



## Preface

This book is about education in America but it began as a book about education in China. My original intention was to write about the mammoth challenges China faces in education to curb America's surging enthusiasm for China's education practices that seem to be an object of admiration, a model of excellence, or a source of competitive students who will threaten America's future. I was going to write about China's efforts to decentralize curriculum and textbooks, diversify assessment and testing, and encourage local autonomy and innovations in order to cultivate creativity and well-rounded talents. I was also going to write about China's repeated failures and unwavering desire to undo the damages of testing and standardization. But while I was going through the reform policies, scholarly writings, and online discussion forums and blogs about education in China, I realized that what China wants is what America is eager to throw away—an education that respects individual talents, supports divergent thinking, tolerates deviation, and encourages creativity; a system in which the government does not dictate what students learn or how teachers teach; and culture that does not rank or judge the success of a school, a teacher, or a child based on only test scores in a few subjects determined by the government.

Having grown up in China, experienced the Chinese education system as both a student and teacher, and closely studied its history



# 7

## What Knowledge Is of Most Worth in the Global and Digital Economy?

*In a 21st-century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there's an Internet connection, where a child born in Dallas is now competing with a child in New Delhi, where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know—education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it's a prerequisite for success.*

—Barack Obama, 2009

*We need to move into niche areas where they will not be able to completely replace us for quite some time.*

—Lee Kuan Yew, 2007

At many highway exits leading to major cities in China, one can spot groups of individuals holding cardboard signs with two Chinese characters, *dai lu*, which literally means “road guide.” As soon as a vehicle approaches, they quickly swarm around it and tell the driver how much the city has changed, how complex the roads are in the city, and then offer to guide him to wherever he wants to go, for a small fee. They are professional road guides—basically, local residents with

knowledge of the city who have decided to make a living by helping drivers navigate through it.

With increased ownership of cars and newly built highways in China, many Chinese have begun to experience the joy of driving. As a result, there is a surge in the number of new drivers traveling to different cities in their own cars. Increased economic activity has also increased the volume of truck transportation in the country. At the same time, almost all cities in China have been going through a construction boom, resulting in dramatic changes in roads and streets. Many cities change so quickly that they are unable to update their maps or put up road signs fast enough to guide out-of-town drivers. Additionally, as many cities in China are adapting to an automobile culture, they enact strict traffic laws, which are even more strictly enforced. Afraid of getting lost or violating traffic laws, many out-of-town drivers appreciate the service of these “road guides.”

The road guides are controversial in China. They are certainly a traffic hazard and can pose potential dangers to drivers because they are not regulated or screened. There is also no standard rate for the fees they charge, which basically end up being whatever is agreed upon between the guide and the driver. Thus in some cities they are more welcome than in others, where their profession is considered illegal. However they are viewed, these road guides have found economic value in their knowledge of their city.

Although technology has increased the economic value of knowledge of a city in China, it is threatening the economic value of the same knowledge in London, where black cabs have earned a world-renowned reputation. For more than a century, the black cabs have offered professional, safe, and efficient transportation services in London. But what has truly made the black cabs famous is the cab drivers’ knowledge of the city.

In perhaps the most strictly regulated taxi service in the world, licensed taxi drivers must pass a rigorous exam that is simply called “the knowledge.” Aspiring drivers must study 320 routes and public buildings, parks, theaters, restaurants, and hotels. According to a report from the Transport Committee of the London Assembly (2005), it takes an average of three years to complete the exam. As a result,

countries. Racial and ethnic harmony rests upon mutual understanding and respect. Despite progress made over the years, racial and ethnic relationships remain a critical issue in the United States. The nation must continue to face this difficult problem and keep its society open, which also requires schools to teach about other cultures and languages. Globalization brings many benefits, but it comes with new challenges, as noted in the CED report:

Despite America's status as an economic, military, and cultural superpower, we risk becoming narrowly confined within our own borders, lacking the understanding of the world around us that is essential to our continued leadership role in the world community. The day has long passed when a citizen could afford to be uninformed about the rest of the world and America's place in that world. (p. vii)

## Defining Global Competence

According to a report of the University of Wisconsin Global Competence Task Force (2008), a globally competent person should have "the skills, knowledge, and attitude to work effectively in our increasingly interdependent world" (p. 2). The report further states the following:

Foremost amongst these "global competencies" are the abilities to communicate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries, to see and understand the world from a perspective other than one's own, and to understand and appreciate the diversity of societies and cultures. Students need to appreciate the interdependence of nations in a global economy and to know how to adapt their work to a variety of cultures. (p. 3)

Fernando Reimers, a Harvard University education professor, offers a similar definition:

I define Global Competency as the knowledge and skills that help people understand the flat world in which they live, the skills to integrate across disciplinary domains to comprehend global affairs and events and to create possibilities to address them. Global competencies are also the attitudinal and ethical dispositions that make it possible to interact peacefully, respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies. (Reimers, 2009)