

Friday Keynote Speaker – Book Review

Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Dragon?

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In keeping with this November’s CABE/CAPSS Convention theme, “Changing Faces, Changing World – Are We Prepared?” the Convention Committee selected **Dr. Yong Zhao** as our Friday morning keynote speaker. Having heard him present several times over the years, we are greatly excited that our members have the opportunity to hear from him.

As part of our preparation for the event, we read ***Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Dragon?***, Zhao’s book on the Chinese educational system and how it compares to that in the United States.

The first half of the book discusses, in detail, the traditions of China and its teaching system and how that system, developed on the idea that the Emperors, who ruled China for millennia, could not be wrong.

The only type of creativity was in pleasing the emperor, as he wanted to be pleased. Thus, the education system followed the desires of the Emperor at all times. Civil servants had the most highly prized positions in the Chinese education system and teachers were just below them.

Interestingly, in the late 1800s, the Chinese tried to encourage some students to embrace creativity and break away (somewhat) from the system by coming to Hartford, CT and getting their high school education here.

This did not work out as many of the students became more Westernized than the conservative Chinese court officials could tolerate and the attempt was soon abandoned, even as Mark Twain and President Ulysses Grant tried to rescue the program.

Despite wars, changes in the world and even the change to the Communist system under Mao Tse-tung, control has remain-ed with the ruler(s). Because

of this con-trol from the top, especially its “monopoly on curriculum and assess-ment”, and the processes used to admit students to college, the Chinese education system marched, and continues to move, in lockstep.

The Chinese system is much more intense and stressful than in the U.S. and leads to cheating – across the education system, including in higher education. Cheating has even led to the absurd story that there was a riot by 2000 people (including parents who understand the need for their children to succeed in school for a better life) yelling that *it’s not fair that they can’t cheat on an exam!*

Even when it comes to competition in areas like developing research papers and other indicia of a progressive, knowledgeable country, the issue is quantity over quality – and, according to Zhao, the quality is often sorely lacking.

Chinese schools, according to Zhao, “exist for test prep. Every class, every teacher, every school is about preparing for the exams... No new content is taught.”

Unfortunately, Zhao writes, “Chinese government controls education just as tightly as the emperors did in ancient times.” Today, creativity is rewarded only when it is desired by the government. Chinese education is “more of a tool for social control than a process for self-enlightenment.”

Over the years, as with the Hartford experiment, Chinese leaders have recog-nized the shortcomings of their system. However, its efforts to limit the use of testing and reduce the academic burden on students



Dr. Yong Zhao is the featured speaker at the Friday morning General Session.

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“have been rendered ineffective.

So have comprehensive reform efforts to broaden the national curriculum, grant more local control of curriculum and textbooks, improve pedagogy and reduce quality gaps among schools.”

Zhao states that effective solutions to the way-too-rigid Chinese system would require “revolutionary changes to the very foundation on which Chinese society operates.”

Alluding to Shanghai and its successful results on assessments such as PISA, Zhao writes that China’s “authoritarianism has just produced great test takers, in a world captivated by test scores.”

So, those who admire the Chinese system are

basing their views on a “simplistic definition of education quality”. To him, it is a waste of time and effort in China, since its system was proven obsolete over a century ago.

So, what does Dr. Zhao think about the changes to the American education system over the last few years? Should we be afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?

Attend his keynote speech at the Con-vention to find out!

Dr. Zhao is Presidential Chair, Director, Institute of Global and Online Education Professor, Department of Educational Methodology, Policy and Leadership College of Education, University of Oregon.