

One Thing We Shouldn't Import from China: Its Education System

I remember a story my college economics professor told my class many years ago about the differences she saw between her American economics students and the Chinese ones she taught during frequent sabbaticals to Beijing. She said that the Chinese economics students generally had superior math skills and the ability to quickly solve complex calculus problems, but her American students generally had a better grasp on the underlying concepts and context, were able to better recognize when certain calculations were incorrect (like a negative number for the Price of a good), and were more creative with solutions.

While it is certainly important for U.S. students to have strong academic skills, trying to replicate the Chinese education system may not be the best approach. Yet, that is just what author Lenora Chu advocates in her new book, *Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve*.

The Price of Perfection

As an American journalist living in Shanghai, Chu recounts the experience of her young son attending a Chinese school for five years. Chu acknowledges the often “draconian” ideas and tactics of Chinese schools, but her book touts the benefits of these approaches and suggests American schools should adopt some of them to become more competitive.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article about her book, Chu writes about the ways her son was force-fed eggs by his teacher, prohibited from bringing his asthma inhaler to school, and “isolated” in a separate classroom with threat of demotion after he “failed to follow in ‘one-two’ step during a physical exercise.”

Yet, she says that these practices are beneficial because they give teachers and schools total authority to push for strong academic outcomes. Parental sovereignty and individual liberty become secondary to teacher control and school performance. Chu writes:

“This deference gives the teacher near-absolute command of her classroom. My son became so afraid of being late for class, missing school or otherwise disappointing his teacher, that he once raised a stink when I broached the possibility of missing a few school days for a family trip. He was 5.”

Fortunately, other scholars are speaking out against importing more standardization and control into America's already coercive, test-driven mass schooling model. In his 2014 book, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon: Why China Has The Best (And Worst) Education System in the World*, author Yong Zhao explains that the emphasis on subservience to authority and an all-out focus on academic outcomes and test scores may propel China to the top of international education comparisons (see below), but it's at the price of freedom and autonomy. Skills and scores replace ingenuity and agency.

	Mean score in PISA 2012	Share of low achievers (Below Level 2)	Share of top performers in mathematics (Level 5 or 6)	Annualised change	Mean score in PISA 2012	Annualised change	Mean score in PISA 2012	Annualised change
OECD average	494	23.1	12.6	-0.3	496	0.3	501	0.5
Shanghai-China	613	3.8	55.4	4.2	570	4.6	580	1.8
Singapore	573	8.3	40.0	3.8	542	5.4	551	3.3
Hong Kong-China	561	8.5	33.7	1.3	545	2.3	555	2.1
Chinese Taipei	560	12.8	37.2	1.7	523	4.5	523	-1.5
Korea	554	9.1	30.9	1.1	536	0.9	538	2.6
Macao-China	538	10.8	24.3	1.0	509	0.8	521	1.6
Japan	536	11.1	23.7	0.4	538	1.5	547	2.6
Liechtenstein	535	14.1	24.8	0.3	516	1.3	525	0.4
Switzerland	531	12.4	21.4	0.6	509	1.0	515	0.6
Netherlands	523	14.8	19.3	-1.6	511	-0.1	522	-0.5
Estonia	521	10.5	14.6	0.9	516	2.4	541	1.5
Finland	519	12.3	15.3	-2.8	524	-1.7	545	-3.0
Canada	518	13.8	16.4	-1.4	523	-0.9	525	-1.3
Poland	518	14.4	16.7	2.6	518	2.8	526	4.6
Belgium	515	18.9	19.4	-1.6	509	0.1	505	-0.8
Germany	514	17.7	17.5	1.4	508	1.8	524	1.4
Viet Nam	511	14.2	13.3	m	508	m	528	m
Austria	506	18.7	14.3	0.0	490	-0.2	506	-0.8
Australia	504	19.7	14.8	-2.2	512	-1.4	521	-0.9
Ireland	501	16.9	10.7	-0.6	523	-0.9	522	2.3
Slovenia	501	20.1	13.7	-0.6	481	-2.2	514	-0.8
Denmark	500	16.8	10.0	-1.8	496	0.1	498	0.4
New Zealand	500	22.6	15.0	-2.5	512	-1.1	516	-2.5
Czech Republic	499	21.0	12.9	-2.5	493	-0.5	508	-1.0
France	495	22.4	12.9	-1.5	505	0.0	499	0.6
United Kingdom	494	21.8	11.8	-0.3	499	0.7	514	-0.1
Iceland	493	21.5	11.2	-2.2	483	-1.3	478	-2.0
Latvia	491	19.9	8.0	0.5	489	1.9	502	2.0
Luxembourg	490	24.3	11.2	-0.3	488	0.7	491	0.9
Norway	489	22.3	9.4	-0.3	504	0.1	495	1.3
Portugal	487	24.9	10.6	2.8	488	1.6	489	2.5
Italy	485	24.7	9.9	2.7	490	0.5	494	3.0
Spain	484	23.6	8.0	0.1	488	-0.3	496	1.3
Russian Federation	482	24.0	7.8	1.1	475	1.1	486	1.0
Slovak Republic	482	27.5	11.0	-1.4	463	-0.1	471	-2.7
United States	481	25.8	8.8	0.3	498	-0.3	497	1.4
Lithuania	479	26.0	8.1	-1.4	477	1.1	496	1.3
Sweden	478	27.1	8.0	-3.3	483	-2.8	485	-3.1
Hungary	477	28.1	9.3	-1.3	488	1.0	494	-1.6
Croatia	471	29.9	7.0	0.6	485	1.2	491	-0.3
Israel	466	33.5	9.4	4.2	486	3.7	470	2.8

In *The Washington Post* this week, Zhao, an education professor at the University of Kansas, wrote a response to Chu's book and her *Wall Street Journal* article. He states:

"I did not see any convincing evidence in the book that supports the proposal that American students need Chinese schools. Quite to the contrary, I understood the book as further evidence for not importing Chinese schools into America. Little Soldiers is far from a love affair with Chinese schools as the title of the Wall Street Journal article suggests. It is, rather, a vivid portrayal of an outdated education model that does serious and significant damage."

Chu doesn't seem to mind the trade-off between authoritarianism and freedom. She concludes her *Wall Street Journal* article with the statement: "Sometimes, it is best when parents—and children—are simply obliged to do as they're told."

We should be careful that America does not become a society of obedient "little soldiers," abdicating our individual liberty to the powers of the state under the guise that it's good for us. High test scores may be commendable, but not if they come at such a high price.