

Learning About Learning

BIG IDEA: How learning reflects a nation's cultural values.

GUIDING QUESTIONS: How does the way we learn when we are young influence our lives as adults? How would you describe the differences and similarities in your classrooms with those in China?

OUR CHALLENGE: To immerse ourselves in students' experiences in China as we explore the exams they take that determine their paths for higher education and job opportunities.

GUIDING ACTIVITIES: In this lesson students discover how China's cultural values and its history influence classroom learning and the two exams that dictate students' educational futures. We meet middle-school English teacher Hu Xingmei who describes how school has changed since her youth; we hear Jin Shan express the shame she feels about not living up to her family's expectations with her disappointing *gaokao* score, and we follow Xue Piao (a.k.a. Tiara) as she sidesteps the intense pressure of preparing for the *gaokao* and attends Syracuse University. Through these girls' experiences, and with the help of additional resources, students explore the relationship between people's cultural values and the way the young in their society are taught and learn.

SETTING THE SCENE

Read the opening of [Learning About Learning](#), stopping at the section, *Gaokao*. Watch [the short video](#) of teacher Hu Xingmei reflecting on her own school days in the same rural town where she now teaches and direct students to closely read the article on [Confucian values](#) included in this section.

Ask students to share their impressions of the opening classroom scene and what was new information about China's schools. Explore with students how this rural Chinese classroom experience compares to theirs.

After that discussion, split the class into two groups – one will focus on cultural values that influence learning in China (“virtue-oriented”), the other will explore Western values (“mind-oriented”). At the university level, students will delve into these differences by reading Professor Jin Li’s **article (need link)**, “Inexhaustible Source of Water: The Enduring Confucian Learning Model.” Middle and high school students will dig deeply into these differences by reading two articles: the [first](#), “Differences Between East and West Discovered in People’s Brain Activity,” and the [second](#), “Tiger moms' vs. Western-style mothers? Stanford researchers find different but equally effective styles.” Encourage groups to write down the cultural values that these articles spotlight.

Organize students into groups of no more than four. Make certain that an equal number from each of the earlier two groups are members of each smaller discussion group. Ask students to share and discuss what they found surprising about how cultural differences influence learning.

Following this discussion, have each group select the values it believes are most representative of its assigned culture. Once chosen, have each group write a short scene with dialogue that illustrates these values in a classroom setting. The scene can range from depicting how the school day, illuminating interactions that happen between teacher and students during a lesson or showing how a teacher presents a lesson to the class. Remind students to be thoughtful in avoiding caricatures. Invite groups to act out their scenes for the class.

SETTING THE FOUNDATION

The preparation to take a life-changing examination is deeply rooted in China’s history. Starting in the mid-7th century and moving through its imperial dynasties, China administered a civil service exam to assign to the most highly educated the tasks that the emperor deemed critical to governing the country. Exams tested young men’s ability to write and their knowledge of Confucian classics and the “Five Studies” – military strategy, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography, and Chinese literature and

philosophy. Only men took this exam. Since women weren't allowed to take the exam, few of them received a scholarly education.

The score on this rigorous exam mattered more than a man's family's status or political connections in being chosen to serve as a member of the imperial court. For Chinese men seeking social mobility, passing the exam was the path to high status; for a small number of test-takers a high score meant the chance to escape poverty. For the emperor, this examination effectively guaranteed a steady stream of scholars to meet his bureaucratic needs. Even the extremely literate men who failed this exam filled a wide range of vital professional roles in Chinese society.

China's cultural emphasis on rigorous exams as path-setting measures and dedicated preparation with a scholarly underpinning still guides testing of its young people today. In 1905, the civil service exam ended, but much about contemporary testing in China is rooted in its tradition. Today, China's test-takers are not limited to a slim slice of scholarly elite. Since nine years of education are mandatory for every child in China, all 9th graders will have prepared for years in school to take the rigorous *zhongkao* exam to determine if they will attend an academic high school (in China, it's called a senior middle school) or be enrolled in a vocational program; those with high scores go to high school and then take the *gaokao* exam as 12th graders. Their *gaokao* score decides the quality of university they will attend. A low score on the *gaokao* sends students on to a vocational college program or to work.

The *gaokao* was introduced in 1952, three years after the founding of the People's Republic of China for the purpose of determining where students who were qualified would be admitted to universities; those who scored low are able to add vocational programs or be sent to test-preparation schools to study again to take the *gaokao*. During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the *gaokao* was suspended, but resumed in 1977. Since then, the exam has evolved in its content. In recent years education officials have been piloting reform-minded changes in the *gaokao* as a lever to bring about changes in classroom teaching in China.

Ask students to return to the story, *Learning About Learning*, and read the boxed text, “Reforming the *Gaokao*.” This should help them better understand the current changes to this national exam and how reformers are hoping they will affect what happens in China’s classrooms.

For many parents in China, their child’s score on the *gaokao* can be a family’s defining moment. It shapes the future lives of young people like no other process, except the *hukuo*, which designates at birth whether a child belongs to a rural or urban household. When students with a rural *hukuo* score high enough on the *gaokao* to be admitted to a university in a first-tier city such as Beijing or Shanghai, their family’s fortunes can change. However, in recent years as China’s economy has slowed during times of transition, even graduation from a highly ranked university no longer guarantees a top-level job.

Ask students to explore the captioned [gallery](#), “From Imperial Exam to *Gaokao*.”

Have students take notes about discoveries they make in moving through this timeline. Using the prompts below, and in small groups, ask students to reflect on the cultural threads they find shared by the Imperial and *gaokao* exams. If students would like to also explore a visual *gaokao* timeline (1977 – present) with captions, click [here](#):

:

- What, if any, connections do you find between the exams given by China’s emperors and the *gaokao* exam students take now in China?
- How do you see China’s cultural values reflected in these exams as they progress through the centuries?
- What is the relationship between the political governance in place in China and the role that these exams play in young people’s lives?

ENGAGING OUR CHALLENGE

In *Learning About Learning*, Maya and Jennie absorb information about what their educational paths might have been if they had not been adopted and educated in America. The girls' experiences draw students into the life of being a student in a rural town in China and invite them to explore this lesson's two Guiding Questions: **How does the way we learn when we are young influence our lives as adults? How would you describe the differences and similarities in your classrooms with those in China?**

Divide the class into four thematic discussion groups of roughly five students apiece. Assign a facilitator and a recorder (note taker) for each group; these roles can rotate among students. The four topics – “School Pressures,” “Equity in Education,” “Family Expectations,” and “Heading to America” – relate to themes the students encounter in the stories. The [curated resources](#) to be used to amplify each group's in-depth exploration are found on the Lesson Four tab. To foster discussion, encourage students to share insights and ask each other questions based on their reading, viewing and listening. Remind students that what they discover in their small group interactions will be revisited in their culminating Reflection and Action Project.

- Individually, or within their small groups, have students read and view the resources assigned to each group.
- They should also return to *Learning About Learning* to seek out information relating to their topic.
- When ready, they should come together to talk about how what they've read and viewed adds to their knowledge of this topic.
- They will also consider how what they are learning about China relates to their own educational experiences.
- Each group should discuss and note in their questions and connections log – the informal journal in which they collect ongoing learning, research and thinking – any unanswered questions and unresolved connections arising out of their discussions. They will use the logs in the Reflection and Action Project.

Group A: School Pressures

Students in China have little time for activities unrelated to the achievement of academic excellence. Keeping up with assignments that prepare them for life-determining exams consumes their waking hours. As the time to take these major exams approaches, students skip meals and come up with ways to keep themselves alert long into the evening so they can study; every year stories surface of students taking their own lives as a response to the pressures that family and teachers put on them to score high on the *gaokao*. The rigid intensity of the *gaokao* preparation and exam is one reason that students in China decide to study abroad. The increasing exodus of top students is motivating China's education officials to reform the *gaokao*, which in turn will change teaching.

Ask students to read the story's "*Gaokao*" section, revisit the "Reforming the *Gaokao*" box, and dig into the [curated resources](#) to prepare to discuss these questions:

- What academic skills are rewarded in China and why?
- Why is a subject such as health education – that most American schools teach – not taught in most schools in China? Are there other subjects that students in China don't get much of a chance to study?
- Among Chinese teens there is a popular saying – "Gain one point, surpass a thousand people." Explain why many Chinese youngsters repeat this saying and what it tells you about the pressures that students face in taking their exams?
- Looking back at the role that exams have played in China's history, describe the challenges that education reformers in China confront in making changes to the *gaokao* and trying to alter the teaching that prepares students to take it. Who most strongly resists such changes?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group A.

Group B: Equity in Education

Through nearly all of China's history, only men from elite families were educated in scholarly ways. During the past century, this exclusive privilege changed as political upheaval in China led to dramatic changes, especially in broadening access. As a result, China's literacy rate increased from 66 percent

to 96 percent in the last half century as the number of high school and college graduates skyrocketed due to a national policy entitling every girl and boy to nine years of schooling. Once girls were in school, China's gender gap in the rate of adult literacy began to vanish. As recently as 1990, only 68 percent of women in China were literate compared with 87 percent of men; among China's youth today, the literacy gender gap is almost nonexistent as the rate for each gender is almost at 100 percent. Still, the majority of Chinese people attain only an elementary or middle school level of education; the majority live in rural regions. Significant questions of equity exist between the schooling experiences of rural and urban students.

Ask students to return to the story, *Learning About Learning*, and pay special attention to information found in the text's links in the paragraphs just below the "Reforming the *Gaokao*" box. These stories, along with those catalogued in the [curated resources](#) section, highlight differences between urban and rural students' learning opportunities and their achievement levels; they also address some gender issues revolving around admission into universities. Being familiar with these topics will help students to discuss the following:

- What are the leading causes of educational inequities in China? Are similar inequities found in American schools and children's education?
- How does where a student lives or her family's situation affect her chances of succeeding on the exams given at the end of 9th and 12th grade? Why?
- Why do young women need a higher *gaokao* score than young men to be admitted to a university? If the *gaokao* is what admits students to a university, is it fair to enroll boys who score lower than girls do?
- Do universities in the United States have admission policies that seem unequal to various groups of people? If so, what are people doing to make admission to universities fairer?
- Are *gaokao* reform measures targeting educational inequities? If so, how?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group B.

Group C: Family Expectations

Families in China expect their sons and daughters to succeed in school, which means scoring high on major exams. When a child does not succeed on the exam it is said to bring shame to her family. Confucian values lead families to believe that if their children work hard, persevere, and constantly push themselves to improve, then they will attain good results and, in turn, bring about a better life for themselves and their family. Social psychologist Hazel Markus identifies this relationship within Eastern families as one based upon *interdependence* rather than *independence* as in Western cultures such as Europe or the United States. A child's interdependent relationship with their parents coupled with family expectations and values directly translate to the culture of learning in China's schools as was explored in more depth in the Setting the Scene section of this lesson. This interdependence and intense pressure to succeed within the family may also shift as ongoing educational reforms in China surrounding the *gaokao* continue to gain momentum.

Ask students to review the "Shaming my Family" section and watch the two videos – "Pressures and Dreams" and "Three Generations of Schooling" – in which Jin Shan's mother and grandmother talk about their schooling and Shan describes her experience taking the *gaokao* and then to learning of her low score: This viewing and reading of the story, *Learning About Learning*, along with exploring the [curated resources](#) selected for this group's learning, should prepare students to discuss the following questions:

- From what you've learned, would you say that Shan's school experience is usual for children raised as she was? Explain why.
- What do Zheng Fan and Chen Chen's stories tell us about what happens to students in China who don't score high enough on the 9th grade exam to enroll in high school? What role, if any, do their families play in the decisions the girls make?
- Millions of children in China are "left behind" in towns and villages when their parents go to cities to work. What affect does this have on these children's educational prospects and why?

- What are the similarities and differences between how your own family and teachers approach your education and what happens with students in China?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group C.

Group D: Heading to America

In *Learning About Learning* we meet Tiara who was born in a rural town in China and is now a student at Syracuse University. We discover that in 2015 she was “among 304,040 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities, more than from any other country.” In each of the past eight years, there’s been a double-digit increase in the number of [students from China studying at American universities and colleges](#). In 2015 there were almost twice as many Chinese students in the United States as five years earlier – many of whom are young women like Tiara whose schooling has been advantaged by China’s one-child policy and her circumstance of being an only child. In contrast, only 13,763 Americans studied at a Chinese university the year that Tiara came to the United States, a 4.5 percent decrease from the previous year. Learning about Tiara’s reasons for wanting to attend a university outside of China – and finding out about her preparation to do so – will provide students with a good start in exploring the exodus of students from China, which is happening at progressively younger ages. Between 2010 and 2015, enrollment of Chinese students in U.S. primary and secondary schools nearly quadrupled.

Ask students to review the story *Learning About Learning* with a focus on getting to know more about Tiara’s story in China and as a university student in America. Then read [“The Long March From China to the Ivies”](#) that describes in great detail what one young woman in China did to achieve her goal of attending an Ivy League college in America. When this material is absorbed, along with the [curated resources](#) selected for this group, students should be well prepared to discuss the following questions:

- Why are more and more university-aged students and families with younger children deciding to leave China to be educated in other countries?

- A writer observes that many Chinese students feel as though their U.S. university experience is like a “[clash of civilizations](#).” What does he mean when he uses that phrase? What do you learn from Tiara’s story about this “clash”?
- Why do you think it is difficult for Chinese students to blend in with American students?
- As students leave China and head for America, how is the Chinese government and education officials responding to their departure?
- Why do you think so many fewer American students go to study at Chinese universities?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group D.

REFLECTION AND ACTION PROJECT

A critical element of this curriculum involves students completing a culminating project to assess and demonstrate their learning. In doing this project students have an opportunity to try out various approaches to the issues or topics they explored through Engaging the Challenge. The students should not expect to “solve” the problem, in the sense of finding a definitive answer, though they should try to come up with ideas about ways to draw public awareness to the situation and/or its consequences. This might lead them to create potent messages and figure out strategies to develop personal connections to shift attitudes and inspire action. By reflecting on what they’ve learned and using this knowledge to inform their ideas about actions, students will gain deeper appreciation of the many strands of challenges individuals confront when they set out to “solve” a problem by trying to inspire other people to act in positive ways to bring about the change they want to see happen.

In this Reflection and Action Project, students will explore the values and assumptions they find shaping their own schooling – focusing on how and what they learn. Have students take 15 minutes to read the following questions, and then write their responses to one or two of the questions that stand out most to them:

1. What traits or skills are most valued by my teachers? By my parents?
2. What evidence do I have that those are the skills and traits most valued? Where do I find I support in learning these traits and skills?
3. Are there traits or skills that I value that are different from those of my school, teachers and parents? Why do I feel they are important? How could they be taught?
4. How would my learning be different if I was a student in China in the same grade as I am now? And how might that different way of learning affect my life after school?

Then, combine students into groups of two or three. The goal is to produce a podcast with the intended audience of Chinese students who are considering coming to the United States to study. As they prepare to do this, encourage your students to think about what they've learned about Chinese culture, as it pertains to learning and classroom experiences in China. They should also think hard about what aspects of their own learning experiences might be helpful for Chinese students to know about. They can refer to their questions and connections log compiled during small group learning; notes they took then could prove helpful now. In deciding how to write and deliver their key messages in a podcast, they will want to keep foremost in mind the cultural mindset of their audience – the students in China listening to their words.

In their message to the Chinese students, they should include thoughts about what these foreign students are likely to find surprising about the classroom – from the expectations that professors will have of them to ways that students and teachers interact. They should also speak about what happens outside of the classroom, preparing the students from China for campus experiences that will likely differ from their relationships and activities with friends in China.

Strongly encourage the students to spend time listening to [this 13-minute podcast](#) – Episode #1 “Made in China Robot Turned Creative Human” – from the podcast series, “One in a Billion.” Not only will they hear from a Chinese student now studying at Wellesley College, but also they will understand more about how a successful podcast is conceived and executed. This listening experience might result in them deciding to work with another student; one

might decide to act as questioner/moderator as the other fills in the podcast's story and message.

Students will share their podcasts with others in their group. Then, their podcasts can be made available to others in the class to hear. They can be published online for others to listen to, if the class decides to do so.

For practical assistance in making podcasts: Voices.com published [this article](#) about planning podcast content, and it can be a useful tool for students to refer to as they create their own podcast. Many apps and websites offer free services for recording and publishing podcasts; this [EdTechTeacher blogpost](#) offers recommendations for equipment and networking.