

Re-education

By Ann Hulbert

April 1, 2007

I. The Student

“Definitely wake me up around 9!!! I have an important presentation . . . wake me up at that time please. . . . Thanks!! Meijie.”

The e-mail message, sent to me at 3:55 a.m. under the subject line “yeah!” was my enthusiastic welcome to Harvard from a freshman named Tang Meijie. That was last May, nine months after she arrived on campus from mainland China. Except for the ungodly hour at which the message was dashed off, you wouldn’t have guessed that its author had come to Cambridge trailing accomplishments and expectations that were impressive even by Harvard standards. Nor was there obvious evidence of a student superstar in the tousled figure in a sweatshirt and khakis who appeared at the Greenhouse Café in the Science Center at around 10 a.m. Greeting me with a reflexive bow, as she had at our first meeting a couple of months earlier, Meijie apologized for taking a few minutes to finish up the talk she had been assigned to give that morning in one of her courses.

Her topic gave her away. What Meijie was editing between bites of a bacon cheeseburger and sips of coffee was a short presentation for an expository-writing class called Success Stories. The questions addressed in the course, which focused on “what philosopher William James once called ‘our national disease,’ the pursuit of success,” have become newly urgent ones in Meijie’s own country. “What is ‘success’?” the course introduction asked. “Is it a measure of one’s financial worth? Moral perfection? Popularity? How do families, schools and popular culture invite us to think about success? And how are we encouraged to think about failure?” At Harvard, she and her classmates were discussing those issues as they read, among other things, “The Great Gatsby” and David Brooks on America’s résumé-rich “organization kids” and watched movies. In China, a nation on a mission to become a 21st-century incubator of “world class” talent, Meijie is the movie. As she progressed through her classes in the cutting-edge city of Shanghai, spent a year abroad at a private high school in Washington, D.C., and came to Harvard, she became a celebrated embodiment of China’s efforts to create a new sort of student — a student trying to expand her country’s sometimes constricting vision of success.

Downstairs in the computer room of the Science Center, Meijie showed me the thousands of Chinese citations that come up when you Google her name. “That’s very crazy,” she said with a laugh, a girl all too familiar with the Chinese ardor for anything associated with the name Harvard. Getting in “early action” in December 2004 set off a media frenzy

at home, where it's still relatively rare for students to enroll as undergraduates at elite American schools, and study abroad promises to provide a crucial edge in a jammed job market. A packet of press coverage her parents gave me — Meijie rolled her eyes at the trove — portrayed her as every Chinese parent's dream child. Child magazine accompanied photos of Meijie and her parents with counsel on how to "raise a great child." The winner of no fewer than 76 prizes at the "city level" or above, as one article marveled, she was a model that top Chinese students themselves were dying to emulate. "What Does Her Success Tell Us?" read a headline on an article in The Shanghai Students' Post. "Meijie Knocked at the Door of Harvard. Do You Want to Copy?" asked The Morning News Express in bold Chinese characters. For months, she was besieged by journalists begging to profile her; publishers, she recalls, clamored to sign her up to write her life story and companies asked her to advertise their products. A director of Goldman Sachs's China division wanted her on the board of the private school he recently helped found, which was then under construction in an erstwhile rice field outside Shanghai.

But what was truly exceptional about Meijie was how she responded to the adulation. The fervent worship back home made Meijie uncomfortable and anxious to clarify what she wasn't. "Don't call me 'Harvard Girl,'" she told one of many magazine interviewers. She was referring to a student six years ahead of her, Liu Yiting, whose arrival at Harvard in 1999 made her a huge celebrity in China when her parents published a book, "Harvard Girl," describing the meticulous regimen that produced their star. It quickly sold almost a million and a half copies and inspired numerous how-to-groom-your-child-to-get-into-college-abroad knockoffs. For all her triumphs, Meijie wasn't obsessed with being at the head of the class and didn't want the well-programmed-paragon treatment. She excelled in assorted subjects, but her school reported that her overall ranking wasn't in the top 10 percent. Her parents had stood by, a little stunned, as their intrepid daughter won distinction in an unusual way, by accomplishing all kinds of things outside of the classroom.

Amid the hoopla, Meijie insisted that the last thing Chinese students (or parents) needed was to be encouraged in their blind reverence for an academic brand name, much less be told there was some new formula to follow and competitive frenzy to join. That was just the kind of pressure they had too much of already. It was everywhere in a culture with a long tradition of rigidly hierarchical talent selection, dating back to the imperial civil-service-exam system more than a thousand years ago — and still there in a school system driven by a daunting national college-entrance exam. The Chinese call it the gaokao, a three-day ordeal for which the preparation is arduous — and on which a single point difference can spell radically different life options. The cramming ethos, which sets in before high school, was what Meijie had tried hard not to let erode her curiosity. In her experience, America had come to stand for a less pressured and more appealing approach to schooling. "There is something in the American educational system that helps America hold its position in the world," she told me. "Many people will think it's a

cliché, but there is something huge about it, although there are a lot of flaws — like bad public schools and other stuff. But there's something really good, and it's very different from my educational system.”

Once at Harvard, in the fall of 2005, Meijie figured out what she wanted to do. She would try to make liberal education's ideal of well-rounded self-fulfillment “more real in China.” She plunged into conceiving a summer exchange program run by and for students. Meijie named it the Harvard Summit for Young Leaders in China, or Hsylc — pronounced “H-silk,” evoking the historic trading route. In August 2006, on the campus of that now-completed private school outside Shanghai whose board she had joined, a cosmopolitan array of Harvard undergraduates would offer a dose of the more freewheeling American campus and classroom experience. Meijie and an inner circle of organizers (similarly on-the-go Harvard women, all of Chinese descent, some reared in the U.S.) envisaged nine days of small-group discussions on wide-ranging issues outside of math and science. Hsylc would also offer extracurricular excitement and social discovery — chances for students to try new things and connect with one another, rather than compete for prizes. The participants that Meijie had in mind were several hundred promising Chinese high-schoolers, to be chosen in an un-Chinese way. She and a selection committee would pick them on the basis not of their G.P.A.'s but of their extracurricular activities and their essays in response to the kinds of open-ended prompts they never encountered at school. On her list was a question that might be a banality in the U.S. but was a heresy at home: “If you could do one thing to change the world, what would it be?”



Meijie's answer to that question — help shake up Chinese education — puts her in step with the latest wave of a 30-year-old government effort to overhaul China's schools and universities to keep pace with "socialist modernization." After the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, when schools were closed and cadres of students assaulted "enemies of the state," Deng Xiaoping resumed the National College Entrance Exam in 1977, marking the start of a radical expansion of the education system. A developing economy demanded it; the implications for politics were less clear, and after Tiananmen Square, there was a brief slowdown. The continued growth since then has been a success in many respects; educational attainments and college attendance have surged. Yet in the process, some prominent government officials have grown concerned that too many students have become the sort of stressed-out, test-acing drone who fails to acquire the skills — creativity, flexibility, initiative, leadership — said to be necessary in the global marketplace. "Students are buried in an endless flood of homework and sit for one mock entrance exam after another, leaving them with heads swimming and eyes blurred," lamented former Vice Premier Li Lanqing in a book describing his efforts to address the problem. They arrive at college exhausted and emerge from it unenlightened — just when the country urgently needs a talented elite of innovators, the word of the hour. A recent report from the McKinsey consulting firm, "China's Looming Talent Shortage," pinpointed the alarming consequences of the country's so-called "stuffed duck" tradition of dry and outdated knowledge transfer: graduates lacking "the cultural fit," language skills and practical experience with teamwork and projects that multinational employers in a global era are looking for.

Even as American educators seek to emulate Asian pedagogy — a test-centered ethos and a rigorous focus on math, science and engineering — Chinese educators are trying to blend a Western emphasis on critical thinking, versatility and leadership into their own traditions. To put it another way, in the peremptorily utopian style typical of official Chinese directives (as well as of educationese the world over), the nation's schools must strive "to build citizens' character in an all-round way, gear their efforts to each and every student, give full scope to students' ideological, moral, cultural and scientific potentials and raise their labor skills and physical and psychological aptitudes, achieve vibrant student development and run themselves with distinction." Meijie's rise to star student reflects a much-publicized government call to promote "suzhi jiaoyu" — generally translated as "quality education," and also sometimes as "character education" or "all-round character education." Her story also raises important questions about the state's effort, which has been more generously backed by rhetoric than by money. The goal of change is to liberate students to pursue more fulfilling paths in a country where jobs are no longer assigned; it is also to produce the sort of flexibly skilled work force that best fits an international knowledge economy. But can personal desires and national demands be reconciled? Will the most promising students of the new era be as overburdened and

regimented as before? As new opportunities have begun to emerge, so have tensions. If Meijie's own trajectory and her Hsylv brainchild are any guide, the force most likely to spur on deep-seated educational ferment in China may well turn out to be students themselves — still struggling with stress, yet doing so in an era of greater personal independence and international openness. Overachievers of the world unite!

II. The Expansion

Brave Shanghai's traffic and head southwest for 40 minutes to the well-groomed grounds of Xiwai International School, the site of last year's Hsylv conference, and you see the broad contours of what has been happening in Chinese education. In an area that is projected to become Shanghai's biggest satellite city, new construction is everywhere and up-to-date school campuses are being built. While American leaders have been debating how best to demand more accountability from a decentralized education system, the Chinese government has decided to loosen its administrative and financial control. The process dates back 20 years now, to the Decision on the Reform of the Education System, issued in 1985 (the year Meijie was born). The push was on to consolidate the Soviet-style hyperspecialized universities into more comprehensive institutions; with the Compulsory Education Law of 1986, mandating nine years of education for all, a major expansion was also under way. In the early 1990s, the government urged an easing of exam pressures and took the step of encouraging "social forces" to establish private schools alongside the public system.

Parents whose own schooling was curtailed by the Cultural Revolution have been avid to realize their educational ambitions — the Confucian key to social and moral advancement — in the paths they chart for their "little emperors," the singletons mandated by the one-child policy of the past quarter of a century. The pace of growth and school privatization surged in the course of the 1990s. The goal was to send 15 percent of the college-age population on to the postsecondary level — that figure being the standard definition of "mass higher education" — by 2010. Meanwhile, extra financing went to a group of top universities in a quest to make them "world class." And in the new millennium, rice paddies are still making way for state-of-the-art school facilities. A nonprofit, private school, Xiwai could be mistaken for a medium-size college. Its spacious brick classroom buildings and dorms (capacity 3,500 students, from pre-K to 12th grade) flank a lovely courtyard with a fountain in the middle. At one end stand an imposing library and a dining facility, and across the way is a large arts-and-sports complex.

"You could say we overbuilt," said Xiwai's co-founder, Xu Ziwang. Boyish in his khakis and navy blazer, Xu, who is 50, has energy to match the wealth he earned as one of Goldman Sachs's first mainland Chinese partners. He has devoted both his zeal and money to establishing the school with Lin Min, Xiwai's headmaster, plowing proceeds from local real estate development into the enterprise. Theirs is a project with roots in a past that could hardly have seemed more remote on the balmy fall day the two of them

proudly showed me around the one-year-old campus. Friends from their teenage years on a farm during the Cultural Revolution, Xu and Lin were sent from school to the countryside when they were about the age of the oldest Xiwai students who greeted us cheerfully on the paved pathways. The two men were among the many millions who, feverishly studying when they weren't busy at their appointed labors, swarmed to take the college-entrance exam in the first sittings in 1977 and 1978; they ended up among the few who scored high enough to secure a scarce college spot. Thirty years later, both had studied and worked abroad (Xu in the United States, Lin in Slovenia, England and New Zealand), and back home, Xu had played a big role in privatization deals. Here they stood on what had been mud, eagerly sharing their vision of a pedagogical and curricular renaissance that would produce a generation "better than us."

What a fortunate cohort today's kids were, both men said: young people growing up in a booming country that had plenty of problems but also a growing middle class and expanding horizons. By 2006, China had vastly exceeded its higher-education enrollment goal; 22 percent of the college-age population — compared with roughly 40 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States — were receiving some form of postsecondary schooling. Yet Xu and Lin also joined in the widespread worry that Chinese youths, spared the real-life challenges their elders were forced to cope with, faced very different constraints. Hunkered down, doing endless exam-haunted schoolwork, they were constantly hovered over by their parents. In 1998, years before the McKinsey report of a talent shortage, Xu heard the wake-up call when he initiated Chinese recruiting for Goldman Sachs.

He picked three graduates from China's top universities and was impressed that they all scored 100 percent on the exam following the associate training stint in New York — only to be disappointed a year later, when their performance reviews were in the bottom quartiles. "There's a price," he concluded, "for 12 years of prep for an exam, and that's to always think there's a narrow, right answer. If you give precise instructions, they do well. If you define a task broadly, they get lost and ask for help." If he and Lin had their way, independent students eager to use their imaginations would be the dominant breed on their campus. They were counting on a rising tide of "broad-minded" parents eager to provide their children with the less-straitjacketed education — a creative mix of the best of East and West — that Xiwai preached and aimed to find teachers able to impart. But as we toured a campus plastered with exhortations to be "global citizens" and to "Smile, Embrace, Communicate, Cooperate, Negotiate," Xu was also blunt: there are lots of obstacles, not the least of them the gaokao that exerts such sway. "The dilemma is, everybody realized it is the problem, but nobody knows what to do."

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Lettering by Leanne Sharpton

Chinese routinely say they wish the exam weren't such a monolithic force, and various provinces have lately been allowed to offer their own versions. Yet bigger changes — like Fudan University's use last year of broader criteria and a totally different test to admit some 300 students — stir concern. In a country so huge — and in a culture so steeped in cronyism — the fear is that no other process could work as fairly. Meanwhile, the success of China's educational expansion hasn't eased gaokao panic, and in fact has made the secondary-school exam a newly fraught hurdle. The unforeseen pressures have unfolded this way: As the number of college graduates has outpaced the growth in desirable high-level jobs, generally located in China's developed eastern region, one result has been a surge of unemployment among degree holders who resist settling for less. Along with that has come a rise in qualifications for lower-level jobs that once didn't require a college diploma.

The situation has left students still desperately chasing elite-university credentials. A degree from the most prestigious Chinese schools, especially those given extra money in the quest for "world class" status (with Fudan and Jiao Tong universities in Shanghai, Peking and Tsinghua in Beijing at the pinnacle) — or from the University of Hong Kong or, more distinctive yet, from a college abroad — is the best shot at success in a job market where a big gap looms between top jobs and the level below. The college race has led in turn to an intensified struggle to get into the best high schools. They boast records of strong gaokao scorers and prestige university placements — yet high schools in general haven't multiplied at the rate that colleges have. Xu wasn't alone in sighing over these strains in the system and at the same time in seeing signs of hope: real change was bound to come.

III. The Experiment

When Meijie next had time to talk, it was in early June of last year, and she was swept up in arrangements for her education summit meeting in August. Among other things she and her fellow Harvard organizers would do when they were in Shanghai (where some Chinese university students would help out, too) was handle the late batch of Hsylv applications from seniors in China's 10th-to-12th-grade high-school system. Meijie had extended the deadline for those applicants so they wouldn't have to squeeze in work on the essays — one in English and one in Chinese — at the height of gaokao cramming. Answering Hsylv's more creative questions would be a nice break for them, she told me at one point with a laugh and a shake of her cropped hair, and she wasn't entirely kidding. Here was a college freshman who had barely closed her own blue books and was eagerly preparing to stage a \$200,000 event (financed primarily by the Goldman Sachs Foundation, thanks to guidance from Xu). Lightening burdens, that "quality education" goal, was not exactly on any of these students' agendas; juggling competing aspirations was more like it.

From the start, as Shanghai pioneered quality-education experiments during Meijie's primary-school years in the early 1990s, she has been the rare student who navigated, undaunted, between China's established educational ways and the emerging opportunities and expectations. Her upbringing reflects the deep-seated zeal for schooling that fuels but also complicates reform efforts. Almost the first thing Meijie told me about her mother (a former opera singer from a musical, Westernized family) and her father (a middle-school teacher of Chinese from a more traditional background) is that "they're very typical Chinese parents." By that she meant "they really focus on my education and cultivation."

In China, a child's schooling is a family endeavor worthy of great sacrifice, in money and time. Over dinner in Shanghai, a melodiously voluble Mrs. Tang confirmed that "when Meijie was very young we controlled her a lot, watched her very closely and guided her carefully. Luckily she was very cooperative and followed our instruction." Effort rather than ability is considered the key to achievement — and among the most important expressions of filial piety is studying diligently (a word I heard a lot). "If there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no shining accomplishment; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant achievement" goes an old saying, invoked as soon as school starts — a far cry from the Western progressive interest in encouraging curiosity and play in the early years. Meijie told me her mother had her memorize her primary-school textbooks (much thinner than ours). Like many children, she was also sent to lessons in music, art and calligraphy. This kind of broader training is a legacy of the Confucian focus on self-perfection, and it is in step with the Maoist notion of "all-round development"; the emphasis is on practice and mastery, where American parents, busy enrolling their young kids in arty extras, are likely to stress self-expression and creativity.

For the reformist vision of more individualized, active learning, this ingrained educational drive has been something of a mixed blessing. It is a great core to build on: “quality education” advocates are emphatic that they have no intention of jettisoning a strong Asian heritage of discipline and humble, family-oriented commitment to self-cultivation. At the same time, the traditional emphasis on arduously conformist, adult-driven, hypercompetitive academic performance — well suited though it is to a standard class size of 40 or 50 — can get in the way of liberating individual initiative and easing pressures.

In her compulsory-education years, Meijie had plenty of old-style schooling — sitting in rows, being rigorously trained in the basics by revered teachers, and excelling. This was the well-entrenched approach observed by the developmental psychologists Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler in the 1980s and praised in their frequently cited 1992 book “The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn From Japanese and Chinese Education.” But she received new-style broadening, too. Seeing he had an eager reader, Meijie’s father began buying her books — she remembers the series of 115 Western classics he got a deal on one summer — in the belief that if she learned one thing from each, they were worth having. Meanwhile, in primary school, Meijie lucked into an early example of just the kind of extracurricular, community-oriented pursuit championed by Vice Premier Li. Thanks to an arrangement between her school and a Shanghai TV station, the 9-year-old Meijie was one of several top third graders tapped to produce a weekly kids’ news segment, which meant skipping class to work on the clips. She ended up doing it single-handedly for three years; her classmates’ parents pulled their children out, worried about school demands and exams.



New School Xiwai International School in Shanghai, one of the new breed of Chinese private schools with a distinctly Western-looking curriculum. Daniel Traub for The New York Times

Meijie moved on to middle school in the late 1990s just as “keypoint” schools, which accept the best students and are better financed, were banned from using the term in the interests of greater egalitarianism (though they remain as sought-after as ever). A lottery was instituted in Shanghai to spread the stellar students around. When Meijie landed in a merely ordinary school, her parents were distraught — and then upset when she flunked a computer-skills test. (She failed to hit “save.”) But soon they backed off, Mrs. Tang explained, to “let her develop herself because we saw how good she is.” Indeed, Meijie proceeded to reap benefits beyond Vice Premier Li’s dreams. “You have time to live your own life,” she told me, remembering the more laid-back atmosphere of her nonselect school, “and you have your freedom to think about a lot.” Among other things, she thought about Web design, partly to prove she was no computer dunce, but mainly because she was an unusually informed girl. Thirteen-year-old Meijie, former journalist, followed the news and was struck that in the midst of the Internet boom, “China is too quiet and behind” in appealing to teens. She saw a niche and focused on building one of the first popular youth sites in China. She was then recruited to help work on kids.eastday.com, a government-endorsed site with comprehensive information and services for younger teenagers.

Up to this point, which brought her to the turn of the millennium, Meijie's experience was a preview of how less hierarchical, more flexible educational innovations might free an extroverted, quite extraordinary student — even as it also shed light on the persistent power exerted by stringent school expectations and demanding parents. By 2001, the pace of curricular change began to pick up, with private schools often in the lead, trumpeting mottoes like “We must put students in the center of learning and focus on cultivation of creativity.” At Xiwai, where I sat in on a first-grade class of merely 29, there was a smart board and desks arranged, Western-style, in clusters. A lively young teacher had the kids chanting cheerfully (and perfectly) in unison, old style, but also scrambling to find partners with whom to practice their Chinese characters; the room buzzed with collaborative work, as Xiwai's administrators proudly pointed out.

Another day, over tea and then lunch in a cafe at East China Normal University, I met Cui Yunhuo, a young professor there who has been active in the nationwide curriculum review and implementation process. He gave an upbeat account of the progress he has seen in grades one through nine in a mere five years — though he also lamented the lack of good assessment methods. There is a wider variety of new textbooks to choose from, he explained, reporting that color had been added and outdated and often dense passages removed. Teachers are “more at an international level,” Cui said and gave me a booklet heavy on proclamations about the new importance placed on “encouraging students to inquire” and helping them “learn to learn.” More hands-on, project-based learning and cooperative endeavors are required. Time must also be allotted for “comprehensive practical activities and school-based curriculum,” which include optional courses designed by individual schools to appeal to students' interests — a hortatory agenda hard to evaluate. At a so-called demonstration middle and high school I visited in Beijing, the vice principal extolled an environmental-studies project, which sent students to visit a waste-water recycling factory. They returned with ideas that they were eager to apply to the new campus under construction on Beijing's outskirts. Student-run clubs are now *de rigueur*. There are also new curbs on competition. The middle-school entrance exam has been officially abolished. Shanghai eliminated midterms in the early primary-school grades, and weekend and vacation review classes are widely discouraged.

Yet no one pretends change is smooth. Cui worried that there hadn't been enough effort devoted to explaining the curricular shifts to parents; others point to the lack of teacher training; and everyone cites dire problems in the countryside, like a shortage of teachers. Cui also joined Yang Deguang, a former president of Shanghai Normal University and now the executive director of the Higher Education Society of China, in voicing concern that competitive duress at the top has been spreading downward. “Don't let the children lose at the starting point” has become a new parental slogan, Yang told me. The boom in private kindergartens had Cui worried, opposed as he is to the push for the early skill mastery and the highly structured English classes that are often their selling points. (With his own son, a fifth grader, he reported he was trying a new policy of fresh air and

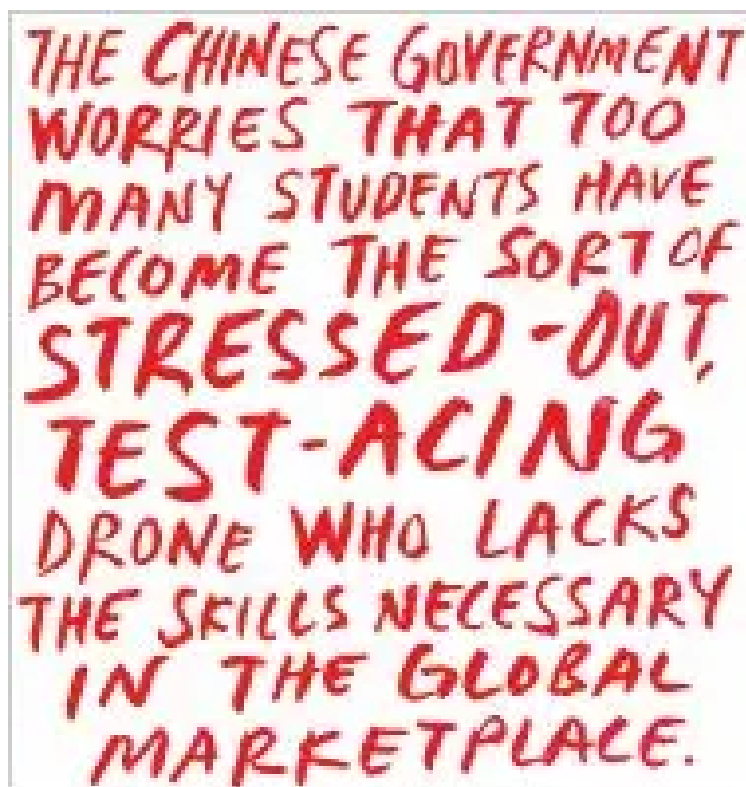
freedom: at 5 p.m. he sends him out of the house and tells him not to come home for an hour and a half.) Happy Cheung, who studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is now the chairwoman of the Sino Capital Education Foundation in Beijing (as well as the co-host of a radio show on family education issues), told me that her fourth-grade daughter is one of the few students in her public-school class who isn't enrolled in after-school English lessons or in "math olympics" — a craze that caught the attention of the Department of Education in Zhejiang Province, which canceled the olympics at the primary level, hoping to "lower the temperature." In his book, Vice Premier Li warns against a vicious cycle: school efforts to diminish competition fueling a market for tutors outside of school, hired by parents as anxious as ever (or more) not to let their children get left behind — and perhaps give them an edge by developing special talents.

As Cheung is not the first to note, progressive ideas have a way of translating rather differently in a Chinese context. In 1919, John Dewey traveled to China, where his views on "student centered," democratic education were all the rage, yet the rhetoric was fuzzy — as much a rallying cry for political renewal as a real blueprint for school change. If there is an American figure to whom Chinese proponents of more active, multidimensional, student-centered learning have listened especially attentively over the past half-decade, it is Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (with whom Cheung herself studied). His Multiple Intelligences theory, which posits various different forms of intelligence in addition to the linguistic and logical-mathematical skills usually honed and rewarded in school, has inspired a huge array of books, articles and conferences. (There are also stuffed animals marketed as good for "interpersonal intelligence," music boxes for "musical intelligence," etc.) His work inspired a national project, begun in 2002, "Using M.I. Theory to Guide Discovery of Students' Potential," which financed efforts to implement the theory in classrooms all over the country.

Yet the M.I. vogue, as Cheung said over lunch, may reflect more familiar thinking than the fanfare suggests. The seemingly simple yet slippery theory readily lends itself to the homegrown tradition of "all round" cultivation, which is in fact informed by a quite different perspective. Where Gardner urges the individualized development of a distinctive blend of inborn abilities, she explained that his Chinese followers are prone to emphasize the structured mastery of multiple talents. Cheung brought along Zhan Wenling, a private-school principal who had toured around China in 2001 with a Ministry of Education delegation, explaining the "quality education" perspective. "Confucius said that a person is not simply a container," Zhan exclaimed; a teacher "should be the fire, light the match," and so must "know what kind of wood you are lighting." But, she went on, it is not so easy for teachers to grasp the idea. The quest to promote a more student-driven ethos is also complicated by practical constraints, most notably China's huge class sizes. Promoting discussion can be a problem. Earlier, another educator had told me:

“You let them free, but it’s such a big group, it’s hard to get them back. It’s a real challenge how to get the balance right. Now the students may ask hundreds of different questions, and our teachers have to face that, they have to be well prepared.” A recent review of the national M.I. project turned up interesting experiments, I was told. Yet Zhan also saw resistance to less rank-oriented, more student-centered nurture. It is hard to loosen up, Vice Premier Li observed, in a culture that still reveres ancient scholars like Su Qin, who is said to have poked his thigh with the point of an awl to stay focused.

Meijie, confronting the high-school-entrance ordeal in 2001, found herself in the vise, too. Caught up as she was with Web-related activities when she took a mock version of the four-day test, she didn’t do well enough to get into Shanghai’s best schools. Her parents resisted the tutoring frenzy, which has intensified lately, thanks not least to the accelerating trend of applying to college abroad. (The New Oriental Education and Technology Group, which holds sway in English-language test prep and other training, just went public in September on the New York Stock Exchange and boasts skyrocketing enrollment figures: some 100,000 signed up in 1999, and the number is now a million.) But Meijie hunkered down to study, with help from a physics and a math teacher, and once again finessed what has others tied in knots. She ended up the top scorer in her district, and among the top 10 in all of Shanghai. That secured her a spot at her dream school, Fudan Fuzhong, which translates as “the high school affiliated with Fudan University.”



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A premier Shanghai public high school with a well-established foreign-exchange program, Fudan Fuzhong was perfect for Meijie. Thanks to its stellar student body, teachers can spend less time on review without jeopardizing exam results, and the

campus bustles with clubs, optional courses, service projects. Meijie, a champion debater and student leader, was the kind of self-driven, “quality” personality the faculty and administrators were eager to reward: she was their unanimous choice for the privilege of a year abroad at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. While the rest of her third-year classmates sweated through gaokao cramming in 2003-4, she had an American experience that she called “fabulous, life-changing, really core.”

At Sidwell, Meijie was an exchange student standout — history buff, bold field-hockey novice, social dynamo. And when she returned to China, she was convinced that an American liberal-arts education was for her. Still, she confessed that more than just her own “passion,” a favorite word of hers, propelled her Ivy League dream. She wasn’t immune to age-old Chinese status obsession: “The Harvard bell rings in me, too.”

IV. The Event

As she prepared for Hsylv during her freshman year in Cambridge, Meijie wasn’t slowed down by concern that her Harvard-affiliated education gathering might end up reinforcing a tendency it aimed to curb: the Chinese worship of a super-academic credential, at odds with the pursue-your-own-passion drive she hoped to inspire. It was the double bind of China’s reform effort in a nutshell (and a dilemma familiar to overachievers everywhere). But Hsylv was built on an insight that can get overlooked in more professional efforts to prescribe the right pedagogical mix of western vigor and structured Asian rigor. Outside the standard classroom, bottom-up cultural exchange is invaluable, as Meijie knew first-hand; impressive faculty, enlightened pedagogy, great facilities, an innovative curriculum — whether imported or homegrown or both — are only part of the story. What may matter more than anything else is student chemistry.

The scene at Hsylv in August was certainly not stress-free, least of all for Meijie. Chinese education is enjoying a wave of international activity, as joint ventures and exchanges proliferate, but her student-driven endeavor called for pioneering entrepreneurship as she rallied sponsors, press coverage and more. During the frenetic lead-up, her parents were thrilled to meet an array of kids from the United States — so much less inhibited than Chinese teenagers, they said, laughing — even as they worried their daughter was overdoing it and hiding the strain. “She’s my daughter,” Mrs. Tang told me, full of fondness. “I know her well. But I also know that everyone has good times and bad times — I know I do. For us, she tells us the good times. She must suffer, pay for that somewhere within. But she doesn’t tell us that.”

The result was an event full of an impromptu energy uncharacteristic of Chinese high-school campuses, even at a flexible place like Fudan Fuzhong. With their messy dorms and worldly ways, Hsylv’s diverse band of Harvard student seminar leaders were skewed toward adventure-seeking underclassmen, by design. Meijie and her fellow Hsylv organizers had selected for bold well-roundedness; the more eclectic the Harvard students’ profiles, the more exotic their travels, the better. And the young seminar leaders

had bitten off ambitious and various topics — from “Africa and the Problems of Development” to “Disneyworld!” — that added up to something quite unlike the scripted “quality education” supplements many of the Hsylv kids had been exposed to. (From 26 province-level divisions, including Hong Kong, the 300 participants reflected the map of educational advantage, coming mostly from eastern, urban areas, with big contingents from Beijing and Shanghai, though Meijie also recruited a dozen or so very poor students.) This was real consciousness-raising, rather than conscientious résumé enhancement. “With half-open eyes, sore legs, constant yawning and a spinning head, it is curious why I am still so excited about the coming day,” wrote a student in *The Silk Road*, the Hsylv newsletter; clearly not alcohol-induced, the daze wasn’t cram-induced either.

The writer, Sindy — the kids mostly went by English-sounding first names they had chosen — proceeded to praise the seminars and the lectures “by distinguished scholars and entrepreneurs with remarkable insight.” (A scheduling glitch produced the highlight event, I was told — two very different Chinese examples of success on stage together: the polished, Western-educated head of Google China, Kai-Fu Lee, and the jeans-clad Jack Ma, homegrown maverick who reportedly bombed the gaokao twice and founded Alibaba.com, China’s thriving e-commerce company.) Sindy was full of enthusiasm too for “various extracurricular activities in which you wish you could send different parts of your body to.” But what held the most allure were the imported seminar leaders themselves. “I am fascinated by the talent, personal charm and perfect articulation of minds in these young people only two or three years older than most of us,” she wrote of the Harvard students.

Meijie had set out to replace blind veneration of the Harvard brand with a more informed appreciation of the charismatic, self-motivated breed of liberal-arts students she found there. What she probably didn’t foresee was that China’s famously studious youth would also be seized with a bad, or rather a very healthy, case of adolescent infatuation. Thanks to flirting and gossiping over meals — “We began searching for beautiful Harvard girls and handsome boys to have dinners with,” one student reported — the seminar leaders became peers, not just paragons. Forget Chinese reticence. The Hsylv participants demonstrated plenty of persistence, seeking out Harvard students to pursue seminar discussions or talk about life problems. Uneasy students were emboldened by a participatory style impossible in their big classes; they joined debates, took on the role of presidential candidates, signed up for a sprawling talent show. “In such an atmosphere, can you keep yourself silent and passive?” asked several fans of the Harvard sophomore Richie Schwartz’s “explosive” seminar on the evolution wars. “Just speak out!” The questions at some of the lectures were contentious bordering on rude, I was told.



'Don't Call Me "Harvard Girl"' Tang Meijie has inspired legions of Chinese students. She's hoping they emulate her goal (a liberal education) as much as her brand (Harvard). Guido Vitti for The New York Times

A spirit of social adventure was inseparable from the intellectual adventure at Hsyc. That blurring is rare in Chinese high schools, where the new curricular broadening coexists with a student culture that is more familial — nurturing or infantilizing, depending on whom you ask. Chinese high-school students, many of whom board at school during the week, generally spend two years together with the same 40-plus classmates and sometimes choose their third-year concentration in order to stick with their friends. When they go home on the weekends, it usually isn't to a social life with peers — dating is strongly discouraged — but to parents who “take care of everything. It's always little baby.” That's how one Hsyc participant, William, put it during a long conversation with me and four other summit alumni in a Shanghai teahouse on a late October Sunday. He discovered what he felt was missing from the Chinese high-school experience during a year abroad in a Texas public high school. “American high schools are more colorful, more like real life . . . more complicated . . . I don't know, you feel like you've somehow grown to be a more mature person. You have to deal with different people and all the complicated things about relationships, and friendship, and programs and activities.”

Yet William — whose personal style, down to his Nike wristband, was amazingly American, and who was in the midst of applying to American colleges “because I think they suit me better” — didn’t speak for all his peers. The view, from the best Shanghai high schools at any rate, is more complicated. Lily, from Fudan Fuzhong, had returned from a happy year abroad at the Taft School in Connecticut that nonetheless left her thinking how “stimulating” her own high school is — and feeling that for SAT-stressed American students, “it’s not much better than in Shanghai.” The previous morning, five other Hsylv kids argued just as fiercely about the state of Chinese education. Bluesky sang the praises of the well-rounded girls at her school, Shanghai No. 3 Girls High School. But Black, arriving from a weekend review class with “physics problems swimming in my head,” was bleak about gaokao-burdened life in his ordinary school. “I am very tired but I must strive,” he said wearily. Whatever their arguments as they compared schools, there was general agreement: it’s rural kids, stuck in bad schools and granted fewer slots at the best universities, who face truly impossible odds and stress.

As for the HSYLC students’ plans for the future, Meijie’s summit meeting had not triggered a stampede to apply to American colleges (where all but the wealthy must hope for full or generous scholarships). Interest in Harvard certainly was high, yet at the same time Hsylv sent a very different message that worked against reflexive Chinese competitive fervor. All stirred up by the experience, a group of talented young people was also left feeling, as one put it, “more energetic, braver and more confident” about figuring out for themselves what might lie ahead — where they could best pursue the personal goals they had been hearing about and which they were told to take seriously. “What impressed me about the Harvard students,” a girl by the name of Shine told me, “was their definite aim for life, whereas Chinese students just go on the road laid out by their parents. In Shanghai and Beijing, we have the sense that we can go on our road. But sometimes it is an empty concept; we don’t know how to contribute to society.” For her — and many other kids agreed — the Hsylv event was a time when “I always ask myself what I want to do.”

Applications for undergraduate study abroad are rising (six times as many students from the People’s Republic of China, 256, applied to Harvard College in 2005 as in 1999, for example), and more foreign degree holders are now coming back to put their educations to use at home. But perhaps as promising a sign of the momentum behind educational change in China is an Hsylv participant like Neal, master of the wryly raised eyebrow, who said when I spoke with him that he was planning on staying put but who was still thinking big. The most caustic critic of Chinese schooling among those assembled for tea, he had already spent time in Germany. But he was inspired to find that his Chinese schoolmates, “known for diligence, silence and obedience, thick glasses as a symbol,” in his words, could be “most vigorous” in a setting like Hsylv.

As he explained to me in an earlier e-mail message, composed in breaks from gaokao cramming, he said he needed “to watch and feel the system by my personal experience” — endure the burdens at their worst in the third year, the “endless homework, strict discipline, frequent exams and the peer pressure.” If he chose to stay in China, he would know how to push toward a new system in which students’ “curiosity is well protected to learn knowledge.” At the teahouse, Neal was already rallying the troops behind a vision of prodding change along at home. “At Fudan University” — which has just inaugurated a less specialized curriculum for freshmen and a house system modeled on Yale and Harvard — “I can take a lecture, and if I want to be more active, I can ask questions, I can tell my friends to ask questions and then students will change the system,” he said. “When a university is eager to change, the vital power is students.” Neal raised both eyebrows, a boy looking ready to rebel against the bookworm stereotype. “People say, ‘Whoa, you’re from China!’ Yes, I’m from China.”

A generation of more independent-minded students with wider horizons — a generation of Neals and Meijies, busy networking and innovating: it is a prospect that may inspire some trepidation as well as optimism among Chinese leaders. After all, campus unrest has left scars, and vast challenges loom, from the environment to rural discontent. The proof that the recent educational changes go deeper than a proliferation of newfangled curricula and degrees will not be merely how China’s economic future plays out; it will be what kinds of political and cultural repercussions unfold, most immediately among the lucky few who are currently benefiting most from the new opportunities. Will it be enough if a bolder breed of the best and the brightest — as Xu predicted — form a cosmopolitan elite whose roots in China help make them the imaginative hybrids that global enterprises need? Over dinner with his wife and daughter (who was busy doing her homework while she ate), Xu was hopeful. At the same time, in a recent Foreign Affairs article, Xu’s friend John Thornton, a former president of Goldman Sachs, who has been directing a new Global Leadership program at Tsinghua University for several years now (and who also gave a rousing talk at Hsylv), points out a serious problem. In a country whose cutthroat educational system was famous for selecting successful bureaucrats, top talent these days goes just about anywhere but the government, clogged as it is with corrupt insiders. If creative, critical-minded outsiders aren’t given a reason to enter the public realm, the prospects for a world-class, more democratic future for all are only more precarious.

Right now, it’s quite unlikely that Meijie would even think of ending up as a mandarin. She was, though, full of plans as the spring semester of her sophomore year got under way after a somewhat dispiriting fall — her Harvard friends worrying about grades, her Fudan University friends in China panicked about careers. “Now I feel I am back again,” she wrote in a late February e-mail message, sent at — some things never change — 3:55 a.m. “Life is so hectic and overwhelmingly exciting!” With two Harvard friends, Meijie had just founded a company — Strategy Alpha International L.L.C., whose mission is to

advise Chinese and American enterprises on carving out niches in the other country's markets. (She and her team were already talking to a top Chinese financial magazine in search of an American partner.)

Meijie the resourceful global entrepreneur hadn't stopped thinking about education, though you might say the liberal-arts champion had become more of a realist. With a nonprofit arm of S.A.I., she was eager to pursue college advising back home and to explore new curriculum designs for English-teacher training and — inescapable in China — test prep as well. Meanwhile, Hsylv 2007 was gearing up. Meijie planned to give this year's event a theme, "Different Paths to Success," with the emphasis on "different" to jolt Harvard kids and Chinese kids alike out of their G.P.A.-obsessed focus on climbing conventional ladders. (In China, she suggested, American-style options like entertainment or sports, say, could use a boost.) It would be a contrast to last year, the now-seasoned summit organizer told me with a nostalgic grin and a groan: then the theme, she joked, should have been "How to Survive in Chaos." Meijie was being modest. How to thrive under the stress of new choices and change was the lesson she learned early, and was working hard — very hard — to share.

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