

There's a new call for Americans to embrace Chinese-style education. That's a huge mistake.



By [Valerie Strauss](#)

September 19, 2017

Every now and again, someone decides to write something about how American students would do well if they only went to schools that were run like those in China, which, supposedly are rigorous and produce hard-working students who do well on standardized tests.

Here we go again.

A new article in the Wall Street Journal is titled, “[Why American Students Need Chinese Schools](#),” written by the author of a new book that explains the experiences of a boy with American parents who attended a school in China. The bottom line? What the title of the article says — even though the author of this post argues vociferously against it.

This was written by Yong Zhao, a Foundation Distinguished Professor in the [School of Education at the University of Kansas](#), as well as a professorial fellow at the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy at Victoria University in Australia, and a global chair at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom.

He previously served as the presidential chair and director of the Institute for Global and Online Education in the College of Education at the University of Oregon and as a professor at the College of Education at Michigan State University. At MSU he served as the founding director of the Center for Teaching and Technology, executive director of the [Confucius Institute](#), and as the U.S.-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence.

His work focuses on the implications of globalization and technology on education. He has published over 100 articles and 30 books, including “[Counting What Counts: Reframing Education Outcomes](#),” “[Never Send a Human to Do a Machine’s Job: Correcting Top 5 Ed Tech Mistakes](#),” “[Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon: Why China has the Best \(and Worst\) Education System in the World](#),” “[Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization](#)”, and “[World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students](#).”

By Yong Zhao

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article titled “[Why American Students Need Chinese Schools?](#)” by Lenora Chu, author of the newly released book, “[Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve.](#)” The message is familiar, along the same lines as another Wall Street Journal article from several years ago titled “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.”

I would have easily discarded the article for its ludicrous title if I had not read the galley of the book before. 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 and her husband are American journalists living in Shanghai. They enrolled their son Rainey in a local Chinese school. The book is a journalistic recount of her observations of the experience and her personal interactions with the school as well as with parents, teachers, students, education leaders, and scholars in China and elsewhere.

Rainey’s experience in Soong Qing Ling, easily one of the best schools in Shanghai, which has perhaps the best schools in China, once again exposes the problems of Chinese education: rigid, authoritarian, and unhealthy competition. He was force-fed eggs by his teacher; he was silenced during lunch; he was rewarded for sitting still and mute; he was told to compete to become No. 1 because there was no reward for second place. He was not allowed to ask questions, and he learned that the teacher and the school have unquestionable authority. His family hired private tutors and spent breakfast time taking tests.

Using threats as motivational tool is common in Chinese education. Chu calls the Chinese “world-class experts at fear-based motivation.” It works but it can have serious consequences. Rainey became afraid. He once asked his father if he’d be taken away by the police if he did not take a nap because the teacher in school threatened that if he did not nap as required, the police would take him away.

Chu also reports that her son became afraid of other things associated with school: being late, missing class, or disappointing the teacher.

As a coping strategy, Rainey learned to lie, to fake. He learned to fake a cough when he wanted water in class because he discovered that was most effective way to get to drink water without irritating the teacher.

Chu was fully aware of the problems of Chinese schooling. She does not have Stockholm syndrome. She is a caring mother, a reflective journalist, and a curious observer. She, of course, wants the best for her child, as any mother would. The best for her is the “exact middle” between academic rigor and play, serious academic studying and enjoying what life has to offer in sports, arts, leisure, literature, drama, and comedy.

It was apparent that the Chinese school was tilting too much toward one end. So the couple devised a countermeasure to mitigate the negative effects of Chinese schooling.

Unlike many Chinese parents who typically have to reinforce what the school does at home, Chu and her husband decided to provide a very different experience for their child. They allowed him to make his own decisions, filled his environment with choices, provided him with art supplies, took him to museums, played soccer and tennis with him, and involved him in other activities for the sole purpose of leisure. Essentially, they created an American experience for their boy at home.

They were able to do what the majority of Chinese cannot. They had the resources and were familiar with American education and culture. They also had the luxury to leave the Chinese system at any time, while the majority of Chinese are stuck in the system forever.

Today, Chu is the proud mother of a young boy who enjoys hard work and has an open and curious mind. In the book, Chu describes Rainey as a boy who can make others laugh and who adapts well in uncomfortable situations. He also has leadership skills.

Such is evidence that her plan worked well. She is ready to share her lessons with the world.

The lessons Chu distilled from Chinese schooling are not new. Many before her have shared the same message: authority and rigidity are virtuous and should be adopted by American schools.

In essence, she wants teachers as an unquestioned authority. She writes in [her Wall Street Journal article](#): “[H]aving the teacher as an unquestioned authority in the classroom gives students a leg up in subjects such as geometry and computer programming, which are more effectively taught through direct instruction (versus student-led discovery) ...”

She also believes that rigidity is an educational advantage: “The reason is simple: Classroom goals are better served if everyone charges forward at the same pace. No exceptions, no diversions,” Chu [writes in the article](#).

Furthermore, Chu believes the sufferings delivered by the Chinese authoritarian, high pressure, and rigid education are nothing more than rigor.

“China’s school system breeds a Chinese-style grit, which delivers the daily message that perseverance — not intelligence or ability — is key to success” because the Chinese believe hard work trumps innate talent when it comes to academics, she wrote.

In essence, Chu believes American education is not authoritarian enough, not rigid enough, and not demanding enough in comparison to education in China. She is not alone.

Admiration for an authoritarian and rigid education has a long history and has fueled waves of reforms to make American education more authoritarian, more standardized, and more demanding. In the 1950s,

American education was criticized for not being as tough and rigorous as that in the Soviet Union.

In the 1980s, it was denounced for not being as tough and rigorous as that in Japan. In the 1990s, Singapore was the target of emulation for its rigorous education, especially in math. If anything, American education has become more authoritarian, more rigid, and more demanding with increased centralization of curriculum standardization, high stakes testing, and imposition of bureaucratic accountability measures. Chu's point about American teachers losing authority and respect is well taken but it is the result of decades of misinformed bashing, which her Wall Street Journal article may be interpreted as such.

As much as I enjoyed the book and admired Chu's courage for sending her son to a Chinese school, I don't see an authoritarian and rigid education as meritorious. As someone who has experienced both Chinese and American education as a student and teacher and an educational researcher for nearly three decades, I have learned that such a system results in unproductive successes — outcomes that appear appealing in the short term but result in long term irreparable damages. Something I call the side effects of education, akin to the side effects of medicine. In this case, the side effects are so severe that the medicine should not be approved.

Chu's book is filled with vivid examples of the unproductive successes of a rigid and authoritarian education: lots of seemingly desirable outcomes with unobserved and severe side effects.

Fear-induced good behaviors

Chu says she likes the Chinese system because it has made her son “a disciplined and polite child,” an outcome that delights every parent. However, the discipline and politeness resulted from fear — fear of being punished, being publicly humiliated, being deprived of a reward, or being taken away by the police, as Chu recounts in the book. Fear-induced good behaviors are motivated by external punishment or rewards rather than intrinsically motivated self-control and discipline. Fear-induced good behaviors are fake. They are lies made to evade punishment or receive award. It called cheating.

There is mounting evidence of the negative, long-term damages of authoritative parenting, which insists on unquestioning obedience and enforces good behavior through threats, shaming, and other punishments. [A recent article published](#) in the journal *Developmental Psychology* summarizing findings of over 1,400 published studies found that harsh control and psychological are the biggest predictors of worsening behavior problems over time. Other damages include social emotional problems: lower social competency, high anxiety, less resourcefulness, less maturity, and lower morality.

Rainey was lucky to have a countermeasure at home. In his case, Rainey experienced authoritarian parenting in the school but has warm, caring, responsive, resourceful, and reflective parents at home. For young children, the home culture is much more important than the school, as Chu admits in her book. So in a sense Rainey was not damaged, at least not as severely as the majority of Chinese children who do not have such a

wonderful countermeasure at home. But I still wonder if he would have turned out to be equally disciplined and polite had he attended an American school. After all, there are plenty of disciplined and polite Americans.

Force-fed learning

Another unproductive success Chu celebrates is her son's math and Chinese. She was thrilled that her child was able to write numbers when he was still wearing diapers at night. She was equally proud that her son memorized hundreds of Chinese characters at a very young age. Academic achievement is a very desirable outcome for many parents and schools. But how significant is the outcome for real life and what are the possible damages?

Rainey could recognize Chinese characters, but he was tired of speaking Chinese, according to the book. He did not want to invite his Chinese friends to his birthday party because he did not want to speak Chinese on his birthday. For Rainey, speaking Chinese is schoolwork — and on his birthday he did not want to do schoolwork.

Rote memorization is not learning. Regurgitation does not mean deep understanding. I remember my own son pointing at and sounding out signs in Chinese characters on buildings when he was 1 ½ years old — but I knew he was not reading. They were simple behaviorist stimulus-response moments, just like a horse doing math. Remember Clever Hans, the German horse that was thought to be so clear that it could learn to do math? Well it was not. It was simply responding to cues from its trainer.

Direct instruction, as I explain with abundant evidence in the article, "[What Works Can Hurt: Side Effects of Education](#)," can indeed produce immediate gains and looks more effective in the short term than student-led discovery. But in the long term, it does not lead to the deep and meaningful understanding that really matters. Moreover, it leads to a loss of curiosity, creativity, interest in learning, and confidence in the subject.

There [is a consistent pattern](#) that shows students in high-scoring education systems in international tests such as the PISA and TIMSS have lower confidence, enjoy the subject less, and place less value in it.

Misplaced grit

Grit is one more unproductive success that resulted from the Chinese schooling experience that Chu proudly discusses. She describes her son as gritty and resilient. She attributes his grit and resilience to the punishing, oppressing, threatening or otherwise demanding experiences he had "survived." Torture is not an excellent pedagogy.

Grit is certainly important and has become a popular quality that parents and educators pursue today. The reasoning is straightforward: without effort and persistence, one cannot succeed, no matter how talented he or she is. But at the same time, blind persistence is simple stupidity. Sticking to something one does not like or has no talent in does not lead to success either. The power of grit in one's success in schools and beyond is not nearly as great as has been claimed, [according to recent meta-analysis published](#) in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

The belief that hard work trumps talent is unscientific at best and cruel at worst. No doubt that human beings can all learn, but to what extent and at what speed varies a great deal for different individuals. I am sure I can learn play football, with perseverance, but I don't think I can play for any NFL team. I can also learn to paint, but I won't be a Picasso. Hard work can certainly help children to improve their school performance, but it can mislead them to focus on something in which they have no talent or interest.

The cruel part of this belief is its denial of individual differences and its basic social injustice. It teaches parents to blame their children for being lazy while they may have conditions that hinder their learning. It rationalizes discrimination against the less fortunate and fuels the myth that children with learning disabilities or born into poverty are simply lazy and lacking grit. It also legitimizes the long discredited one-size-fits-all education model.

Furthermore, it supports the illusion many privileged have about their success. They believe they worked hard for their success while the fact is that they inherited the success or the conditions in which they could become successful from their parents. Abundant evidence shows that students' academic success is much more related to family background than grit!



American education has problems, very serious problems, but Chinese schooling is not the answer. As I point out in my book, "[Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon: Why China Has the Best \(and Worst\) Education in the World](#)," the Chinese education is extremely effective, perhaps the best in the world, in producing homogeneous, compliant, and hard-working people. At the same time, the system fails miserably at cultivating a diverse, creative, independent-thinking, and inventive citizenry. The failure and success are two sides of the same coin.

There is widespread discontent with education in China. The Chinese government has engaged in massive reforms to improve its education over the past few decades, but without much success, as Chu documents in her book.

Why should American students experience Chinese education? Unless it wants a homogeneous and compliant workforce, America does not need Chinese education. American students do not need Chinese schools. They need better American schools.

 **52 Comments**

Valerie Strauss

 Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times. [Follow](#) 

The Washington Post

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

Try 1 month for \$1

