

2016

Bringing worlds together: China and America through the eyes of Dr. Yali Zhao

John S. Crumb II

Chara H. Bohan

Georgia State University, cbohan@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mse_facpub

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crumb, John S. II and Bohan, Chara H., "Bringing worlds together: China and America through the eyes of Dr. Yali Zhao" (2016). *Middle and Secondary Education Faculty Publications*. 75.
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mse_facpub/75

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Middle and Secondary Education at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Middle and Secondary Education Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

Bringing Worlds Together: China and America through the Eyes of Dr. Yali Zhao

**John S. Crumb II &
Chara Haeussler Bohan**

Georgia State University

Imagine pioneering a brave new frontier with all of the questions, fears, and excitement that exploration brings. Yali Zhao was not part of the American westward expansion, nor was she an astronaut seeking to step out into outer space. She is however, on a journey to expand multi-cultural relations through cultural exchange and the analysis of multiple historical perspectives. Zhao's journey began in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in northwestern China.¹ Her journey continues today in the Southeastern region of the United States.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Yali Zhao's life story is representative of many Chinese immigrants' experiences in the U.S., yet it is also to show how her biographical experiences are unique. From a laborer's daughter in China to a well-respected scholar in the United States, Zhao's story reflects an interesting dichotomy. A member of the Han majority in China, Zhao was raised in a region where she was a minority among the Uygur, a Muslim ethnic group. As Zhao explored cultural differences in China, she developed a distinct perspective among her fellow Chinese citizens. Zhao would later experience life as a minority yet again in the United States. In the following narrative, we recount Zhao's life during China's Cultural Revolution in Xinjiang province, her collegiate

and graduate life in Xi'an, and Beijing, China and Athens, Georgia, and her work with international students in the United States. These experiences led Zhao to develop an interest in diverse ethnic groups around the globe and to pursue teaching social studies at the university level in order to share this knowledge and interest with future teachers.

Biographical Theory and Methodology

This investigation into Zhao's life story provides an opportunity to expand educational research through biographical inquiry.² Through this biographical inquiry, the complex issues and problems Zhao faced provide insight into her evolving beliefs as an educator.³ For example, Zhao exemplifies a strong work ethic typical of many Chinese who experienced the hardships of the Cultural Revolution. Yet Zhao's life is atypical among Chinese immigrants because of her encounters with diverse groups throughout her life. Zhao's narrative provides a "traditional orientation that includes telling the subject's story in a chronological pattern with more emphasis upon developing a 'quest plot' and describing those life-periods of recognition (or notoriety) to the general public."⁴ Different from an ethnography, Zhao's narrative awakens the imagination to her world view as an educator.⁵

Narrative biography fills an important role in educational research by providing a glimpse into the lived experiences of other educators who confront historical and contemporary issues. As Craig Kridel suggested in 1998, "the study of biography is slowly emerging as a significant development in the field of educational research;" subsequent recent work in educational biography demonstrates its continued acceptance and relevance as a field of educational study.⁶ Documenting Yali Zhao's life experiences, situated in historical and contemporary contexts, fills a gap in educational research, as the lives of Chinese American professors are often omitted from educational biographies. Many benefits emerge from educational research that focuses on the biographies of educators. As Stephen Oates explains, "There are good reasons for biography's appeal. For one thing, it demonstrates that the individual does count – which is reassuring to people in our complex, technical age, who often feel caught up in vast impersonal forces beyond their control."⁷ Zhao's life may appear typical of Chinese immigrants in the professoriate, yet her life experiences are also unique and worthy of investigation and description.

In order to conduct this particular educational biography, the authors read secondary literature on contemporary China in order to situate Zhao's life in historical context. In addition, the authors obtained and reviewed relevant articles that Zhao authored, as well as syllabi and

other materials related to her educational biography. Both authors held individual personal interviews with Yali Zhao on two separate occasions. Subsequently, both asked follow-up questions with Zhao when needed for clarification purposes. Finally, the authors submitted the manuscript to Zhao at least four times to provide opportunities for her to correct any misinterpretations and to serve the function of member-checking. Zhao provided feedback and editorial corrections each time to ensure accuracy of the authors' description of her life. Member-checking also served as a means to honor Zhao's perspective on her lived experiences. Thus, the authors' approach reflected a traditional biographical approach that relies on contextual documents, as well as incorporated oral history interviews, in order to give voice to the biographical subject.

The relationship between the authors and the biographical subject remains complex. The primary author is a doctoral student at the university where Zhao works and the secondary author is a colleague at the same institution. The first author is married to a woman of Chinese origin and the second author has an adopted child from China. Thus, both authors have a personal interest in Chinese culture and history. The first author never studied under Yali Zhao as she teaches in the elementary education department, thus a hierarchical relationship does not exist. The second author has been a colleague with Zhao for a decade and they have a collegial working relationship. Certainly, these relationships with Zhao enhanced access to information about her life experiences. She was able to clarify statements in the manuscript quickly. However, the research was also complicated by the personal relationship, especially when the authors and biographical subject held differing viewpoints. For example, Zhao did not want the authors to include a picture of Confucius that she found offensive. The authors agreed to change the image. In another instance, Zhao and the second author came to an understanding after considerable deliberation that their views on the one-child policy respectfully differed. Thus, the biography reflects a traditional approach to writing about a life, while simultaneously honoring the lived experience of the subject.

While deference to Zhao's perspective on her lived experience is offered, several differences between Zhao's written account of her cross-cultural experience and the authors' perspectives emerged. For example, the authors provide more details on the socio-cultural and historical context of the Cultural Revolution as well as post-Mao China and how these events impacted Zhao's life. Zhao provides a more personal and emotional description of her life in her autobiographical narrative and in-person interviews. Moreover, the authors reference literature related to human rights from an American perspective, and they offer a comparison of the Chinese and American education systems. Zhao does not describe these contex-

tual issues in her narrative and observes that her perspective of China's government and policies is less critical. Thus, this educational biography highlights elements of Zhao's life that she has not detailed in her own writings. Ultimately, both the authors and Zhao believe her life story has meaning and relevance, particularly for individuals who are minorities or who face cross-cultural challenges.

Life Prior to the 21st Century

Yali Zhao was born in 1965, one year prior to the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution that was initiated and led by Chairman Mao Zedong. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and lasted until Chairman Mao's death in 1976.⁸ During this timeframe, all of China under Mao was cast into upheaval, which was later referred to as "ten years of catastrophe."⁹ All forms of capitalism including land ownership were repudiated and anyone practicing capitalism was persecuted and publicly humiliated in endless denouncing meetings.¹⁰

Some Americans might question how a society could blindly follow the dictates of one man. Understanding the Cultural Revolution is difficult given the geographic and cultural differences between America and China, but considerable literature has been published recently to illuminate this time period in Chinese history for American audiences.¹¹ For the vast majority of the people of China during the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao was viewed as a diety.¹² Controlling all forms of the media and education, Mao gave orders and the people most often obeyed without question.¹³ Chinese citizens were passive in politics and possessed few human rights.¹⁴ Authors of histories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution have painted a portrait of a time period that appears harsh, particularly from an American perspective. For example, Fairbank and Goldman wrote in their history of China that the Chinese, "...have no human rights because they have been taught that the assertion of human rights (such as due process of law) would be selfish and antisocial and therefore ignoble. It would also be severely punished."¹⁵ According to estimates, there were around one million victims of the Cultural Revolution, many of whom did not survive.¹⁶ "To Chinese, so sensitive to peer-group esteem, to be beaten and humiliated in public before a jeering crowd, including colleagues and old friends, was like having one's skin taken off."¹⁷

Yet, not all Chinese people experienced such brutal conditions during the Cultural Revolution, and Yali Zhao believes that such a description did not match the historical reality that her family experienced during her childhood in Xinjiang. In a recent interview and in a published chapter, Zhao noted that even though her family, "experienced some discrimina-

tion being labeled as 'class of landlords', we were not physically bullied or cruelly treated."¹⁸ The discrimination to the Zhao children was more of a verbal or psychological kind as the topic was rampant in school textbooks and public slogans. While the brutal descriptions of life during the Cultural Revolution did happen to many people, Yali Zhao noted that her life experience was not as harsh as those who had more ruthless encounters. In reading a draft of this manuscript for member-checking purposes, Zhao explained that a few reasons accounted for these differences in experiences.¹⁹ First, she was very young, aged 1-11 years old, during the Cultural Revolution. A child's understanding differs from an adult's understanding, and certainly Zhao's knowledge and experience of Chinese politics would have been limited at such a tender age. Second, her parents worked exceptionally hard to gain people's respect, despite their landlord label. To this day, Zhao continues to exhibit a strong work ethic and a positive view of the world. This understanding is not intended to convey that all people with strong work ethics were as fortunate as Zhao's family, nor that the contrary is true. During the Cultural Revolution many Chinese people lost their homes, jobs, educational opportunities, and sometimes their own lives.²⁰

Zhao's family's class was that of "landlord,"²¹ even though her grandparents' family in central China did not actually own a lot of land before new China was founded in 1949 and her parents were very young and had no land at all. The landlord title held much disdain and hatred. To escape condemnation and also answer the call of young people to improve conditions in remote and frontier areas, Zhao's parents migrated from central China to Xinjiang province in hope that the Cultural Revolution in this region would not be as frenzied as in the central and eastern parts of China. Family members were hired and worked as hard laborers for the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), where many Han Chinese settled down for both building and defending Xinjiang.²² Xinjiang was known as a "minority"²³ region (home of the ethnic Uyghur), so Zhao grew up in a "very very diverse part of China."²⁴ The Han is the dominant ethnic group (the majority) throughout China; however, it composes only a minority part of the population in the five ethnic minority autonomous regions in China; Xinjiang Uyghur, Guangxi Zhuang, Tibet, Ningxia Hui and Inner Mongolia (see Map 1). Zhao grew up in an Uyghur dominated area and acquired an appreciation for Uyghur food, music, crafts, and other aspects of the Uyghur culture.²⁵ Fear of ethnic tension existed in the region, but Zhao was curious about the Uyghur Muslim way of life. She also wanted to discover more about the Uyghur people.²⁶ Growing up in Xinjiang, Zhao learned that it was critical to act in harmony with other ethnic groups.²⁷ "I still remember clearly how often we were admonished by

our parents and teachers that we must respect the lifestyles and religious practices of the Uyghur people to avoid triggering any ethnic conflicts."²⁸

Being raised in Xinjiang brought mixed emotions. While she was proud of her parents for being pioneers on China's "western frontier", Zhao felt as if she was "living at the end of the world and had been forgotten by the rest of China - a sentiment shared by many in my hometown."²⁹ Zhao noted that her family lived far in the south of Xinjiang from the 1950s through the 1990s. When she was a young girl in the 1970s, it took at least eight days at that time to reach cities such as Beijing by bus and or train. While growing up, Yali Zhao noted that some sporadic unrest between Han Chinese and minority groups existed in Xinjiang, but the relationship between groups was tolerable. Generally speaking, as a young child, Yali Zhao did not perceive the need to cope with such issues as she lived mostly with Han people.³⁰ Additionally, relations with China's neighboring countries to the west "had become tense and unstable."³¹ Compared to China's eastern provinces, Xinjiang lagged behind both in terms of economic and educational opportunities.³²



Map 1 (Five autonomous regions of China highlighted in light gray)³³

The Cultural Revolution and Education

Prior to 1912, the emperor and nobility dominated Chinese political culture (a form of Chinese feudalism), while the vast majority of people worked as peasants.³⁴ This stratified economic and political system led to considerable unrest in the early part of the 20th century. Military coups and civil wars plagued the country until 1949 when China became a communist country under Chairman Mao.³⁵ The Chinese government under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party extirpated this old feudal system and began classifying citizens into various social categories.³⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people were further divided into the Seven Black Categories and the Five Red Categories.³⁷ Citizens who belonged to the Five Red Categories were given preferential status;

they included: revolutionary soldiers, workers, poor and lower-middle class peasants, revolutionary officers and revolutionary martyrs.³⁸ Citizens who were members of the Seven Black Categories included: landlords, rich farmers, reactionary bad elements, rightists, traitors and spies, and their children.³⁹ Those in the Seven Black Categories were excluded from many privileges. Among the privileges they were denied was joining the Communist Party and the army, being promoted at work, and pursuing higher levels of education.⁴⁰

As a young student, Zhao found that carrying the label of one of the Seven Black Categories to be tremendously painful because the anti-landlord topic was pervasive in all the textbooks they read at that time, mostly during her elementary school years (1972-1976).⁴¹ This humiliating status remained with Zhao's parents, siblings and herself no matter how well they behaved.⁴²

My siblings and I were naturalized 'landlords,' a title of which we were painfully ashamed; it was a nightmare that we had to endure for many years, whether it was on the first day of school, when we had to write down our family's classification on the registration forms, or when we were reading textbooks about how the poor peasants were mistreated and exploited by the cruel landlords. Such themes were prevalent and ubiquitous in every school subject area, even in math application problems. Slogans and posters denouncing the Black Categories always hung conspicuously on the walls, often making me feel as though I were sitting on pins and needles. I was unhappy and confused about why young people like me who had grown up "under the red flag" (a term referring to generations who were born after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949) had to carry on the humiliating burden of our ancestors.⁴³

Yet, Zhao perceived that she did not face arduous discrimination overall because she continuously worked hard to earn respect and was an honored student.⁴⁴ Her parents, however, did encounter discrimination, and consequently Yali Zhao was always aware of the discrimination enacted towards people with such labels. Zhao reflects that it was through this difficult time, she learned humility, patience, and kindness.⁴⁵ These experiences "forced me to become strong and optimistic when facing challenges."⁴⁶



Figure 1
"Liuxia Zhi severely berates Confucius"⁴⁷

Education had been emphasized and valued throughout Chinese history until the Cultural Revolution. Confucius, the central figure and founder of Chinese private education, was criticized and many of his temples and statues were ruined during that time. "What better way to attack old belief systems than to attack their perceived champion, Confucius"⁴⁸ (see Figure 1). Not only were capitalists targeted and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, but so were intellectuals, a category which included teachers. However, Zhao's mother and father still believed in the intrinsic value of education, and encouraged their children to work hard in school to achieve high grades and become teachers. "My parents were always very humble and very nice people. They taught me to work hard and be nice to (other) people. By working hard you may someday have an opportunity (for advancement)."⁴⁹

Zhao and her siblings, an older sister and a younger brother continued to encourage each other to put forth their best effort. According to Zhao, of the three children in her immediate family, she worked the hardest. In her hometown in Xinjiang, if a person was born into a family of a five black-listed category, the only career choices available was to become a farmer or a hard laborer. When Zhao was young, she dreamed of being in the military but members of her family could not qualify. Chinese textbooks wrote about how lovely and honorable military service was, and thus Yali Zhao thought she would enjoy serving her county. Like military requirements in the U.S., Chinese soldiers needed to reach an age of maturity before serving. Yali Zhao was 11 years old when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and social classification ended in 1979. By the time she was 18 years old and able to attend a university, she realized that obtaining a college education was more attractive and honorable than joining the military. Yet, during the Cultural Revolution, Zhao's parents hoped that if their children worked diligently and earned high grades in

school, local schools might hire them as teachers.⁵⁰ During the Cultural Revolution, teaching represented a career opportunity for people like her family members.

Life after the Cultural Revolution

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, political events started unfolding in China that would profoundly affect Zhao's life. While she was in fifth grade in 1976, Mao Zedong died. Hua Guofeng took over as Chairman of the Central Committee, bringing the Cultural Revolution to an end.⁵¹ Zhao entered middle school, a time of great transition for her and for China. Hua was replaced by Deng Xiaoping, who ruled China from 1978 until his retirement in 1992. Deng recognized that Mao's economic policies had failed China, plunging the nation into isolation and poverty.⁵² The Cultural Revolution had also damaged Chinese universities, as Mao attacked what he deemed as "reactionary bourgeois academic authorities."⁵³ Jung Chang in her tome on Mao describes in great detail the atrocities Mao incited in the universities.⁵⁴ Fortunately, Deng instituted new economic reforms that once again opened international relations with the western world. A few years after the Cultural Revolution, new thoughts and ideas flowed into China from the West. Zhao and her siblings became able to attend college in the early 1980s. By the time Yali Zhao and her siblings enrolled in college, expectations and college admission in China had changed dramatically. In the end, all three children attended universities in different areas and selected different majors to study.

The educational system in place at the time of Zhao's collegiate experience dictated that college students from China's frontier towns would return to their hometown after graduation. The policy was instituted by the government to improve the frontier and remote areas as they lagged behind in education and other opportunities.⁵⁵ However, this policy was perceived to be unfair by many students from frontier areas because they wanted to live in more populated and cosmopolitan areas and wanted a chance to pursue careers outside their hometown.⁵⁶ If a student took and passed the graduate school exam and was admitted to a university, the student did not have to return to the remote hometown. This path is the option that Yali Zhao followed.

Zhao, like many students from remote areas, hoped that she would be able to remain in a cosmopolitan area after graduation. For Zhao, it was important to avoid the college assignment system which would have forced her to return to her hometown. Although she was admitted to a graduate program in another city, Zhao decided against attending because she was not familiar with the city. The decision to turn down the

graduate program opportunity meant that Zhao was once again enrolled in the college assignment system. Zhao discovered that some colleges in Urumqi, the capital city of her hometown province of Xinjiang, were recruiting outstanding university graduates as part of the faculty. The opportunity to work in Xinjiang would allow Zhao to be closer to her family than most other cities in China. Confident she would be hired because of her outstanding grades and some awards she had won in her college program, she was asked to conduct a public lesson that her departmental faculty would attend. Being asked to conduct a public lesson was a unique opportunity afforded only a few students.⁵⁷

On the day of her graduation job assignment, when she would learn where she would be employed, Zhao received a pleasant surprise. "I was totally shocked to hear that I would be hired by our department to teach English as an assistant professor. Of course, I happily accepted this position as I knew the university and the city Xi'an so well...It was my dream university at that time."⁵⁸

Zhao pursued her degree with a fiery passion in order to bring honor to her family and learn new knowledge. Because of her deep interest in the English language and the influence of her high school English teacher, when Zhao graduated from high school, she wanted to teach English. Her study of English reflected her continuing interest in diverse cultures. In 1987, Yali Zhao earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, China. In China, Normal Universities specialize in educating college students to become teachers in specific subjects. Upon graduation, she was hired by Shaanxi Normal University and worked as an assistant professor of English. This achievement was a great honor for Zhao's family and for Zhao the position brought a sense of relief and security.⁵⁹ "I began to build my self-esteem and confidence, both in communicating with people of various backgrounds and seeking ways to accomplish my dreams."⁶⁰

Yali Zhao's dreams continued to come true as she migrated to the city of Beijing, a city which held special meaning for Zhao, not only for its elite status as China's capital and cultural center, but also because of how she was educated about Chairman Mao when she was young.⁶¹ Zhao further developed her interest in diverse cultures in Beijing as she began an advanced study of English language and Western Cultures. Zhao earned a Postgraduate Advanced Study Certificate in English Language and Literature from Beijing University of Science and Technology, in Beijing, China in 1991. Upon graduation, Zhao was hired by the university. As an assistant professor in Beijing, Zhao taught a course called, "English-Speaking Countries and Western Culture."⁶² The course not only broadened her knowledge of western history and culture, but it sparked Zhao's inter-

est in how western countries dealt with diverse ethnic and social issues.⁶³ At the University of Science and Technology, she worked as an assistant professor for six years and as an associate professor for three years. From 1995 to 1999, Zhao also served as the Coordinator of Foreign Affairs at the same university. During the 1990s, acquiring an academic job in China was considerably different from the process in the United States. In the United States, the vetting process is quite rigorous and often requires a doctorate from an institution of higher education. Chinese institutions of higher education faced the challenge of rebuilding in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.

Zhao's tenure at the University of Science and Technology reinforced her strong work ethic. Zhao authored five articles that were published in *Foreign Literature Review* (China), and three articles in *Book Reading Weekly* (China). She also translated and published many articles in newspapers and journals. The subject matter included western literary works such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Beowulf* and writings by authors Robert Frost and Robin Robinson. In 1995, Zhao co-authored the book *English Advertising and Culture*.

Zhao met her future husband in Lanzhou and married in 1988 in Xi'an when she was 23 years old. Her husband's career seemed to mirror her own. Both were tenured professors at the University of Science and Technology. Both would move to the U.S. and become doctoral students, and both would teach at universities in Georgia. Their daughter was born in 1991 and was in fifth grade when the family immigrated to the United States.

Life in the 21st Century

With the ushering in of a new millennium, Zhao experienced dramatic changes in both her life and career. Zhao's diligence and interest were evident in 2000, when she came to the United States. "I yearned to visit an English-speaking country so that I could gain some firsthand knowledge and experience of life in the western world. At the same time, I felt the urgent need to obtain a doctoral degree for my academic advancement and promotion."⁶⁴ She was admitted to the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens, GA where she began working on her doctoral degree in social sciences. In addition to her doctoral studies, in 2003, she also began working on her Master's degree in Instructional Technology at UGA. In Athens, Georgia, Zhao once again was a minority among the people with whom she lived.

The year 2004 was full of many important events in Zhao's life. Zhao received her Ph.D. degree in social sciences and an Interdisciplinary

Qualitative Studies Graduate Certificate. In 2004, Zhao also became an assistant professor at Georgia State University (GSU) in the Department of Early Childhood education. Georgia State is located in Atlanta, GA. Zhao experienced the birth of her second child in 2007, an event that was made possible because of the move to the U.S., as Zhao was able to avoid China's one-child policy.⁶⁵ In 1979, the Chinese government instituted the one-child policy, but in October 2015 the law was changed to a two-child policy.

In 2010, Zhao was extended tenure at GSU and became an associate professor. With this promotion, her accomplishments and security were solidified. Not surprisingly, Zhao has been extremely industrious, especially after arriving in the United States, as she honors her father and mother with her diligence. Since 2000, Zhao has delivered over 50 presentations at various conferences across the United States. Zhao has applied for and received grants and many awards including: the Outstanding Contribution to Georgia "We the People" Program (2007),⁶⁶ and the Distinguished Research in Teacher Education Award by the Georgia Association of Teacher Educators (2005-2006).

Research in the United States

Zhao's research work in the United States initially reviewed how social science classes and character development among students changed in China during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, she identifies how traditional values of good citizenship were replaced by the need for students to become aware of the influence of globalization and the need to become socially adaptable.⁶⁷ This interest in globalization reflects Zhao's understanding of diversity that stemmed from her early life experiences.

During the beginning of her doctoral studies, Zhao did not foresee how social studies education would become relevant to her career and at one point even regretted her decision to major in it.⁶⁸ The program matched neither her interests nor career direction. This attitude would eventually change as Zhao saw that the curriculum included an abundance of information about western history, geography and culture. Zhao realized that she could better serve her Chinese college students when she returned to China by obtaining her doctoral degree in the U.S. Gradually, through her coursework she began to understand how social studies education could help shape the minds of students and influence their future actions. In Georgia, Zhao became even more receptive to the diverse cultural elements of various ethnic groups. Just as she had appreciated many aspects of the Uygur culture during her childhood, she was willing to expand her knowledge of the western world. At this point, Zhao embraced social

studies education as her passion and career.⁶⁹

Zhao's work started to change as she began researching elementary school teacher and student perspectives of social studies content in the United States.⁷⁰ In one of her published articles, Zhao corroborated previous research about the negative perceptions of social studies that exist among some elementary students and how many students do not understand the value of social studies. This study was an outer reflection of how Zhao started examining social studies education in the United States as part of her research.

While working on her doctorate at the University of Georgia, Zhao took several instructional technology courses.⁷¹ Originally she wanted to learn some new skills for teaching.⁷² Gradually, she found it to be challenging and entertaining. As Zhao was searching for a dissertation topic, she realized that she could combine two of her interests, social studies and technology. She wanted to find out to what degree social studies teachers were incorporating technology into their pedagogy. Zhao wrote several journal articles that focused on the integration of technology in the classroom; more specifically, Zhao addressed the relative lag in social studies teachers' utilization of technology in the classroom when compared to other content areas, such as math and science.⁷³ Zhao cites several reasons for the lack of technical infusion into the social studies curricula which include: insufficient technology, inadequate training and lack of planning time.⁷⁴ Zhao noted in her research that the use of technology in the social studies classroom often promotes student engagement.⁷⁵ The study's findings concluded that while teacher training could help teachers integrate technology in the classroom, it does not ensure that teachers would increase their usage of technology.⁷⁶

One of Zhao's pedagogical passions is to help pre-service elementary teachers better understand cultural diversity, thus demonstrating a unique quality that sets her apart. As an integral part of her life, Zhao wishes to impart her love for diversity to her students. With the ever increasing number of students with limited English proficiency entering American schools, it is important for teachers to comprehend the diverse backgrounds that their students bring to the classroom.⁷⁷ Zhao believes that pre-service teacher exchange programs can provide one possible way for teachers to further develop and keep a positive relationship with immigrant students.⁷⁸ Zhao directs a program that brings American college students at an urban institution to schools in China, so that the students can gain direct experience with the Chinese education system.

The Immigration Experience: Career with a Purpose

Prior to entering the United States, Zhao intended on returning to

China once she earned her doctoral degree.⁷⁹ However, family and professional reasons altered that decision. While writing her dissertation, Zhao's husband and daughter were both at crucial stages in their respective academic careers. Additionally, the United States offered Zhao an opportunity to conduct multicultural research from multiple perspectives.⁸⁰ Perhaps one of the most important reasons that Zhao decided to stay in the U.S. was that she had found a career with a purpose. In her eyes, she had become a cultural ambassador for students from diverse backgrounds.⁸¹ She became impassioned about researching and teaching educational issues while working with prospective students to help them serve culturally diverse students.

Once she had decided that she wished to remain in the United States, one of the greatest challenges for Zhao was being able to stay. The process for obtaining a green card was long, tedious, complicated, and expensive. Dealing with the immigration service bureaucracy was extremely frustrating at times. She feared that the delays in processing her status placed her tenure in peril. Zhao's temporary work immigration status would not allow her to apply for external grants nor were some academic opportunities, such as federal student loans and in-state scholarships, available for her daughter.⁸² Although her daughter had attended public schools in Georgia for many years, she did not have a green card. However, Zhao's diligent character allowed her to persevere with the immigration process.

As an international student, Zhao experienced a handful of language and cultural barriers in the American educational system, but perhaps not as many as other students; in the meantime, many American teachers lacked appropriate understanding of Chinese students' cultural background. In order to facilitate student learning, it is important for teachers to empathize with their students and teach from culturally responsive pedagogy. Therefore, Zhao started to lead college of education students in cross-cultural immersion experiences in China so that pre-service teachers can become better prepared to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is not sufficient for students and instructors to learn about other cultures, but they must also learn from and with others who have diverse cultural backgrounds.⁸³ As an example, Zhao views university study abroad programs as successful because they give students opportunities to develop global and cultural perspectives.

Zhao wishes for social studies teachers to embrace diversity by conveying to their students that for every event, multiple perspectives exist and that often history is far more complex than the stories depicted in textbooks. In a study that Zhao helped conduct, the authors analyzed the Korean War from multiple perspectives using textbook excerpts from China, Japan, Russia, North Korea, South Korea (all translated into English)

and the United States.⁸⁴ Headline news involving North Korea's further development of its nuclear weapons program provided an opportunity for students to examine the past and better understand its ramifications on the present and future.⁸⁵

The ways we were educated, the cultures we grew up in, and the multiple perspectives we learned in our academic life have greatly influenced our narration and understanding of the Korean War. We will not hide our biases, which are always there when we interpret historical events. We see history not as a fixed set of facts, but as an interpretive process of debates, controversies, and conflicting issues.⁸⁶

By introducing or further developing analyses of multiple perspectives, teachers are able to implement lessons involving student inquiry around issues-centered problems.⁸⁷ One of the exciting elements about Zhao's work is that she does not simply point out problems that exist in education, but sets forth in word and actions to find solutions to these issues. One of the obstacles that teachers might have in implementing a lesson centered on the Korean War may be based on limited resources such as time and information.⁸⁸ To partially compensate for the lack of resources, Zhao helps provide detailed lesson plans and materials for teachers. In her course syllabi, Zhao has students read works about diversity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multiple perspectives. These readings include works by Linda Darling-Hammond, Geneva Gay, and Beverly Daniel Tatum.⁸⁹ She also has students engage in projects that reflect her commitment to diversity and cross-cultural understanding.

Differences in Educational Systems

Transitioning from the role of student in one educational system to the role of teacher in another educational system demonstrates Zhao's adaptability. Zhao has been able to examine the educational systems in China and the United States as both an instructor and a parent. Zhao posits that each system is moving in seemingly opposite directions. "In China, education has become more student-centered while the United States is moving toward what China used to be: more teacher-centered and exam-focused."⁹⁰

Zhao comments that students in China typically are much more respectful of their teachers than their counterparts in the United States. American classrooms are much more diverse, and students are encouraged to voice their opinions. Some students may perceive this climate as

less respectful than a homogeneous classroom where students sit passively and listen to the teacher. Clearly, the pedagogies in American and Chinese classrooms are divergent, and can be misinterpreted. Interestingly, Zhao also believes that students in China are becoming less respectful, because of the one-child policy, the parents and grandparents are easily tempted to spoil the only child. In China, moving to a more student-centered approach is difficult for teachers because of large class sizes, in comparison to the United States. Each elementary class often ranges from 45 to 50 students, while middle school classes are composed of 60 or more students.⁹¹ Depending upon the particular school, the class sizes in some high schools can even be higher. The large student numbers make "small" group activities difficult to facilitate because of the restricted confines of each classroom and limited teaching resources.

Obviously, there are many cultural differences between the Chinese and American systems of education. The American system seems to be much more open to diverse student cultures than the more homogenous student culture of the Chinese system. However, one system that some school districts are implementing in the United States, the cohort system, has been used in China for many years.⁹² Under the system in China, Zhao explained in her interview, students who are just beginning in elementary school are divided into different classes and they remain in those classes with the same classmates until they graduate from that particular school (elementary or middle). Each class will stay together for all subjects (math, art, Chinese, etc.). Traditionally, in the United States, a group of students will remain together for some subjects and separate for others. The following year, these groups of students will be mixed up again and will be part of a different group of students. One of the advantages to a cohort system is in allowing teachers and students to build relationships with each other that they can strengthen over the course of several years.⁹³ Students can also form a community in which they develop strong collaborative skills.⁹⁴ However, Zhao is quick to note a potential disadvantage of the system if students perceive the teacher to be a poor and uncaring instructor, which can hinder the learning process. Often, students, teachers and parents will work together to solve this potential problem. According to Zhao, teaching policies also differ between China and the United States. For instance, teachers in China specialize in a specific subject, even in elementary school; a math teacher in elementary school will only teach math.

The college admission processes for China and the United States are distinctive. The Chinese admission process is much more rigid and requires students to demonstrate the utmost in diligence if they wish to be successful. In China, high school graduates must participate in the National College Entrance Exam if they wish to be admitted into a college or

university.⁹⁵ This exam is administered once a year and all students must take the exam at the same time and on the same days, June 6th, 7th and 8th. In most recent years, some prestigious universities started to offer early application and test opportunities for highly academically successful students. After the exams, students must estimate their own scores and select a limited number of colleges or universities and majors they wish to attend based on their perceived performance.⁹⁶ Once a student is admitted and has chosen a major, he or she normally cannot change the major. All students in Chinese colleges and universities are required to pass the National English Test Band 4 before receiving their diploma.⁹⁷ According to Zhao, the expectations for success depend greatly on the industriousness and perseverance of the student. In the United States, students have a broader range of flexibility in deciding which major they wish to pursue as well as which college or university they wish to attend.

Zhao believes that only some aspects of the education systems of both China and the United States are comparable. In China, the education system by and large is unified on a national scale. In the United States, fifty states and Washington D.C. have their own distinctive school systems and within most of those school systems educational subsystems exist. For example, in the state of Georgia, each county has its own school system. However, the Common Core is facilitating a national curriculum in the United States. Thus, the two worlds of China and the U.S. appear to be moving closer together in the area of standardization in education.

Philosophy

Yali Zhao has a desire for her students to appreciate cross-cultural perspectives. Zhao states that she is passionate that her students learn to view the world through a global lens. It is only by broadening their awareness of the world beyond their own borders that American students will be able to more fully grasp that they live in a complex and increasingly interconnected world. According to Zhao,

More than ever, there is the need for people all over the world to understand better the differences between people, nations, culture, religious beliefs, and values in order to live peacefully in this increasingly diverse but globalized world. More than ever, schools need to integrate global education into school curricula and throughout student school life to prepare them for the new challenges of the twenty-first century.⁹⁸

In her own life, Zhao wishes to continue to broaden her international communication network. Zhao's passion for global studies stems from her experiences living as a minority in nearly all of her residences.

For Yali Zhao the journey continues. Like all explorers, Zhao has faced many challenges in her life. From navigating the waters of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to overcoming the hurdles of language and cultural barriers present in the United States for many immigrants, Zhao perseveres and overcomes. Zhao still has many obstacles ahead of her but she is willing to meet them with a firm resolve to expand global awareness among all of her students. Zhao increases this global awareness in part by conveying to her students that human history is complex. One method of helping students understand complexity better is by investigating historical events through multiple perspectives. What is her next goal? "Right now I want to keep on building cultural bridges between the United States and China."⁹⁹

Throughout her life Yali Zhao has exemplified the diligent work ethic typical of her generation. Persevering through the challenges of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese educational system and immigration to the United States, Zhao exemplifies that the diligence bears great rewards. Yet through the perseverance, Zhao was able to foster an attitude that was receptive to various cultures that were different from her own. Zhao's narrative sets her apart in the field of education because of her commitment to teaching her students and her colleagues of the importance of diversity that arose from her own life experiences as a minority in an autonomous region of China and in the southeastern United States.

Notes

¹ Dr. Yali Zhao had an opportunity to preview this manuscript on several occasions. She graciously provided feedback and checked the information for accuracy. While Zhao humbly expressed that she did not believe that she was worthy of a biography, her experiences speak to the importance of drawing connections and comparisons between China and the United States. She participated in the biographical project as a means to help others.

² Craig Kridel, *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Craig Kridel, "Biographical Meanderings: Reflections and Reminiscences on Writing Educational Biography." *Vitae Scholasticae* 25, (2008): 5-16. Education Source, EBSCOhost (accessed January 17, 2016).

⁵ Craig Kridel, *Writing Educational Biography*.

⁶ Craig Kridel, "Introduction" in *Writing Educational Biography*, 3; Craig Kridel, "Biographical Meanderings: Reflections and Reminiscences," 5-16; Craig Kridel, "A Biographical Research Bookshelf: Method of the Madness." *Vitae Scholasticae* 31, no. 2 (2014): 5-12.

⁷ Oates, *Biography as History*, 5.

⁸ J. A. G. Roberts, *A Concise History of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 278.

⁹ Lindsay Cafarella and Chara Bohan, "The Top Five narratives for Teaching about China's Cultural Revolution." *Social Education* 76, no. 3 (2012), 128-131.

¹⁰ "Cultural Revolution Redux." *China Post*. December 9, 2007. <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/editorial/2007/12/09/134199/Cultural-Revolution.htm> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jeffrey Hays, "Cultural Revolution---Enemies and Horrors." *Facts and Details*. April, 2012. <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=67> (accessed April 15, 2013).

¹³ Lindsay Cafarella and Chara Bohan, "The Top Five narratives for Teaching about China's Cultural Revolution," 128-131.

¹⁴ Ji-Li Jiang, *Red Scarf Girl* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 265.

¹⁵ John Fairbank, & Merle Goldman, *China a New History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 383.

¹⁶ Ibid., 383.

¹⁷ Ibid., 402.

¹⁸ Yali Zhao, interview by Chara Bohan, March 24, 2015, transcript, personal interview at Georgia State University; Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ An Hua, interview by John Crumb, January 31, 2016, transcript, phone interview.

²¹ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.

²² Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

²³ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 115.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Ibid.

³³ "File:China autonomous regions numbered.svg." accessed December 13, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:China_autonomous_regions_numbered.svg#file

³⁴ "Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party.

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_23.htm (accessed March 22, 2015).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Deborah Sommer, "Images for Iconoclasts: Images of Confucius in the Cultural Revolution." *East West Connections* 7, No. 1 (December 2007), 3.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.

⁴² Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

⁴³ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁷ Deborah Sommer, "Images for Iconoclasts: Images of Confucius in the Cultural Revolution." *East West Connections* 7, No. 1 (2007), 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jonathan Mirsky, "How Deng did it." *The New York Times*, October 21, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/books/review/deng-xiaoping-and-the-transformation-of-china-by-ezra-f-vogel-book-review.html?_r=1& (accessed November 16, 2013).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ J. A. G. Roberts, "A Concise History of China," 279-282.

⁵⁴ Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 514-518.

⁵⁵ Yali Zhao, email message to John Crumb, January 27, 2016.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Yali Zhao, "English-Speaking Countries and Western Culture." Class taught at Beijing University of Science and Technology, Beijing, China, January–May, 1991.

⁶³ Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

⁶⁴ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.

⁶⁵ Charlie Jane Adams, "Did China's one-child policy actually reduce population growth? io9 (January, 29, 2014), <http://io9.com/did-chinas-one-child-policy-actually-reduce-population-1511784972> (accessed May 3, 2015).

⁶⁶ "We the People" is a project developed by the National Endowment for the Humanities, centered on the understanding and teaching of the stories of American culture. "Bringing Our Stories to Life." *Georgia Humanities Council Annual Report*, (2005), 4. http://www.georgiahumanities.org/about/annualreports/GHC_AnnualReport05_FINAL.pdf (accessed November 23, 2013).

⁶⁷ Yali Zhao, "Curriculum Change and Development of Chinese Social Science Education Since the 1980s," *The International Journal of Social Education* 19, no.1 (March 2004), 28.

⁶⁸ Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Yali Zhao, and John Hoge, "What Elementary Students and Teachers Say about Social Studies." *Social Studies* 96, no. 5 (September 2005), 216.

- ⁷¹ Yali Zhao, "Social Studies Teachers' Perspectives of Technology Integration." *Journal Of Technology and Teacher Education* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 2007), 312.
- ⁷² Ibid., 313.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 319.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 329-330.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Yali Zhao, "Impact of Immersion Experience in Immigrant Community on Pre-service Teachers' Cross-cultural and Global Awareness." *Journal of Education and Human Development* 1, no. 2 (2007), 1.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.
- ⁷⁹ Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ Yali Zhao, Laura Meyers, and Barbara Meyers, "Cross-cultural Immersion in China: Preparing Pre-service Elementary Teachers to Work with Diverse Student Populations in the United States." *Asia-Pacific Journal Of Teacher Education* 37, no. 3 (August 2009), 295.
- ⁸² Yali Zhao, "Straddling Multiple Culture Worlds," 113-139.
- ⁸³ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.
- ⁸⁴ Lin Lin, Yali Zhao, Masato Ogawa, and John Hoge, "Teaching Historical and Current Events from Multiple Perspectives The Korean War and Six-Party Talks." *Social Studies Research and Practice* 4, no. 3 (2009), 56.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., 59.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 57-58.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., 58.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., 58.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 61-75; Yali Zhao, Course syllabi Georgia State University, College of Education and Human Development, ECEE 3255 "Cultural Foundations in Early Childhood and Elementary Education," Fall 2015 and EDCI 8650 "Curriculum and Instruction in Contemporary Urban Settings," Spring 2015.
- ⁹⁰ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.
- ⁹¹ Ibid.
- ⁹² Ibid.
- ⁹³ Ibid.
- ⁹⁴ Anon, "12 Differences between Chinese Education and American Education," *Dalian Diary*. <http://slkchina.wordpress.com/2007/06/01/12-differences-between-chinese-education-and-american-education/> (accessed June 3, 2013).
- ⁹⁵ Kim Stanley, "Education 101: What is a Cohort Program?" *examiner.com*. April 10, 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/article/education-101-what-is-a-cohort-program> (accessed June 3, 2013).
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.
- ⁹⁷ Zhan Ying, "Washback on Chinese learners: An impact study of the College English Test Band 4." The University of Hong Kong. http://www.iaea.info/documents/paper_2b71287c.pdf (accessed June 3, 2013).
- ⁹⁸ Yali Zhao, Lin Lin, and John D. Hoge, "Establishing the need for cross-cultural and global issues research." *International Education Journal* 8, no. 1 (April 2007), 139.
- ⁹⁹ Yali Zhao, interview by John Crumb, May 23, 2013, transcript, phone interview.