

# Yong Zhao: Education in the Flat World An International Perspective

A Review of Books

By Charlotte Sanford Mason

*World Class Learners, Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students*  
224 pp., Corwin, Thousand Oaks: 2012

*Handbook of Asian Education, A Cultural Perspective*, Zhao, Yong, Ed.,  
547 pp., Routledge, New York: 2011

*Catching Up or Leading the Way, American Education in the Age of Globalization*  
228 pp., ASCD, Alexandria: 2009

Yong Zhao is an educator, author, gamer, and speaker. In his books and presentations, he often compares Chinese and U.S. education. His message to U.S. educators is, 'Don't let concerns for quantifying student achievement reduce the creativity quotient that U.S. schools are so good at fostering; don't deaden the school experience for children with too much focus on testing.' In other words, he deplores the rise of high-stakes standardized tests at the cost of arts and critical thinking, which are more difficult to measure features of U.S. education. He lists entrepreneurship as a prime driver of the future economy, and, like Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind*, he believes that products' creative features will prove to be the key factors in economic revitalization. He carries an apposite message to China's educators, 'Your emphasis on high-stakes tests is preventing true academic reform in keeping with China's rapid economic development. Zhao's upcoming visit to Boston has prompted the following review of his books.

His first book, *Catching Up or Leading the Way, American Education in the Age of Globalization*, has been widely read by K-12 school administrators and teachers. Since this first book, Zhao has published two additional books, *Handbook of Asian Education, A Cultural Perspective*, and *World Class Learners, Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students*, books that are very different from one another. The former is a scholarly anthology of essays, while the latter is an experiential and enthusiastic disquisition. During the process of writing them and, perhaps, to gain a broader platform from which to work, Zhao moved from his position as professor of education at Michigan State University to the University of Oregon's Presidential Chair, as Associate Dean for Global Education and Director of the Center for Advanced Technology in Education at the College of Education.

By choosing to publish Yong Zhao's book, *Catching Up*, ASCD<sup>1</sup> implicitly asked educators to question the value of high stakes testing in our educational system, and to take pride in our unique, historic, and innate American strengths in education—creativity and critical thinking. In *Catching Up*, Zhao draws from his personal experience growing up in rural Sichuan and going to school in China, his children's experiences in schools in

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<sup>1</sup> The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development was established in 1943 to provide professional development and services to develop programs and improve teaching. It is a highly respected professional organization for educators.

Michigan, and his scholarly research in the field of education, in order to compare the way students in the U.S. and China learn and what they learn in the process.

Zhao writes compellingly, especially when speaking from his personal experiences of schools. He favorably compares the United States' highly decentralized, highly individualized educational system to China's highly centralized, test-driven educational system. He cautions us not to glorify or try to emulate China's system, which has been highly effective at teaching students how to take tests, but is sadly lacking in providing a rich, broad, and happy experience for them. In fact, China's current educational reform has set out to borrow from American strengths, namely "more local autonomy, more flexibility, more choice, less testing, less content, and less standardization."<sup>2</sup> Zhao describes the experience in Michigan of his children's school talent shows as an example of the inclusiveness, the encouragement of initiative and responsibility, the valuing of diverse skills, and the development of self-esteem—all strengths of the U.S. system. He believes that in education, "What really matters . . . may lie somewhere else [other than in standardized curriculum, teacher knowledge, standards, and testing], such as in the overall philosophical approach to education, the aggregation of all activities outside and inside the school, and how students and teachers treat one another."<sup>3</sup> Where many Chinese observers see problems associated with diversity of the U.S. population, Zhao sees creative energy. Zhao identifies positive features of a U.S. education as complementary talents, innovation, ability to change, tolerance, and second chances, and attributes them to its diversity of race, ethnicity, skills, and talents.

Zhao provides many examples of best practices and offers suggestions for defining necessary knowledge and anticipated uses of technology. For example, close to home, Zhao features Newton's long-standing exchange program with a partner school in Beijing as an example of a valued international experience for pre-college students, and he identifies global competence as an essential skill for 21<sup>st</sup> century students, as defined by Harvard Graduate School of Education's Fernando Reimers. (Reimers served for a time as co-chair of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Global Education Advisory Council.) According to Reimers, global competence includes "the knowledge and skills that help people understand the flat world in which they live, the skills to integrate across disciplinary domains to comprehend global affairs and to create possibilities to address them . . . [and] attitudinal and ethical dispositions that make it possible to interact peacefully, respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies."<sup>4</sup>

In *Handbook*, Zhao and his fellow editors arrange the book's essays about the educational systems of fifty Asian countries into five different cultural traditions: Sinic-Confucian education of China, Korea, and Vietnam; Japanese education; Islamic education of Central Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, The Middle East, Pakistan, and Turkey; Buddhist education of Nepal, Thailand, Lao, and Burma; and Hindu education of India. The authors present a scholarly examination of education through the lens of teaching and learning, governance and management, curriculum and assessment, formal and out-of-school education, and the experience in the West of each area's immigrants. Whenever possible, the authors have conducted experiments themselves, or reported

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<sup>2</sup> *Catching Up*, p. 60

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>4</sup> Reimers, F.M, "Preparing Students for the Flat World," from <http://www.edweek.org/> quoted in Zhao, *World Class Learners*, pp. 221-222

on others' studies to substantiate their facts and observations. Reading this book reminds us, in this age of globalization, of how much culture defines education, how universal are efforts to modernize education, and how difficult the process. The book demonstrates how the increasing socio-economic gap between rich and poor, in all the different countries of Asia, are correlated with the disparities between rich and poor and good and bad schools.

Since education is driven by cultural norms, which are more enduring than other elements of society, it doesn't lend itself easily to borrowing or imitation. Nonetheless, this groundbreaking study of the different educational systems and traditions of Asian countries has important implications for U.S. educators. It provides tools for teaching immigrant Asian students in U.S. classrooms, by sharing valuable information about the cultures from which they come and their school experiences. It advances a framework for serious study in the field of international education. It compares the cultures of the different Asian countries, and the impact of culture on the educational systems in situ, where educators can learn from others' experience. Finally, it exposes the conflicts and challenges inherent in the restructuring, diversification, and blurring of disciplines in Asia's educational systems due to globalization, just as we see this dynamic in the U.S.

In *World Class Learners*, Zhao has some fun with us. His expertise with technology and his enjoyment of gaming have led him into the world of start-ups and entrepreneurship. He reverts to a theme he developed in *Catching Up*: that schools' increasing reliance on standards, guidelines, assessment and evaluation is antithetical to producing creative, risk-taking entrepreneurs. He equates rates of "perceived entrepreneurial capacity" with numbers of patents and patent applications. Then, by comparing high scores on international tests, such as PISA and TIMSS, with the number of patents and patent applications in various countries, he establishes an inverse relationship between the two. He concludes, for example, that students from Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan achieve high-test scores, but produce low rates of entrepreneurship; students from the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. achieve middling test scores, but produce high numbers of entrepreneurs. He believes that support for entrepreneurship is exemplified in education that presents students with cross-disciplinary approaches, uses interactive pedagogy, and encourages creativity, critical thinking, and innovation. These elements are found in all good schools in the U.S., according to Zhao, and reflect our national character.

Zhao believes that the extent of entrepreneurship is the banner measure of excellence in our age, but he sees a move in the wrong direction in U.S.'s implementation of the Common Core—toward more high stakes testing, narrowing and standardization of curriculum, and fewer choices for students. He hears many U.S. educators tout the excellence of China's system that produces highly disciplined, respectful, successful test-takers, even while China is trying to transform its schools to become more child-centered and more encouraging of creativity.

Zhao has access to Chinese publications, including those not available in English, and he quotes them to bolster his arguments. To counter what he considers to be an overly complimentary view of Chinese education, Zhao quotes a National Education Commission of China study about China's schools, conducted in 1997:

'Test oriented education' refers to the factual existence of our nation's education, of the tendency to simply prepare for tests, aim for the highest test scores, and blindly pursue admission rates [to colleges], while ignoring the real needs of the student and societal

development. It pays attention only to a minority of the student population and neglects the majority; it emphasizes knowledge transmission, but neglects moral, physical, aesthetic, and labor education, as well as cultivation of applied abilities and psychological and emotional development; it relies on rote memorization and mechanical skills as the primary approach, which makes learning uninteresting, hinders students from learning actively, prevents them from taking initiatives, and heavily burdens them with [an] excessive amount of course work; it uses test scores as the primary or only criterion to evaluate students, hurting their motivation and impeding their overall development.<sup>5</sup>

To defend the strengths of American education, he brings in the viewpoints of other Chinese educators. For example, after visiting classes in American schools, a professor of education, Huang Quanyu, observed in his book, *Quality Education in America*, which became a best seller in China, that education in the U.S. is characterized by “respect for the child, toleration for individual differences, and multiple criteria for evaluation of talents.”<sup>6</sup> Another Chinese educator, Li Xigui, writes and Zhao quotes, “When a society allows and encourages everyone, regardless of his class and occupation, to become an expert in their own way, it is certain that human potentials can be maximally realized, and consequently there is fertile soil for cultivating individuality, and dare to follow their own ambitions and only then can they truly become ‘themselves.’”<sup>7</sup>

Zhao sees danger in the direction U.S. educational reform is taking toward greater standardization, more emphasis on assessment, and less entrepreneurial spirit. He fears that U.S. schools may lose their greatest strengths in preparing students for the future in the global economy. He recommends new definitions of success to enable students to follow their interests, better training of teachers as entrepreneurial leaders, and more effective use of technology. Zhao sees technology as an important tool in education, not just for collecting data, but also for integration into the curriculum. Technology will prepare students for future work by providing them with the tools they need to create art, books, and media projects, and they will learn how to market and work collaboratively with one another and with their counterparts in other parts of the world. He suggests that globalization be harnessed to build partnerships and share knowledge, rather than to compete and challenge. This will require global competence, creativity, communication skills, and critical thinking, and will lead to entrepreneurial opportunities.

We might wonder how it is possible for Zhao, a student from a rural village in Sichuan Province, not particularly gifted in English language learning and not very good at technology, as he describes his youthful self, to rise to become a distinguished (and published) professor in the U.S., an expert in education and technology education, and inventor of computer games. Is it not likely that Zhao is the recipient of the combined strengths of both the Chinese and American systems of education? Perhaps it was his education in China that enabled him to develop his work ethic and his scholarly discipline and, equally, his education in the U.S. that enabled him to partake of the

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<sup>5</sup> Report of the National Education Commission of China, 1997, quoted in *World Class Learners, Op. Cit.*, p. 130

<sup>6</sup> Huang, Quanyu, *Quality Education in America*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, Hong Kong: 2003, quoted in *World Class Learners, Op. Cit.*, p. 131

<sup>7</sup> Li, Xigui, *Thirty-Six Days: My American Travels*, quoted in *World Class Learners, Op. Cit.*, pp. 132-133. Mr. Li is the principal of the National Day School in Beijing, one of China’s best schools, notable for its child-centered approach under his direction.

American Dream and follow his passions wherever they took him. Zhao is enjoyable to read, while stimulating us to think hard about the direction we are taking in U.S. education today and making us more aware of what education looks like in different parts of the world.