Chapter 2
A Long but Colorful Day

The timetable (Table 2.1) shows a typical day for Xiaoyang, a student of Grade 2 in a junior middle school in Haidian District, Beijing. From the moment he wakes up until the moment he falls asleep, most of Xiaoyang’s day is spent at school.

Xiaoyang is not alone, this is also the typical day for most Chinese students. Among these activities, what would best reflect their experience with education? What are special features? What can we learn from these activities? With these questions, we can learn more about the typical long but colorful day of Chinese students.

2.1 Intensive Classroom Learning

With the playing of music, the first class begins. It is a Chinese language class. Xiaoyang has put his textbook neatly on his desk 5 min earlier. The door opens. The Chinese teacher quickly goes to the podium. “Class begins. Good morning, everyone.” The teacher’s brief but powerful voice quickly draws the attention of the students, who immediately stand up, give a bow and respond in unison, “Good morning, Sir.” “Sit down, please.” With this ends the greeting. Then the teacher leaves the podium and asks, “Whose turn is it to give the report for today’s ‘cultural snack’?” “My turn, Sir.” Xiaoyang raises his right hand high while leaving his seat and heading for the podium. Facing the whole class, he says, “Today, my theme is ‘love’.” A five-minute speech ensues and ends with loud applause of great recognition from his classmates. The teacher shares his own thoughts on Xiaoyang’s speech with the class and then begins the formal lesson. After a simple introduction, the teacher brings out the theme of “hutong 1 culture.” Meanwhile, the digital screen in front of the class presents the theme, the buildings and architecture

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1Hutong, a type of narrow streets or alleys, commonly associated with northern Chinese cities, most prominently Beijing.
of the hutong in old Beijing. The teacher then introduces Wang Zengqi, the author and his writing style, which is followed by everyone reading aloud while students are reminded of tones and tempo. Then the whole article is read by several students with each student finishing one part. The teacher gives an evaluation of each student’s performance, and asks those who did not use the appropriate tone to repeat particular expressions and sentences. Then comes the key part: The teacher asks the class to work in teams and consider how to divide the article structurally. Upon hearing the instructions, the students begin to discuss this in teams of four. During the discussion, the teacher listens to different groups every now and then. Five minutes later, three groups are chosen to make a report. It is found that two of the groups share the same opinion, while Xiaoyang’s group has a different idea. In the face of disagreement, the teacher first speaks highly of Xiaoyang’s group for coming up with new ideas; then he analyzes the points of disagreement further. In the end, Xiaoyang and other group members agree to accept the opinion of the other

### Table 2.1 A typical day for Xiaoyang

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:00</td>
<td>Getting up</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:10</td>
<td>Getting washed and having breakfast</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Leaving for school</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Arriving at school</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:00–7:20</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:20–8:00</td>
<td>Morning self-study</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:00–8:45</td>
<td>1st class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:55–9:40</td>
<td>2nd class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:50–10:10</td>
<td>Setting-up exercise and the flag-raising ceremony</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:10–10:55</td>
<td>3rd class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:05–11:50</td>
<td>4th class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:50–11:55</td>
<td>Ocular gymnastics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td>Midday break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:30–14:15</td>
<td>5th class (class meeting)</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:15–14:20</td>
<td>Ocular gymnastics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:25–15:10</td>
<td>6th class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:20–16:05</td>
<td>7th class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:15–17:30</td>
<td>8th class (student society activities)</td>
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<tr>
<td>17:30</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:00</td>
<td>Arriving home</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:30</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
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<tr>
<td>19:00</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>19:30–21:00</td>
<td>Homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:20</td>
<td>Getting washed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:30</td>
<td>Going to bed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
groups. At this moment, the music plays again, the teacher wraps up the whole class with a sentence and says, “Class is over.” “Goodbye, Sir.” Comes the response from the students, ending the Chinese language class.

After entering junior middle school, Xiaoyang has developed a keen interest in Chinese class, because he thinks the class is active and he likes that the teacher always gives students chances to express their opinions. This teaching method is not as rigid as his other classes. In particular, he likes the “cultural snack” part of his day most, because it helps him to improve his presentation skills and learn interesting things from fellow classmates. However, what Xiaoyang liked most in primary school was not Chinese, but English, for the same reason: The English teacher taught in an interesting way and always took good care of the students’ feelings. All in all, for Xiaoyang, the classes he likes are not those where teachers read from the textbook and spoon-feed the students, but those where students interact and participate actively with witty teachers to gain knowledge while having fun.

Attending classes is the most significant part in a typical day of Chinese students. Most of their time is spent in classes on all kinds of subjects. Classroom learning activities keep them busy and share commonalities, but are also different between primary, junior, and senior high schools. Sorting out these features will help us to better understand Chinese schools.

### 2.1.1 35–45 Minutes for Each Class

In primary schools, each class lasts 35–40 min; in high schools, it ranges from 40 to 45 min. Longer classes reflect that lessons are getting harder.

### 2.1.2 Regular Class and Self-study Class

Each day usually has six regular classes at primary schools and seven at middle schools, which are followed by one or two self-study classes where students can finish the homework of the day, or ask the teacher for further clarification.

### 2.1.3 Regular Teacher–Student Interaction

At the beginning and end of the class, there is always a necessary mutual greeting, which upholds China’s tradition of honoring the teacher and respecting his or her

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2A “regular class” refers to a class where the teacher teaches in front of the class while students follow the teaching in their seats.
teaching. Apart from this, interaction between teacher and students (and between students) during class has nothing to do with which grade the students are in; it mainly has to do with the teacher’s way of teaching. This will be further discussed.

2.1.4 Flexible and Diverse Ways of Teaching

Ways of teaching are fairly similar in primary and secondary schools, strongly related to the nature of the course and the teacher’s style. Some prefer lecturing and having absolute control over the classroom from the beginning to the end; others would rather have discussions and give students more opportunities to express their own opinions. In that sense, Xiaoyang’s opinion is typical of most students: When comparing the lecturing method, students prefer their teachers to use a more active method that involves their participation, interaction and discussions.

2.1.5 Evaluation Methods

There are certain differences in student evaluation between primary and secondary schools. In a primary school, a token program, for example giving students small painted red flowers and red flags, is commonly used to provide incentives. In Xiaoyang’s memory, all head teachers in his primary schooling years handed out awards to students in this way. However, this method does not work once students hit middle school age, in a middle school, and especially at the senior stage, because the students are getting more mature. In this case, teachers will often choose to offer verbal or non-verbal praises and recognition instead.

2.1.6 Reflection

As a result of Chinese students from Shanghai winning the PISA championship twice in 2009 and 2012 (Shanghai Students Rank No. 1 again in PISA 2012. (2013, December 4)), the international community has gradually turned their attention to China’s school education. From the above case and analysis, we can see that though class activities are busy, teaching itself is not dull. Teachers make use of advanced multimedia technology to present the teaching content, and bring the role of students into full play through teamwork and discussions. In addition, to better incentivize students, teachers will design activities that suit the level of physical and intellectual development of students. In a word, high scores gained by Chinese students are not completely a result of harsh disciplines; on the contrary, they reflect Chinese teachers’ wisdom in teaching and China’s teaching tradition throughout thousands of years.
2.2 Flag-Raising Ceremony as a Means of Education

At 9:50, the bell rings for the setting-up exercises. Accompanied by the “Athlete March,” students run towards the site of their class from the playground to gather. At this moment, a PE teacher takes a microphone, steps onto the flag podium, glances at his watch and says, “Every class please march in order.” Upon hearing this instruction, all classes begin to stand in neat lines. Then the PE teacher says, “Today Class 2 from Junior 1 will host the ceremony.” Then, a lanky boy gets to the front stage, taking over the microphone and says, “I’m Li Xiang from Class 2, Junior 1. The flag-raising ceremony of Week 3 for the semester begins now. The flag-raising squad comes from Class 2, Junior 1. Please be ready.” Then, the six students responsible for the ceremony goose-step towards the podium from one side of the playground, like soldiers. They gather round the flag pole to get the flag tied and stand in their respective posts. Li Xiang then announces, “The flag-raising ceremony officially begins now. Raise the national flag and play the national anthem.” As the music goes up, all teachers and students sing the national anthem and salute the flag. After the flag is raised to the top of the pole, the squad returns to the line of their class. The host says, “Now Gao Lu from Class 2, Junior 1 will make a speech under the flag.” Then a girl goes towards the flagpole, taking out her prepared speech and reads, “Good morning, everyone. I’m Gao Lu from Grade 2, Junior 1. My topic today is ‘Honesty is a virtue’…” Her speech ends with loud applause from the gathering. Then the PE teacher takes over the microphone and gives order of dismissal, “Everyone. Attention. Teachers leave first. Students leave by class.” With this the teachers go back to the teaching building in small groups and are followed by students. This is how the flag-raising ceremony ends.

This is an episode unique to Chinese schools. In Xiaoyang’s school, during the setting-up exercises every Monday, the flag-raising ceremony is hosted. Xiaoyang is really familiar with the routine: Since primary school, it has been a habit and it always takes place at a fixed time on Mondays. Xiaoyang knows every step of this activity, because he has watched it so many times and he was once in the flag-raising squad. For him, it is not just a ceremony; it instills a strong sense of patriotism in him. Every time he watches the five-star red flag rising to the sky, he feels his patriotic feelings stir up and linger. The flag-raising ceremony, while sharing similarities with other ceremonies, also has its own features.

2.2.1 Fixed Time and Site

Hosted in both primary and middle schools, the solemn ceremony usually takes place on school playgrounds on Monday mornings or during setting-up exercises. It will also be held on important school festivals or anniversaries.
2.2.2 Students in Uniform

A rigorous dress code is followed for the ceremony. In primary school, students must wear the school uniform and a red scarf. In secondary school, the red scarf is no longer required, but the school uniform is still compulsory. These requirements reflect the importance of the ceremony.

2.2.3 Fixed Procedures

The ceremony has to go through a set of fixed steps: escorting the flag, raising the flag, singing the national anthem, and giving a speech underneath the flag. Sometimes, when the flag is raised on other days, for example on the occasion of festivals and anniversaries, the ceremony does not follow the same steps. Therefore, these occasions are not the same as the flag-raising ceremony.

As spelled out in The Notice on Regulating Flag-Raising and Lowering in Primary and Secondary Schools in Accordance with the National Flag Law, which was issued by the National Education Committee, “When the national flag is raised or lowered without holding the ceremony, faculties and students passing the site should face the national flag and stand in salutation until the raising or lowering finishes.”

2.2.4 Class and Personnel Selection

There are rules in choosing those in charge of the flag-raising, including the class, the raising squad, and the speaker underneath the flag. Generally, classes will carry out these tasks in turns. In primary schools, students in lower grades are too young to take on the task, so classes above Grade 4 take charge. After the class is identified, the head teacher will often choose school or class cadres to form the flag-raising squad. As for the speaker under the flag, the head teacher will choose a top-performing student. The theme of the speech also varies, as long as the theme carries a positive message.

2.2.5 Reflection

The flag-raising ceremony is a most distinctive educational activity in China with special values. Undeniably, there are pros and cons to this ceremony. As some point out, “The ceremony is always the same, and inherently disinterests the students” (Chen 2014, p. 115). Some also say, “Flag guards, flag raisers and the speaker
under the flag are mostly class cadres. Other students find it difficult to get involved” (Zhang et al. 2008, p. 22). Indeed, these problems are real. But for the activity per se, there are more pros than cons. Just as Xiaoyang says, “It is not just a ceremony; it instills a strong sense of patriotism in me.” The flag-raising ceremony is education-oriented. In its solemn atmosphere, the students feel an increased sense of national pride. In addition, it also brings the school together as a community, which nurtures a sense of belonging. To be chosen as a member in the flag-raising squad or the speaker under the flag is honorary, this also provides incentives for students. Thus, for Chinese schools, the ceremony plays a significant role in education.

2.3 Multi-functional Class Meeting Activities

At 13:30 sharp, upon the ringing of the bell, the weekly class meeting starts for Xiaoyang and his classmates. According to the notice given by the head teacher last week, the major task of this meeting is to select “Triple A” students for this semester. Potential contestants are ready for the competition. The head teacher goes to the front and says, “Our meeting today is to select ‘Triple A’ students for the semester. The procedures are known to all. First, a three-minute speech; then, a secret ballot. We have five slots for the title and they will go to candidates with the most votes. Any questions? OK. Candidates who are ready please take turns to go to the stage and make your speech.” Just as the teacher finishes the last word, Xiaoyang quickly moves to the stage and speaks enthusiastically, “Good afternoon, everyone. First, as the study commissary, I’ve always been among the top in academic performance. I’m also active in assisting the teacher…. That’s my speech. I hope that you’ll vote for me. Thank you!” About a dozen other students follow Xiaoyang to speak for themselves. In the end, the teacher asks the class to fill out their ballots, which are collected by group leaders. Two students who are not contestants are asked to count the votes on the stage, with one calling out the names of those who win the votes, “Xiaoyang, Zhang Lei, Wang Xin…” and the other writing down the number of votes for each candidate. The result shows that Xiaoyang and four other classmates are the winners of the title. At this point, the teacher gives a brief summary and says, “The rest of the classmates are expected to learn from them and become ‘Triple A’ students with all-rounded development in morality, intelligence and physique.” Then the bell rings and the class meeting comes to an end.

In Xiaoyang’s junior middle school, the first class of every Monday afternoon is a class meeting where all classes are required to arrange activities. Some themes are given by the school; others are decided by every single class. In the eyes of Xiaoyang, these meetings mainly fall into three categories: theme education, summary of class performance by the head teacher, and selection for excellence and awards. Looking back on his class meetings in the primary school, Xiaoyang said, “They are mostly about ideological and moral education.” Xiaoyang’s cousin also
attends class meeting every week, but by comparison, her head teacher usually
gives a summary and gives out expectations during the meeting and even takes it as
a self-study course, leaving the students to complete their homework or ask
questions if they need any clarification. It is evident that this class meeting
encompasses various functions in Chinese schools.

The class meeting was initiated in 1998, after the release of *The Rule on Moral
Education Work in Primary and Secondary School* by the National Education
Committee. It is provided that “education authorities at all levels and primary and
secondary schools should ensure the time for school meetings, class meeting, youth
league meetings and social practice” (Xie 2013, p. 16). In most cases, a class
meeting carries a particular theme for moral education (Chen 2013). Its features
include the following.

### 2.3.1 Fixed Time

Generally speaking, class meeting activities take place at a relatively fixed time,
such as the first class on Monday afternoons or the fourth class on Friday mornings.
In addition, on special days such as Tree-Planting Day and Earth Day, all classes
are required to hold related meetings, so as to deepen the students’ understanding of
particular themes.

### 2.3.2 Head Teacher as the Designer and Leader

Usually, without being a special requirement from the school, the head teacher is
responsible for the class meetings and decides on its content and format. That is
generally the case, but sometimes the head teacher will entrust the monitor or other
class cadres to hold the meeting. This is especially common in middle schools.

### 2.3.3 Rich Content

Some meetings are clearly themed while others are less so. Some center around
activities while others focus on talks by the head teacher. Some are related to big
events in the country, and others are on topics close to students. In a word, class
meetings in Chinese schools are diverse and take on many forms. Generally
speaking, the content includes specific theme activities (for example gratitude,
honesty, and friendship), a summary of class affairs or a selection for excellence and
awards. It has also been observed that a few schools turn class meetings into
self-study time.
2.3.4 Reflection

As an important form of moral education in Chinese schools, class meetings facilitate students’ mental health and moral growth. In addition, they contribute to the development of class culture and solidarity. But some typical problems are as follows. Firstly, regular class affairs meetings are often confused with class meetings. The former is to sum up all aspects of class performance in the week by the head teacher. However, most head teachers would expand the function of class meetings to include regular summations and beyond; secondly, the teacher takes charge without much participation from the students. Everyone is supposed to get involved, but the teacher often makes decisions on the content and format, leaving students with a supplementary role. Thirdly, the role of class meetings in moral education is not brought into full play. To deliver the target effect, activities in class meetings should be designed in a systematic way based on the age and features of students, as well as what happens around them but currently, many meetings are loosely organized without a clear theme, making it impossible for students to gain genuine value out of them and achieve the goal of a moral education.

2.4 Competition for Titles and Honors

The above example of the class meeting also provides a glimpse into the competition for titles and honors among Chinese students. Such competition is mostly conducted through speeches and voting. From the perspectives of the students, this is relatively fair as it provides a level playing ground for all. Besides, Xiaoyang’s class offers quite a number of honorary titles each semester, such as “Labor-Loving Student,” “Model of Good Manners,” and “Star of the Class.” Through competitions, students are encouraged and incentivized to work harder and improve themselves.

Such competitive selections have a long tradition in China. In modern school education, the selection is measured against a set of norms as defined by the school (Lu 2009, p. 5). Such competitive activities facilitate positive guidance for students and demonstrate the following three features.

2.4.1 Diversified Types of Honors and Awards

Firstly, in terms of level, selections for honors and awards take place on class, school, city, province, and nationwide levels. The higher the level, the greater also the social value and higher the honor received by the student. Secondly, there are group awards and individual awards. Thirdly, some honors and awards are formal, while others may just be given in verbal recognition or as praises. Fourthly, there
are awards recognizing overall performance (i.e., “Triple A Student,” “Outstanding Student,” and “Top 10 Middle School Student”) and awards honoring students with extraordinary performance in one aspect (i.e., “Model of Study,” “Star of Sports,” and “Star of the Arts”).

2.4.2 Diversified Standards of Evaluation

Different selection projects have different standards and makers of standards are also different. For school-level awards, the standard is determined by the school, while for class level ones, the head teacher decides on what rules to follow. Standards are high for comprehensive selection projects such as “Triple A Student” and “Outstanding Student” while standards are usually one-dimensional for awards like “Star of Labor” and “Star of Sports.” In making standards, schools and teachers usually evaluate candidates’ presentations and academic performance.

2.4.3 Standardized Procedures

In school-level selection, the Student Affairs Office of the school will first inform head teachers of the standards and slots for awards, and then selection starts within the class. The steps that follow are basically the same as class-level selection projects: First, the head teacher announces the standards to the students, and those who are eligible and willing to compete for the award will make preparations; second, open selection is conducted at a time chosen by the head teacher, and students will make speeches in order; third, secret ballots are cast in the class, which is followed by open counting and identification of potential award winners. The result will be handed to the Student Affairs Office, which will publicize the list of award winners after checking the candidates’ academic records.

2.4.4 Reflection

Offering competitive honors and awards is common in China’s primary and middle schools. Through these activities, students get the opportunity to find role models around them, which will provide incentives and contribute to their growth. In addition, award winners will be inspired to achieve even higher targets. However, there are negative influences too. Academic performance is overemphasized in selections, leading to students being labeled as either good or bad. In some cases, this may even lead to under-the-table deals that destroy equal education. Despite these disadvantages, offering competitive honors and awards still exist for a reason. So long as the down side is well controlled, honors and awards are still useful.
2.5 Frequent Exams

As the bell rings, students quickly return to their seats and get ready to learn. At this moment, the door opens. The math teacher, holding a pile of paper walks to the front of the class and says, “Today we will have a test for the unit. Please clear away your desk, and leave only a pen and scrap paper.” As the students put away their books, some murmur, “Test, test, and test.” Despite this, the teacher gets off the podium right away and hands the exact number of test paper copies to the students sitting in the first row of each group. “Pass them down.” With this instruction, the students quickly pass down the test papers, and begin to pen down answers. “The test will take 40 min. Test papers will be collected at the end of the class,” the teacher reminds them. Xiaoyang takes a look at the clock and glances the paper over and starts to write down answers carefully. The whole class goes silent in a minute, and the drop of a needle could be heard. As time passes, Xiaoyang writes down answers that he knows most certainly. Then he begins to deal with the more difficult questions. He scratches his head and quickly scribbles. Xiaoyang finally finishes answering all questions with less than 3 min left to go. He looks at the clock again and gives a brief glance over the paper, and makes recalculations for the questions he is not very confident about. The bell rings, “Hand in the test paper. Hurry up. No more writing.” says the math teacher. Some students are still writing quickly, but with the repeated calls to hurry-up they have to give up. When all the test papers are collected, the teacher says, “We will explain the paper tomorrow. Today, don’t forget to finish your homework.” With this he leaves the classroom.

Xiaoyang could not be more familiar with the word “test” because test has long been part of his school life, in both primary and secondary school. Since his first day at school, he has sat through numerous dictations, weekly and monthly quizzes for each course, as well as mid-term and end-of-term tests year after year. Deep down Xiaoyang is resistant to tests, but he also knows well that tests exist for a reason, at least he is pressed to study hard. Xiaoyang’s cousin is 3 years older than him and is even more occupied by tests as she is in senior middle school. Such intensity has left her no time to contemplate meaning of tests. Her only hope is that her performance can steadily improve after each test so that she can successfully pass the highly competitive gaokao and have a successful start to her university studies and career.

Tests have long been one of the most disputed topics in the development and reform of China’s school education. Discussions seem to be never ending in the education community and beyond. On the one hand, the outstanding performance of Chinese students in international tests has attracted our attention to the value of testing in the Chinese system, but on the other hand, problems inherent in Chinese tests trigger much criticism. So what are the features of Chinese tests?
2.5.1 Types of Tests

There are various types of tests, including pop quizzes (morning tests\(^3\) and noon tests\(^4\)), unit tests, monthly tests, mid-term tests, end-of-term tests, graduation exams, and entrance exams for junior/senior middle school and college. Among them, pop quizzes, unit tests, monthly tests, and mid-term tests are formative tests that aim to find out the progress of studies. End-of-term and graduation tests are summative tests, which are used to examine how students get on with their study throughout the semester or throughout the whole study period, so as to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. By comparison, the third type of tests exerts the greatest influence on Chinese students, which include entrance exams for junior middle school,\(^5\) senior middle school and college. Such tests are essentially selective: The purpose is to select the most qualified among all peers for a certain level of education (Liao 1988). It needs to be pointed out that the various types of exams are more frequently seen in middle schools than in primary schools.

2.5.2 Frequency of Tests

Different types of tests are held with different frequency. Pop quizzes are small quizzes conducted frequently in class after the teacher finishes their teaching. They can happen at any time. Unit tests are held every week or every other week after the lecture of a unit finishes. Monthly tests are held at the end of each month, totaling two to three each semester. Mid-term and end-of-term tests are held once respectively at the middle and end of the semester. Unified graduation tests for junior and senior middle schools are held once respectively after students finish 3 years of study. Finally, entrance exams are held once to screen candidates for middle school and college education.

2.5.3 Forms of Tests

Most tests in Chinese schools are closed book written tests. Some subjects (e.g., political science and history) are open-book; some subjects (e.g., physics, chemistry, and biology) require both written tests and tests that require experiments to be conducted. Sport tests mainly focus on students’ fitness, and are gaining increasingly more attention in China’s school education, occasionally even influencing the

\(^3\)Morning tests are carried out during morning study.
\(^4\)Noon tests are carried out during noon self-study in some senior high schools.
\(^5\)Entrance exams for junior middle school have been scrapped in some Chinese cities.
recruitment of middle school students. Subjects like music and arts are basically test-free.

2.5.4 *Publication and Ranking of Scores*

Generally speaking, primary schools publish scores and no ranking. In junior middle school, scores are open to all. Some schools choose to publish rankings while others do not. In senior middle school, as there is mounting pressure from college entrance exams, both scores and rankings are published. In terms of rankings, only those for major tests such as mid-term, end-of-term and mock exams are open at both class and school levels, sometimes even at district and city levels.

2.5.5 *Reflection*

Tests can be a double-edge sword. Its deep root in Chinese history proves its value to some extent. As pointed out by Zhenglun (1982) in *On Teaching*: “For students, tests encourage and urge study; for teachers, they provide information on teaching effects and help accumulate experience; for schools, they help to reveal problems and improve leadership; for the country, they are a tool for talent selection” (pp. 347–348). Thus, tests in Chinese schools have a positive side, but problems are also evident. They are at times ridden with strange, tricky, and unreasonably difficult questions that are not closely related to reality, the form of some exams are stereotyped and old-fashioned, they are carried out too often, and they lay too much emphasis on selection and too little on result analysis. These problems directly undermine the positive side of tests and the overall development of school education. Thus, in future reform, the problems listed above must be addressed so as to bring the potential of tests into full play.

2.6 *Rich Activities of Student Societies*

Today is the day for student society activities. After the third afternoon class, Xiaoyang and his fellow classmates start to pack up their schoolbag and get ready to head for the activity rooms. At the beginning of the semester, Xiaoyang signed himself up for the wood carving society without hesitation because he likes carving. As usual, with his bag on the back Xiaoyang rushes to the art classroom on the second floor of the teaching building. He pushes the door open and says hello to the senior students already in the classroom, and takes a seat. At this moment, the teacher comes in and after a greeting, says, “Last week many of you did not finish your work. We will continue this week. Please raise your hand if you have any
questions.” Before the teacher finishes speaking, Xiaoyang takes out his half-carved stone and starts to carve in all seriousness. The teacher passes by Xiaoyang, takes a close look at his work and gives comment on the details. Xiaoyang nods his head several times as a sign of agreement. Time flashes by and by the time the bell rings, Xiaoyang has basically finished his stamp carving. He holds his work in his hands, and appreciates it again and again, beaming with a sense of achievement. As the teacher calls for class to be over, Xiaoyang packs away the tools, puts his backpack on again, and goes back home.

Having fun in the student society class is Xiaoyang’s favorite activity. Every week he looks forward to activity days. In primary school, there were not many societies available, so he had to make do with a basketball society. After he entered junior middle school, he found a rich variety of societies ranging from arts to sports and leisure available, including his favorite: carving. Though not many students register for this society, the teacher is very conscientious. Through weekly activities, Xiaoyang gains a lot of knowledge and skills related to carving. In senior middle school, where Xiaoyang’s cousin studies, there are also a wide range of societies available to students. She chose the movie society in her first year for some relaxation. Now she has developed a strong interest in astronomy, and is a member of the astronomy society.

In Chinese schools, a student society refers to a community organization created for knowledge, practice, resource-sharing, skill improvement and self-growth by the teacher and students who voluntarily join in through registration based on their interests, hobbies, and characters (Liang 2008). Unlike societies in colleges, societies in primary and secondary schools are set up with the support of teachers and school resources, as students are not yet grown-ups and not yet independent. In general, student societies in Chinese schools have the following features.

### 2.6.1 Fixed Activity Time

Society activities are hosted at a fixed time once a week, usually in the last class on a certain afternoon from Monday to Friday.

### 2.6.2 Joint Participation

Student societies are participated in not only by students, but also by teachers. As mentioned above, this is mainly attributable to the fact that students are not yet grown-ups. Societies are mainly built by schools, managed by teachers and at times supported by parents. It should be pointed out that the teachers in the society do not all come from within the school but that some of them are professionals recruited from outside the school so as to provide the best guidance to students in specific fields.
2.6.3 Rich Varieties

On the whole, there are fewer student societies in primary than middle schools. Specifically, there are four major types of societies: (1) culture and arts to develop students’ potential in writing and art appreciation, such as reading and writing, calligraphy and painting, chorus, dancing, orchestral music, recitation, English dubbing, carving and drama; (2) science and technology, such as Mathematical Olympiad, astronomy, geography, model airplane, and computer graphics; (3) sports and leisure activities such as track and field sports, football, ping pong, basketball, gymnastics, martial arts, movie and television evaluation, cooking, clay sculpture, and the art of the tea ceremony; and (4) public interest, of which are few that mainly focus on environmental protection.

2.6.4 Varied Activities

For art and sports societies, the activities are mostly rehearsal, training and at times competition on behalf of the school as organized and overseen by the school. For other societies, students’ interests mainly motivate activities. Environmental protection initiatives, for example, and curriculum-related projects are organized with the help of the teacher.

2.6.5 Reflection

In Chinese schools, the student society is an effective tool for improving student’s education quality and competence. The student society has become a pioneer in the building of school culture and has played an irreplaceable role in improving students’ knowledge framework, strengthening practical skills, enhancing overall competence and even moral standards. As students can join societies based on their own interest, they are often more enthusiastic about society activities than course learning, which translates into better results. Apart from that, students take their own initiative in society activities, and participate more in the organization, planning and coordination, thus improving their leadership and team-working skills. More importantly, as a support to regular teaching, societies can help reduce the tension of learning to some extent, because they bring knowledge and fun to an otherwise more rigid environment. However, societies in Chinese schools are still in their early stages and have many problems, including the lack of effective evaluation, incentives, innovation and convincing results. There is still a long way to go for the development of student societies in China.
2.7 Homework

After dinner, Xiaoyang chats with his parents on the sofa. He tells them excitedly that he got an award as a “Triple A Student” of the semester, which pleases his parents. His father even promises to reward him by realizing one of his wishes. At this time, his mother takes a look at the clock on the wall. It is already 19:30. She reminds him: “Go and finish your homework. Start early and sleep early.” Though a bit reluctant, Xiaoyang answers “Alright” and goes to his room. He sinks into his chair and ponders for a moment. A few minutes later he drags his schoolbag over and takes out the notebook. He ticks off math homework, as a sign that it is finished. What is left undone is reciting a text, and an English test paper. He quickly takes out the paper and begins to work on it. Forty minutes later, he gets it done and puts it back into the folder. He drinks a cup of hot milk. Xiaoyang drinks it and starts to recite: the last item of today’s homework. Half an hour later, he calls his mother in, who listens to him reciting while checking it against the book to ensure that there are no mistakes. Xiaoyang recites three times to make sure that he remembers everything. Then he packs up his Chinese textbook feeling confident. It is 21:15 when he finally finishes his homework.

For Xiaoyang, a major difference between primary and middle schools is more homework which takes longer to finish. Now, he spends almost 1.5–2 h doing homework every day. Thankfully there are times when he has already finished some homework during his self-study class, thus having a lighter load after returning home. Personally, Xiaoyang likes practice-oriented homework, especially the work that can be done with other classmates, but such assignments are few and far between. By comparison, he hates most recitation and copying exercises because they are comparatively boring. Though he finds it tiring to do homework, Xiaoyang does not resist it, “Firstly, it does help me consolidate what I’ve learned but if the teacher gives us more interesting and creative homework, I’d be more than willing to finish it.” Xiaoyang’s cousin is even more occupied by homework. It takes her 2–3 h to finish her homework after returning home every day, apart from the time she has spent in self-study. For her, homework is a large part of her life. It is tiring, but she will not quit to realize her dreams.

Homework is a crucial part in teaching and learning. Cognitive psychologist Gagne emphasizes the role of homework in learning. In his theory, that outlines nine instructional events and corresponding cognitive processes, one event is stimulating recall of prior learning: homework (Zhang 2011). Hence, homework plays a big role in school education. For Chinese students, it is nothing more than an ordinary learning activity. Under the influence of traditional education, homework in Chinese schools is identified to have the following features.
2.7 Homework

2.7.1 Higher Grades, More Homework Hours

Generally speaking, primary school students spend about 0.5–1 h per day on homework. For junior middle school students, it is about 1.5–2 h per day and for senior middle school students, it is about 2–3 h per day. As every school arranges self-study time for students on a daily basis, students can finish part of their work at school so that they have a reduced load at home.

2.7.2 Various Sources of Homework

Teachers are undoubtedly the major assigners of homework in Chinese schools. The homework they assign takes up the largest share. Amongst all subjects, Chinese, mathematics and English are the main courses with the most homework assignments. Meanwhile, influenced by the tradition of holding high hopes for children, some parents assign them extra tasks. Children may also have to finish other work as part of extracurricular learning. Besides, some students with excellent academic performance will give themselves a heavier load every day by assigning homework to themselves.

2.7.3 Structure of Homework

Currently, there are four types of homework: written homework, oral homework, crafts or fieldwork, and others (Luan 2007). Amongst them, written homework includes copying, article writing, exercises and beyond; oral homework includes recitation and reading; crafts or fieldwork refers to creating something by hand, investigating, or conducting surveys; others refers to previews or reviews (tasks other than writing or memorizing). Written homework takes up the absolute majority of the homework. In primary school and junior middle school, Chinese and English homework usually comprises of copying and recitation while mathematics homework is mainly exercise. Other subjects are rarely accompanied by homework. In senior middle school, basically all subjects tested in the college entrance exam are supported by homework in the forms of exercises and test papers.

2.7.4 More Objective Checks Than Subjective Comments

When it comes to homework evaluation, the typical process involves handing in homework, a teacher’s check, handing homework out again, reading the ticks and
crosses and finally correcting errors. As most Chinese classes tend to be relatively large, teachers mostly choose to only review important homework to ensure teaching effectiveness and timely feedback. In checking homework, the teacher usually uses marks such as checks. Only in checking subjective homework such as compositions and diaries will the teacher write comments.

2.7.5 Reflection

Homework plays an important and valuable role in China’s school education. Firstly, homework helps students strengthen, deepen and utilize the knowledge taught in class and facilitates the realization of teaching goals. Secondly, it contributes to enhancing the students’ learning competence. The process of doing homework is comprehensive training. However, it is undeniable that there are problems in homework assignment and evaluation, including long homework hours, boring content, lack of flexibility, too many writing assignments, tick-or-cross evaluation and lack of tailored comments. In the future, Chinese schools must further improve the quality of homework, lessen the workload and break away from the traditional framework so that the homework system can be more humane and diversified, as well as focus on self-learning.

The above describes a typical day for Chinese students like Xiaoyang. Activities such as attending classes, joining in the flag-raising ceremony, joining class meetings, sitting for tests, getting involved in student societies and doing homework are repeated day after day. To sum up, students spend every day with a busy learning schedule and activities. Undeniably, these activities still have many problems, but the positive influences far outweigh the negatives. On the road ahead, Chinese schools will be committed to building on the fine tradition of the past and trying to avoid and address some of the problems so as to build the best possible learning environment and a more colorful life for students.

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