

## **Taking “The Tall Test”: Chinese Prep School**

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

**TIME ALLOTMENT:** Two to three 45-minute class periods

### **OVERVIEW**

In this lesson, students will examine the culture of a Chinese prep school as its graduating class studies for the national college entrance exam—the *Gaokao*. A good performance on this single “Tall Test” is critical to students aspiring to a place at one of two top universities, which in turn all but guarantees a leading role in China’s growing economy and international presence.

After first sampling the difficulty of the *Gaokao* for themselves, students will explore daily life in the highly pressurized world of Bashu Middle School #2 through the differing perspectives of its students. A culminating activity invites students to research, compare, and evaluate the college entrance exam systems of several other countries.

### **Learning Standards:**

#### **New York State Standards**

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/cores.html#SOCIALSTUDIES>

#### **Standard 2: World History**

Use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

- Key Idea 1: The study of world history requires an understanding of world cultures and civilizations, including an analysis of important ideas, social and cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. This study also examines the human condition and the connections and interactions of people across time and space and the ways different people view the same event or issue from a variety of perspectives.
- Key Idea 2: Establishing timeframes, exploring different periodizations, examining themes across time and within cultures, and focusing on important turning points in world history help organize the study of world cultures and civilizations.
- Key Idea 3: Study of the major social, political, cultural, and religious developments in world history involves learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.

## **MEDIA RESOURCES**

### **Video:**

Selected segments from the *China Prep* episode of the PBS series *Wide Angle*, which follows Chinese students through their final high-pressure year at an elite high school, where eighteen hundred students vie for spots in Beijing's top two universities.

### **Web:**

#### **The Gaokao: How Would You Fare?**

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/china-prep/the-gaokao-how-would-you-fare/2264/>

A sampling of questions from the Chinese college entrance exam from PBS's *Wide Angle* website for *China Prep*.

#### **Entrance Exams Around the World**

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/china-prep/video-students-around-the-world-relive-entrance-exams/2568/>

A short video from PBS's *Wide Angle* website *China Prep* for featuring candid assessments by students around the world of their nation's college entrance exams.

## **OBJECTIVES**

Students will be able to:

- Define the *Gaokao* and its role in determining who the future leaders of 21<sup>st</sup> century China will be.
- Describe the daily environment and routine at a Chinese prep school.
- Discuss the ongoing power of the Chinese Communist Party even as the nation has adopted a capitalist economic system.
- Compare and contrast differing perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese educational system.
- Consider alternate definitions of "freedom" in a non-democratic political context.

## **PREP FOR TEACHERS**

Ideally, each student will have their own internet-enabled computer for the first activity, although students can be grouped as necessary to share computers. At least five internet-enabled computers will be necessary for the Culminating Activity.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask the class how American high school students get into college. (*Answers will vary but will include taking a standardized test like the SAT.*) Explain that students in China also take a college entrance exam, in their case one called the *Gaokao*, or “tall test.” Have each student log onto the “How Would You Do?” website at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/china-prep/the-gaokao-how-would-you-fare/2264/> and explain that it they will all be taking a brief mock test consisting of a small sample of the *Gaokao*. Allow 10 minutes for students to answer the questions on their own—no answer-sharing or collaboration allowed! [Note: if necessary, divide the class into as many groups as there available computers and have them take the sample test as a group activity.]
2. When all students have completed the test, ask students how they fared. Did they find it difficult? Easier or harder than standardized tests like the SAT or PSAT which they may have taken themselves? (*Answers may vary, but the consensus will probably be that that Gaokao is quite difficult.*)
3. Frame the first video clip for students by explaining that they will now be taking a look at the first of several segments from ***China Prep*** an episode of PBS’s documentary series ***Wide Angle*** which examines the preparation Chinese students undertake for the *Gaokao*. Provide a focus for students by asking them why Chinese students face such pressure to perform well on that exam? Play ***China Prep*** from 3:05 to 6:07.
4. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: why do Chinese students face such intense pressure to perform well on the *Gaokao*? (*Answers will vary but should include the following: a high score on the test will get them into a top university, which almost guarantees a successful career; China’s “one child” policy, instituted in 1979, has resulted in parents being particularly invested in the success of their single child, who by Chinese tradition will eventually be responsible for their care; Chinese students are the living manifestation of China’s national ambition to replace the United States as the #1 economic power in the world.*) Ask students if they feel similar academic pressures themselves. Why or why not? (*Accept all answers.*)
5. Frame the next clip by telling students that it will introduce them to how Chinese prep schools are run, and the expectations they place upon their students. Provide a focus question by asking students how they think Chinese classrooms differ from their own. Play ***China Prep*** from 6:52 to 8:48.

6. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: how do students think Chinese classrooms differ from their own? (*Answers will vary but may include the following: Chinese teachers take a much more active “parental” role in encouraging proper sleep and nutrition habits; Chinese teachers don’t hesitate to single out individual students for public reprisal—for lateness, in the case shown—if they feel there is a lesson for the rest of the class to learn from it; Chinese teachers wear microphones to be heard by their very large classes; classes seem to involve more repetition and rote memorization than their American counterparts; their curriculum seems much more focused on core academic subjects rather than less rigorous elective subjects.*)
7. Frame the next clip by asking students what sort of government China has. (*Communist.*) Ask students what sort of economic system China has. (*Capitalism.*) Ask students how they think these two systems—which were once considered antithetical, and were even militarily hostile throughout the Cold War—can so successfully coexist in China today? (*Accept all answers.*) Provide a focus question for next clip by asking students how the Chinese teacher describes China’s past and present with respect to the rest of the world. Play **China Prep** from 32:18 to 33:13.
8. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: how does the Chinese teacher describe China’s past and present with respect to the rest of the world? (*China has gone through many periods in its history when it has been open to the world, and many periods when it has been closed off.*) Ask students when they think the most recent periods of Chinese isolation and openness have been. (*The most recent phase of China’s international isolation was during the Cold War, which began to thaw in the 1970s, when diplomatic relations were reestablished with the United States through “ping pong” diplomacy and the visits of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon.*) Ask students if any of them know what “ping pong” diplomacy refers to. (*The exchange of Chinese and American ping pong teams in the 1970s as cultural ambassadors.*) Play **China Prep** from 33:13 to 34:08. Provide a focus question for students by asking what role the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to play in Chinese society and in the aspirations of at least some Chinese students.
9. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what role does the CCP play in Chinese society and the aspirations of at least some Chinese students? (*Chinese government continues to be dominated by the CCP, which seeks out the best and the brightest of China’s students to become party members, who will then be groomed to “make a contribution to China,” and most likely enjoy greater professional success in the process.*)

10. Frame the next clip by explaining that not all Chinese students are so patriotically confident about China’s educational system and the future it’s shaping. Provide a focus for students by asking what alternate view of Chinese education is held by the student Peng Kun—an independent thinker presented here as typical of what the Chinese call the “I Want” generation. Provide a focus question for students by asking what Peng Kun feels is the great weakness of China’s education system. Play **China Prep** from 35:21 to 37:15.

11. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what does Peng Kun feel is the great weakness of China’s education system? (*Chinese education doesn’t promote creativity or independent thought.*) Ask students if they think what they’ve seen of the Chinese education thus far leads them to agree or disagree with Peng Kun? (*Accept all answers.*) Ask students what consequences this educational shortcoming may have on China’s future? (*Accept all answers.*) Ask students if Peng seems more “American” in her perspective than, say, CCP aspirant Zhang Lie? (*Yes.*) On a larger scale, does the Chinese notion of an “I Want Generation” have any parallel in American history? (*Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that the post-WWII “Baby Boomer” generation was commonly known as the “Me Generation.”*) Ask students which type of Chinese personality they’d rather be competing against in the future—the driven, disciplined, ambitious, and party-connected Zhang Lie, or the more independent, creative, easygoing Peng Kun. (*Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that Peng Kun is an exception in a Chinese educational system designed to produce as many Zhang Lies as possible.*)

12. Frame the final clip by telling students that it portrays the high-stakes culmination of years of hard work and sacrifice for students, parents, and teachers at Bashu Middle School #2: exam day. Provide students with a focus by asking them what Zhang Lie’s definition of freedom is. Play **China Prep** from 43:37 to 48:16.

13. Follow up the clip by reviewing the focus question: what is Zhang Lie’s definition of freedom? (*Freedom for Zhang Lie is not something which one can demand of society, but rather a drive which must be found in oneself in order to realize one’s own dreams.*) How might this answer reflect Zhang Lie’s political perspective and environment? (*Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that by defining freedom as a personal responsibility rather than a social condition, Zhang Lie sidesteps the conventional western criticism that modern China, however economically capitalistic, remains a politically communist nation which limits one’s personal freedom.*) Ask students if they agree with this definition? Why or why not? (*Accept all answers.*)

## **CULMINATING ACTIVITY**

1. Divide the class into five groups and have each group log onto the “Entrance Exams Around the World” website at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/china-prep/video-students-around-the-world-relive-entrance-exams/2568/>. Explain that this site features a video made by students from the United Kingdom, India, France, Greece, and Ireland candidly discussing their own nation’s college entrance exams. Assign each group to follow the comments of one student as they watch the video together and compile a list of comments, criticisms, and observations about that student’s national college exam system.
2. Either in class or as homework, have each group conduct online research about their assigned student’s college entrance exam system with the aim of creating a brief 5 minute report to be delivered before the rest of the class. Each report should begin with a straightforward description of the exam system itself, but students should also look at the larger context and consequences of the exams. As much as possible, encourage groups to focus their research on elements of the exam systems which have been commented on by the students in the video (e.g. premature academic focus in India). Suggested lines of inquiry for each group to consider:
  - Is the exam system a single test (as with China’s *Gaokao*), or a series of tests (as with the United Kingdom’s A-Levels)?
  - Is the exam system designed to test knowledge or measure intellect?
  - Does the exam system make provision for non-academic creative ability?
  - How focused is the exam system on particular subject areas?
  - Does earlier subject focus in the exam system come at the expense of opportunities for later academic exploration?
  - Is this system “fair”? How important is “fairness” in the college entrance process?
  - What are the tradeoffs and limitations of this system?
  - To what extent does exam performance in this system determine a students’ subsequent life?
3. Have each group make their presentations before the rest of class, pausing after each presentation to encourage discussion about the relative merits of and problems with each college entrance exam system. After all presentations have been made, have each student vote on which exam system they think is the “best” and offer a brief explanation of why they think so.