AN AMERICAN BOY *in a* CHINESE SCHOOL

JOURNALIST'S NEW BOOK CHRONICLES HER FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE

MICHELLE RHEE, *former chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public schools, recently spoke with journalist Lenora Chu about Chu's new book,* Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve *(HarperCollins). Chu and her family currently live in Shanghai, where her son, Rainey, attends local schools—part of a Chinese education system that is renowned for its academic results yet notorious for some of its more-authoritarian methods. The book's American perspective on Chinese schooling has been variously described by reviewers as perceptive, fascinating, hilariously funny, and at times shocking.*

MR: *Little Soldiers* was so compelling that I read it in three days flat. For those who haven't read it yet, I'd love to start by having you talk a bit about the book. The premise is that you and your husband, Americans living in Shanghai, decided to send your oldest son, Rainey, to a Chinese public school when he was three. Before you did, you talked to a lot of people and did a fair amount of due diligence. What were your biggest concerns about the decision? What were you afraid of? Why did you ultimately decide to take the plunge?

LC: When you first move to a new community, there's almost always a school people speak of with awe: the facilities are great, the teachers are top-notch, the parents are educated and engaged, and you hear the waiting list is a mile long. This was that school. We wanted our son to become bilingual. We liked the idea that he'd pick up some of that Chinese-style respect for education. I had concerns, too: he'd be a foreigner in a roomful of Chinese classmates, and he didn't speak native-level Mandarin at the time. Ultimately, I believed my son

Lenora Chu with her son, Rainey, who has attended local schools in Shanghai since he was three.

PHOTOGRAPH / GRÁINNE QUINLAN

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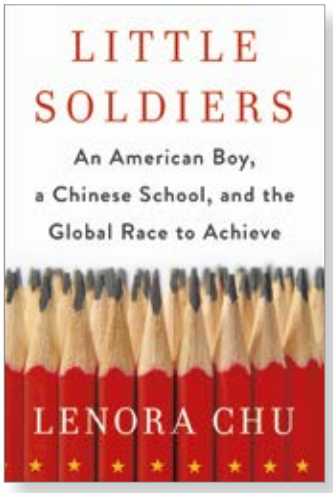
could handle it, and that learning to adapt would be a good experience for him.

MR: But some of the experiences Rainey had were ones you didn't expect. He was force-fed eggs (which he hated). He was told the police would come and take him away or that you wouldn't pick him up if he didn't do as he was told. When you complained to school staff about these things, they said it was critical that Rainey not see any light between mom and teacher. What kept you from running for the hills?

LC: Great question. First I got angry, and I tried to confront the problem. I don't usually run away each time I encounter something uncomfortable or scary—perhaps that's the journalist in me. Also, I never felt my son was in real physical or emotional danger. Frankly, my background and culture probably inured me; I was born and raised in America, but my parents are Chinese immigrants and they were strict. Some things were non-negotiable to them, whether it was eating certain foods or learning algebra or showing respect to elders. When I became a parent myself, I began to realize that kids, left to their own devices, aren't exactly going to explore their way into things they don't initially like. I became fascinated with this question: Where should the balance lie?

MR: Those experiences (force-feeding and threatening) are the ones that critics of your book will take and run with, though. They'll say, "We should stay as far from Chinese education as possible! Look at what they did to this child!" Or they'll accuse you of being a bad parent for making your son endure these experiences and thinking it was acceptable. How would you answer those critics?

LC: Fear and revulsion sell—they're part of the popular narrative when it comes to China. Certainly, people will grab hold of any example of shock and awe in regard to China to support whatever position they hold about anything from democracy to education. And, indeed, using force in the classroom is horrifying—I was horrified, and I made my objections known. The Chinese are well aware that abuse of teacher authority is a problem, and every year a handful of outrageous cases generates a public firestorm.



That's separate from the question of whether there's merit to observing how the Chinese educate. Let's not confuse the two. At the very least, China's is an important culture for us to understand. Educational practices reveal society at its most foundational, with implications for everything from how we prepare our kids to compete as the world changes and grows smaller, to how we conduct business and even how we engage politically with the Chinese. What's happening in the classrooms of 200 million Chinese schoolchildren?

I write honestly about our family's experiences, and it certainly makes me vulnerable to attack. Everyone has an opinion when it comes to parenting and education, and it's easy to judge from afar. Instead of judging, why not learn a bit more about the complexities of my parenting journey and this massive school system in China?

MR: Well said! That's what I feared when I first read your book: I thought that one side would say, "This is why what China does is evil and bad," and the other would proclaim, "See, we need to move to the Chinese system, it's so great!" In fact, what you're describing lies in a nuanced middle ground: there are some great things about the Chinese way that Americans should look at, but there are other aspects of public education that we actually do better. Can we find a balance that combines facets of both?

Unfortunately, the issue of public education has become polarized and divisive in our country. In education reform, the way that it plays out is that reformers are cast as only caring about test scores and blaming teachers, while non-reformers are portrayed as only caring about adults and not kids. Instead of acknowledging that both sides have valid points and seeking a common-sense balance, we talk past each other and get nowhere.

LC: Great observation. Why do issues around education have to be so black-and-white? Perhaps in this click-bait, fast-moving information culture, we're no longer capable of absorbing complexity? I hope not.

From the media headlines about my book, it's clear that balance isn't popular. They often paint Chinese education as "draconian" and a "mistake," or on the flip side,

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Michelle Rhee* (left), *former chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public schools, spoke with journalist Lenora Chu* (right) *about Chu's new book.

they trumpet that the Chinese are "better at math" or tout "what Americans can learn from the Chinese." Another issue? Those outside China often have trouble separating the Chinese government from the people and their culture. Anyone who looks past the headlines and reads my book will understand that it is a fair, in-depth assessment of the world's largest education system. I detail many of the problems with this system, including corruption, inequality, crushing academic pressure, high-stakes exams, and an increasingly heavy-handed political curriculum. I also narrate the stories of a few urban and rural teenagers to provide context; China is not a monolith, and educational experiences can vary depending on whether a school is, say, public or private, or urban or rural. Certain groups of students—such as the children of migrants—are particularly disadvantaged.

Yet though I'm not saying we should move toward the Chinese system by any stretch of the imagination, I do highlight some positive aspects of Chinese education culture—note that I said culture, *not* system—that have helped make students successful. I use research and interviews with educators and experts to illuminate these findings.

MR: Since the book has come out, have you sensed that there's an appetite for having a rational discussion about what a balanced approach could look like?

LC: I hope so. The Chinese are aware of their problems, and they're working to change for the better. They're sending teachers over to the United States and Europe to examine what we do well in the classroom. As one of China's top mathematics researchers told me, "Maybe [a] hybrid of the American and Chinese systems is perfect." China's latest national education-reform plan went through dozens of iterations; education officials realize change must be in store if their students are to be globally competitive.

I'm a graduate of American public schools. I worry that, in contrast, we are too quick to latch onto ideology or voices that support a predetermined path. Change is uncomfortable, it's difficult, it requires us to listen, to reflect, and to have thoughtful discussions. In the United States, our kids aren't keeping up with international benchmarks; though they don't illuminate the entire picture, they are one measure to consider. In the book, I shed light on what educators from around the world are thinking about and looking at. From reader mail and comments prompted by media interviews and talks I've given, it seems the book is provoking thought.

MR: I think that many people (and perhaps the loudest voices) are less interested in meaningful dialogue and solutions in the middle and more interested in proving that they are right and that those who have different opinions aren't just wrong but are bad people. We should try to see if we can change that dynamic, but I don't think these extreme voices represent the views of most Americans. As a parent of two, I've seen a lot of handwringing on the part of parents and grandparents about whether we're pushing too hard or not pushing hard enough, whether we're building self-esteem or self-indulgence. For that silent majority out there, I think this would be a welcome conversation.

That brings me to my next questions. What, specifically, have been the best parts of Rainey's Chinese schooling experience? Also, you describe him as being quite rambunctious before he started school. You say that you felt he learned a lot of self-discipline and focus through Chinese school. To what extent do you feel that he'd be a different kid today had he gone to school in America?

PHOTOGRAPH / MARY STEWART(RHEE); GRAINNE QUINLAN (CHU)

"The Chinese believe it's essential to impart good academic habits and attitudes early. It's not about helicoptering or hovering—it's about setting the kids on the right path."

LC: My son's doing wonderfully. He has internalized a set of values about education: most important, the Chinese socialize their kids to struggle and work hard, and to understand that learning isn't always easy. "Genius Means Struggle," a chapter in my book, brings in psychologists and cognitive scientists on the importance of perseverance when it comes to tackling "difficult" subjects such as math and science. My son is also taught never to be late for school and never to miss school. Parents are required to support the teacher, at least in front of their children; conflict should be broached in private. This early signaling demonstrates for children the importance of education, and it supports the teacher in his or her work. In fact, a 2014 survey found that teachers in China enjoy a social status that's tops in the world—on par with doctors.

I feel there's a growing emphasis in U.S. education on making learning fun; studies show there's also a relative tendency to emphasize innate talent (rather than hard work) when it comes to academics. That can mean that we're giving some kids a free pass when they encounter something tough. American teachers are also telling me they don't feel respected, they're fielding challenges from parents and students alike, and they're spending more time managing behavior than they are teaching, compared with a generation ago.

I expect to return to the United States before long, and I'm well aware my family is lucky to have the option to leave the Chinese system. But I think that American school culture

PHOTOGRAPH/JONATHAN BROWNING; REDUX

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revolves so strongly around the core of athletics, extracurriculars, and social life that sometimes we can lose sight of the purpose of school, especially in the early years. The Chinese believe it's essential to impart good academic habits and attitudes early. It's not about helicoptering or hovering—it's about setting the kids on the right path.

MR: While I agree that those are important values to instill in children early on, we've both also seen how, as kids get older in these systems, things can go awry. As a child, I attended school in Korea for a year, and I learned a lot of the lessons you just described. However, in the Korean system (and in the Chinese system, judging by your interviews with high school students there), as children move through school, the "grind" becomes overwhelming. And I think there's sometimes an overemphasis on passing the college entrance exams that is detrimental. Again, where does the balance lie?

LC: The Chinese have gone off the deep end on entrance-exam pressure, and in many ways the system is stuck. "My life is *dandiao*—monotony," says Darcy, a Chinese student whose story I chronicle in the book, as he begins cramming for college entrance exams. Test pressure in later years is detrimental to children's health, emotional well-being, and ability to explore their own interests. (By comparison, the classroom culture in our country is good at stimulating our students' intrinsic curiosities and encouraging them to express themselves.)

When I write about the merits of the Chinese way, I'm not referring to testing or scores; I'm talking about attitudes that are important to academic success. At first I was horrified to see that many Chinese classrooms would post test results and rankings publicly, but I began to notice that the culture is less afraid of numbers than ours is. In part, that's because of the belief in Chinese education that effort pays off—and it goes to follow that grades aren't a reflection of a child's worth. There's no argument for protecting self-esteem. Poor grades prompt a "let's work harder" response. In the early years, that can be helpful. But, again, the trick is in the degree, and the balance. You don't want a child struggling over a task that's not useful or relevant to his or her life.

Overall, I think it's useful to think about where that pendulum should swing between academic rigor and a child's own interests. They're not mutually exclusive—but in the United States I see a growing resistance to the idea that there are basic things every child should know, skills every child should have.

MR: What do you think that equilibrium might look like? Is it that we should use many of the Chinese strategies (that promote self-discipline, a deep respect for learning, the understanding that effort is critical, and a strong foundation of basic facts and knowledge) early on, and then, in later grades, focus more on critical-thinking skills, analytical abilities, and the pursuit of individual passions through curious exploration? Or is it something else?

LC: I think that's a great plan, and that is what's working so far for my family. Cement the basics and move on. The Western focus on self-directed or child-centered learning has taken hold in part because we tend to fear that if creative exploration isn't allowed early, creativity may never develop. Yet the research shows that guidance or teacher instruction can be important, particularly with some subjects in the early years. For example, many teachers I speak with have yet to meet a child who could self-direct her way into learning rigorous math. And math is important. Strong primary-school math skills correlate to later academic proficiency and even higher earnings 20, 30 years down the line. Yet there's a growing resistance to such findings, with the idea that teacher-directed practice kills creativity or that issuing grades is harmful (of course, much depends on how assessments are used).

The balance can arise from common sense. If a child's in a purely self-directed environment with little to no structured academics, for example, the fundamentals may need to be reinforced outside of school. If a child's in a schooling environment like my son's—which is heavy on math and Chinese language learning—parents might want to provide opportunities to explore art, athletics, and personal interests. As our school systems continue on their reform journey, it's even more important to think about where the strengths and weaknesses lie in a child's school and home environments and find ways to make up for them when needed.

MR: I agree. It's really unfortunate that in our conversations about education the camps are so often on polar extremes. If we could have more balanced discussions, we might be able to find a middle ground that makes sense, that people feel good about, and that's effective! ■