

Playing ‘Catch-Up’ with Developing Nations Makes No Sense for U.S.

AN INTERVIEW WITH YONG ZHAO



Photos courtesy Michigan State University

The United States should deepen what it does best, rather than trying to catch up to developing nations.

By Joan Richardson

KAPPAN: I'd like to know more about where you grew up in China, about your experience with the *gaokao* (the Chinese test that determines college admissions), and how you came to the United States.

YONG ZHAO: I grew up in a village of about 200 people in southwest Sichuan Province. It's a very mountainous area and quite remote. You still cannot reach the village by car because no roads lead there.

My father was an assessor of water buffalo. He would travel to villages all over the province to study water buffaloes and let their owners know if they would be good for farming. He's quite well-known in those villages, but he's practically illiterate because he had no education growing up.

The elementary schools I attended were quite typical of schools in rural China at that time. They had just one classroom and served several villages. Kids from all different ages were in the same classroom with one teacher. The teacher was everything. She was the teacher, the principal, the organizer of everything.

I was in elementary school during the Cultural Revolution. We had no textbooks in the first few grades. In later grades, books often arrived late because I was in a remote school and there was one textbook for the entire nation and one channel for distributing the books. We studied the selected works of Chairman Mao. At the end of elementary school, we took a test to select who would go on to middle school. Almost everybody went to middle school, although two students whose parents were categorized as "landlords" did not go because being a landlord was very bad in the Mao years.

At the end of middle school, we took another test to select who would go to high school. That school was 10 miles from my village so that was not walkable. The school had boarding facilities with 20 to 40 students sleeping in one large room with bunk beds. The high school was more like a school, with different classrooms and different teachers. We had classes with 40 to 60 students. Everything I learned was from reading books. There was no art, no music. I studied physics, biology, and chemistry but with very little lab experiences because there were no resources or facilities. There were no sports facilities, either.

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When the Cultural Revolution ended, China resumed testing to select students for college. I took the *gaokao* in 1982. Only two or three people from my high school class of probably 400 students were selected to go to college.



I got into Sichuan International Studies University (then known as Sichuan Institute of Foreign Languages) in Chongqing, about 150 miles away from home in a big city. I went there to study English as a foreign language. I was in the newly established English teacher education program.

From
***Catching Up or Leading the Way:
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Instead of instilling fear in the public about the rise of other countries, bureaucratizing education with bean-counting policies, demoralizing educators through dubious accountability measures, homogenizing school curriculum, and turning children into test takers, we should inform the public about the possibilities brought about by globalization, encourage education innovations, inspire educators with genuine support, diversify and decentralize curriculum, and educate children as confident, unique, and well-rounded human beings.

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I don't think I knew much about the schools or the kids. I knew a lot about the theories of education from the readings, in a very abstract sense.

It was quite a shock to me when friends at Linfield College in Oregon took me to an American high school. That was about 1992. I remember standing in the hallway and seeing how massive it was. And the students were so independent. They were walking all over by themselves to their classrooms. It was very different. In China, we mostly stayed in the same classroom while different teachers came to teach us.

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF U.S. EDUCATION

KAPPAN: You told me earlier that you had read *A Nation at Risk* and were surprised by what a negative picture it painted of American education.

ZHAO: Yes, and of course, I believed it because it was published by the U.S. government. That sounds strange to you but, in China, the culture is to believe what's published in government documents. You learn to believe that what the government says is true. So, take the same cultural framework and apply that to the United States. Nobody in China would dispute what the United States said in that report. It was the government saying that. It was a most authoritative document.

KAPPAN: I've often wondered how other countries interpret the test scores that we are so worried about in the United States. What is the Chinese view of American education now?

ZHAO: I am not sure many people in China know about the test scores, but many certainly have opinions about American education now. I would say most of them view it positively, but there are people who tend to think that basic education in America is not as good as in China. Those who have more direct experience with American education are more likely to think American education is doing very well. Although some Chinese government officials may say they believe China has a very solid basic educational system, they're also making reforms to make it more like the American system.

Recently, I hosted a group of school leaders from a very, very good secondary school in Beijing and helped them visit American schools. They went back and wrote a great set of reflective essays. They were really inspired and awed by the situation here, by the creativity, by the way American schools are run. They were really praising us.

KAPPAN: So when they have firsthand experience with American schools, we come off looking better than in published reports about U.S. schools.

ZHAO: Yes, exactly. And here's another example. I know many Chinese professionals in universities

and businesses in the U.S. and none of them sends their children to go to school in China. In fact, one of the biggest challenges facing China's plan to attract high-level Chinese expats educated in the U.S. to go back is their children's education. If their kids attended school in China and then attend schools here for even a few years, the kids refuse to go back to China. I also know a number of diplomats who face the same situation. The parents know their kids will not be able to compete in China because the way they learned in the U.S. is not what will help them do well on the test. They have to do well on the *gaokao* in order to get into a Chinese university. So, once they're in the United States, it's a better choice for them to continue in the United States.

KAPPAN: Isn't there also a sizeable number of Chinese families who move to the United States, especially to California, specifically so their children can attend school in the United States?

ZHAO: Oh, yes. And it's not just California and Chinese. My daughter has a friend here in Okemos (Michigan) who is Korean. Her mother and sisters are living here so the girls can attend American public schools. The father still stays in Korea. A lot of that goes on.

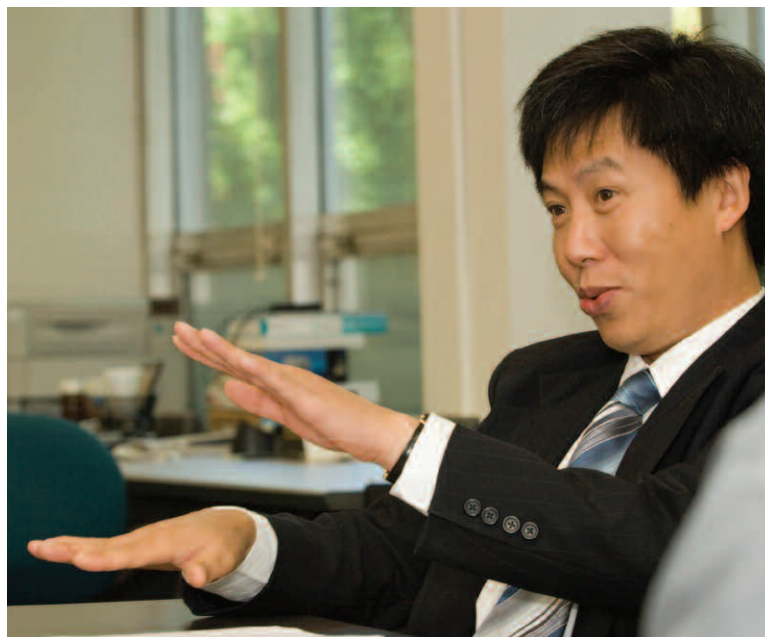
NATIONAL, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

KAPPAN: It's not just the content that's different. It's the whole approach to instruction, the culture of the classroom that differs markedly from China to the United States.

ZHAO: I think it helps to think of the school or the college as an ecosystem. In any ecosystem, there are some selection preferences. Whatever helps you get selected and move upward in a society, that's what gets emphasized in the schools. In China, what helps you move up is doing well on the test, so preparation for the test is what gets emphasized in school.

In China, if you're not good at taking the test, then you are not worth much. But if you are, you are getting a lot. Here is a story that illustrates the value of good test takers. Last month (September 2009), 10 college students of Peking and Tsinghua University who scored the highest in *gaokao* in their respective province agreed to auction off their rights to be spokespersons for advertisements and donate the proceeds to the flood victims in Taiwan. The starting bidding price is RMB 100,000 (about \$16,000 U.S., in a country where the average college graduate earns about \$400 to \$500 U.S. a month). They are celebrities in China.

But China is beginning to recognize and give credit for other indicators, things that are not on the test, because they want to be more like the American system.



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The Digital Pencil: One-to-One Computing for Children, with J. Lei and P. Conway. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008.

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For example, students can get credit for their skill in art or music. But to get credit, students have to receive a national medal or prize. Those prizes get converted into scores. Students just practice the few pieces over and over and over again so they'll do well when they're tested. They are not really learning music, and they are not enjoying music.

Here's another example, and this is very sad. There was a news report that students in one sec-

ondary school were successfully granted 500 national patents in three years, and 30% of the students in the school are patent holders. People look



at that and say, “Wow, that is so great. They’ve gotten so creative.”

But what happened is that China started expanding the selection criteria to get into college. Now if a student has some kind of creation, a patent for creating something, some colleges may give you priority. It will show that you are not only a bookworm but someone who can create. So what happens? Parents are spending money to get national patents for their children. Companies are making money by selling certificates saying that someone has gotten a patent or they claim to be able to file applications on behalf of students. And parents pay a big price for this. So what are some of the patented inventions? The reporter lists a few: a chain to connect the cup and body of a fountain pen named “pen anti-loss device” or a plastic sheet on the computer screen named “computer radiation prevention device.” It’s crazy. But you hear people like Bob Compton (producer of the video, *Two Million Minutes*) who look at the superficial numbers and claim that China is taking

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Education that is oriented solely to preparing students to achieve high scores on tests can be harmful to both individuals and the nation it is supposed to serve.

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Globalization has enlarged the market for certain talents and increased the value of some previously “worthless” talents because they did not have many customers in one local community.

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over the world.

KAPPAN: So the Chinese have become really expert at gaming the system?

ZHAO: Yes, but it is not unique to China. The “Race-to-the-Bottom” problem identified by Secretary Arne Duncan is essentially the same — states or schools game the system of AYP. When too much is attached to one single criterion, people will always try to figure out how to appear superior to others.

OPPOSITION TO STANDARDS

KAPPAN: That goes to the heart of your concern about national standards. Most of those who support standards do so because they believe that’s the way to drive equity. Your belief is that standards actually drive testing as a proxy for equity but don’t really change the underlying education system.

ZHAO: My logic is this: If you have national standards on certain subjects, those subjects become the ones that are emphasized in school. If you have national standards, you also have to have a way to enforce those standards. Tests are the way that you enforce standards. Otherwise, schools won’t pay attention to them.

Once you enforce it, you create a selection pressure. People will try to conform to that, to prove that they are doing well, they are worth something.

Once you do that, you also highlight some subjects as more important than other subjects because they carry consequences and others don’t. So you automatically select out those other subjects.

NCLB may not have had national standards, but it did have a national practice. And with NCLB, you already saw that we were narrowing the curriculum. If we are judged by our performance on one set of tests, then that will drive the system. And that doesn’t necessarily drive equity. Equity is ensured more by teachers, by the classroom than by standards. If the school doesn’t have the capacity to implement, no matter what standards are in place, students will not be given the same quality education. And by the way, there are already national standards in math, English, social studies, and other subjects anyway. They are just not enforced through testing. So if schools and teachers could and wish to, they could have just referenced these.

China has had years of national standards and national testing. But the inequity there is very large because there is no capacity. It all depends on where you were born.

When you select a few subjects and enforce standards, you’re also going to drive schools that don’t have the capacity into unethical practices. China, for example, sends quite a number of people, students,

parents, and teachers, to prison because of cheating on national exams, such as the *gaokao*, every year.

National standards don't really solve this problem. We often compare ourselves to Singapore. Singapore is a very small country, three million, maybe four million people living in an area of less than 300 square miles. They have national standards and tests, but the gaps between their schools are huge. There are very good schools and there are very bad schools, so standards by themselves don't solve the equity issue.

Also, we've had standards at the state level. But have these standards closed the gap and made education more equitable in states? Just look at here in Michigan. Has education in Detroit significantly improved? I don't think so. So, how is the federal government going to get local school districts to meet standards if the states have not been able to get local school districts to meet standards?

I think standards actually distract people from addressing equity. It hides the real cause of educational inequality and shifts the responsibility from government to educators.

INPUTS OVER STANDARDS

KAPPAN: So your answer is to look at the inputs.

ZHAO: I think the problems are more contextual. Look at what we have to offer to each school. Each school has its unique problems and challenges. In Michigan, for example, the challenges facing Bloomfield Hills (an affluent suburb of Detroit) are different, and you would not force the same model on them. I would suggest that, number one, we need to ensure that we have equal funding for schools. And number two, we should stimulate local innovations and identify different models that would work in different situations.

But the approach the federal government takes today sounds like a very American, John Wayne-type thing, playing tough, which can sound very appealing. We want you to meet the standards or else. We will give you the autonomy, and you just have to meet these standards. But just telling schools that they have to do it is not going to get them to do it better. We're assuming they're able to do better but are unwilling to improve, while the reality may be that they are willing but unable to improve.

The current policy movement is really moving away from America's traditional strengths. You have to localize the problem and find local solutions.

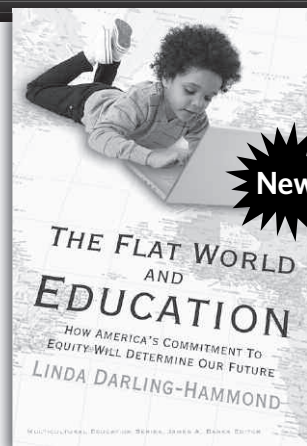
WHO'S THE LEADER?

KAPPAN: One of the most arresting ideas in the book is that developed nations like the United States should not be following developing nations like China. We got where we are by being leaders, and now it appears that we're turning around to follow those who are trying to catch up with us.

ZHAO: It's really such a silly irony. Globally, there are a lot of developing countries that are coming up now. They happen to do very well in testing because that's all they can do given what they have, although they'd rather do something different, as the examples of reform efforts cited in my book show. They focus on what they can do, which is reading and memorizing. The tests happen to reflect most of those things. When you look at that uncritically, it looks pretty good. We treat that as something worthwhile because we make the connection between the test scores and future successes. We assume that they are doing better on those kinds of tests so they are going to be better than us, that they will out-compete us in the future. But such connection has not been borne out by research.

There is a general tendency to try to reduce something complex, like education, to something simple like a test score, and then use it to rank people and institutions, as Stephen Jay Gould writes in

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his book, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Norton, 1981). That's human nature. But then we also tend to take that number and attach a lot of meaning to it. When

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A truly global mindset about education further suggests that developed nations must take responsibility for deliberately cultivating new talents because they are endowed with more resources. They must not fall back to compete with developing nations in the same domains, for both their own sake and the benefit of the world.

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What is needed is a diversity of talents rather than individuals with the same competencies.

An international uniform curriculum or national curriculum can only serve to destroy local traditions and strengths.

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we see that we are behind others, we naturally want to catch up. You can see such a tendency at work in all kinds of exotic contests in the world.

For the United States to try to catch up in test scores on a few subjects with other countries is simply silly. Go to most American schools, look at the musical instruments they have, the facilities that they have. Look at the museums, the public libraries, and other cultural establishments we have and that our children have access to. Why would you want to abandon great art programs, music programs, science programs, technology programs, sports programs so we can focus on learning that can occur basically by memorizing from a book? This is sad and to

some extent unethical and unfair to others because we are setting the goal to outcompete those who have much less instead of trying to innovate and create a better world for all.

KAPPAN: If you want to take the measure of a country and gauge how well a school, a state, a country is doing in terms of achieving excellence, then how do you do that if you're not using a test?

ZHAO: It actually may not make sense to do any sort of global ranking using one or two tests. Although international comparative studies can help us learn from each other, simple ranking does not make sense, and unfortunately ranking is what gets in the media and grabs the public and politicians.

I think the Olympic Games work as a good metaphor. Think of the different sports that make up the Olympics. What if you reduced that to one sport, say, swimming? And every country was going to be judged on how well it did in swimming. No other sports would matter. No divers, no runners, no volleyball.

To measure a nation's ability in sports, everyone would have to compete on that one indicator. Of course, that makes no sense at all, since different countries have different resources and facilities and athletes are differently talented. But the Olympic Games are not a perfect metaphor for the global economy because, after all, it is to reward the few winners. The globalized world does not necessarily have to have winners and losers. It is not a zero-sum

game. The diverse economy can use all different talents we have and different economies can complement each other.

So I think a lot about niches. Different communities need different knowledge, and different people may develop different skills and knowledge. Look at me. I think I am useful here in the United States because I have certain knowledge that's needed here. But if I return to my village in China, I am not very useful. They don't need the knowledge that I have. They need other kinds of knowledge. I don't know how to tend to water buffaloes, I don't know how to drive water buffaloes.

The United States is at a different stage of economic development and needs different talents and skills than China, which, as a developing country, needs more vocational and technical workers. They need a system that encourages people to develop those skills. The current system does not allow that.

DIFFERENT EDUCATION FOR CHINA

KAPPAN: So are you saying that China's education system is not aligned with its current needs?

ZHAO: No, it's not. With Confucian education, China has traditionally emphasized reading, the brain, the intellectual elite. So they have an overproduction of college students. Every Chinese parent wanted a child to go to college so they can avoid manual physical labor. The whole system was designed to prepare students to do well on a test so they could go to college.

The selection criteria for college emphasizes knowledge for jobs where you don't have to use hands, you don't have to have a skill. Now, China has an overproduction of college students and it needs more students with vocational-technical skills. The government has realized this problem and has been encouraging more vocational and technical education over the past few years. They need more community-level colleges.

KAPPAN: Does China's experience tell us something about what direction American education should take?

ZHAO: American education is at a crossroads. We have two choices. We can destroy our strengths in order to catch up with others on test scores, or we can build on our strengths and remain a leader in innovation and creativity. The current push for more standardization, centralization, high-stakes testing, and test-based accountability is rushing us down the first path. What will truly keep America strong and Americans prosperous is the other path because it cherishes individual talents, cultivates creativity, celebrates diversity, and inspires curiosity. **K**

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