

**Review on 'BBC Are our kids tough enough: Chinese Schools' based on history, literature and personal experience**

**Yiran Zhao**

Undergraduate at Cambridge University

Paper written in **September, 2015**

## Abstract

The 3-episode BBC Documentary, *Are our kids tough enough: Chinese Schools* sparked off a heated debate on the effectiveness of Chinese teaching style in both the UK and China. I kept an eye on the comments and reports in mainstream media and online forums. There are some misunderstandings of both education approaches, so I would like to explain them in this article by drawing from my one-year experience in Cambridge University and 18-year Chinese school experience.

The aim behind this article is to generally introduce the structure of Chinese schools, evaluate the underlying differences in terms of cultures, values and social structures, analyse the main points that have caused disputations in media.

### ● Background information

The Bohunt School is a successful secondary school located in Hampshire. In March, 2015, it conducted a one-month experiment by inviting five experienced Chinese teachers to open a Chinese school for 50 Bohunt Year 9 students. These students were taught on the same syllabus as the other Bohunt students and their performance would be assessed a month later by an independent research body (Institute of Education).

Despite the conflicts between the Chinese teachers and the students in terms of long hours, rigid discipline and traditional Chinese teaching style, Chinese teachers won in the end with higher average scores in the tested three subjects: Maths, Science and Mandarin.

The experiment was conducted to find out how British students coped with this new teaching system, uncover the truth of why Chinese students top the OECD/Pisa global league table and why British students lag three years behind in Maths.

### ● Academic performance

#### **The credibility of OECD/Pisa League table**

PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, is a study conducted by the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It tests the academic performance of 15-year-old students from member and non-member countries every three years in Reading, Maths and Sciences. In 2012, the main focus of PISA was in Maths and 65 nations participated with Shanghai, China ranked first and United Kingdom ranked the 26<sup>th</sup>.

However, it seems that PISA has generated more critics than support in the field of education, particularly in its negative influence on political positioning. In the letter to Dr Andreas Schleicher, academics around the world worried that PISA has resulted in 'the escalation in standardized testing and increased reliance on quantitative measures' (Andrews et al., 2014). This has caused many countries to change its education practice so that they could 'quickly climb up the ranking' (Andrews et al., 2014). An example would be the US 'Race to top' programme that promotes the performance-based evaluation and rewards schools that

meet the standards of certain education policies. However, many critics believe that governments like the US have overlooked the importance of ‘immeasurable education objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development’ (Andrews et al., 2014).

Besides its influence on education practice, there are many other factors listed in the letter that criticized the validity and credibility of PISA. In the article written by Simon Jenkins from the Guardian, ‘*China’s schools are testing factories. Why is Britain so keen to copy them?*’ (Jenkins, 2015) he criticized the use of PISA result in judging and comparing student’s academic performance in the UK and in China. Although I fail to agree with most of his viewpoint, I do partially agree with the latter half of the title that fully ‘copying’ a school’s practice should not be encouraged based on the consideration that there are numerous differences within each education approach. In fact, I agree that China needs to learn from the UK about the development of an all-round education system. My view parallels with what Eton headmaster Tony Little said that British schools should not seek to emulate China’s academic system because it is wrong “to confuse league-table success with a good education” (Singh, 2014). He also pointed out the irony that the British schools are trying to create the same straitjacket the Chinese are trying to wriggle out of (Singh, 2014).

### **True of False: Chinese students have better grasp of knowledge during compulsory education**

Chinese compulsory education generally refers to its primary education (Year 1-6) and secondary education (Year 7-9). It is widely acknowledged that this compulsory education has laid a solid foundation for Chinese students, which ensure their success in international tests. However, this idea was opposed by Shing-Tung Yau, a prestigious Mathematician. During his speech at the acclaimed High School Affiliated to Beijing Normal University, he unexpectedly pointed out that it is unrealistic for Chinese students to think that they have surpassed those American students who are at the same age. Also, he openly criticized rote learning and compared those American and Chinese students in Harvard University: American students are better articulated, more creative and most importantly, better grasp of the essence of knowledge.

In his view, before year 8, American classrooms are highly flexible, allowing students to look for their interests in academics, sports, arts or music. After year 8, most American students are as hard working as Chinese students in order to get into a good college. As they are purely interest-driven, they often have more passion and stronger determination in their subjects, while in the other hand, the exam-oriented education in China has consumed the students’ energy, left them less motivated (Sohu, 2015 in Chinese)

I would like to hold a neutral position in this case and answer this question by drawing from my own experience. I received my 9-year compulsory education in two traditional Chinese schools, but after that in 2011, I studied in an International Curriculum Centre inside a traditional Chinese school. In other words, I received both Chinese and Western education between year 10 and year 12. In 2014, I pursued my undergraduate study in Cambridge University, but before that, I never immersed in a full-English environment.

When I started to learn IGCSE in 2011, I found it difficult to adapt to a new Education system: less homework, more practical work and only two exams per term. Since I learnt some of my major subjects like Maths and Sciences in English, which was a language I rarely used, I almost left behind in first year.

However, owing to the fact that I laid a solid foundation during Compulsory Education, especially as I developed strong learning techniques, I maintained my high level academic performance throughout high school.

However, practical work was one of my weaknesses, especially when I was asked to suggest improvements for the experiments. This was due to both my lack of practical experience and critical thinking skills. My science class in secondary school was exactly like the one in the documentary: teacher was giving a lecture while I was crazily copying the notes on blackboard and I was rarely given the chance to perform the experiment myself (I nearly burnt my finger in one of the few Chemistry experiments I conducted). The main reason behind it in my mind is due to the scarcity of equipment and space. Also, since lab work will not be assessed in the final exams in traditional and exam-oriented Chinese education system, it seems time-consuming and slightly worthless for students doing practical themselves. However, this was completely changed after I received western education, as lab work is compulsory in the final exam and also highly encouraged by my foreign teachers. The practical paper in A-level provided me the best practice of critical thinking through data analysis, detailed observation, thorough evaluation and self-reflection. Also, it helped me develop my independent research skills and awakened my passion to study Physics.

My degree in Cambridge, Education with Physical Science, contains both Arts and Science subjects: History, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology of Education, an additional Education paper that varies every year and pure Physics from Natural Science Tripos. This interesting combination in fact brings me unexpected amount of challenges. As I never tried to write academically in English before, I suffered terribly at the beginning especially when I had to adjust into a completely new environment and bore the pressure from the fact that English is either the native or the official language for my other course mates. What even worse was the ruthless reality that I did not have any experience in literature evaluation and I doubted my capability to become an independent thinker. However, thanks to the tremendous help offered by my supervisors, I could witness my significant progress right after my second term in Cambridge. As for Physics, I was amazed by all these artistic, passionate and diligent future scientists around me. This contradicted to my old-fashioned view in high school that western people are bad at Maths-based subjects. At Cambridge, drawing a quote from my supervisor, as an undergraduate student, I am expected to be adaptable and need to learn how to learn rather than become a library after rote learning. My real experience in Cambridge proved Shing-Tung Yau's view that British people pursue what they love and their enthusiasm for it is unimaginable.

Overall, I do not deny the effectiveness of Chinese compulsory education in developing students' studying techniques and learning skills but I sincerely suggest that the current curriculum should provide more chances for students to work independently and constantly reflect or evaluate issues in academics or society for the sake of acquiring critical thinking skills.

- **Class disciplines**

## **Confucius philosophy and its influence in classroom**

### **1. The core values**

Confucian philosophy has a profound influence on Chinese society: it has been absorbed into the people's intellectual lives and into the modern education system. The core values of Confucius Philosophy highlight the importance of family cohesion, cultural transmission and respect of elders by their offspring, respect of seniors by the juniors and respect of husbands by their wives. Confucius also believed that family is the basis for ideal government, i.e. a stable regime is supported by thousands of harmonious families.

Influenced by Confucius, Confucianism gradually developed and has been inherited by numerous famous Chinese academics for centuries. Their ideas have been recorded in many classics, such as Confucius Analects, the Three-Character Classic and Di Zi Gui. Most notably, 'full respect for teachers' is mentioned in almost every one of them. An example would be “一日为师，终身为父” --- 'He who teaches me for one day is my father for life', from 太公家教---family rules set by grandfather, Chinese oldest literature for family rules. Therefore, 'respect for teachers' is the basic rule that should be followed in every Chinese school.

### **2. Deep in Confucianism lies in mutual respect rather than absolute authority of teachers.**

生乎吾前，其问道也，固先乎吾，吾从而师之；生乎吾后，其问道也，亦先乎吾，吾从而师之。吾师道也，夫庸知其年之先后生于吾乎？是故无贵无贱，无长无少，道之所存，师之所存也。

韩愈 《师说》

Anyone who was born before me and learned the doctrine (referred to knowledge, virtues, insights etc.) before me is my teacher. Anyone who was born after me and learned the doctrine before me is also my teacher. Since what I desire to learn is the doctrine, why should I care whether he was born before or after me? Therefore, it does not matter whether a person is high or low in position, young or old in age. Where there is the doctrine, there is my teacher (Hjenglish, 2011)

By Yu Han <Shi Shuo>

敏而好学，不耻下问

孔子 《论语》

Never feel embarrassed to ask somebody's subordinate (by subordinate he meant those who were less experienced in life)

By Confucius <Confucius Analects>

三人行，必有我师焉，则其善者而从之，其不善者而改之。

孔子 《论语》

Three of us walking together, at least one of the other two is good enough to be my teacher. Learn from their good points and reflect on their weak points.

By Confucius <Confucius Analects>

All of these quotes above emphasize the significance of mutual respect and the equal position of teachers and students in face of learning and obtaining knowledge. However, unfortunately, this traditional value is overlooked and treated less seriously than they were in the past. The major reasons behind it are war and

political change. After 1905, the year when the Imperial Examination was abolished, it was not until 1952 that the National Higher Education Entrance Examination was created. However, in the early 1970s, the Cultural Revolution broke out and the Gaokao system was not recovered until 1977. The discontinuity in education system exerted an enormous negative impact on the society and most severely, caused the loss of tradition values. Therefore, Moral Education classes that shown in the documentary are designed to raise awareness of the lost cultural values rather than indoctrination or brainwashing.

### **3. Teacher's responsibility**

Since Chinese teachers are fully aware of their responsibility, they strive to help their students to achieve their goal as possible as they can do. In episode 3, the Maths teacher serves a great example by giving small group lessons to the left-behind students. He encouraged restless students and inspired them to see their potential. Also in episode 2, the Science teacher cried and blamed herself for her failure in class discipline control and in raising students' interest. In my view, the current Chinese education achievement should be largely owing to the efforts made by all the Chinese teachers like those in the documentary. Without them, the Chinese education system could not be brought back and reach the level it is today within 40 years.

## **Difference in culture values and the impact of cultural conflict**

### **1. Conflict of values in the documentary**

The rigid discipline in Chinese school caused rebellion rather than conformity among students. The students refused to follow the rules: played with their phones, brought kettle to make tea and skipped classes, which caused disappointment of Chinese teachers. However, in my view, no one should be blamed in this cultural conflict since the trigger for the class chaos was the underlying difference between Chinese and British cultural values.

For these students who had no previous knowledge in Chinese cultures, it is undoubtedly difficult for them to accept some values. In episode 2, the Chinese teacher offered a class on Confucius philosophy, in which she taught the students that 'children should follow their parents'. This has caused completely one-sided disagreement among the students: 'Parents aren't always' and 'you should be who you are'. I believe this disagreement arises from the fundamental difference between individualism and collectivism, especially when Chinese society is based on the unit of family. What is shocking to me is when the Chinese teachers held a parent meeting and hoped these parents could cooperate with them to improve class disciplines, one of the parents said, 'Can I just say, isn't the school that should do and why we are blamed for it?' In Chinese culture, it sounds extremely irresponsible.

### **2. The significance of family and respect for the elders**

子曰：父母在，不远游，游必有方。

孔子 《论语》

When parents are alive, one should not travel far from home. If one has to, one should have a precise destination.

By Confucius <Confucius Analects>

This quote from Confucius reflects his wish that when one's children are fully grown up, it would better for them to remain close to their family. In other words, family cohesion is the priority in the whole society,

which explains the significance of Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, the days for family reunion.

The obedience of the young to the elder is determined by Chinese family structure since it is traditionally hierarchical, which the elders receive the largest degree of respect. As for the other members of the family, proper amount of respect from the young has to be shown as well. Therefore, in the documentary, the Chinese teacher should explain that ‘obedience’ would be better interpreted as ‘respect’.

### **3. Parent’s responsibility for children**

‘Filial piety’, ‘continuing family line’ and ‘bringing honour to ancestors’ are three of the underscored values within Chinese family. Therefore, Chinese parents would offer the young the best education so that they could make contribution to their family since it is common for the young to support the old financially. After the one child policy was established, each family only has one child to rely on, which means this child could enjoy all the attention and the best resources. However, at the same time, this child is bearing huge pressure to support one’s parents and even four grandparents in the future. This inevitably increases the competitions within the society and between colleagues. Therefore, it is self-evident that the parents have to invest a huge amount of money in children’s education for extra classes to learn more skills and obtain more certificates or qualifications. They also pay much more attention to their children’s performance in school and are much more willing to accept teachers’ suggestions. All of these reasons above explain why the Chinese teachers failed to find parent meeting so effective as it was in China.

## **● Education Values**

### **The significance of ‘competition’ in Chinese education system in history**

In the third episode, many students in Chinese schools were on the verge of collapse and according to one of them, ‘competing with others is just not a healthy lifestyle’. On the other hand, Chinese students are fully aware of the competitiveness in the society the moment after they get into primary schools. In other words, they are used to competitions and comparisons with the other peers based on grades and qualifications. In this sense, I believe that the over-emphasized importance of competition within Chinese education directly leads to the focus on academic performance and the overlook of other skills, such as innovation, leadership and research ability. However, these are not the only problems: stress on students, financial burden on parents, and unrealistic expectation of the social and economic return on education investment etc. In my view, the current value of education demands a change. Living is more than surviving. Similarly, education is more than Maths, Science or reading.

The significance of competition in Chinese education dates back to the day when the Civil Service Exam, i.e. Imperial examination started in year 605 as the civil service examination system was an important vehicle of social mobility in imperial China (Cohen and Teiser, n.d.). In Confucianism, academic success is only determined by one’s own ability rather than one’s social status, political or family connections. The Civil Service Exam provided equal opportunities for all candidates to be selected into the government and thereafter to change their destinies. Undoubtedly, the Civil Service Exam was the fairest exam based on merit at that time. Young boys (most girls were restricted to have education) started school and learned Confucian Classics on various aspects of politics, society, economy and intellectual life in Imperial China (BPG,2009). They had to succeed at each level of the test to enter examination system. In other words,

there was a round of elimination at every stage in their life based on their grades and rankings and only the elites could be offered the chance to work for the government. This education system indeed had long-lasting positive effects: high literacy rate, widespread Confucian values and effective cultural, social, political and educational construction contributed by these talents. (BPG,2009).

Within this education model, one of the major means to select or eliminate candidates is to compare and rank their performances. Therefore, becoming a better self is not enough. What one should do is to surpass one's peers in all the tests in order to achieve one's goal. The significance of ranking and grade remained the same to university admission after the establishment of GaoKao, i.e. the National Higher Education Entrance Examination.

### **Universal or Elite Education**

In 2000, the Millennium Development Goal was established by in the Millennium Summit of the United Nations. Its second goal is to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015. The Compulsory Education Act for children between year 1 and year 9 in China was first drafted in 1986 and re-enacted in 2006. It follows the Universal Primary Education goal to reduce illiteracy, promote education equality and publicizing the idea that 'educating children gives the next generation of the tools to fight poverty and disease.' However, arguably, this is one of the goals of Chinese compulsory education. In my view, Elite Education, whose goal is to send student to higher education institutions rather than only offer basic education, is secretly promoted through selection of students in most state schools.

There is a famous Chinese saying, 'studying can help you change your destiny'. Also, during Gaokao preparation in 2012, a high school in Zhejiang Province showed an 'inspiring quote' to the candidates, 'without Gaokao, how are you going to defeat the second generation of the rich and the politicians?' This is just one of numerous cases. What could be concluded from the above is that Chinese people are told that every single one of them has the potential to change their lives by receiving higher education and getting into a good university no matter of your family backgrounds and your socioeconomic status. There is no doubt that these sayings and quotes are truly inspiring and indeed the Chinese education system has cultivated many successful graduates who come from a rural area, an illiterate or unemployed family. Despite of the controversial household registration system, I believe this Gaokao system is the best and fairest way so far to provide equal opportunities for Chinese students considering the social structure and the population in China.

According to the reasons above, most Chinese students have innate drive to work hard and achieve outstanding grades during high school. Plus, teachers feel the sense of responsibility to help these students change their destinies. Thus, the education practice presented in the documentary for Science and Maths classes would be the most efficient way to improve students' grades and the quickest way to meet the standards of those higher education institutions.

### **The myths of Gaokao**

Gaokao, the National College Entrance Examination, was brought back into Chinese education system in 1977. Chinese students in Year 11 could choose to study either in Arts or in Science Class, which thereafter determined which papers they would take two years later. That year, only 4.8% of the 5.7 million candidates were accepted into Higher Education Institutions. It was not until 1981 when this figure

increased above 10%. In 1984, English exam was included in Gaokao. In 1999, an innovative and amended Gaokao policy called '3+X' was enacted. '3' referred to the compulsory papers, Maths (for Arts or for Science), Chinese and English. 'X' referred to combined Arts paper (History, Politics and Geography) and combined Science paper (Physics, Chemistry and Biology). In the same year, the Higher Education Institutions expanded their enrolment rate. Thereafter, this figure rose from 59% in 2000 to 76% in 2013. In other words, each year, the Chinese Education System is creating increasing number of university and college graduates, but this trend has both pros and cons: the public becomes better educated than the year before, while the job market becomes oversaturated, resulting in the rising unemployment rate of the latest graduates. This has become the biggest issue for the Department of Education, which has established several policies to protect these graduates' interest, like encouraging them to start up business (Sina, 2015 in Chinese).

In 2014, the Gaokao Reformation Act was established, which would be implemented in 2017. In two years time, Chinese students will not be separated into Arts and Science classes. All the students will be expected to take 6 papers, with 3 compulsory papers on Maths, Chinese, English and 3 chosen papers from various subjects. English will weigh less in the overall score and can be taken twice a year. Only two grades will be offered for the 3 chosen papers, pass or fail. The aim of this act is to reduce students' pressure and encourage students to do more extra-curricular activities.

This act in fact signifies a change from exam-oriented to interest-driven education. Owing to the pressure of exams in the current education system, it is impossible for the students to have spare time pursuing their habits and discovering their interests. After this act implemented, the university admission will take several factors into considerations: social experience, academic or technical abilities and etc. This infers a trend for the Chinese Education System to become more all-round.

## ● Conclusion

In the age of globalization, I believe education could become globalized as well. Rather than wasting time on criticism, it would be more effective to learn from each other and adapt it to one's own education system. For instance, Chinese education system needs to pay more attention on students' practical experiences, independent research skill and critical evaluation ability. On the other hand, British education system could consider raising students' level in Maths or Science by guiding them to develop certain learning skills and reinforce their abilities through more practices.

'BBC: Are our kids tough enough: Chinese Schools' has already raised the attention and stimulated the interest of both Chinese and British media, education scholars and policy makers. I sincerely suggest cooperation between two Education Departments in the interest of the student's development in both countries.

## References

Andrews et al., 2014. *OCED and Pisa tests are damaging education worldwide-academics*. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics>

Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009. Civil Service Examinations 科举. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<https://www.princeton.edu/~elman/documents/Civil%20Service%20Examinations.pdf>

Cohen and Teiser, n.d. *The Confucian Classics and the Civil Service Examination*. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/irc/classics.htm>

Hjenglish, 2011. 《师说》英译：师者 所以传道授业解惑也. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://www.hjenglish.com/new/p184223/>

Jenkins, 2015. *China's schools are testing factories. Why is Britain so keen to copy them?* Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/04/china-schools-testing-britain-copy-government-pupils>

Sina, 2015. 1977-2014 历年全国高考人数和录取率统计. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2015-06-18/1435473862.shtml>

Singh, 2014. *Eton headmaster warns Government: 'Don't put British children in a Chinese straitjacket'*.

Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11010748/Eton-headmaster-warns-Government-Don-t-put-British-children-in-a-Chinese-straitjacket.html>

Sohu, 2015. 哈佛教授：中国学生基础好，那是自我麻醉！ Retrieved September 4, 2015 from

<http://learning.sohu.com/20150422/n411706508.shtml>