

Education in the Asia-Pacific Region:  
Issues, Concerns and Prospects 21

Charlene Tan

# Learning from Shanghai

Lessons on Achieving Educational  
Success



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# Learning from Shanghai

# EDUCATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND PROSPECTS

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Volume 21

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Charlene Tan

# Learning from Shanghai

Lessons on Achieving Educational Success

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Policy and Leadership Studies  
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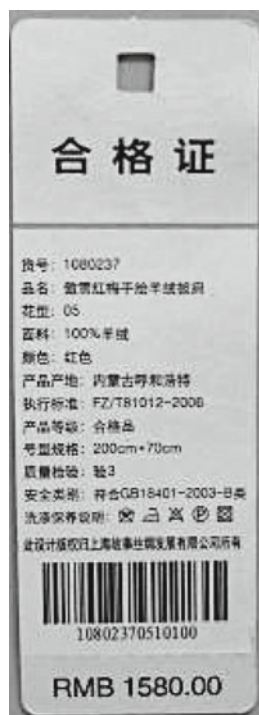
*To my husband Lim Pin (twb)*



# Prologue

As I write the prologue, I'm comfortably seated at home with a shawl wrapped around me. The shawl is lovely – it's made of 100% cashmere, extremely soft to the touch, and hand-painted with delicate plum flowers.

The shawl was given to me by a Shanghai school principal whose school I visited last year. When presenting me with the shawl, he said to me, “Teacher Chen, our school has a gift for you. It's a shawl made in China. Do you know that there're different grades of shawls here? Some cost just 99 yuan (about US\$15) but others many times more.”



**Photo 1** The price tag of the shawl



When I returned to my room, I removed the wrapper and saw the price tag: 1,580 yuan (about US\$250). That's equivalent to about half a month's salary of a beginning teacher in Shanghai.

The shawl's brand was 'Story in Shanghai' [Shanghai gushi]. How apt, I thought, for I had intended to write a story about Shanghai.

The shawl was just one of many gifts I've received from the Shanghai principals when I visited their schools. They arranged for their school drivers to chauffeur me, invited me to expensive meals at posh restaurants, and accompanied me on visits to various places of interest, including a day-trip to nearby Suzhou one weekend.

The warmth and hospitality I've received from the school principals were overwhelming. The principals simply spared no effort to make me feel welcome. Perhaps it helped that they did not see me as just any visitor. I was their course instructor when they studied for a Master's degree in Singapore some years ago. So there's a special teacher-student relationship between us. "One day as my teacher, the rest of my life as my father" [yiri weishi zhongshen weifu], one principal, quoting a Chinese proverb, said to me. A Shanghai teacher I met in a school gave me a gift and said, "Since you're our principal's teacher, you're also our teacher". Indeed, the perceived high status of a teacher and a strong teacher-student bond reflect the sociocultural values held by Shanghai educators.

I was in Shanghai in May and June 2011 to research for this book on education in Shanghai. Shanghai has gained international attention since its impressive performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009. PISA evaluates the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems in some 70 countries that comprise nine-tenths of the world economy (OECD, 2010a). What differentiates PISA from other international assessments is its focus on the students' ability to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. Shanghai students emerged top among 65 countries and economies in all 3 categories in 2009: reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2010b, 2010c).<sup>1</sup> Shanghai also has the world's highest percentage (76%) of 'resilient students' in 2009, defined as students who come from the bottom quarter of the distribution of socioeconomic background in their country who have scored in the top quarter among students from all countries with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (OECD, 2010e, p. 13).

In a report entitled 'What makes a school successful', OECD defines a successful school system as one that performs above average and shows below-average

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<sup>1</sup>OECD (2010d, p. 23) defines 'reading', 'mathematics' and 'science' as follows: reading refers to "the capacity of an individual to understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts in order to achieve his/her goals, to develop his/her knowledge and potential, and to participate in society". Mathematics refers to "the capacity of an individual to formulate, employ and interpret mathematics in a variety of contexts" and "assists individuals in recognising the role that mathematics plays in the world and in making well-founded judgments and decisions that constructive, engaged and reflective citizens would require". Science refers primarily to "the extent to which an individual possesses scientific knowledge and uses that knowledge to identify questions, acquire new knowledge, explain scientific phenomena, draw evidence-based conclusions about science-related issues" and "engages in science-related issues and with the ideas of science, as a reflective citizen".

socioeconomic inequalities (OECD, 2010a, p. 13). Based on this definition, OECD declares that Shanghai is a ‘stunning success’ (OECD, 2010a, p. 3). At the point of writing this book, the results for PISA 2012 have yet been announced. But it is highly probable that Shanghai will continue to out-perform many other countries in PISA and produce many resilient students.

There are a number of factors to account for Shanghai’s educational success (as I shall elaborate in this book), but one key factor is the school leaders. The Shanghai educators I’ve taught and met are all well-versed in international affairs, global in their outlook, IT savvy and even ‘Westernised’ compared to their counterparts in other parts of China. But beneath all these are deeply ingrained sociocultural values, beliefs and logics that shape their behaviours and influence their school leadership styles. And it’s this curious mix of tradition and modernity, a synthesis of East and West, that characterises school leadership, teaching and learning in Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> It is a story that is waiting to be told.

Like the shawl, this book tells a ‘Shanghai Story’ – a story of a city’s relentless quest for and achievement of ‘stunning success’ in education.

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<sup>2</sup>It is of course difficult to define what one means by ‘East’ and ‘West’. It is beyond the scope of this book to engage in a detailed discussion of the terms. For the purpose of this research, I use the term ‘East’ to refer to China and other East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. I use the term ‘West’ to refer to Anglophone countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.



# Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a privilege and joy for me. I am most grateful to all the Shanghai principals, vice-principals, education officers, teachers and students for providing me with valuable research data. In particular, I am indebted to the school principals in Shanghai who hosted me when I visited their schools in May and June 2011. They, as well as their school staff, have showered me with so much warmth, care and concern that my trip has been most fruitful, enjoyable and memorable!

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All the persons mentioned are not in any way responsible for any mistakes found in this book, which are wholly mine. *Ebenezer*

Singapore  
June 2012

Charlene Hwee Phio Tan  
(a.k.a. Teacher Chen)



# Introduction by the Series Editors

As the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris points out, Shanghai has achieved very impressive success in the performance levels achieved by students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA focuses on the ability of students to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. Shanghai students have achieved ‘stunning success’, being top of the 65 countries and areas taking part in the international assessment exercise (PISA), in all of the three areas assessed: reading, mathematics and science.

There has been worldwide interest in explaining how and why Shanghai students are the top performers in PISA. The author of this informative and interesting book seeks to explain this success by answering three key questions: How successful is education in Shanghai? What factors contribute towards educational success in Shanghai? What can the world learn from Shanghai’s education success?

This is an important book on an important subject. It tells the story of Shanghai’s very successful efforts to achieve great educational success for its students and as such provides a role model for others throughout the world who are keen to achieve the same high-level outcomes for their students. It examines international implications of the Shanghai PISA results, and what the rest of the world can learn from Shanghai. This is a fascinating book which provides deep and ensuring insights to explain the success of students in Shanghai. Many researchers and policy makers have gone to Shanghai to try to better understand this phenomena.

Charlene Tan’s research shows that there are many lessons to be learnt from Shanghai. For example, the Shanghai experience demonstrates the desirability and value of taking ideas from elsewhere and then adapting them judiciously to meet the local context. Ideas from other parts of the world are adopted selectively and carefully in Shanghai, and not on a wholesale basis.

The book is a blend of quantitative and qualitative data. We find the interview data particularly insightful, with the reporting of quotes from the interviews doing much to personalize the data and make it even more powerful than would otherwise be the case.

Charlene Tan demonstrates that policy makers, education leaders and teachers in Shanghai are open minded, show a willingness to borrow ideas from elsewhere which

they then modify to accommodate the local context and Chinese culture. As one teacher interviewed put it: 'Teachers in Shanghai do not go solo'. Shanghai educators have a shared vision on education which contributes to education success.

This book has much of value to teach us about achieving educational success. It deserves to be widely read.

Rupert Maclean, Hong Kong Institute of Education  
Ryo Watanabe, National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER), Tokyo

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