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Zhao, Yong (2009) *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*. VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development

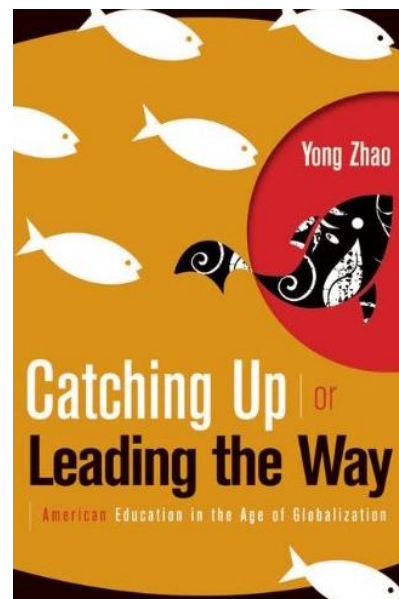
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Reviewed by Mark Oromaner
New York City

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In *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, Yong Zhao throws a wide net, however, it does not go very deep. His opening line in the Preface is, "This book is about education in America but it began as a book about education in China" (p. vi), and, China is never far from his thoughts or writing. Indeed, I found his examples from China spread throughout the book and his chapter, "Why China Isn't a Threat Yet: The Costs of High Scores," to be among his most informative examples and discussions. His counter-example of China, and to a lesser extent South Korea, Japan, and Singapore, diminish his ability to explore in more depth American education within 203 pages of text. I suggest that the ever presence of



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Chinese society has led Zhao to use extreme language in reference to trends in American education, e.g., "... American education has become increasingly authoritarian..." (p. 19), "Even without national standards and national tests, there is little doubt that education in the United States has become authoritarian" (p. 38), and, as a title of a subsection, "The road to educational dictatorship"(p. 40). In the American context, a move along the path of accountability, testing, and national standards should not be equated with an "educational dictatorship" or an "authoritarian" system. Zhao is a University Distinguished Professor at the College of Education, Michigan State University, he was educated through college in China, and he has conducted research in China. On the other hand, he has been a student, professor, researcher in the U.S., and has two children in school in Michigan. His jargon free writing is enhanced by the integration of autobiographical material.

A word or phrase from each of the nine chapters indicates the scope of Zhao's work: 1: Recent education reform in the U.S; 2: From Missile gap to learning gap; 3: Strengths of American education; 4: Why China isn't a threat yet; 5: Globalization; 6: Technology; 7: What knowledge is of most importance in the global and digital economy?; 8: Global competence and digital competence; 9: The future of American education.

Zhao argues that the goals of recent reforms in education in the U.S. have been instituted to address two types of "so-called" achievement gaps. The first is an internal gap and the second is an external gap. Both of these are well-known. The first refers to the performance gap between minority- and white-students within the U.S. and the second to the performance between U.S. students and other students. As to the internal gap, Zhao, of course, cites the role of poverty but goes beyond this to propose that we need to recognize a broader range of talents and abilities in admission to college and to reconsider the value of different talents and knowledge. He never addresses adequately the issue of poverty nor does he devote space to the exploration of the assumptions and consequences of his proposals concerning



Yong Zhao is University Distinguished Professor at the College of Education, Michigan State University, where he also serves as the founding director of the Center for Teaching and Technology, executive director of the Confucius Institute, as well as the US-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence. His research interests include computer gaming and education, diffusion of innovations, teacher adoption of technology, computer-assisted language learning, and globalization and education.

talents, abilities, and knowledge. From the perspective of education policy, the external performance gap is the more important of the two gaps. However, “the only empirical study that examines the relationship between countries’ performance on international tests and other indicators of the countries’ well- being shows either a negative correlation or no correlation between the two”(p. 16). Unfortunately, the emphasis on testing and curricula in reading, science and math and its negative consequences, e.g., relative neglect of other disciplines and talents, is built upon the myth of this so-called gap.

Finally, the paradox that the U.S. students trail many other nations in performance on achievement tests and that the U.S. remains a leading nation in all measures of scientific and technological contributions and output is explained by the “overall philosophical approach to education” (p. 45) in the U.S., e.g., educational opportunities throughout the life cycle, value of a diversity of talents, stress on individualism, “can do” spirit, and the like. These and other qualitative differences go a long way in explaining the gaps in creativity and innovation in favor of the U.S.

At this stage in its history, education policy in the various states of the U.S. is dependent on federal policy and funding. Therefore, Zhao waited for the 2008 presidential elections to write his Afterword. He had hoped that the criticisms of George Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) would have resulted in a rethinking of that policy and the focus on standardized testing in a few areas. The historic election of Barack Obama provided encouragement that drastic changes would be instituted. However, based on Obama’s early 2009 statements concerning education, Zhao is both encouraged and concerned. He is encouraged by Obama’s recognition that we must provide students with knowledge and skills that will enable them to be successful in the new globalized world. At the same time, he is concerned by the president’s emphasis on national standards and on his examples of low performance of U.S. students on tests in math and reading. To quote the president, “The solution to low test scores is not lowering standards—it’s tougher, clearer standards,” (p. 201). A November 29, 2009

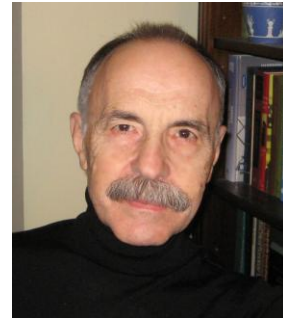
New York Times article “White House Plans Campaign to Promote Science and Math Education” (p. 13) should reinforce Zhao’s ambivalence about President Obama’s education policy. He should appreciate the administration’s campaign to involve companies, foundations, and other nonprofit groups in education. These will encourage TV stations, video game manufacturers and professional associations to provide students with after school educational opportunities. This campaign is necessary according to administration representatives because “In international comparison exams, American students have long lagged behind those in much of Asia and Europe,” (p. 13). A change in administrations may have led to a change in means; however, the goals appear to have remained the same.

On the back cover of the book we are told that readers will “gain a clear understanding” of the kinds of knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenges of globalization and technology. At the same time, Zhao concludes his text with the statement that the book is offered to political leaders, educators, and parents “who are designing and implementing education...” (p. 202). Some readers (e.g., general public, college students) will gain a clearer understanding of the challenges Zhao cites. And, he deserves very high marks for citing the limitations and consequences of the testing and accountability movement, for warning of the dangers of a narrow education, for pointing to the challenges of globalization and virtual reality worlds, for citing the needs to think globally at the local school level. He also deserves high marks for providing state, local, and school decision-makers with numerous suggestions concerning ways in which they can expose students to what he refers to as “the new universal knowledge and skills,” i.e., global competence and digital competence. However, I doubt that decision makers at the highest levels, i.e., federal government, are searching for a clearer understanding but rather for works that support their worldview. At a minimum they are, I assume, looking for works of more depth on each of the important concerns Zhao raises.

Zhao posits that American education is at a crossroads: one road leads to an attempt to “catch up” with others by destroying our strengths and one road leads to an enhancement of our strengths in order to ensure that we continue “leading the way.” My fear is that we will continue to lead in scientific and technological innovation and creativity, however, we will fail to address the issues of internal poverty and inequality.

About the Reviewer

Mark Oromaner is a retired sociologist whose career comprised teaching at a number of four-year colleges and administrative/research positions at a community college. His articles and essays on education have appeared in publications such as *The American Sociologist*, *Community College Review*, *Research in Higher Education*, and, *AAHE (American Association for Higher Education) Bulletin*.



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