

Project Proposal:

Reading defined my childhood. Both my parents love to read, and would frequently talk about the books they were reading. When we were little, my parents would read several books to us each night before putting us to sleep. My older brothers both read extensively, and I naturally followed in their steps. There was not a single Christmas when I did not receive at least one book, and all together we had three to four thousand books in our home.

A major problem throughout my youth (and one we still face!) was where to put new bookcases that my brothers and I would build to house our ever increasing collection. We did not limit ourselves to our own books, however: we took weekly, or sometimes bi-weekly, trips to the library to return an armful of books and take out as many more titles as we were allowed.

As I was home schooled, I found plenty of opportunity to read in-between my assigned subjects. Without the distractions of a class, I finished my work in a few hours and would spend much of the rest of the time reading. While fantasy and science fiction were the genres I read most, at my parents encouragement I read everything from classic literature to books on muscle structure function.

I have visited China three times, and in those three times, I was shocked to discover the utter lack of a reading culture. Those I met, from poor migrant workers to educated lawyers, lacked a significant reading habit or appreciation. This phenomenon has been confirmed by the testimonies of Chinese international students in America. This is in contrast to much of the tradition in America. One of the Chinese international students told me, "Americans are reading are the time; it is like they are drinking water."

Given the extensive research done by sociologists, psychologists, and educators, it is clear that the choice to read or not to read is simply a cultural difference: reading habits affect academic success and post-graduation continued self-education. Individuals who develop reading habits early in life show improved reading levels in their academics. These habits are accompanied by an increased awareness and interest in news, science, culture, politics, and economics later in life. Consequently, fostering reading habits in children is a deeply valuable goal for all schools to promote.

America has a long tradition of promoting education among the common people, stemming from the land division of early American settlements to the founding of colleges and public schools. Even tiny towns in America have a free public lending library, and books have been part of the American experience since before the nation was founded. China's relationship with books has been much more complex, but the result has created a society which does not particularly value reading beyond acquiring information for a specific purpose (such as passing an exam). Establishing new initiatives and encouraging existing efforts to promote interest in reading among Chinese school children is therefore extremely important.

In addition to the reasons above, China's particular situation requires an educated public informed by reading habit. China is currently transitioning from a primarily agricultural and state-run society into a highly developed urban and capitalist one: in such circumstances, an

educated and informed public is even more important. This is made evident through China's own history: many of the great revolutionary intellectuals and writers of a hundred years ago were well-read both in Chinese and foreign literature, and continued to read beyond the requirements of any schooling. Fostering reading habits in China today will help train China's generation of tomorrow to manage the responsibilities of a country in transition.

I therefore propose that Chinese educators learn from the research of Americans, and model elements of their educational system after the one that Americans have to increase reading among children. I will specifically focus on how educators can encourage self-initiated reading by allowing students increased access to books, by modeling reading, and by encouraging parental involvement in reading. My goal is to present the educators both with evidence proving the worth and effectiveness of these methods as well as some specific suggestions as to how they can be implemented. Through use of explanations of my own experiences, academic research, and observations of Chinese and American societies, I will make these points clear.

Below you may find the outline of the talk I would give to Chinese educators. A PowerPoint presentation format is likely to be most effective both in retaining the attention of participants and providing them with a visual structure of my talk. It also would be appropriate, as a PowerPoint emphasizes reading, even if it is not quite the deep, engaged reading that I promote.

Access to Books: The Gateway to Education

I. Introduction

- a. Anecdote of myself as a child: As a home schooled child, I
 - 1. had immense amounts of free time to read on my own.
 - 2. had parents who read and encouraged me to read.
 - 3. had parents who read themselves.
 - 4. had huge numbers of books in the house.

II. The benefits of instilling personal reading habits:

- a. better academic performance.
- b. ability to increase critical thinking, attention span, and ability to interact across demographics.
- c. connection with later success in life.

III. The American experience. Even though the encroachment of TV and the internet is significant, still:

- a. public libraries.
- b. school libraries.
- c. everyone has a book with them in travelling.
- d. most homes have several dozen books, some several hundred. My home has approximately. 5,000 books.

IV. The Chinese experience:

- a. fewer public libraries.

- b. fewer school libraries.
- c. no one reads books.
- d. most homes have very few books.

V. The research supporting efficacy of reading:

- a. evidence for positive connection between extracurricular reading and academic reading skills.
- b. evidence for extracurricular reading persisting over time.
- c. evidence for presence of books in environment encouraging reading.
- d. evidence for adult role models reading increasing chances of children reading.
- e. evidence for assigned extracurricular (non graded) reading being effective.

VI. Suggested course of action for Chinese educators:

- a. Establish and expand school libraries; allow book lending.
- b. Allow some recreational reading in class for younger ages.
- c. Encourage children to read outside of class:
 - 1. Through oral encouragement.
 - 2. Through assigning them to pick any book from the library.
- d. Encourage parents / teachers to model reading.
- e. Encourage parents to read to and with their younger children.

VII. Conclusion

- a. In today's digital age, we must learn to adapt to new educational methods that seek to incorporate the media of film and computers, especially the pedagogical power of the internet. Online books projects are also bringing old stories into digital form.
- b. Traditional reading, however, is still extremely important. We cannot skip over it, since there are elements of reading which provide unique benefits to children both in school and later in life.
- c. Thus we must both increase access to books in the home and at school, and also encourage and model reading outside of graded school assignments. In this way we can foster reading habits which will last a lifetime, long after school is finished.

Two additional anecdotes that might be included in a later draft:

- Personal experience: going to the library to get books, getting to choose three books my mother would read to me at night.
- Personal experience: my father telling me I needed to read at least one non-fiction book for every three fiction books I read.