 soon faded into obscurity.

Then came Bill Clinton, who also wanted to be remembered as "the education president." He believed in the national goals and added two more to the original six (one about teacher training, another about parent involvement). Congress passed Goals 2000, Clinton's program, in 1994. It awarded money to states to devise their own standards and tests. Then came President George W. Bush, and his education program, No Child Left Behind, became law early in 2002. It was an audacious federal intrusion into education policy. It directed every state to test every child in reading and math every year from grades 3 through 8, while requiring that children be proficient in those two basic subjects by the year 2014.

This was an impossible goal, one that no nation in the world has ever met. Any school that did not make steady progress toward that goal was at risk of being closed, taken over by the state, or handed over to private management. With the passage of NCLB, the nation's public schools became obsessed with test scores. Failure to raise test scores every year jeopardized the survival of the school and the jobs of its staff. Many hundreds, possibly thousands of public schools have

been closed since the passage of NCLB, due to low test scores.

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, educators expected that he would repudiate NCLB and help them cope with rising costs, budget cuts, and growing levels of poverty and non-English-speaking students. But the Obama administration was as fixated on test scores as its predecessors. In 2009, Obama and his Education Secretary Duncan unveiled the administration's own plan, Race to the Top. The very terminology signaled that this administration wanted test scores that were at the top of the world.

Pete Souza/White House

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan visiting a classroom at Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH), Brooklyn, October 2013

Race to the Top offered states a chance to win a share of $4.35 billion in federal funds if they agreed to open more privately managed charter schools, intervened aggressively to "turn around" their lowest-performing schools (for instance, by firing and replacing their staff), adopted rigorous standards (i.e., the Common Core) to demonstrate that students are "college- and career-ready," and evaluated their teachers in relation to the test scores of their students. The Obama administration also favors "merit pay," paying teachers more if their students have higher test scores. Far from being a fresh initiative, Race to the Top reaffirmed the bipartisan consensus that scores on standardized tests are the

ultimate decider of the fate of schools and teachers.

Obama and Duncan used the latest international test scores as proof that more testing, more rigor, was needed. The Obama administration, acting out the script of "A Nation at Risk," repeatedly treats our scores on these tests as a harbinger of economic doom, rather than as evidence that more testing does not produce higher test scores. Now, a dozen years after the passage of George W. Bush's NCLB, it is clear that testing every child every year does not produce better education, nor does it raise our standing on the greatly overvalued international tests.

At this juncture comes the book that Barack Obama, Arne Duncan, members of Congress, and the nation's governors and legislators need to read: Yong Zhao's *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World*. Zhao, born and educated in China, now holds a presidential chair and a professorship at the University of Oregon. He tells us that China has the best education system because it can produce the highest test scores. But, he says, it has the worst education system in the world because those test scores are purchased by sacrificing creativity, divergent thinking, originality, and individualism. The imposition of standardized tests by central authorities, he argues, is a victory for authoritarianism. His book is a timely warning that we should not seek to emulate Shanghai, whose scores reflect a Confucian tradition of rote learning that is thousands of years old. Indeed, the highest-scoring nations on the PISA examinations of fifteen-year-olds are all Asian nations or cities: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei, Singapore, Korea, Macao (China), and Japan.

Zhao explains that China has revered a centrally administered examination system for at least two thousand years as the sure path to professional esteem and a career in government. A system called *keju* lasted for thirteen hundred years, until 1905, when it was abolished by the emperor of the Qing dynasty. This system maintained Chinese civilization by requiring knowledge of the Confucian classics, based on memorization and writing about current affairs. There were local, provincial, and national examinations, each conferring privileges on the lucky or brilliant few who passed. Exam scores determined one's rank in society. The *keju* was a means of social mobility, but for the ruling elite, it produced the most capable individuals for governing the country.

Keju, writes Zhao, was China's fifth great invention, "along with gunpowder, the compass, paper, and movable type." Because it was seen as meritocratic, the *keju* system was adopted in other East Asian nations such as Japan, Korea, and

Vietnam. It "shaped East Asia's most fundamental, enduring educational values." Zhao holds *keju* responsible for China's inability to evolve into a modern scientific and technological nation:

> For example, the Chinese used their compass mainly to help find building locations and burial sites with good *fengshui*—not to navigate the oceans and expand across the globe as the West did. Gunpowder stopped at a level good enough for fireworks, but not for the modern weaponry that gave the West its military might.

China had all the elements necessary for an industrial revolution at least four hundred years before Great Britain, but *keju* diverted scholars, geniuses, and thinkers away from the study or exploration of modern science. The examination system, Zhao holds, was designed to reward obedience, conformity, compliance, respect for order, and homogeneous thinking; for this reason, it purposefully supported Confucian orthodoxy and imperial order. It was an efficient means of authoritarian social control. Everyone wanted to succeed on the highly competitive exams, but few did. Success on the *keju* enforced orthodoxy, not innovation or dissent. As Zhao writes, emperors came and went, but China had "no Renaissance, no Enlightenment, no Industrial Revolution."

Zhao says that China's remarkable economic growth over the past three decades was due not to its education system, which still relies heavily on testing and rote memorization, but to its willingness to open its markets to foreign capital, to welcome Western technology, and to send students to Western institutions of higher education. The more that China retreats from central planning, the more its economy thrives. To maintain economic growth, he insists, China needs technological innovation, which it will never develop unless it abandons its test-based education system, now controlled by *gaokao*, the all-important college entrance exams. Yet this test-based education system is responsible for the high performance of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and East Asian nations on the international tests.

China has a problem, however, that is seldom discussed: cheating and fraud. When the government rewards the production of patents for new products, the number of patents soars, but most of them are worthless. High school students get extra points for college admission if they receive patents for their proposals. Zhao points to a school where a ninth-grade class had received over twenty patents; the school as a whole had registered over five hundred patents in three years. Even middle school students had collected national patents. A large proportion of these

patents, writes Zhao, are "junk patents" or demonstrations of "small cleverness." When the government requires the publication of scientific papers for professional advancement, the number of scientific papers increases dramatically, but a high proportion of those papers are fraudulent. Zhao says there is a billion-dollar industry in China devoted to writing "scientific" papers for sale to students and professionals who lack the research skills to write their own.

The quality of China's patents and research publications, Zhao says, is "abysmal," because of the circumstances under which they are produced and the ubiquity of fraud. Any criticism of the authoritarian culture that produces cheating and fraud is "viewed as un-Chinese and anti-Chinese" and might lead to "political and legal troubles."

Zhao quotes Zheng Yefu, a professor at Peking University and the author of a popular book in 2013 titled *The Pathology of Chinese Education*, who wrote:

> No one, after 12 years of Chinese education, has any chance to receive a Nobel prize, even if he or she went to Harvard, Yale, Oxford or Cambridge for college…. Out of the one billion people who have been educated in Mainland China since 1949, there has been no Nobel prize winner…. This forcefully testifies [to] the power of education in destroying creativity on behalf of the [Chinese] society.

This was written after officials who administer the PISA examinations had hailed Shanghai for its remarkably high test scores. Zhao says this is what Chinese students, even in rural areas, are best at: high test scores. Chinese students regularly win any competition that depends on test performance. Where they fall short is creativity, originality, divergence from authority. The admirers of Chinese test scores never point out that what makes it the "best" education system is also what makes it the worst education system. It is very effective in "eliminating individual differences, suppressing intrinsic motivation, and imposing conformity." It is

> a well-designed and continuously perfected machine that effectively and efficiently transmits a narrow band of predetermined content and cultivates prescribed skills…. Because it is the only path to social mobility, people follow it eagerly.

China is trapped by Western praise. Its education leaders, Zhao writes, would like to break free of the exam-based orthodoxy that limits creativity but they dare not abandon the methods that produce the results that Westerners admire.

China is accustomed to hierarchy and ranking, and the education system delivers both. As the only path to success, students are ranked according to their performance, and very few will win the race. Competition is fierce for the top spots in the top schools and universities. Not surprisingly, wealthy parents resort to cheating and bribery to give their children advantages, such as extra lessons, the best teachers, and the best schools. Chinese educators complain that the competition makes children unhappy and unhealthy, and that it is unfair and inequitable.

Zhao describes the lengths to which students go to get high scores. Many of the courses they take are specifically geared for test preparation, not learning. Schools exist to prepare for the tests:

> Teachers guess possible [test] items, companies sell answers and wireless cheating devices to students, and students engage in all sorts of elaborate cheating. In 2013, a riot broke out because a group of students in Hubei Province were stopped from executing the cheating scheme their parents purchased to ease their college entrance exam.

The British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reported that an angry mob of two thousand people smashed cars and chanted, "We want fairness. There is no fairness if you do not let us cheat." In the last year of high school, many schools do nothing but test preparation; "no new content is taught…. A large proportion of publications for children in China are practice test papers."

The most shocking story that Zhao tells is about a rural township in Anhui province that is known as Asia's largest test-prep machine. It is home to Maotanchang or Mao Zhong, a residential secondary school devoted to test preparation. More than 11,000 students from this school took the college entrance exam in 2013, and 82 percent scored high enough to gain admission to a four-year college. Tuition is about $6,000, the same as the average annual income for residents of Shanghai. Parents pay for a year's living expenses in addition to tuition. Students come to this school from across China to prepare for the tests. The workload is three times what it is in the typical Chinese school. Students are in class by 6:30 AM and finish for the day at 10:30 PM, with homework yet to do. The school "has become a legend in China. The national TV network, CCTV, sent a drone to capture the send-off for more than ten thousand students, traveling in seventy buses, escorted by police cars, to take the exam on June 5, 2013."

Leading Chinese educators have attempted to reduce the importance of

examinations, but thus far have failed. Zhao calls testing "the witch that cannot be killed." No matter how often they issue directives to reduce homework and academic pressure, the pressure remains, enforced by schools and parents. Zhao wrote his book to warn Americans not to abandon their historic values of creativity and innovation, not to be lured by China's high test scores, not to be corrupted by authoritarian standards and tests. Americans mistake "China's miseries as secrets to success." China, he writes, is "a perfect incarnation of authoritarian education." It is no model for the United States:

> As traditional routine jobs are offshored and automated, we need more and more globally competent, creative, innovative, entrepreneurial citizens—job creators instead of employment-minded job seekers. To cultivate new talents, we need an education that enhances individual strengths, follows children's passions, and fosters their social-emotional development. We do *not* need an authoritarian education that aims to fix children's deficits according to externally prescribed standards.

If the West is concerned about being overtaken by China, then the best solution is "to avoid becoming China."

The United States is already ensnared in the testing obsession that has trapped China. It is not too late to escape. Parents and educators across the nation are up in arms about the amount of instructional time now devoted to test preparation and testing. Yong Zhao offers wise counsel. We should break our addiction to standardized testing before we sacrifice the cultural values that have made our nation a home to innovation, creativity, originality, and invention.

Zhao believes that the two major changes that should shape education policy are globalization and technology. Students need to understand the world that they will live in and master technology. Repelled by test-based accountability, standardization, and authoritarianism, he advocates for the autonomy of well-prepared teachers and the individual development of their students. He strongly urges that the US equalize the funding of schools, broadly redefine the desired outcomes of schooling beyond test scores, and eliminate the opportunity gaps among students of different racial groups.

He rejects the current "reforms" that demand uniformity and a centrally controlled curriculum. He envisions schools where students produce books, videos, and art, where they are encouraged to explore and experiment. He imagines ways of teaching by which the individual strengths of every student are developed, not under pressure, but by their intrinsic motivation. He dreams of schools where the

highest value is creativity, where students are encouraged to be, as he wrote in his last book, *World Class Learners*, "confident, curious, and creative." Until we break free of standardized testing, this ideal will remain out of reach.

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