

## Chinese Education from the Perspectives of American Educators: Lessons Learned from Study-Abroad Experiences

reviewed by Chen Li & Wayne E. Wright – March 27, 2017

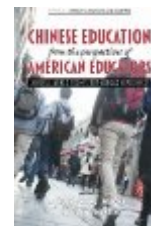
**Title:** Chinese Education from the Perspectives of American Educators: Lessons Learned from Study-Abroad Experiences

**Author(s):** Chuang Wang, Wen Ma, & Christie L. Martin (Eds.)

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*Chinese Education from the Perspectives of American Educators*, edited by Chuang Wang, Wen Ma, and Christie L. Martin, is poised to make a unique contribution to the field of comparative education studies. Much of the book's content connects to a two-week-long study abroad program by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte). Faculty members and students from this university visited various school settings in three famous regions of China, namely Beijing, Guilin, and Xi'an. The chapter authors are mostly American educators who focus on cross-cultural comparisons of hot topics and diverse aspects of education in China and the United States. Despite the volume's title, only nine of its 14 chapters include observations from this study abroad experience. Also, less than half of the authors appear to have participated in the study abroad program itself. The chapters vary widely in writing quality and research design due to the range of each author's background (e.g., varying from undergraduate students to senior scholars). Nonetheless, most of the content provides valuable cross-comparative information and unique insights.

To provide a context for the text, editors Wang, Ma, and Martin offer a broad overview of education in China and the U.S. in Chapter One. They discuss how contrasting educational philosophies along with differing social, political, and economic influences (e.g., urban and rural inequality) shape their educational systems and components. This chapter also outlines the organization of the book.

Part One, "School Administration," begins with Chapter Two. Education consultant Tatia Prieto explores the different organizational structures of Chinese and American schools. She was surprised to learn during her study abroad experience that central school district offices and their functions (e.g., food service, transportation, and instructional technology support) do not appear to exist in China's educational system. In Chapter Three, elementary school assistant principal Sony Anderson reflects on her study abroad experience. She wrestles with the relationships among the quality of teacher preparation programs, teacher evaluation practices, principal evaluation practices, and students' academic achievement in the U.S. and China.

Alan Mabe, a visiting professor of educational leadership at UNC Charlotte, compares Chinese and American higher education within a global context in Chapter Four. He discusses two internationally influential university ranking systems, namely the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. The author analyzes the challenges for Chinese universities to achieve top international rankings. Mabe also examines the difficulties American research universities experience regarding issues like international student mobility, educational opportunities, and cost sharing.

As the author of both Chapter Five and Chapter Ten, Richard G. Lambert, UNC Charlotte's Director of the Center for Evaluation Measurement and Evaluation, describes student perceptions of the Chinese National College Entrance Exam (Chapter Five). He also examines both American and Chinese challenges in preparing students with twenty-first-century life skills during an age of globalization (Chapter Ten). In Chapter Five, the author explores the historical and cultural differences regarding the perspective of educational assessment between the U.S. and China. During the study abroad program, Lambert spoke with various Chinese students and educators about their experiences with the National College Entrance Examination, *Gao Kao*, and its impact on their lives. He found that the *Gao Kao* system has a narrow focus, requires long hours of test preparation, takes away the joy of childhood, and leads to questionable consequences. This leads to the author's discussion of twenty-first-century life skills in Chapter Ten. They include technological fluency, higher order thinking skills, and essential life skills. Lambert proposes a middle ground between the Chinese and American education systems. He argues that education should help students build a solid knowledge foundation (valued in China) and develop higher level thinking like creativity and critical thinking (valued in the U.S.).

Part Two, "Pedagogical Practices," begins with the scholarship of Elizabeth Ashley Ward, an elementary ESL teacher, and Lan Quach Kolano, the Graduate Program Director of the Teaching English as a Second Language program at UNC Charlotte. In Chapter Six, they describe the personal journey of an aspiring English as a second language teacher during her study abroad program. They discover that this experience upended her assumptions about Chinese culture and its educational system. Pamela L. Shue, a professor of child and family development at UNC Charlotte, and Meredith Jones, a doctoral student, reflect on their personal experiences during their study abroad program in Chapter Seven. They also compare early education practices and educational disparities between urban schools and rural schools in China and the U.S.

In Chapter Eight, UNC Charlotte professors Patti Wilkins (instructional systems technology) and Drew Polly (elementary education) provide a comparison of educational technology practices in China and America. However, only Wilkins participated in the study abroad program. They note similar patterns in both countries regarding challenges related to a lack of resources and restricted access to online resources. In addition, Polly co-authors Chapter Nine with help from undergraduate teacher education student Lauren Breindel. They compare mathematics teaching and achievement primarily by analyzing the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in the United States, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, Macao, and even Germany. Again, neither author appears to have participated in the study abroad experience. Also, they do not include the regions of mainland China in their shared data. These regions are where this study abroad program took place.

Part Three, “Students in China and the United States,” begins with Lambert’s Chapter Ten that was described earlier. In Chapter Eleven, editor Wang teams with two Chinese university professors named Pingan Huang and Liquan Xie. They present the findings of their comparative research study on self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulated learning strategies. Their subjects include Chinese students learning English as a second language in the U.S. and as a foreign language in China. Chinese students in the U.S. report higher levels of self-efficacy beliefs that are positively related to their proficiency scores.

In Chapter Twelve, Adrienne L. Wynn, a special education teacher and UNC Charlotte doctoral candidate, uses an autoethnographic approach to reflect on her experiences as an African American woman in the U.S. and in China during her study abroad program. Drawing on these experiences, she discusses broader issues like the inner conflict of beauty or the level of externalized racism within and across both countries.

In a shift from the earlier parts of the book, Chapter Thirteen focuses on Chinese international university students in the United States. Peter Briggs, the Director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at Michigan State University (MSU), acknowledges the important economic, cultural, and academic contributions Chinese international students make to U.S. universities. He also describes his challenges at MSU in depth. These include innovative responses to address the social, linguistic, and academic needs of the institution’s rapidly growing Chinese undergraduate student population since 2004.

In their concluding chapter, editors Martin, Wang, and Ma highlight a few themes and some key findings. They also discuss the implications of their work for Chinese and American educational thinking and practices. They note that both China and the United States struggle with significant issues like poverty, equal educational opportunities, achievement gaps between the rich and poor, achievement gaps between rural and urban students, and an overemphasis on high-stakes testing. They reinforce the recurring ideas of *the East can learn from the West*, *the West can learn from the East*, and *let’s find a happy middle ground*.

We approach our review of *Chinese Education from the Perspectives of American Educators* as a Chinese international doctoral student with several years of experience in the U.S. and as an American professor of education who has limited experience in China. We note a few shortcomings of the book. They include uneven writing, chapters that do not seem to fit the volume’s theme, and factual inaccuracies about the Chinese and American educational systems. They also include perceptions that are skewed by the authors’ very limited experiences in China and chapters that could have used more thoughtful editing. Nonetheless, the text led to some great discussions between us. We both gained valuable new insights on our Chinese and American education systems. We appreciate how this book celebrates the importance of learning from each other while considering cultural, political, and socioeconomic differences. We recommend this volume to students and scholars who are interested in taking a comparative perspective to acquire some fundamental knowledge about educational similarities and differences between the United States and China.

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