

# Teaching Chinese National Identity to Elementary Students in Hong Kong

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**Developing national identity** is a goal of schools around the world. Historically this goal has been especially important for nations coming out of colonization as new governments seek to unify their nations and promote national identities. From 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong was a British colony whose excellent harbor made it a linchpin of British economic interests within Asia. When the British lease expired and Hong Kong returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, its schools faced a new goal: fostering students' identity as citizens of China.

How have Hong Kong schools, with over a hundred years of British curricula, made efforts to teach students to understand China and identify as Chinese citizens? Relying upon lessons developed by Hong Kong teachers to meet such goals, this article provides insights into teaching about China and Chinese identity from the perspectives of elementary teachers and students in Hong Kong. The lessons can connect young Americans to their counterparts in Hong Kong as they also experience learning about China, its history and culture. The lessons can be a springboard for discussions of what it means to identify with your nation and become a good citizen.

## Background

For 155 years, the education policy of Hong Kong's British colonial government was largely "de-politicized" and "de-nationalized." Up until 1997, teachers in Hong Kong focused on the many cultures and events of 5,000 years of Chinese history. In order not to create

conflicts with its giant neighbor, the British administration preferred that schools end Chinese history courses with World War II. After Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, its educational policies began to emphasize understanding China and fostering national identity. The study of Chinese history and contemporary life was to play a role in smoothing the transference of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China.

The remaking of Chinese identity in Hong Kong after such a long period of political alienation from Mainland China (the term used in Hong Kong to denote the PRC) has been a complex and thorny issue. Though the majority of people in Hong Kong share a common cultural "Chineseness" with the people of Mainland China, they have developed a special multi-faceted identity shaped by Hong Kong's international outlook, its economic competitiveness, its innovations and unique style. Even though there has been increased economic integration with China since

the early 1990s, most people in Hong Kong (with the exception of pro-China groups) have continued to identify themselves as Hong Kongers and shown a strong identification with local, rather than national, interests.

In order to implement the 1997 principle of "One Country, Two Systems" (the socialist system in China and the capitalist system in Hong Kong), the post-colonial government in Hong Kong has placed an emphasis on the need for students to understand China (now their country) and Mainland Chinese culture as part of their development of national identity. The social studies curriculum today fosters pride in being Chinese citizens within the contexts of global understanding and the information era.

We know that teachers are instructional gate-keepers and implementers of curricula in the classroom. In the lessons that follow, we can see how two teachers' practices interact with the goals of developing national identity. The lessons described on pages 24–25 were taught in urban Hong Kong schools in 2005 and 2006. The first lesson was taught to 32 sixth graders in an affluent school where the medium of instruction is English; the second lesson was taught to 38 fifth graders in a school that has a mostly lower middle class student population and the medium of instruction is Cantonese

(a dialect of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong). Both teachers are very experienced and consciously plan lessons so that their students will be thoughtful and critical.

## Conclusion

In these lessons the teachers are beginning to lay the groundwork for students to examine the complex relationship of their identity as citizens of both Hong Kong and China. This is important as Hongkong Chinese have already developed multiple identities as Hongkongese, Hongkong Chinese, and global citizens (e.g., some are holders of foreign passports and some are returned migrants). How the students will resolve the tensions generated by the conflicting and yet overlapping identities will remain a vital issue if Hong Kong is to sustain its role as “the world city” in Asia.

These lessons also raise questions of how moral inculcation and critical analysis are related to national identity. Must certain values be taught as a component of Chinese identity? Is media education necessary for students to critique various sources of information? Are some historical events especially important for students to know about as they are developing their sense of national identity? These lessons also demonstrate that it is teachers, rather than curriculum guides, who matter most in how students come to terms with multiple identities. 🌐

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We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the schools and teachers as well as the Education Bureau officials who have rendered help and support to our observations and data collection. Their names are kept anonymous in this paper by their request.

## Sidebar 1. Events and Actions of Qin (As Listed by Students)

- When he was a young man, he came to power in the Qin state and perfected military strategies that helped him ruthlessly invade and conquer other states.
- He followed the legalist philosophy, which assumes that people are evil in nature and that stringent laws and harsh punishments are required to keep order.
- He had a Great Wall built (the longest wall in the world at that time) to protect his people from invasions from people in the north.<sup>1</sup>
- He banned or burned all books that conflicted with his ideas in an effort to drive out other beliefs such as Confucianism and Taoism.
- He set up national conscription so that every male between the ages of seventeen and sixty years had to serve one year in the army.
- If a person was convicted of a small crime and could not pay a fine immediately, the person was forced into labor to work off his debt.
- People convicted of stealing were punished by amputation (a foot or nose) or became convicted laborers.
- He changed the way people got military and administrative jobs from being determined by noble birth, to being decided by merit. Therefore any man who performed well could rise to a high position.
- He standardized the currency to a circular copper coin with a square hole in the middle so all people across China used the same coins.
- He made it a law that all cartwheels and axle lengths had to be the same size so all carts could use the same size roads. His roads became the expressways of the time.
- He had people build a network of roads across the country to increase trade and communication.
- He heavily taxed people to pay for his public work projects (roads, canals, the great wall, etc.) and his palaces.
- Millions of people were forced to work on his building projects under very harsh conditions. More than a million people died in the construction of the Great Wall.
- He had people who disagreed with him executed or buried alive.
- He had all books of a non-technical nature burned, in an attempt to eliminate the teachings of Confucius and any writings that disagreed with his ideas.
- He sought absolute control over information across China.
- He named himself ‘shi Huangdi,’ meaning the First Emperor.
- He built canals across the country for irrigation and transportation; these canals saved thousands of people from famine during droughts.
- He divided China into 36 prefectures each with the same kind of local governance.
- He destroyed the power of kings and nobles.
- Before he came to power, each state had its own way of writing. He standardized the script so that the same Chinese writing could be read and written across the whole country.
- He built a great palace that accommodated 10,000 people.
- He standardized measurements (how things are weighed and measured) so no matter where people lived in China they measured grain, wood or cloth the same way.
- He standardized laws so all people were held accountable to the same laws.
- He built a mausoleum (a place where his body was to be buried) with 6000 life-size terracotta (clay) guards, and many horses. This site, uncovered in the 1970s in Xian, is one of the greatest historical sites in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. This wall is recognized as the first Great Wall of China although the present 4,856-kilometer-long Great Wall of China was largely built or re-built during the Ming Dynasty.
2. See [english.people.com.cn/200507/09/eng20050709\\_195157.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200507/09/eng20050709_195157.html) for a Chinese newspaper story on the terracotta warriors and the tomb. American resources on the Qin, the tomb and the great wall include [www.utexas.edu/courses/wilson/ant304/biography/arybios98/smithbio.html](http://www.utexas.edu/courses/wilson/ant304/biography/arybios98/smithbio.html), [www.ccds.charlotte.nc.us/History/China/02/politte/politte.htm](http://www.ccds.charlotte.nc.us/History/China/02/politte/politte.htm) and [www.historyforkids.org/learn/china/history/chin.htm](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/china/history/chin.htm). Other excellent resources on China can be found at the East Asian Studies site at Columbia [afe.easia.columbia.edu/](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/) and Ask Asia [www.askasia.org](http://www.askasia.org).

# LESSON ONE: A Hero or a Tyrant? The Unification of China

The learning objectives for the lesson were for students to:

1. Analyze the actions and accomplishments of Qin Shi Huangdi, the person who unified China.
2. Make an informed decision as to whether he was a tyrant or a hero.
3. Compare unity in the Qin Dynasty with Chinese unity today.



**Background:** The students had already studied the historical period “The Warring States,” from 475 to 221 B.C.E. During that time, many small kingdoms across the land that was to become China began joining together to become major states. These states were called by the names of the kings that ruled them—Zhao, Wei, Han, Qin, and so forth. Huge armies (half a million soldiers in an army was not

unusual), battles and sieges over many months were common during this period. It was also a period when great philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism developed.

The lesson is about Qin Shi Huangdi, who conquered several separate states and united China into one large country with a population of over 40 million. Qin (Chinese surnames are always first in writing a person’s name) developed a national network of canals and roads, a new system of local governments, and a new bureaucracy based on merit instead of the inherited privilege of kings and nobles. He standardized writing, currency, and weights and measures so that across the new empire people began to share many commonalities. He was also very cruel, taxed people heavily, and persecuted anyone disagreeing with his laws and policies. A Qin saying was, “A thousand die so that a million may live.” Qin is pronounced “Chin” and is the origin of the name *China*.

The teacher began the lesson by showing a map of China and asking, “Who are the Chinese people?” “How did this large area of land that was made up of so many separate states become China?” She then told the students that they were going to learn about the man who unified many states into the Chinese empire. “I want you to decide if he was a tyrant or a hero.” The students

brainstormed characteristics of a hero (an admirable person, brave, virtuous, saves people) and a tyrant (cruel, feared, makes people obey). Then they saw clips from the film, *Hero*,<sup>1</sup> in which Qin has both heroic and horrific qualities. Students learned from a presentation by a guest historian, studied maps and printed materials and then made a list of items that characterized Qin’s life. (Sidebar on page 23) They grouped items on the list under the category headings of “hero” or “tyrant” in order to prepare for debating his impact on China then and now.

As students debated the pros and cons of Qin’s efforts to unify China and the impact of unification on China today, they agreed that Qin made China stronger despite the hardships suffered by many people. Points of importance to the students included the process of getting jobs based on merit, standardization, and improving agriculture through canals and roads. They were especially fascinated by his tomb, with its artistic treasure of terra cotta warriors.

The last part of the lesson focused on a comparison of media reports on the Taiwanese independence movement and the anti-secessionist law of March 2005 in which the PRC government asserted its right to attack Taiwan (also called Formosa) if the government there moved towards formal independence from Mainland China.<sup>2</sup> The final questions for students to consider were these,

- If Taiwan becomes independent from China, what other places might want to become separate countries?
- What is best for the Chinese people?

Students were then led to explore the complex and conflicting issues related to the plurality and unity in the building of national identity.

## Notes

1. The film *Hero* (2004) is widely available. See [www.miramax.com/hero/](http://www.miramax.com/hero/) for the trailer. Only selected cuts were shown to the students as this film includes violence.
2. Students can read *China Daily*, a major Chinese newspaper, in English at [english.peopledaily.com.cn/](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/) and some American cable companies have international channels with news and programs directly from China.

## Sidebar for Lesson Two:

### Desirable and Undesirable Characteristics (As Listed by Students)

#### Positive

1. polite
2. moral
3. patriotic
4. family-minded
5. diligent
6. frugal
7. willing to help

#### Negative

1. smoking and spitting
2. impolite, queue jumping
3. lacking social-mindedness
4. selfish
5. aggressive
6. inconsiderate
7. unhygienic



## LESSON TWO: Two Car Accidents: How Do People Respond?

Learning objectives were for students to:

1. Increase their understand of China through study of people's reactions to everyday events;
2. Develop critical thinking skills in analyzing stories reported in the media, and identifying underlying assumptions, core values, and cultural beliefs;
3. Reflect on their identity as Chinese from different perspectives.

The 38 fifth grade students were seated in heterogeneous groups of five to six. In previous lessons the students had used primary sources to learn about cultural identities of Hongkongese (the people of Hong Kong) and the cultures of Mainland China.

The teacher began the lesson with the question: "What do you know about people in Mainland China?" As the students raised their hands and spoke, the teacher wrote their responses on the board. Then the students were asked to categorize each answer as either a positive or a negative characteristic (Sidebar page 24).

As students examined the lists on the board, the teacher asked them to explain where they could find evidence to support these characteristics. The teacher found that, in general, students had learned positive characteristics of Chinese people from their parents, from moral lessons and adages, or from school books and Chinese literature. Most of the negative aspects came from media sources on current issues and events in Mainland China and Hong Kong. For example, polluting the environment and spitting and smoking in public spaces were reported in the press. The discussion led to questions of how to develop opinions when there is conflicting evidence from trusted sources.

Following this discussion the class watched two television news reports on car accidents that occurred on the same date in two different places in China. The teacher asked students to identify Chinese cultural values evident in the videos.

### *Episode One*

*On November 18, 2006, a truck loaded with cardboard paper was on fire on a highway in Jiaying city. The firemen were busy putting out the fire. Suddenly, a large number of people were rushing out from different directions. Instead of helping to put out the fire, they were picking up the piles of cardboard.*

*"Stop it! Don't do that!" The cardboard was the driver's property! The truck was already burnt!" Some firemen shouted out loudly.*

*"What a shame! You are robbing!" The reporter helped in stopping the gang of people.*

*The gang of robbers ignored the comments and went on picking up the cardboard. While the firemen were still fighting against the fire, the robbers had left the scene with their carts loaded with cardboard.*

### *Episode Two*

*On the same day in a small village in Anhui, there was also a traffic accident. A truck loaded with cartons of apples was on fire on a highway. The firemen were busy putting out the fire. Suddenly, a group of villagers were seen rushing to the scene from different directions. They were picking up the apples, which were spread all over the road. However, instead of taking the apples home, they put them back into the cartons, which were then re-arranged neatly on the road.*

*"I have to offer help. That is doing something good," said an old villager.*

*"Indeed, the driver is already suffering and losing a lot. We need to help him out," said another younger villager.*

*After the fire was put out, the apples were safely and orderly re-arranged on the road. ....*

After the videos, the teacher asked the students to discuss these questions in their groups:

1. What have you seen, smelt or tasted?
2. Why did the people in the two places behave so differently?
3. If you were one of those people on the scene of traffic accident in Jiaying city, what would you do?
4. If you were the driver of the truck with cardboard paper, what would you feel?
5. Judging from the two episodes, what are your impressions of the Mainland Chinese?
6. How do you feel about being Chinese?

The class was motivated to discuss the events and explore underlying values through a sensory awareness activity. The divergent responses of the students to question number five were revealing. One group remarked that they felt proud of the behavior of the Chinese villagers in Anhui and explained that people in villages might be more rustic and simple, and therefore less corrupted by urban vices as can be demonstrated by people's unlawful behavior in Jiaying city. Another group of students commented that the misbehaviors as shown in the first episode were not unique among Chinese people. Students suggested that these were universal human frailties that might be seen in other parts of the world. Instead of seeing the Mainland Chinese as different from themselves, many responses showed that the students were open-minded and chose to see connections through cultural universals and moral relativism. Most students were not "chauvinistic" to the Mainlanders in spite of the occasional negative reports from the media.

The students probed deeper into the stark contrast of Chinese characters presented by two traffic accidents. Through empathy and reflective learning, students demonstrated appreciation of the predicament of others and critically examined Chinese actions and underlying values.