A comparative study of history interests between American and Chinese college students*

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to compare the history interests between American and Chinese college students. Research studies have consistently shown that American students have very limited knowledge on their country's history. American college students usually do better than K-12 students, but their scores are still low. To address the issue, it is important to understand their history interest. By conducting a cross-nation comparison between American and Chinese college students, the authors found that American students had lower history interest than their Chinese counterparts, but the difference only existed on their positive feeling toward history. Suggestions have been made on how to increase American students' involvement in the history subject.

Key words: history interest; positive feeling; interest field; historical legacy

1. Introduction

Results from the surveys and tests show that American students' history knowledge level about their country is very low (Wineburg, 2004). Since interest in a domain has a powerful facilitative effect on learners' cognitive functioning (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 152), it is necessary to examine students' history interest. However, it is clear that just measuring American student history interest cannot address the issue thoroughly. An effective approach is to compare their history interest with another country that has possible higher level of history interest. We selected Chinese students as counterparts because of the historical background of China. China is a country with at least 4,000 years of history and rich legacies, while the US is relatively young, the total period since the U SA independence only dates back 233 years. Going back to the establishment of Jamestown in 1607, the first England colony, the American history is about 400 years[1].

The purpose of this study was to compare history interest levels between the two countries' college students as well as to explore the reasons contributing to the difference.

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[1] People may argue that American history goes back to Native American history. The social forms for Native American history in North America were primitive without word records. On the other hand, Native American history is not the ancient history of modern America.

2. Literature review

2.1 American students' low history scores and possible explanation

Tracing back to 1915-1916, a large-scale test was administered to measure factual knowledge of the United States history that history teachers said American students should know. The result was disappointing: The overall score was 16% at elementary level, 33% at high school, and 49% in college (Bell & McCollum, 1917). Later surveys and tests showed little deviation from this trend:

During the World War II period, the New York Times reported a test result about college freshmen's history knowledge, showing that they were ignorant of the most fundamental aspects of their country's past (Fine, April 4, 1943).

In 1976, the Educational Testing Service conducted a survey examining college students' history knowledge. The outcome indicated that young people's knowledge about their country's history was limited (Fiske, May 2, 1976).

Ravitch and Finn (1987) reported the result of the first national assessment of 17-year-old students' knowledge of history and literature, revealing that students' overall performance on American history was "extremely weak".

In 2001, NASP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) US history test indicated that the majority of grade 12 students scored below the basic knowledge level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

To explain the survey and test results, Wineburg (2004) believed that the students' achievement in the last century provided no evidence for the "gradual disintegration of cultural memory" or a "growing historical ignorance" (p. 1405). He attributed the low score to the assessor, who tried to guarantee the result would be a symmetrical bell curve. The normal curve ensured that the majority of students could not score very good credit.

However, this explanation requires further examination, since the surveys and tests intended to measure students' fundamental knowledge, and they were conducted by different institutions but the results were consistent. The results may reflect that American students possess limited knowledge on the national history.

2.2 Interest and its relationship with students' achievement

"Interest" refers to people's liking and willful engagement in an activity (Schunk, Pintrinch & Meece, 2008, p. 210). "Interest" is an interactive relation between an individual and his/her environment, relating to specific topics, tasks, or activities (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Schiefele, 1991). Researchers commonly sorted the situational interest and the personal interest. The former refers to a temporary, situation-specific attention, and the latter represents a relatively stable disposition. Both of them influence students' cognition and achievement (Krapp, Hidi & Renninger, 1992).

Stevens (1980) investigated the relationship between higher ability students' topic interest and reading comprehension. In the study, Stevens distributed to 5th and 6th grade students a series of reading tasks varying on interestingness and then tested their comprehension ability. The data demonstrated that higher interest materials were significant factors for students with higher ability, but not for lower- and middle-ability readers. Stevens suggested that providing interesting materials to higher-ability students would increase their performance.

Furthermore, Ainley Hidi and Berndorff (2002) investigated how personal and situational interests might influence students' science and text learning. They investigated 8th and 9th grades students from Australia and Canada using self-report and interactive computerized methods. The results revealed that both personal and situational interests influenced students' topic interest, which positively related to students' persistence in learning

the texts.

In Europe, Corbiere, Fraccaroli, Mbekou and Perron (2006) assessed the relationship between students' academic self-concept and their academic interest. More than one thousand students from France and Italy participated in the survey. They concluded that there were positive correlations between students' self-concept, academic interest, and their school achievement.

At the college level, Schiefele, Wild and Krapp (Krapp, 1999) reported a research on the influence of interest on college students' attitude towards learning strategies. One hundred and forty-four students from different majors were recruited to attend the study. During the semester, they filled in a questionnaire assessing their attitude on interest in the course topic, motivation to learn for good grades, per week learning time devoted to course-related work, and general use of learning strategies. After 3 months, students were asked to introduce their strategies in preparing the final exam. The research found that students' study interest affects their adoption of learning strategies.

Schiefele, Krapp and Winteler (1992) did a meta-analysis of the former research on the relationship between students' interest and their academic achievement. After reviewing the 121 independent correlation coefficients, they found that for the subject area (excluding biology and literature), the correlation coefficients are above 0.30, explaining 9% of the variance. There was a significant difference between male and female students: interest explained 12% of the variance for males, but only 6% of the variance for females.

2.3 Constructs of interest

Schiefele (1991) adopted two components of the personal interest: a feeling-related and value-related. The former refers to an association with a topic or topic related activity with positive feeling, especially enjoyment and involvement; and the latter with personal significance to a topic. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) adopted three components—knowledge, value, and the positive feeling. They added knowledge as a component to increase people's attention to an activity. Iran-Nejad (1987) argued that interest and liking serve different functions and that the situational interest is not necessarily accompanied by positive feeling.

In the present study, we aimed at investigating the history interest differences between American and Chinese college students. Three questions guided the research: Were there differences of the history interest levels between the two countries' students? What were the reasons? What were the implications of the results in increasing American students' history interest?

3. Method

3.1 Study design

The researcher used quan-QUAL sequential confirmatory mixed methods design, with priority of analysis placed the QUAL stage (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). The rationale for mixing both types of data was that quantitative data could only examine history interest differences, but failed to give the explanation. Consequently, qualitative data would be used to explain and confirm the quantitative results.

We adopted within-strategy mixed methods data collection in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by the survey. Data analyses were conducted with two phases. In the first quantitative phase, we hypothesized that American students had lower history interests than Chinese students. T-test was conducted to compare students' interest levels. In the second phase, qualitative data were analyzed in exploring the reason of differences.

3.2 Participants

Eighty-five undergraduate students from a university in the US and 116 undergraduate students from a matched university in China attended the survey. Both universities are public institutions and enjoy similar ranks in their respective countries. The possible influence of different majors on students' history interest was taken into accounts. In both countries, we sampled students in majors that have the same distance to history. Chinese students came from majors of physics, psychology and human resource management; American students mainly came from majors of physics, education and philosophy. After data screening, we kept 79 surveys in America and 113 surveys from China for data analysis.

3.3 Instrument

We developed the History Interest Inventory (HII) to measure college students' history interest. Reliability, Cronbach's alpha =0.95; concurrent validity, r=0.52, p=0.001.

The inventory included two constructs: the positive feeling and value, which generally conformed to the theory of Schiefele (1991). The construct of the positive feeling reflected students' passion level toward history, including 9 items, such as "I am interested in history" and "I like watching history movies and videos". The construct of value measured students' perception of the value of history, including 14 items, such as: "History let us understand our culture and identity" and "History knowledge can be used to solve present problems" (see Appendix).

Although the inventory was developed with American students, the items and constructs measured students' general history interest. Thus, they can be applied to students from countries of different historical backgrounds.

3.4 Procedure

For American students, HII surveys were distributed to students in class time, and students answered the surveys with paper and pencil. For Chinese students, the Chinese edition of HII was sent to a teacher in the specified university, who printed and distributed to students in class time. After the student answered the questions, the instructors inputted the data into Excel and emailed back to the principal researcher. Students from both countries were told that the inventory was to test their history interest, and no mention was made about the comparative purpose.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative phase

Descriptive statistics showed that, for the general history interest (general interest), which was the sum of the two constructs, the total possible score was 161. The average score of American students was 111.16, *SD*=26.74; Chinese students was 123.57, *SD*=22.39. For the construct of the positive feeling (positive feeling), the total possible score was 63. American students had the mean of 39.90, *SD*=13.57 whereas Chinese students, 47.08, *SD*=11.19. For the construct of value (value), the total possible score was 98. American students averaged 71.26, *SD*=16.61; Chinese students, 76.49, *SD*=13.73 (see Table 1).

Independent sample t-test was conducted to compare students' general history interest and the two constructs, namely positive feeling and value respectively. We set alpha at 0.05 (two tails). Because we ran three times comparisons, to control type I error, we reset α at the 0.025 divided by 3 or 0.008 using the Bonferroni method. The results showed that, for the general history interest, the scores of American students were significantly lower than their Chinese counterparts, $t_{(148.36)}$=-3.38, p=0.001. The effective size was small, η^2=0.05, and the 95%

confidence interval ranged from -19.67 to -5.15. For the two constructs, American students' positive feeling to history was significantly lower than Chinese students, $t_{(146.79)}$=-3.87, p<0.001. The effect size was medium, η^2=0.07, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from -10.84 to -3.51. But for the perception of value of history, there was no significant difference between the students (see Table 2).

Table 1 Group statistics

Countries	General interest		Positive feeling		Value	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
America	111.16	26.74	39.90	13.57	76.49	13.73
China	123.57	22.39	47.08	11.19	71.26	16.61

Table 2 Independent sample t-test

Interest	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	η^2	Confidence interval (95%)	
						Lower	Upper
General interest	-3.38	148.36	0.001*	-12.41	0.05	-19.67	-5.15
Positive feeling	-4.00	146.79	0.000*	-7.18	0.07	-10.84	-3.51
Value	-2.38	190	0.018	-5.23	0.03	-9.56	-0.90

Note: * p≤0.001.

4.2 Qualitative phase

The quantitative results showed that the American students scored significantly lower than their Chinese counterparts on the general history interest, but the difference only existed on the construct of the positive feeling. Qualitative data analysis explored the possible reason contributing to the difference. We adopted modified grounded theory in data analysis. Students' answers were broken into units that expressed positive feelings or the perception of value, with the analysis focusing on themes of the positive feeling.

Two themes emerged that might explain students' difference on the positive feeling were "interest field" and "richness of a country's legacy".

4.2.1 Interest field

The inventory measured the general history interest without specifying historical fields or phases. However, students' responses demonstrated that they had different emphases of interest. American students concerned both their country and other countries. In contrast, Chinese students mainly focused on the Chinese history. Even if Chinese students talked about the world history, the intention was to define the position of china in the world.

(1) American students' expression of interest on both their country and other regions

(a) It is also important to know and understand history, particularly that of my own country and culture.

(b) Looking back at history we can see how other countries and civilizations lived and what their structure was for government, social status, education, and their economy. We can tell that the US is like the Roman Empire, if we actually look into detail and compare and contrast our histories! The Roman Empire fell and hopefully the USA will not follow in their footsteps.

(c) History is also useful for learning about the growth of one's society, the mistakes of the society, and the perspective that influenced the people of the past.

(d) It (history) represents all of knowledge that has been passed down through the ages—all history.

(2) Chinese students mainly showed interest on their own country

(a) Chinese history let me more clearly understand people's life, behavior, and psychology in the past; therefore, more understand China.

(b) If a nation lacks detailed historical records, people's national dignity and confidence in striving for success will be weakened. Therefore, to stimulate our people' patriotic spirit, we have to carry forward our nation's inherited patriotic spirit and study our history.

(c) I am interested in history because history can allow me to increase my national responsibility and not to forget national humiliations suffered. At the same time, history let me more understand our country's position in the world and the capability of influence.

(d) History let us know our roots and resources. History makes us unite and stimulates patriotism.

It is clear that American students view history with the concept of the world history, concerning both the USA and others. But for Chinese students, history is perceived as the national history conceptually, featured by a strong sense of nationalism. In terms of history concepts, we may say that American students embrace a world history orientation whereas Chinese students hold a national history orientation.

4.2.2 Richness of a country's legacy

Similarly, both groups of students expressed a theme that learning history was an interesting and enjoyable experience. In addition, both groups attributed the textbooks and classrooms to making the subject dull and ponderous. However, Chinese students demonstrated another reason for their interests due to the richness of Chinese legacy, which did not appear in American students' responses.

(1) Chinese history is centuries-old

(a) History is Chinese development process of five thousand years, including many excellent cultures and thoughts. By history, we can know the steps of Chinese progress, summarize experiences and lessons, and pass the essence of Chinese cultures.

(b) Our nation has many centuries' history, which is like an extensive space, full of diverse stories and human experiences. There are too many things that we can learn and refer to.

(2) Curiosity about the past

(a) I am curious on ancient life styles and ancient people.

(b) There are a lot of mysteries that are very attractive. I am curious on revealing these mysteries.

Long history leaves rich historical legacies, including "cultures", "thoughts", "experiences and lessons", and "human experiences". "Curiosity" closely relates to "many centuries' history". Stories that happened long time ago seem mysterious to students. Thus, these expressions reflect the influence of Chinese rich heritages.

5. Discussion

The results confirmed our hypothesis that American students had significantly lower history interests than Chinese students, but the difference only existed on the positive feeling to history. Based on students' explanation of why they were interested in history, we tentatively analyzed the reasons as following:

(1) American students show interest in both of their countries and other regions, but Chinese students' history interest field is mainly about China. If students perceive themselves as part of a distinct ethnicity, such an identity can be emotionally powerful (Barton & Levstik, 1998, p. 500).

(2) The richness of a country's legacy influences students' history interest. China is an ancient country with plenty of heritages, such as legends, stories, artifacts, and buildings. Historical topics permeate in media,

magazines, and books. In contrast, America is a young country, and such a historical atmosphere is not as strong as in China.

The two reasons may relate to each other. American students are more interested in other countries and cultures because they have less historical heritages. Furthermore, interest field orientations reflect two countries' population components: Chinese population is homogeneous, recognizing the same tradition. American populations are heterogeneous, with people coming from different countries and regions in the world. That may explain why American students wish to know not only their country's history but also other regions'.

American society is technological in nature, but history is still very important. History application and usage exist everywhere, from scientific study to humanities. To increase students' history interest, some suggestions are made below:

(1) Include more history topics for young students in the media, magazines and books. A historical program for children and young people may be opened in public TV channel.

(2) In consideration of American students' expression of interest to other countries and cultures, schools may include more history from other cultures and regions.

As indicated by Schiefele and his colleagues (1992), interest only played part role in explaining students' achievement; therefore, other factors need to be explored in order to better understand and increase American students' history achievement, such as quality of instruction and student learning strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the history interest difference between American and Chinese college students. Students in both countries recognized the importance of history, but expressed different positive feelings to history. To increase the history interest of American students, more historical topics should be included both in schools and public cultural environments; furthermore, to incorporate more materials concerning other countries and cultures may make up the weakness of American history.

A limitation of this study was that we did not do a follow-up interview in order to deeply understand students' history interest, interest field, and their reason. Another limitation was that this study only inspected the general history interest without specifying interest fields. American students may be more interested in world history, and Chinese students more interested in national history. More investigations are needed to answer these questions.

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Appendix:

History interest inventory (college students)

This questionnaire adopts a linear scale 1 to 7, 1 represents disagree, and 7 represents agree.

First construct, positive feeling

(1) I am interested in history.
(2) I like history.
(3) I like listening to history stories.
(4) I like reading history books.
(5) I enjoy reading history stories.
(6) I like watching history movies and videos.
(7) Sometimes I think why a history event happened.
(8) I like discussing history with friends.
(9) I like touring history sites.

Second construct, perception of the value of history

(10) Learning history is important.
(11) History increases people's judgment.
(12) History makes people clever.
(13) History involves analysis and understanding.
(14) History would help me and others to be informed citizens.
(15) History training increases people's ability in argument, presentation, and data selection.
(16) Leaning history broadens my vision.
(17) To understand today better, we should know yesterday.
(18) History knowledge is useful in my major/career.
(19) History offers models of successfully and morally good persons.
(20) History helps locate our place in contemporary time.
(21) History let us understand our culture and identity.
(22) History knowledge can be used to solve present problems.
(23) Sometimes I think why a history event happened.