



# Who's AFRAID of the BIG BAD DRAGON?

Why China Has the Best (*and Worst*)  
Education System in the World

YONG ZHAO

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Source: "US Public, Experts Differ on China Policies," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC. September 18, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/09/US-Public-and-Elite-Report-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-September-18-2012.pdf>. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 1.2 What Worries Americans the Most about China's Economy

Source: "US Public, Experts Differ on China Policies," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC. September 18, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/09/US-Public-and-Elite-Report-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-September-18-2012.pdf>. Reprinted with permission.

## More Praise for *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?*

“Better understanding between the US and China is important not only for both nations, but for the world. Having spent the first half of his life as a student and teacher in China, and the second half as a scholar and innovator in the US, Zhao is a unique interpreter of where China's educational system has come from and where it needs to go. It should be read by caring educators around the world creating schools for the future of an uncertain world.”

—MILTON CHEN, senior fellow, The George Lucas Educational Foundation; chairman, Panasonic Foundation

“Zhao's extraordinary book turns all the popular and politically hyped assumptions about East-West educational relations back to front and inside out. Asia's not an educational mirror for the West, but is actually a hall of mirrors that distorts the West's view of it. China's not an authoritative exemplar of high achievement, but is an authoritarian imposer of it. Unexpected and outrageous, this is the book that no one will ignore or want to.”

—ANDY HARGREAVES, Brennan Chair of Education, Boston College; coauthor, *Uplifting Leadership*

“Yong Zhao's new work analyzes the origins, strengths, and failings of China's authoritarian education system. It is an important work—timely and concise, well-researched and well-argued—that will positively influence the debate over education reform in both the United States and in China.”

—JIANG XUEQIN, Chinese education reformer; author, *Creative China*

*“In **Catching Up or Leading the Way**, Zhao challenged Americans to play to their strength rather than chase the myth of foreign excellence. In **Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?**, he focuses on the US obsession with China—which he knows better than anyone writing on education policy today. Chapter 8 (“The Naked Emperor: Chinese Lessons for What Not to Do”) is a devastating unmasking of the China Superiority Myth that lays responsibility at the door of PISA and lazy journalists.”*

—GENE V. GLASS, regents' professor emeritus, Arizona State University; research professor, University of Colorado at Boulder; coauthor, *50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America's Public Schools*

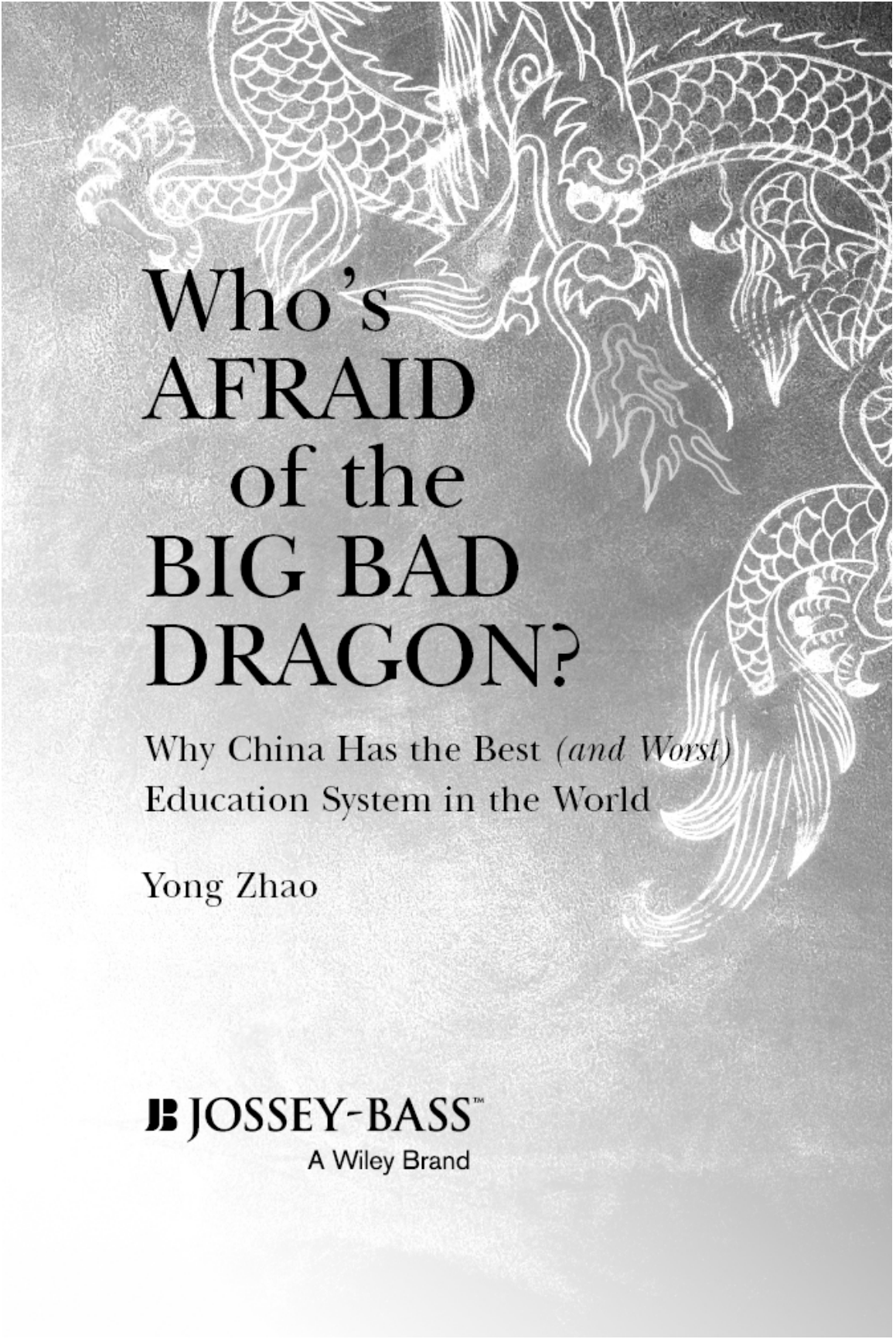
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To my parents, who gave me the freedom to be me



## About the Author

**Yong Zhao**, born and raised in China's Sichuan Province, taught English in China for six years before coming to the United States as a visiting scholar in 1992. He currently holds the first Presidential Chair at the University of Oregon, where he serves as director of the Institute for Global Education and professor in the Department of Educational Measurement, Policy, and Leadership. He is also a senior fellow at the Mitchell Institute of Victoria University in Australia.

Zhao's contributions to the education field are many. He has developed computer software, including the award-winning ZON (<http://enterzon.com>), the world's first massively multiplayer online role-playing game for studying Chinese. The college English learning system Zhao codeveloped, New Era Interactive English, has been used by millions of college students in China since its publication in 2004. Zhao also led the development of Education for Global Citizenship, an innovative bilingual, bicultural, and dual pedagogy program for early learning. He has won numerous awards for his contributions in research, leadership, and innovation.

A popular keynote presenter, Zhao has delivered speeches and workshops in over a dozen countries on six continents. He has been quoted or featured as an expert commentator in such media outlets as *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Parenting* magazine, NPR, ABC, *The Australian*, Xinhua News Agency, and China's national television network, China Central TV.

Zhao is the author of more than one hundred articles and twenty books. His most recent publications include the

books *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization* (ASCD, 2009), *The Handbook of Asian Education* (edited; Taylor and Francis, 2011), and *World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students* (Corwin, 2012).

# Acknowledgments

The Acknowledgments section is always the most difficult part of writing a book because there is no way to list all the people who have made it possible. It's especially difficult for this book due to the time it took me to complete it and the number of people from whom I have benefited.

The idea of a book about Chinese education came to me over ten years ago when I first saw the spirit of Chinese education reincarnated in the No Child Left Behind Act. Instead of writing a book about China, I ended up writing a book about education in America: *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*. I never gave up the idea of writing about the Chinese system, but it was Marjorie McAneny, my editor at Jossey-Bass, who started me on this project again. Working with Margie has been one of the most enjoyable and productive intellectual trips I have taken. Her encouraging words, gentle nudging, professional insights, and expert editing are evident in this book.

The ideas in this book are the result of numerous conversations I have had with colleagues and friends all over the world. A few individuals have significantly contributed to my thinking and deserve special recognition: Kathe Kirby, executive director of the Asia Education Foundation in Australia; Tony McKay, chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership; Zhong Binling, president of the China Society for Education; Gao Chen, principal of Northeast Yucai Secondary School; Gilbert Choy, founder of Beijing 3e International Kindergarten; Xuyang Yao, CEO of Beijing Channel Consulting; Sun Qijun, director of Chaoyang Education Commission in Beijing; Liu Libing, deputy

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As always, my wife, Xi Chen, has been a critical and encouraging reader of the first drafts. She has also pointed me to new sources and challenged me to think and write in different ways. My son, who works at the Arts Club of Chicago, has served as an excellent example of why passion and interest matter in education. My daughter, Athena, has been a great source of inspiration and smiles.

# **Introduction**

## **Fatal Attraction: America's Suicidal Quest for Educational Excellence**

In 2009 Beverly Hall, former superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools, was named America's National Superintendent of the Year for “representing the ‘best of the best’ in public school leadership.”<sup>1</sup> Hall was hosted in the White House by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In 2010, the American Educational Research Association honored her with its Distinguished Community Service Award, which “recognizes exceptional contributions to advancing the use of education research and statistics.”<sup>2</sup> Also in 2010, President Obama appointed Hall to the elite National Board for Education Sciences.

In 2013, Hall was indicted by a grand jury in Georgia for “violation of Racketeer Influence and Corrupt Organizations Act, false statements and writings, false swearing, and theft by taking.”<sup>3</sup> The Racketeer Influence and Corrupt Organization Act is a law typically used against Mafia leaders. If she is convicted, Hall faces forty-five years in prison.

What made Hall a national hero is precisely what brought about her downfall. She earned national recognition by significantly improving tests scores in the Atlanta Public Schools, one of America's largest urban school districts and one with a large proportion of minority students. These higher scores, it turned out, were not the result of improved student learning but of a conspiracy of teachers and school leaders. Together with Hall, thirty-four top administrators, principals, and teachers in Atlanta were indicted for “improving” student test results through



cheating. The total number of individuals involved in the scandal was even larger: some 178 principals and teachers at nearly half of Atlanta's schools were reportedly in on the scam.

This case is just one of many unfolding national scandals in the United States. Celebrated heroes have been graced with honorary titles and rewarded generous cash bonuses for dramatically improving test scores—and then exposed for cooking the books. In 2012, Lorenzo Garcia, former superintendent of the El Paso Independent School District in Texas, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for “improving” his schools by preventing low-performing students from taking the state test. Garcia had twice been nominated for Texas Superintendent of the Year. Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the Washington, DC, public schools, was implicated in cheating scandals soon after the district's dramatic improvement sent her to national stardom—with a prominent spot in the influential documentary *Waiting for Superman*, on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and backed with millions of dollars for her new organization StudentsFirst.

Cheating scandals have been discovered in almost every major school district that has reported great improvements: Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York.<sup>4</sup> The most obvious victims are the hundreds of thousands of innocent children directly affected by the unethical, immoral, and illegal activities of the adults working in their school systems. But millions more are affected. What about those students, teachers, and school leaders who did *not* cheat and were adversely affected by their lower test scores? Even the instigators of these cheating scandals are victims in a sense. Sure, they may have been driven by greed for the cash prizes and promotions associated with improved test scores (or by the desire to avoid punishment for reporting poor test scores).

But it's unlikely that these people entered the education profession intending to hurt children for their own gains.

The villain behind these cheating scandals is the accountability system itself, which is based on high-stakes testing. Ushered in by President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and reinforced by President Barack Obama's Race to the Top initiative in 2009, test-based accountability that directly links student performance to educators' livelihood has become the yardstick of American education. By attaching lavish rewards and harsh punishment to student test scores, the system provides powerful incentives for cheating. Educators have far less control over student performance—and far less impact on its quality—than policymakers presume. And that's especially true for teachers working in impoverished communities.

When it comes to the harm done by high-stakes testing, rampant cheating is just the tip of the iceberg. As Sharon Nichols and David Berliner point out in their book *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*, this “cooking of the books” is but one of many damages done by testing reported by parents, teachers, and researchers.<sup>5</sup> Education historian Diane Ravitch warns in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, that high-stakes testing is one of the many symptoms of a virus threatening America's future.<sup>6</sup>

That virus is the rising tide of authoritarianism in the United States. In exchange for the comfort of knowing how their children are doing academically and that their schools are being held accountable, Americans welcomed high-stakes testing into public education. Without the benefit of historical experience with these kinds of high-stakes tests,

however, Americans failed to recognize those benign-looking tests as a Trojan horse—with a dangerous ghost inside. That ghost, authoritarianism, sees education as a way to instill in all students the same knowledge and skills deemed valuable by the authority.

Despite cheating scandals and stressed-out students, America doesn't seem ready to be rid of its villain. Many Americans still believe standardized tests are needed and that problems like widespread cheating can be fixed through superficial means. Since the cheating scandals went public, most of the attention has gone to the crimes committed by a few individuals and technical fixes that would have prevented them—everything from prescribing more severe punishments to increasing testing security and inventing better tests. Political leaders have pushed aside the call to abandon high-stakes testing altogether.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said that while he was “stunned” by the Atlanta cheating scandal, the problem “is an easy one to fix, with better test security.”<sup>7</sup> Most parents support standardized testing and the use of test scores in teacher evaluation. Even some educators and school leaders support standardized testing, including the two largest education unions: the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.

Herein lies the tragedy for America—and the reason for my writing this book.

The tale told by Chinese education illustrates the full range of tragic events that can happen under authoritarian rule. As one of the perfect incarnations of authoritarian education, China has produced superior test takers who have maintained a great civilization for millennia—but failed to cultivate talents to defend against Western aggressions backed by modern technology and sciences in the 1800s. Since that time, China has struggled to retreat

from its tradition of authoritarian education. Although it has already benefited from a gradual withdrawal from central dictation, as evidenced by its recent miraculous economic growth, authoritarianism still rules.

Technical fixes won't stop the damage and embarrassment of cheating scandals. Reducing the amount of high-stakes standardized testing does little to limit its destructive influence. The damage done by authoritarianism is far greater than the instructional time taken away by testing, the narrowed educational experiences for students, and the demoralization of teachers. The deeper tragedy is the loss of values traditionally celebrated by American education—values that that helped make America the most prosperous and advanced nation in the world. Erase those values, and you lose the creative power of a culture that celebrates diversity and respects individuality. You also lose the time, resources, and opportunities you need if you are to invent a new education that will continue to lead the world.

High-stakes testing is America's Faustian bargain, made with the devil of authoritarianism. Under the rule of authoritarianism, which gave birth to high-stakes testing in the first place, disrespect of teachers as professional colleagues and intrusion into their professional autonomy are praised as characteristics of no-nonsense, tough leadership with high expectations. Beverly Hall became national Superintendent of the Year for having “demonstrated a commitment to setting high standards for students and school personnel.”<sup>8</sup> That commitment turned out to be authoritarian rule, as a 2012 *New York Times* report points out: “For years, Beverly L. Hall, the former school superintendent here [Atlanta schools], ruled by fear.” Principals were told that if state test scores did not go up enough, they would be fired—and 90 percent of them were removed in the decade of Hall's reign. “Underlings were humiliated during rallies at the Georgia Dome,” to set

an example of Hall's "rule by fear," the *New York Times* report continues. "Dr. Hall permitted principals with the highest test scores to sit up front near her, while sticking those with the lowest scores off to the side, in the bleachers." Moreover, "she was chauffeured around the city, often with an entourage of aides and security guards. When she spoke publicly, questions had to be submitted beforehand for screening."<sup>9</sup>

Lorenzo Garcia, the former El Paso superintendent, was another action-oriented leader praised for his miracles. He kept almost half of students eligible for tenth grade from taking the tenth-grade exam by not allowing them to enroll in the school, retaining them at ninth grade, or rushing them into eleventh grade. Although what he did was reported and investigated by both the US Department of Education and the Texas Education Agency, twice he got away "because he held people's careers in his hands....If you said no to him, you were gone," said El Paso's director of student services, Mark Emmanuel Mendoza on NPR.<sup>10</sup> El Paso has a large population of Mexican immigrants, and Garcia also exploited the community's fear of the courts, fear of the Border Patrol, and trust in the school system. The students excluded from the tenth-grade exam "were made to feel like they did something wrong," said Linda Romero, the drop-out prevention counselor who blew the whistle.<sup>11</sup>

Under the spell of authoritarianism, the Obama administration has consistently disregarded the law, not to mention the checks and balances of American democracy. Instead of reworking the expired No Child Left Behind Act, President Obama and his secretary of education have given out waivers to states, exempting them from the law in exchange for their willingness to accept the administration's wishes. States have responded favorably,



and Congress has largely forgiven, if not condoned, the administrations' actions.

Under the spell of authoritarianism, 50 million American children are being taught a de facto national curriculum, then subjected to a de facto national standardized test. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, created with little input from the people or their representatives, is now enforced with tax dollars in nearly all states. Although the federal government did not technically pay for its development or officially adopt its standards, the billions of dollars in the Race to the Top program, which required the adoption of common standards and assessment, undoubtedly helped the CCSS spread.

Under the spell of authoritarianism, Americans have willingly surrendered their beloved local governments to state and federal control. Locally elected school boards have turned into bureaucratic branches of state and federal government, for in effect, they only collect local taxes. They then use that tax money to implement the wishes of the state and federal governments in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Authoritarianism has driven America to admire, glorify, and emulate other authoritarian education systems because they seem to produce “results,” defined as test scores. Instead of valuing what their own educational methods can produce, American leaders envy countries with top test scores in a narrow set of subjects—which is simply a sign of how successfully those countries have homogenized their students. Mistaking China's miseries as secrets to success, American education pundits and political leaders have been eager to learn from the quintessential authoritarian education system. Ironically, they've condemned China's authoritarian political system in the same breath.

A survival strategy the Chinese people developed to cope with thousands of years of authoritarian rule has been glorified as China's secret to educational success. The belief that the Chinese attach high values to education is widespread in the United States.<sup>12</sup> That belief has been used to explain the educational success of Chinese students; it has also been used to condemn Americans in general, and some racial and cultural groups in particular, for their poor test scores.

This belief is, however, an illusion at best and a cruel glorification of authoritarianism at worst. The Chinese people were deprived of any other means to succeed in life, both spiritually and materially. Their only option was to pass the exams dictated by the absolute authority—emperors in the past and the government today. When people are convinced that there are no worthy options to pursue in life except the narrow path prescribed by an authoritarian government, they are forced to comply, accept indoctrination, and be homogenized. For this reason, Chinese parents have to invest generously in their children's education and test preparation; their efforts mitigate the lack of sufficient investment from the government. When onlookers praise the efficiency of the Chinese educational system, in which minimal government investment begets huge gains in test scores, they ignore the resources Chinese parents throw into the pot.

The Chinese have also been praised for emphasizing effort and diligence instead of inherent intelligence or social conditions. Again, this is no more than a mistaken romanticization of an authoritarian ploy to deny the existence of individual differences and unequal social conditions. Emphasizing effort is a convenient way for the authority to evade responsibility for leveling the playing field for those with diverse abilities and talents. It is an excuse for not providing programs for children with

disabilities or those born into extremely unfavorable social circumstances. It also serves as a seductive marketing slogan, persuading individuals to welcome homogenization.

Admirers also glorify Chinese students' inability to question and challenge authority. For instance, Andreas Schleicher, in defending China's top PISA ranking, noted how much more likely Chinese students are to blame themselves instead of their teachers for their failure in math, compared to their counterparts in France.<sup>13</sup> While the finding is correct, Schleicher fails to notice its cause: an authoritarian culture that tends to shift the blame from the authority, which no one dares to question, to the students. This is true in other authoritarian education systems as well; just look at Russia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

The Chinese national educational system has won high praise as an efficient system with national standards, a national curriculum, a high-stakes test (the college entrance exam), and a clearly defined set of gateways to mark students' transitions from one stage to another.<sup>14</sup> Admirers note that every Chinese student has a clear and focused goal to pursue; Chinese teachers and parents know exactly what to do to help their students; and the government knows exactly which schools are doing well. What those admirers ignore is the fact that such an education system, while being an effective machine to instill what the government wants students to learn, is incapable of supporting individual strengths, cultivating a diversity of talents, and fostering the capacity and confidence to create.

I wrote this book to show how China, a perfect incarnation of authoritarian education, has produced the world's best test scores at the cost of diverse, creative, and innovative talents. I also tried to illustrate how difficult it is to move away from authoritarian thinking by showing how China

has struggled to reform its education for over a century. The book is intended to warn the United States and other Western countries about the dangerous consequences of educational authoritarianism.

Education in the West must go through transformative changes. A paradigm shift will be necessary if we are to prepare children to live successfully in the new world: a shift I wrote about in my previous book, *World Class Learners; Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students*.<sup>15</sup> As traditional routine jobs are offshored and automated, we need more and more globally competent, creative, innovative, entrepreneurial citizens—job creators instead of employment-minded job seekers. To cultivate new talents, we need an education that enhances individual strengths, follows children's passions, and fosters their social-emotional development. We do *not* need an authoritarian education that aims to fix children's deficits according to externally prescribed standards.

If the United States and the rest of the West are concerned about being overtaken by China, the best solution is to avoid becoming China. The empire that led the world for over two millennia was shattered by Western technological and scientific innovations in the 1800s. Its education represents the best of the past. It worked extremely well for China's imperial rulers for over one thousand years, but it stopped working when the modern world emerged. The Chinese system continued to produce students who excel in a narrow range of subjects. Only 10 percent of its college graduates are deemed employable by multinational businesses because these students lack the very qualities our new society needs.<sup>16</sup>

China's achievements over the past thirty years should be no reason for the United States and other Western nations to panic, as forewarned by French historian Nicolas

Boulanger more than 250 years ago: “All the remains of her ancient institutions, which China now possesses, will necessarily be lost; they will disappear in the future revolutions; as what she hath already lost of them vanished in former ones; and finally, as she acquires nothing new, she will always be on the losing side.”<sup>17</sup>

Discussion questions for each chapter are available. Register at [www.wiley.com/go/dragon](http://www.wiley.com/go/dragon) using the password 87136.

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