

## **A comparative study on teaching methods of middle school history curriculum between China and the United States**

**Liu Yi**

Ideological and political theory teaching and research Department  
Jiangsu Police Institute  
Nanjing, China

**Liu Xiaobo**

School of information engineering  
Nanjing Xiaozhuang University  
Nanjing, China

### **Abstract**

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*The change of education ideas and teaching ways is an important task of basic education curriculum reform. This paper studies the middle school history teaching methods of China and the US and discusses their similarities and differences to help the history curriculum reform of China.*

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**Keywords:** China, the United States, history curriculum standard; comparison

### **1. Comparison**

#### **1.1 Background**

##### *1.1.1 Cultural differences*

In the long feudal society in China, Confucianism was the orthodox school. Under the culture of the teacher's dignity, teacher's external inculcation and the students' memorizing mechanically became the main teaching methods which have been carried over into today.

The United States is an immigrant country, *the declaration of independence* announced that "all men are created equal" to the world, people pursuing freedom, liberal and democratic atmosphere created American independent consciousness and self-concept. Educators encourage children to make their own decisions to deal with problems and form their own opinions.

##### *1.1.2 Goal difference*

Chinese objective is divided into three dimensions including "knowledge and ability", "process and method" and "emotional attitude and values". "Knowledge and ability": knowledge level was consists of the specific historical facts and abstract understanding. The ability level included the cultivation of history skills and history cognitive ability. "Process and method": changing the students in the knowledge, cognition and emotion psychologically through the systematic and planned teaching activities changes, and forming their personalities. "Emotional attitude and values": through the study of history, setting up humanities consciousness of the humanist and treating life, shaping healthy personality, cultivating a strong will and spirit of unity and cooperation, and setting up the spirit of advocating science. It also should inherit and carry forward the excellent traditional culture and national spirit, cultivate patriotic emotion, understand and respect cultural heritage of all ethnic groups in various areas of the world, and form the open world consciousness furtherly.

The goal of American history education is to cultivate students become a good citizen with knowledge, attitude and skills in a democratic society, appreciate and respect the system and background of the United States, have the ability of criticizing and thinking the current social, political and economic problems, and enhance the tolerance and understanding of the world.<sup>[1]</sup> The target is divided into “history thinking” and “history understanding”, it should attach importance to the integration of the two, pay attention to the cultivation of the students' comprehensive ability, and cultivate the students' history thinking ability. It required students understand the development process of the US in order to enhance their patriotic consciousness. The specific goals were: A. understanding the achievements and existing problems of American history to cultivate sense of patriotism and devotion to democracy; B. asking students to adopt the method of analogy to think about the problems facing modern society, have certain insights to the current situation at home and abroad, and forming their insightful point of views; C. cultivating students' ability to clarify and textual research facts, and form their own values; D. letting the students to form the global consciousness, analyzing, studying and understanding the relationship between the world and the United States; E. providing some historical backgrounds of observing and analyzing problems for students to learn other social disciplines.

### 1.1.3 Theoretical differences

After the founding of new China, middle school history teaching was always around Kairov's teaching theory in a fairly long period of time. It took knowledge as the center, teacher's teaching was the main study method, and students studied and mastered the systematic theoretical knowledge through the unified teaching plan, syllabus and textbook of school. It is influenced by Dewey's education thought in the United States. Dewey advocated student-centered and to learn from children's own activities, namely “learning from practice”, he was against united and mechanical learning methods, paid attention to practice, and students had a lot of initiative, formed a huge difference with China.

## 2. The similarity

### 2.1 Emphasizing on training ability

Studying history are not only to grasp the basic knowledge, but also to master a certain history learning ability, including understanding, analysis, interpretation, research ability and the method of learning history. China and the US also have emphasized historical study should improve ability of analyzing and explaining historical problems, especially the cultivation of exploring ability.

The “historic practice” teaching method of the US took the student as the main body from the “historical problems” to the “conclusion”, the students consulted, analyzed, and to solve the problem with use information under the guidance of teachers, and obtained their own conclusions. Students learned the knowledge, also learned to learn, their abilities of discovering history also were cultivated. In Chinese “discussion method” teaching, it is also not difficult to see teachers change the formed teaching method of “deciding everything by one man's say”, highlighted the principle status of students, teachers guided students through questions, students analyzed, researched, discussed and concluded, it embodied pay attention to cultivate students' ability of analysis and exploration in the process of teaching. Of course, they all paid attention to the training inquisition ability, but there are differences in specific ways: the American history education is vivid, creative and good at combining the reality of students, let students study history from their own life, community life and first-hand investigation. It emphasized students study and see history from different angles. Although Chinese history education put forward to change the students' learning way of memorizing mechanically and accepting knowledge passively and form the habit of inquiry learning in the curriculum standard, but there is no completely change in this situation.

### 2.2 Attaching great importance to the teaching methods

In the long-term teaching practice, China and the US all created and summarized the rich variety of teaching methods. America has “practice history”, “role play”, “speech”, “plan project”, ‘discussion method’ and so on, it has received the good effect in application, but expository method is still the main teaching method, in practical teaching, various methods used comprehensively. “Practice history” improved the student's study way, and highlighted the cognitive activities including exploring, inquiring and research in the learning process which became the process of finding problems, asking questions, analyzing and solving problems of student. “Role play” let the students learn history in their own “experience”, and learnt to learn history, this is the process of ability cultivation, is also the process of cooperative learning.

In teaching practice in China, both teaching method and discussion method are also changing the former passive study way, and using a variety of ways, approaches and strategies to encourage all students participate actively in the teaching, which make learning become students' own activities, and let the students in the transition from "learn knowledge" to "learn to learn".

### **2.3 Attaching great importance to the information technology**

China and the US all pay attention to the positive use of information technology in history teaching. Multimedia technology can not only let the students get the system knowledge of history, better be close to the history, understand history, grasp the vertical and horizontal links between the knowledge, promote thinking training effectively, and also inject new vitality for teaching history itself, it has changed the traditional teaching mode, and provides a more extensive knowledge and convenient information platform.

Whether "practice history", "role play", "teaching method" or "discussion method", it must supply students with exploration, experience, and self-study materials which rely on abundant and convenient network resources. In the United States, there are different sizes of the libraries from nation and states to middle and primary schools, among them, the world's largest library of congress both have nearly one hundred million books, and can provide digital network services. The library has a "learning page" section which not only provides a large number of rich historical materials (historical documents, pictures, charts, movies, sound recording and so on), but also includes a large number of cases and the teaching result which help teachers use the network share resources to guide teaching effectively, also help students to understand and use these data.

In China, there are also many historical sites, for example, the "middle school history teaching network" and "history situation net" have introductions of learning history, political, economic, culture and war history, most of them are designed according to the ordinary high school history textbooks, there are the lesson plans and teaching experiences uploaded by front-line teacher, but data classification is not clear, not as convenient as the website of the US, it also requires us to further improve.

## **3. The difference**

### **3.1 The differences between the teaching contents**

History teaching contents between China and the United States are quite different. In the American history class, the teacher will not only make use of textbooks, but also introduce students to a large number of literatures which are in the form of cooperative learning to read and analyzed, the teacher will guide the study and evaluate the process of analyzing data with questions. Then asked each student to finish a paper. There are four parts including the text introduction, teaching manuals, student handbook and the historical data in each lesson.

In the Chinese class, the teacher mainly revolve around a textbook, which also involves some literature, but mostly choose words and phrases in the textbooks and workbooks, so the students lost its solution, did not analyze, identify the authenticity of a literature. Teachers were limited in proposition to explain the relevant literature in teaching.

### **3.2 The differences between the teaching effects**

In China, both "teaching method" and "discussion method" were studying a complete and systematic historical events in the teaching process. It taught the background, content, results and influence of each event, in order to make students master the systematic knowledge, understand the development law of the society, students only mastered the systematic knowledge, they could cope with exams.

In the United States, whether "practice history" or "role-playing" pay attention to the students' experience or personal study of experiencing and understanding history. Not only students learned "history", but also the more important is that they experienced the skills used by historians' history practice, it helped students to achieve the state of "history", and also stimulated the students' interest in the history, deepened students' understanding of the problem, and cultivated the ability of students to find and solve problems. The teaching effect produced by this kind of teaching method of the United States is not the same as the Chinese.

### 3.3 The differences between the teaching evaluations

In the teaching activities, teaching evaluation is an important link, is a kind of feedback on whether teaching methods is reasonable. There are differences in the teaching evaluation of history between China and the United States.

In the practice history" of the United States, we could see: through the literature analysis and interpretation, they obtain their own conclusions and finally write the essay. In this process, the teacher track and evaluate students' whole learning process, this evaluation method is not only evaluation of paper, but also the evaluation of various kinds of tasks' completion in the whole process. This form need to spend a lot of time for teachers and students.

Evaluation method is commonly used to test in China. Such as: "discussion method" mentioned it should do the intensive training to assess the students after class which is doing some exercises related classroom content, the exercises are usually from the question bank which have two main types including subjective and objective questions. The traditional test methods is relatively weak for testing the various research abilities what the students were required for mastering. Although it also proposed some novel, creative achievements evaluation system to evaluate students' situation of grasping comprehensively in the curriculum reform, it become a mere formality and not have the real practical effect in practice.

## 4. Epilogue

The goal of American high school education in the 21st century is: "training students' being good at study and studious qualities, the habit of critical thinking and always enjoy the situation that you are unable to decide which is right in the process of solving problems, and be prepared for the middle school education in various aspects including the knowledge, ability, emotion and so on." <sup>[2]</sup> It should develop students' potential in various aspects excavated fully and have all-round development. The Chinese curriculum standard put forward: "changed the tendency of paying attention to teach knowledge too much, highlighted the new high school history curriculum cultivated students' humanities accomplishment, from the simple paying attention to impart knowledge to the all-round development which guide students to master knowledge, train ability, learn to learn, and learn to be a man." <sup>[3]</sup>

In 1990 the United Nations educational, scientific and cultural organization stipulated world education theme be "learning to care about, learn to live, learn to study, and learn to communicate", with the advent of the 21st century, "learning to learn" is more and more important. In the study of the history teaching methods between China and the US, we find that any kind of teaching method are committed to achieve the final goal of "learning to learn". The reform of teaching method could be really implemented only under the guidance of "learning to learn" thought.

### 4.1 The reform of teaching methods

Due to the inherent teaching idea and the college entrance examination, Chinese history teacher still does one-man show, the goal of the students' "learning to learn" is difficult to achieve. The concept of teachers must be thoroughly changed, and teaching methods should be reformed. Some effective teaching method can be transplanted into the history classroom teaching, such as American practice history, role playing, debates, simulation, and discussion method. Second is the reform and innovation, it should reform and innovate the traditional teaching methods, break through the old model, create a new teaching method for Chinese students, and meet the requirements of new curriculum reform.

### 4.2 The reform of teaching environments

If we want to make the new teaching method advocated by new history curriculum into high school class really, it also needs to reform teaching environment (teaching tools, materials, evaluation methods and so on) thoroughly. At present, the Chinese high school history curriculum also has some disadvantages, first is the course design is lack of humanistic care, content is too politicized and away from the students' life; second is the ideological education is far from the objectives, it seemingly attaches great importance to the ideological education, but reduces the attraction and edutainment of the course; third is ignoring education of scientific spirit in the study, it referred to let the students to explore "history process", and get "history conclusion" in the curriculum, and it always tell the ready-made results to students directly in teaching, students rarely have the opportunity to gather, explore, process and comprehend the scientific spirit.

The emergence of these problems is connected not only with the textbooks which are lack of a large number of historical materials and information to explore, but also with the traditional way of examination evaluation inseparably.

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