

Chinese Students' Perceptions of High School Economics: Studying the Relationship between Economics and Social Values

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of undergraduate exchange students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) regarding high school economics education. For the case study, the participants (n=20) used an online system called Nicenet. Qualitative data was gathered from the transcripts of the online sessions. In this study, literature on PRC economics and within a sociocultural framework was explored. The results of this study lend credence and value to educational research investigations for multiple perspectives, as in this case, PRC students and their attitudes and beliefs regarding economics education.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, it is important to define the terms in order to preserve the consistency of collective meaning between the researcher and the reader. The following terms were used to describe the research.

Attitudes--A person's disposition, with regards to tendency or orientation.

Beliefs--A person's feelings or convictions.

China's Communist Party--Serves as head of Mainland China's political system.

Citizenship Education Programs--The importance of an educational system in developing citizenship that is implemented at all academic levels.

Curriculum in the PRC--Textbooks have been rewritten to be livelier, more appealing and have stronger connections with students' lives and the outside world.

Economics--Comprises an extraordinarily powerful and flexible set of tools that can reliably assess a thicket of information to determine the effect of any one factor, or even the whole effect. That's what "the economy" is, after all a thicket of information about jobs and real estate and banking and investment. But the tools of economics can be just as easily applied to subjects that are more interesting.

Patriotic Education in the People's Republic of China--Educational system that is used to foster loyalty and a citizenry equipped to participate in a globalized economy (Gries, 2004).

Social Economics--Studying the relationship between economics and social values.

1. Introduction

Every nation has a concept of economics (Khiknani, 2001) and Green (1997) contended that schools play a primary part in development in modern nation-states from Asia to Europe. Countries face the issue of being able to participate in a globalized society. Being isolated would prevent a nation from labor and communication in an ever connected economic sphere. Price (2002) warned that nations also must maintain their individuality or risk losing their identity. As a result, countries must balance between globalization and localism to maintain the economics curriculum. For the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on Chinese Student being able to understand and implement national goals and objectives and the effectiveness of economics curriculum.

1.1 Socialization through the Curriculum in the People's Republic of China

From 1950 to 1976, the social sciences were used as an instrument for socialization in the People's Republic of China (PRC), directly affecting students' perceptions of authority, human rights, and justice (Lin, 1991). School curriculum encouraged students to be collective persons serving the public good (Lin, 1991). In the PRC, political study is always required. Social science was taught at all levels and used to implement nationalistic ideology.

A good citizen in the PRC was judged morally, as well as politically, by attitudes and behaviors toward the government (Lin, 1991). Social studies curriculum in the PRC focused on developing moral citizens who obeyed the laws (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2006).

Economics education for secondary schools in the 21 century stressed the collective lifestyle that is essential for good citizenship (MOE, 2006). Within the MOE curriculum, students were encouraged to cultivate personal interests and their own personalities (MOE, 2006). Even while developing their own personalities, students were told that the collective good took precedence as the following excerpt indicates:

We young people have to nourish collective consciousness and to learn to deal correctly with the relationship between personal interests and collective interests. When they are in conflict, we should consciously place collective interests first and personal interests second. If it is necessary that we have to sacrifice personal interests, we should have the courage to give up all, including ourselves, to protect collective interest. (Esben& Black, 2006)

Economics education focused on teaching these values by reasoning with students.

1.2 Social Studies Course Structure

The People's Republic of China's students begin studies with Moral Character and Life in primary school. By junior high school they take Moral Character, History and Society, and Sports and Health. In high school they take Political, Physics, and History courses. According to the *People's Education Press* (2003) textbook:

The first classes are to ensure economic efficiency and growth for the national economy, to ensure that continuous strength as a whole society. The purpose of the Party is to serve the overall interest of their culture by creating a harmonious organization; adhere to the times, the courage to reform and innovation; seeking truth and being pragmatic, to achieve bigger and strong. (p. 1)

Reasoning within the PRC was based on fixed formulae with clear, predetermined answers (Lin, 2006a). According to Lin, economics education was an official part of the core curriculum in the PRC but was offered in less than 20% of schools. Only 16% of students studied economics in the PRC (MOE, 2006), whereas 37.4% studied art. According to Lin (2006b), this action told social science teachers that economics was not as important as other core courses. This resulted in schools putting little effort into the guidelines. Classrooms were required to have patriotic rituals, field trips, and guest speakers. The schools were limited by funds and resources. Many of the teachers decided to focus on ancient history, leaving out modern PRC history. According to the *People's Education Press* (2003) textbook:

In the motherland's long history, a developed economy, progressive scientific technology, and a magnificent culture were the embodiment of the labor and talent of generations of Chinese people. These demonstrate the great wisdom and power of the Chinese people. We should be able to absorb power from it, and make our motherland even more wonderful and great. (p. 11)

Lin (2006) revealed that a number of professors and researchers are now involved in the development of textbooks. The desire was to create textbooks that are scholarly and sound. The People's Education Press (PEP) is the preeminent textbook company in the PRC, controlling 90% of the textbook market (MOE, 2006). Despite the improvements, students are told that the textbook is not the only source of information; textbooks are to be considered a learning tool. The PEP textbooks also encourage students to be independent thinkers and to partake in a careful assessment of all information before drawing a conclusion. According to Lin (2006), many teachers are not happy with the new textbooks, specifically about issues which range from sequencing to the vagueness of the curriculum as well as a division of courses and optional courses.

1.3 Economic Textbooks

The PEP provides three textbooks that are required: political history, economic history of the world, and cultural history of the world. The favorite optional courses are reforms, democracy, and war and peace (MOE, 2006). The reason for this popularity rests with the MOE decision that Americans and Europeans have better practical abilities, critical thinking, and problem solving skills (2006). The MOE incorporated standards from the United States, England, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, compiling these sources to create their history standards (PEP, 2003). The desire is to create a textbook that is more balanced and neutral in examining social events than existing material.

Common Knowledge of China's Socialist Construction (CKCSC) (2006) is used in the ninth grade as an optional course to help students understand current economic and social reform. The CKCSC textbook insists that the PRC's students must adhere to its socialist ideology. According to the textbook, the PRC does not copy other countries' methods of reforms (2006). The CCP believe that the reforms are socialist based. The logic is that the PRC will use Western style capitalism to better help its economic situation. The understanding is that Western style capitalism will not challenge PRC's concept of capitalism (Lin, 2006a).

The CKCSC textbook explains the relationship between economic development and the necessity of opening the PRC to the world. The goals focus on economic development, population growth, and cultivating spiritual and confident citizens (CKCSC, 2006). These measures are used to ensure that the PRC does not lose its concept of self. The four basic principles are still taught in a less direct manner. These focus on the socialist road to guarantee the political direction of socialist reconstruction; to emphasize the leadership of the CCP; to be adamant about the proletariat; and to insist on Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong's ideology (2006). The students are told that the four principles will help guide them in understanding the correct policies and modernization. The three goals of the MOE curriculum are to develop national economic construction, maintain political control, and reunify with Taiwan (CKCSC, 2006). Another concern for the CKCSC is the issue of patriotism over internationalism. It encourages youths to study other nations so that they can help their own country. The youths should view the whole world as a family, but national interest should not be forsaken. Patriotism should always come before internationalism (CKCSC, 2006).

1.4 Content Analysis of Common Knowledge of China's Socialist Construction

The analysis of the CKCSC textbook from 2006 provides a framework for students to follow as they develop. The guidelines recommend that civics be presented by cross-disciplinary methods in subjects ranging from art to physical education. Analysis of this source was quantitative and qualitative, using Venezky's (1992) distinction between manifest curriculum and latent curriculum. The manifest curriculum is what is evident from the textbook's table of content and index. The latent method is what is conveyed in the body of the text. I conducted a quantitative analysis of themes appearing in the table of contents of the textbook. Each chapter title and subtitle was assigned a category according to its theme, for example, education. By calculating the percentage of the textbook devoted to each category, the full results of this analysis developed (See Appendix A). While conducting the manifest method, I found that economic issues-domestic accounted for 8.2% of the textbook's content, economic issues-international accounted for 14.2%, and environmental issues accounted for 5.3%. Local community affairs accounted for the highest percentage with 29.0%. The area receiving the least coverage was leisure with 1.6%.

During the latent portion of the research, the text describes how students are taught. This includes the issue of democracy as a system where the majority of people enjoy political power and many rights. The text also denotes that democracy is not without its class system. Within the texts, "if democracy is ever used to overthrow the socialist system, it will only result in failure for those individuals" (CKCSC, p. 11). The textbook concludes that the young people are the future of the PRC. They are the main force in modernizing the PRC. Students should learn well and fulfill the needs of the country (CKCSC, 2006). Page five of the textbook asks the students to think critically because it is imperative that the PRC develops people who can critically think. By page six, the textbook instructs students not to question the government (2006). The CKCSC directs students to do any trade that is asked of them. Students should know that they are serving the people and the government's causes at different levels. The students should be enthusiastic about any job they receive.

Throughout the textbook, the CCP is given positive coverage. Any mistakes made during their time in power are blamed on other parties (Walker, 2012). The language of the texts appears neutral. The authors of the text make it clear that with economic improvement, a greater diversity of viewpoints and higher tolerance of others should be increased (Walker, 2012). The textbook mentions that business administration and international trade also have become more popular among the secondary students. This is tied to the students who will be able to make money and travel abroad (Levin & Wu, 2005). This aspect has increased interest in economic education among the students. The authors of the textbook also realized that political slogans often are shallow. The textbook encourages students to learn from the past and from other countries. Students should always strive to create new knowledge. Students must be more objective in developing their attitudes and to explore realistic development (Walker, 2012). Determined by the economic foundation, education will have to follow the changes in the political system and be under the direct control of the political party in power.

The aims and purposes of education, education policies, curriculum content, and other elements of education, all have to fit into the general expectation and control of the political system (Walker, 2012).

2. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to advance understanding of international exchange business students' perceptions from the People's Republic of China regarding economics education. The purpose of this section is to discuss the methods and procedures that were used to conduct the study. The following provides an outline for this chapter: (a) research questions, (b) research design, (c) data collection process, and (d) data analysis.

2.1 Research Questions

The following research question guided this study:

1. What were the overall perceptions of economics held by undergraduate exchange business students from the People's Republic of China (PRC)?

2.2 Research Design

Online sessions can afford an understanding of respondents' motives, patterns of thoughts, and emotional reactions that are not observable with quantitative methods (Thomas & Brubaker, 2008). The survey questions (See Appendix B) for the PRC business foreign exchange students were presented on Nicenet. In total, there are 7 questions. They had 48 hours to post their responses. I selected the loose method of questions because it may reveal the various ways in which respondents interpret a general question. Because the purpose of the study is to expose the extent of variability or uniformity among participants' interpretations, this method offered the participants the opportunity to respond on their own interpretation (Clark & Creswell, 2008). Prior to the first meeting, I attempted to recruit 15-20 students from the CCC. This group was referred to as research group A. I had also recruited a secondary group by advertising on campus to PRC international exchange business students. This group was referred to as group B.

2.3 Description of the Participants

The study consisted of 20 foreign exchange business students from the People's Republic of China. All the students were studying in the Finance Department at a research university in the southeastern region of the United States of America. In describing their background, eighteen of the participants described themselves as living in an urban area of the PRC. Only two students described themselves as living in a rural area (students C and M). All the students were from Shandong Province; they attended the same university in the People's Republic of China, and they were here in the United States of America as international exchange students. The students ranged from 20-23 years of age. They were all academic juniors and seniors. The participants included 10 females and 10 males.

Out of the 10 students, only two had traveled abroad for academic reasons, both females (students B and C). Student B took courses in India, and student C attended a local high school in the southeastern region of the United States of America for one semester through an international exchange program. For eight of the students, then, this was their first experience abroad in any capacity. Fourteen students have friends and family members who have studied abroad. Only six had no friends or relatives who have studied abroad before: two are female and the other four are males (students E, G, H, O, Q, and R). Table 1 illustrates the students' general background information. At the first meeting, I had an informational meeting with 20 PRC business students in a computer lab. I discussed the participants' rights as required by the IRB process and received signatures from them. I explained how the Nicenet system works. The students were allowed to ask questions regarding the study and were informed of their rights as research participations. At the end of the study, the researcher held one additional meeting to check for authenticity.

2.4 Member Checking

The foreign exchange students from the PRC did not mention any concerns while looking over their answers. Under the area of suggestions, the students mentioned that they were concerned by their lack of responses. I reassured them that their only responsibility was to respond honestly. They suggested that I try this study with high school freshmen in the PRC; it may yield more useful information for my research. None of the students wanted their answers removed. All students were satisfied with their responses.

3 Data Analysis

The research question sought to determine how the educational background of each of the sample students contributed to the formation of their economics views. The major themes identified were secondary education, concerns about mainland China, activities useful in all secondary economics classrooms, and university attitude. Data investigating research question two were collected through survey two. Table 2 describes the participants' results of the surveys.

3.1 Secondary Education

Under the theme of secondary education, the students referred to their economic education experiences. Eighteen of the twenty students provided a brief description of the types of courses they took in the PRC. They mentioned studying broad topics like globalization, macroeconomics, and microeconomics. Student E mentioned, "The effects of globalization. Only lecture. No additional sources. The courses were history, economics, geography, and political science." Student A stated, "History and development of economics, structure of economy, and economic principles." Student B wrote, "History and development of economics, structure of economy, and economic principles." Student C noted, "Commodity and commodity economy, socialist market economy." Student D mentioned, "Economics is about money. Both macro and micro. Teachers only focus on lecture." In the PRC, economics education is taught during the freshman year in high school. All participants took economics courses and reported similar experiences in learning methods.

When describing learning methods at the secondary school level, twelve students mentioned that classes were lecture based with no additional activities used. According to students A, B, C, D, E, F, I, H, and J (n=9) memorization also was an important aspect for these participants. Student H explained the use of memorization as, "We have to learn many concepts. To do this, we have to spend too much time memorizing terms." According to students all students (n=10), the most common learning methods were reading from the book, lecture, and memorization. Student J explained, "No school activities. We just had lecture." Student G noted, "The classes are all in lectures." "No group activities." Student B stated, "Just lecture." The students also talked about other aspects concerning their high school economics.

Under the theme of secondary education, the participants B, F, G, M, P, and R (n=6) mentioned that they learned economics mainly from a political point of view while studying micro and macroeconomics. Student F wrote, "Much of our economics focuses on what the CCP has accomplished in the last 60 years. We were told that our economic success is linked to our political success. [sic]" Student G stated, "We are told that our economic success comes from having a government that controls the business sector." There was uniformity in learning among the six participants' responses. This information is relevant because the participants are demonstrating a conclusion that is mandated by the MOE (2006). Another concern for the MOE, is the devotion of its citizenry to the PRC.

3.2 Concerns about Mainland China

Under the theme of concerns about mainland China, students B, C, D, E, F, H, J, L, M, N, O, P, and R (n=14) referred to the economics classes in the PRC. Student B mentioned that the PRC needs to focus on corruption. Student F expressed concern, "We have some real problems. Some people are really rich, but some are real poor." In the Ministry of Education's (MOE) view, students are to be taught that there are no social divisions in the PRC (2006). Everyone is to be viewed as working together for the common good. Despite being taught this view, these participants were aware of social divisions in the PRC. The next theme deals with the activities that could be used in the classrooms to support the objectives of the MOE.

3.3 Activities Useful in an Economics Classroom

Under the theme of activities, students discussed activities that could be useful in an economics classroom. Students A, B, C, D, F, I, K, L, M, N, and S (n=10) discussed aspects like field trips, volunteer work, and media as tools that could be used to make economics more interesting for students. According to student I, "Using the internet in schools would help. Lectures are not interesting. Learning about the real world seems more important. Textbooks are not helpful." Students B, D, E, G, H, I, J, L, N, O, Q, R, S, and T (n=14) wrote that students need to learn about the "real world." When asked for improvements to the learning process, eight of the students referred to the usage of multiple media. Student E suggested that current events should be included, as she wrote, "That by examining the world around them, high school students could benefit from economics."

Economics presented as a theory is useless and a waste of time.” Student B referred to current events as “Hot topics. Textbooks always fail to cover the real world.” Not one student suggested traditional lecture or memorization were useful or important. The students expressed a strong desire for a student oriented educational system. Students A, C, D, F, K, M, N, and P (n=8) made reference to personal financial success being associated with a college education in the United States. This was a common theme throughout the study. Even though the focus was on secondary education, the students were still concerned with their university education. Despite the sample negative view of education, they still expressed a positive view of their own academic abilities and desire to be successful in their university education.

The main themes were secondary education, concerns about mainland China, activities useful activities in an economics classroom, and university attitudes. Under secondary education, the students (n=16) provided a description of their economics education. Under concerns about mainland China, the students (n=14) referred to social division and corruption in the government. Under activities in economics classrooms, the students (n=14) discussed field trips, internet usage, and current events. They spoke negatively of lectures, memorization, and textbooks. Despite this fact, they still felt like they were properly prepared for the rigor of studying abroad.

4. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Discussion of Research Question

The analysis of the data from this study indicated that the participants had some form of economics in high school. Participants noted lessons that focused on economics topics including globalization, macroeconomics, microeconomics, and trade. While participants demonstrated a working knowledge of economics terminology, they failed to provide concrete examples of key economics principles. Under the theme of secondary schooling, participants agreed that more student-centered activities would be beneficial for understanding economics topics. The participants were adamant about the usage of the internet, newspapers, and television news programs. Even though the participants voiced having a negative experience with learning economics, they expressed the importance of the topic during their secondary schooling. All of these items fit within the directives of the MOE (2006).

4.2 Implications

The analysis of the data from the current study suggests that these participants see themselves as prepared for an active role in the 21st Century. These students were not susceptible to all methods of indoctrination. The researcher did not attempt to suggest that this sample was indicative of the entire PRC citizenry. The sample (n=20) from the PRC does not provide positive or negative views of the PRC culture. This study is not meant to criticize the PRC or its foreign exchange students; the intention was to capture the participants’ attitudes and beliefs regarding economics education. The research also examined the effectiveness of indoctrination in the PRC on international exchange students.

4.3 Future Research

There is a lack of quantitative and qualitative research regarding PRC students, which suggests that there are unlimited possibilities for researchers in terms of attitudes and beliefs. Possible research questions regarding PRC students might include the following: What are characteristics of PRC students, and how are those characteristics manifested? How do PRC foreign exchange students’ attitudes and beliefs differ from PRC students who do not study abroad?

More research needs to be done that involves multiple PRC groups. This study lacked the depth to generalize to the larger PRC population. Further studies should reflect geographic differences. One suggestion would be to use quantitative methodology or a mixed method research approach. This could be achieved by using field notes, recording interviews, and applying quantitative surveys to a larger population of PRC students. Creating multiple groups based on gender, location, and age would be another means. Further studies should be conducted to measure the economics content knowledge and critical thinking skills. Another avenue for future research is to address what factor socioeconomic status plays in economic attitudes and beliefs. Researchers should examine different forms of indoctrination. Investigate methods that can be used to observe indoctrination and what methods can be used to counteract the negative impacts of indoctrination.

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Tables

Table 1. General Background Information Group A

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Urban/Rural	Junior/Senior	Traveled Abroad
Student A	F	22	U	S	N
Student B	F	20	U	J	Y
Student C	F	23	R	S	Y
Student D	F	21	U	S	N
Student E	F	20	U	S	N
Student F	M	20	U	J	N
Student G	M	21	U	S	N
Student H	M	21	U	S	N
Student I	M	21	U	J	N
Student J	M	21	U	J	N

General Background Information Group B

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Urban/Rural	Junior/Senior	Traveled Abroad
Student A	F	22	U	S	N
Student B	F	20	U	J	Y
Student C	F	23	R	S	Y
Student D	F	21	U	S	N
Student E	F	20	U	S	N
Student F	M	20	U	J	N
Student G	M	21	U	S	N
Student H	M	21	U	S	N
Student I	M	21	U	J	N
Student J	M	21	U	J	N

Table 2.

		Students									
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Themes											
Schooling (secondary school)	Descriptions of high school economics	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	X
	Classes centered on lectures		x		x	x		x		x	X
Concerns about mainland China	Reference to social class / divisions in China			x	x	x			x		X
	Field trips and volunteer work	x	x	x	x		x				
Activities (suggestions for economics)	Learning about the real world through media		x		x	x		x	x	x	X
	Multimedia used in classroom for better understanding of economics	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	X
University attitudes	Personal financial success associated with college education in US	x		x	x		x				

Research Group B

		Students									
		K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Themes											
Schooling (secondary school)	Descriptions of high school economics	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	X
	Classes centered on lectures		x		x	x		x		x	X
Concerns about mainland China	Reference to social class / divisions in China			x	x	x			x		X
	Field trips and volunteer work	x	x	x	x		x				
Activities (suggestions for economics)	Learning about the real world through media		x		x	x		x	x	x	X
	Multimedia used in classroom for better understanding of economics	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	X
University attitudes	Personal financial success associated with college education in US	x		x	x		x				

Research Group A

APPENDIX A
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTBOOK CONTENT BY TOPIC

<i>THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA</i> <i>PERCENTAGE OF TEXTBOOK CONTENT BY</i> <i>TOPIC</i>	
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Citizenship	5.4%
Culture/Art/Media	3.0%
Economic-Domestic	8.2%
Economic-International	14.2%
Education	6.2%
Environment	5.3%
Health	5.9%
Law	4.3%
Leisure	1.6%
Local Community Affairs	29.0%
Local Government	5.2%
Local History	3.0%
Local Population	5.3%
Social Welfare	3.4%

APPENDIX B
ON-LINE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Individual Perceptions' of the People's Republic of China High School Economics

Guidelines

1. When you think about economics in high school, what images come to mind?
2. Looking back in retrospect during high school, what economic topics were covered? Which was most important and why? Which was the least important and why?
3. In your opinion, please describe three high school classroom activities related to economics? As you describe the activities, talk about, how they helped you better understand economics, if possible? If yes, how? If not, why not?
4. Did your high school economic education encourage your own goals? Please describe which ones.
5. How would you describe your concept of financial success?
6. How would you describe your concept of economic success?
7. You have been asked by your high school teacher to improve his economic classes. What would you suggest and why?