

**Document 19.1. “My Chinese High School,” by Zhang Chengyan, 2006**

*A school year in China consists of forty academic weeks in two semesters with a summer break in July and August and a winter break around Chunjie (Chinese New Year, 春节). The structure of a school day in China also has its own characteristics in terms of activities, class periods, and breaks. Zhang Chengyan attended school in Kunming, Yunnan Province until she came to the United States in 2005. She was a student at Cushing Academy in Massachusetts.*

When I first went to an American boarding high school from China mainland, I have no clue what should I do with my new schedule. It was arranged from A through H and the order changed from day to day. It marked different classrooms for different classes. I was really scared that I could not go to class on time at all. When I really experienced the classes, I was shocked by the big difference of the way I had class in Kunming, Yunnan.

First of all, in my grade, there were nearly one thousand students divided into fourteen classes when I was in Grade 10. Every class has sixty to sixty-five students, and we stayed all day long in the same classroom with the same students. We had the same level of courses if we were in the same grade, and there is no AP or Honor courses. Because there were so many students have the same level of courses, schools arranged different schedules for different classes every day, and there are two to three teachers teaching the same subject for different classes.

In China, when we are in Grade 10, we have chance to choose area in which we are more interested, humanities or science. After we choose the area, we have fewer classes on the other area and by 12<sup>th</sup> grade none at all. Humanities classes focus on history, government, and geography; and science classes focus on chemistry, physics, and biology. Chinese, English, and mathematics are mandatory for all students. Therefore, at the beginning of Grade 11, school arranges us into new classes based on what we choose to learn. In my grade 11, there were nine classes following the science curriculum and five focusing on humanities.

We do not need to run to different classroom for different classes, teachers come into our classroom for each class period. Every class has its own head teacher to not only teach one subject but in charge of daily affairs for the whole class, such as holds assembly for class every Monday, and contacts with parents when students have any problems. The head teacher arranges seats for students at the beginning of the year, so everybody has their own seat and it is unchangeable. It is the same for every class.

Every class has some student officers to help the teacher to organize the class. There is a president, a vice president, and a treasurer, and they have the similar duties like those in American student government. They always organize weekly or annual events for classes. Because there are too many students, it is hard for teachers to check or collect homework themselves, so we have subject representatives to help teachers. The subject representatives always are the ones who perform best abilities on that subject. They also are responsible to help other classmates who have trouble on learning on that subject after school if teachers are not at school.

There are eight periods every day from Monday to Friday for Grade 10 and 11. We generally arrive at school around 7:40. Students need to sit down and hand in all the homework before 7:50, and the subject representatives will hand in all class homework to their subject teachers at the end of the first period. This first period is fifteen minutes and is typically for “morning reading”. A Chinese teacher and English teacher alternate, coming in to guide students to read textbooks aloud together. Sometimes the teacher uses this time to give us some vocabulary pop quizzes.

After a five-minute break, first class starts at 8: 10 a.m. and every class is forty-five minutes long with a ten-minute break between every class. There is no typical class arrangement for morning classes and afternoon classes. After two classes in the morning at 10:00, the whole school gathers on the playground to exercise for twenty minutes. While music is playing, we all do exercises together that we learned in the Physical exercise class. Two classes continue until 12:00 p.m. Then students have two hours and a half to have lunch before the afternoon classes. During this long time, some students go

back home, some have lunch near school with friends and go back to classroom to study or take a nap, and others may go to play basketball.

Afternoon classes starts at 2:30 p.m. For Grade 10 and 11 students, there are three mandatory classes until 5:15. Since 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Chinese, math, and English meet for a double period (two periods lectures) once a week. Science courses and humanities courses have double periods in Grade 11 and 12, too.

In the afternoon, there is an eye exercise session between the first and the second period. We learn these eye exercises in elementary school. The exercises involve pressing gently on several pressure points and also massaging around the eye while music plays. This is all done with our eyes closed, and it keeps our eyes healthy.

If teachers want to give students extra practice, quizzes, or extra tests, there is an extra class after 5:15. In grade 12, students have four classes every afternoon until 6:00 p.m. in order to be well prepared for taking the college entrance examination.

Because teachers need to attend school the same time as students, students have a lot of time to discuss with teachers if they have any problems. They can find teachers during that two and a half hours in the noon, or they can ask teachers simple questions during a ten-minute break. They also can ask teachers questions after 5:15. But we do not have a fixed time for extra help like American schools.

My high school in China organizes some sports game between different classes in the same grade, such as basketball games, volleyball games, and soccer games. Students who participate those games can practice after school if they want, or they can practice in a physical exercise class. Every class has two physical exercise classes each week no matter which grade we are or what other classes we have. During the games, we go to watch them and cheer for our classmates. Those games start after two weeks of a new term and continue until the second to last week of the term. It takes place every Monday afternoon after classes.

There is an annual Art week and sports meeting for whole school. During the Art week, different Grade has various plans every year, such as performing arts competition between classes, or singing competitions. We are very enjoyable to participate on those activities.

We always have a lot of homework for all the subjects we learned every night, and they need to be hand in the next day. We usually spend the whole night, from 7:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m., to finish our homework. It always involves a lot of practice from textbooks and practice books about topics we learned that day.

We have totally different exam system in China. Every quiz or test we taking are not counted in our GPA. Unlike in America, the purpose of quizzes and tests other than middle or final exams is to help teacher collect information about whether students have already understand the topic, and also a way for students to check themselves whether they have problem on the topics they learned. We have middle term exams and final term exams for all subjects and every grade takes the same exam at the same time. We have two terms a year, so a total of four exams in an academic year. We have eight subjects, and every day we take exams in two of them. One is in the morning and one is in the afternoon. The exam period lasts four days long. After exam, school ranks and announces every student grade in a booklet so that everyone can see his own grades and others'. There is a parents meeting after all grades are announced. Teachers will give detailed information to parents and answer their questions.

After grade 12, there is a two-day exam, the *Gao Kao* (National College Entrance Examination, 高考) for all seniors in China.<sup>1</sup> This exam is the only factor that determines which college they can go. China Educational department gathers the best teachers to design the exam, so all seniors in China take the same exam. After the exam, colleges

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<sup>1</sup> The *Gao Kao* includes mandatory tests in Chinese, math and English, physics and chemistry (for students specialized in sciences), and history and political science (for students specialized in humanities). Each subject test is about two to three hours.

provide different grade lines to students. The better the college, the higher the grade line. The college can accept students whose grades are above the grade line. Different majors have different grades. Popular majors like business, doctor, and law always have higher grade lines.

Because of the large population pressure in China it becomes harder and harder to go to a college. Many high schools in China have mandatory classes for Saturday. Students need to go to school at the same time as weekdays, but there only two to three classes in the afternoon. It is also pretty normal that more and more Chinese students go to practice schools at night or Sundays in order to have a better score.<sup>2</sup>

*A typical weekly schedule:*

	Morning				Afternoon		
Monday	Math	Chinese	English	Chemistry	Biology	Physics	Math
Tuesday	Chemistry	Chinese	English	English	Physics	Physics	Math
Wednesday	Biology	English	Chemistry	Chemistry	Math	P. E*	Chinese
Thursday	Biology	Chinese	Math	Math	English	Physics	Physics
Friday	Chinese	Chinese	Biology	Chemistry	Math	P.E	English

Note: P.E is Physical Exercise class

The first period is Chinese and English alternate every day

Every single Saturday are tests for Chinese, Math, and English from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m, and 2:30 p.m. to 5:15 p.m.

Every day (Mon. to Fri.) after 5:15 p.m, teachers give tests for different subjects, and it varies every day.

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<sup>2</sup> These classes are called *buxi ban* (补习班), which literally means “catch-up classes.” Because of the competitive study environment, almost all students see themselves as somewhat lagging behind the class and think they need to catch up. Therefore many students also have private tutors to help them on different subjects.