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HNR 499 Senior Thesis Report: Final

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Introduction: Aims of the Project

For most of its history the American education system has focused on Western culture and history. However, current Michigan school students are witnessing a profound change in this traditional focus, because of new graduation requirements implemented recently. My intention with this Senior Thesis Project is to conduct research into how this shift in curriculum is being seen in current American education, with a particular focus on the teaching of the Michigan World History and Geography Content Expectations (WHGCEs). Since October 2008, the Michigan Board of Education has changed the state social science requirements for high school graduation to include detailed content on China and East Asia. This has also had an impact on middle school students, because the earliest eras of the new WHGCEs are being taught to middle school students across the state, mainly in Grades 6 and 7. I believe that this trend deserves attention because it is a unique occurrence in American education history. I hope that my research will be able to offer an insight into this recent curricular shift, and the impact it is having on teachers and students.

Background: Recent Attempts to Incorporate Chinese History and Culture into the United States education System

While the resurgence of an interest in Chinese culture and learning in American is recent, it is however a renewal and not a new occurrence. China and the United States have had a cultural and educational exchange going back many generations.

The first era of changing attitudes towards foreign cultures in the American Education system occurred during the Cold War Era of the 1950s. This was during the era of Sputnik and the arms race that the United States had with the Soviet Union. US government leaders at that time were concerned that American school children would fall behind in terms of geography, math and science¹. Since the United States had just emerged as a leader on the world stage, many educators thought that the general population should learn languages different to the traditional foreign languages taught in many schools, such as French and Latin. The idea was that since the United States was going to be dealing with many different countries in the future, American citizens should know languages that were scarcely being taught in schools at the time. Across America, new Russian language programs appeared at several universities, and at some secondary and even elementary schools. There was also a push for Japanese and Chinese languages as well. Rather than fostering a feeling of good will and trade through learning these languages, particularly Russian, many US leaders felt that learning these languages was a necessity since the US had serious political tensions with the Soviet Union.

After Russian, the two most popular “new” languages taught were in fact Japanese and Chinese. Instead of teaching these languages on a wide scale, however, experimental programs were set up in school districts limited to big cities such as Chicago, Boston and St. Louis². The Mandarin language was thus not being taught on a very wide scale level. Tensions with China were still being felt, but there was a lack of qualified teachers, and the fact that Mandarin was such a difficult language meant that students opted for the easier languages. This culminated in ensuring that Mandarin would

¹ Frederick H Jackson “Instruction in Chinese and Japanese in Secondary Schools” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 356, (Nov. 1964) 114

² Frederick H Jackson 115

only be taught on a small scale. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon became the first US president to visit the People's Republic of China. While Americans were curious about China, drastic changes were not seen in the education system just yet. Indeed, the fascination with China soon waned, and since China was not yet such a large trading partner with the United States, many felt that China's importance would eventually lessen. It was considerably later that American's attitudes towards China changed drastically.

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping called for the People's Republic to adopt a more open policy economically. The ultimate result of this was a flood of Western influences as Western companies embraced the emerging market economy in China. Simultaneously, Chinese officials realized that since Western countries, particularly the United States of America, were investing so heavily in the People's Republic, it would be beneficial to train a large number of people to speak English in order to be competitive.

Initially then, it was the Chinese education system that was largely influenced by the West. Chinese educators were already deeply considering the sort of curriculum that would be most relevant and useful to the new generation of students that had emerged following the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Schools across China, from elementary to university level, moved to adopt a European style of education³. Many educators from America and around the world were invited to China to help policy makers decide how to best educate Chinese students. As recently as 1996, the American credit system was adopted in Chinese schools⁴. For most of the past two decades it was the Chinese education system that was being influenced by American and other Western nations.

³ Zhixin Su, Suzanne Goldstein and Jilin Su "Science Education Goals and Curriculum Designs in American and Chinese High Schools" *International Review of Education* Vol. 41, No 5 (1995) 375

⁴ Michael Agelasto "Educational Transfer of Sorts: the American Credit System with Chinese Characteristics" *Comparative Education* Vol. 32, No 1 (Mar. 1996) 70

In the 2000s, the situation began to change. As the trade relationship between China and America became even stronger, calls for increased levels of education about Chinese culture, language, and history were increasingly heard in the United States. A large number of high schools began to offer Mandarin courses, and other schools started to teach current affairs in China. Then, many state content expectation standards began to incorporate more Chinese content and perspectives. In 2004, for example, the state of New Jersey adopted new standards that included content concerning Chinese history in the Early Modern period (during the Ming and Qing dynasties)⁵. In 2002, Tennessee adopted the same type of curriculum, but also included knowledge of Chinese geography and current affairs⁶.

Michigan is also one of the few but growing number of states that has rewritten its social studies curriculum. The Michigan World History and Geography Content Expectations (WHGCEs) were passed in late 2008 and adopted for the 2009 academic year. Michigan educators and curriculum designers have striven to incorporate new and different standards of history and geography in middle and high schools, to include eastern cultures as well as their western counterparts. China is one of the main components in the new standards. The goal of the WHGCEs is to teach non- Western history and culture in its own context while maintaining a strong background in western culture as well. Before, China and East Asia were taught mainly from the perspective of how these regions had affected the West or how the West had impacted East Asia and other Eastern cultures. The goals of the new standards are to familiarize students with all aspects of non-western cultures. In middle school, students learn about the beginnings of

⁵ “6. Standards of High School Curriculum” State of New Jersey Department of Education

⁶ Tennessee Standards of Education

these eastern civilizations, mainly Mesopotamia, the Indus valley and China. The emergence of human civilization globally is thoroughly discussed. Then, as the student enters high school, geography, modern culture and modern history is taught. The whole curriculum is divided into eras, focusing on what happened globally rather than teaching a specific region.

It must be asked why are we seeing this trend particularly in Michigan? Why did state educators feel that a change was necessary? While much of this new learning is aimed at promoting a non-centric perspective, there is also a growing fear of competition between the People's Republic and the United States. The fact is that many US and Michigan leaders are worried that American education is falling behind other countries' education standards. As noted above, while Michigan is not alone in seeing a change, this new standard of education has been proposed so that Michigan children can "compete in a global world." Americans fear that the United States will lose its position in world geopolitics and that its current status might be lost to China. Many Mandarin language programs have been adopted for practical purposes, in order to give American schoolchildren a chance to compete in the global market⁷. Michigan policymakers have realized that familiarizing Michigan schoolchildren with growing markets such as China and India will greatly improve their future prospects. If Michigan children are knowledgeable about countries such as China, then their marketability for a job would also increase.

⁷ Kate Been "Chinese by Choice" *The School Administrator: The American Association of School Administrators* (February 2008) 1

Methods

However, there was a great concern among many Michigan teachers that although the State Department of Education had now mandated these new standards they had done little to provide professional development to better equip teachers to teach this new material. With that in mind, I decided to create an online survey in order to allow middle and high school teacher to express their opinions of how well the new standards were working. Teachers were selected from a variety of schools across Michigan randomly. Participants had a variety of options available in order to successfully answer the survey questions ranging from yes and no; multiple choice; text boxes etc. Below the survey questions are listed.

1. Do you teach social studies at middle school or high school?
2. What grade are you currently teaching?
3. How many years have you been teaching social studies?
4. How long have you been teaching the new Michigan social studies content expectations at your school?
5. How would you best describe your experience teaching the new CEs?
Challenging? Rewarding? Easy? Difficult?
6. How prepared did you feel professionally to teach the new CEs?
7. Approximately what percentage of your lesson plan involves teaching about Chinese geography and history?
8. Are you mainly teaching ancient, pre-modern, or modern Chinese history in your classes?
9. Approximately what percentage of your class is devoted to Chinese history, as opposed to geography? 50/50?
10. How did you prepare yourself to teach about China? Reading? Website research? Professional development workshops?
11. Do you feel it is important for students to have a greater knowledge of Chinese history and geography?
12. Do your students feel it is important for them to have a greater knowledge of Chinese history and geography?
13. Do you feel you and your students have been successful in learning about Chinese history and geography?
14. What are the main pedagogical strategies you use in class to teach about China?
Lecture? PowerPoint? Activities? Readings? Others?
15. Do you use a text book in class? If so, which one?

16. How happy are you with your text book, in regard to its coverage of Chinese history and geography?
17. Do you regularly use any world history websites in lesson preparation? If so, which one(s)?
18. How do you assess your students in your social studies class? Essays? Multiple choice tests? Projects (group or individual)? Presentations?
19. Do you also teach AP world history? If so, what differences (if any) do you notice between the AP syllabus and the Michigan CEs concerning China?
20. Overall, are you satisfied with the content and organization of the Michigan social studies CEs?

In order to easily facilitate the survey process, questions were grouped together according to topic. For example, questions at the beginning of the survey dealt with the instructors' experience and length of teaching, then moved to questions concerning the new WHGCEs.

Data and Findings

At the end of the survey, sixteen Middle and High School Teachers responded. Initially the sample group was forty-seven teachers.

Of the sixteen teachers that responded, there were an equal number of high school and middle school teachers(eight and eight). Most teachers taught tenth grade and the average number of years that the teachers have been teaching is fourteen years. The social science teachers have, on average, been teaching the new WHGCEs for two years.

When asked to describe the nature of teaching the new WHGCEs, a majority of the teachers (nine out of sixteen) did describe the new standards as challenging to teach. However, most noted that the WHGCEs were also rewarding. Even though the

standards might have been challenging to teachers, 50 % noted that they were “somewhat prepared” to teachers and 37 % felt that they were extremely prepared⁸.

In dealing with Chinese geography and history in particular, teachers stated that their lesson plans do deal with China about 5 % to 25 % of the time. A majority of the teachers teach ancient Chinese culture, while others overlapped with pre-modern and modern. Teachers tend to favor teaching more Chinese history than geography.

The next set of questions dealt with how the teachers themselves prepared to teach, as well as the students’ reactions towards the new curriculum. It seems that a majority of teachers did their own personal research on the new topics, mainly gathering their information from social studies websites, as well as doing their own reading. 81 % of teachers felt that it was important that their students learn about Chinese culture while eighteen percent were unsure. 50 % of the teachers responded that their students felt that it was important for their students to learn about China, while 25% were unsure and 31% were indifferent. About 75% of the teachers felt that they had a “somewhat successful” response by students in the classroom⁹.

The last group of questions discussed how the teachers assess and instruct students. It seems that teachers favor a variety of instruction methods, with readings being the most popular, and lecture, PowerPoint and class activities all equally tied for second¹⁰. In respect to using a textbook in class, eighty-one percent of teachers do use a textbook and History Alive as well as Geography Alive are the favorites. About fifty-six percent of teachers are indeed happy with their textbooks. Like their methods of instruction, teachers assess their students using a variety of methods. All of the teachers

⁸ See Fig. 1

⁹ See Fig 2

¹⁰ See Fig 3

stated that they used multiple choice tests, 93.8% used essay, 75% used group projects 81.3% used individual projects, and 56.3% used presentations¹¹. A majority of teachers did not teach AP world history, but those who did felt that the AP test and curriculum goes more in depth than the Michigan WHGCEs. 68.8 % of the teachers surveyed were ‘somewhat satisfied’ with the new standards.

Analysis

What does all this data mean? In order to understand, we have to take a closer look at the data. While the survey did not receive the number of participants anticipated, the numbers and data are still sufficient to generate a few conclusions. The teachers that are instructing these new standards are not new teachers, but in fact veterans. For years, the educators, had been used to teaching a certain standard, but have now had to revamp their lesson plans in order to facilitate the new standards. Most teachers did state that at first the new standards were difficult to teach, mainly because of a lack of resources from the State of Michigan. However, as the teachers gained experience with the subject matter, the standards seem to have gotten easier to teach.

As a whole, the students as well as the teachers have had positive reactions to the new WHGCEs. The teachers all stated that they felt it was important for their students to learn about China. Thus, they *want* to teach the new standards and felt that it is relevant to their profession. In addition, the students have had a positive reaction to the current requirements. A good number of students felt that it as important to learn about China and the teachers state that the students have had success with learning the new concepts.

¹¹ See Fig 4

What is interesting to note is that teachers took the initiative to learn about the contents of the new standards themselves. What I believe this shows is that perceptions of China's importance in world geo politics is changing in Michigan. Teachers and officials in Michigan have realized that learning about the entire world, instead of just focusing on one hemisphere, is vitally necessary to survive in today's globalized world.

Jenny Lechy

04/21/2010

Supervising Professor: Dr. Craig Benjamin

Grade Awarded: A

Figure1

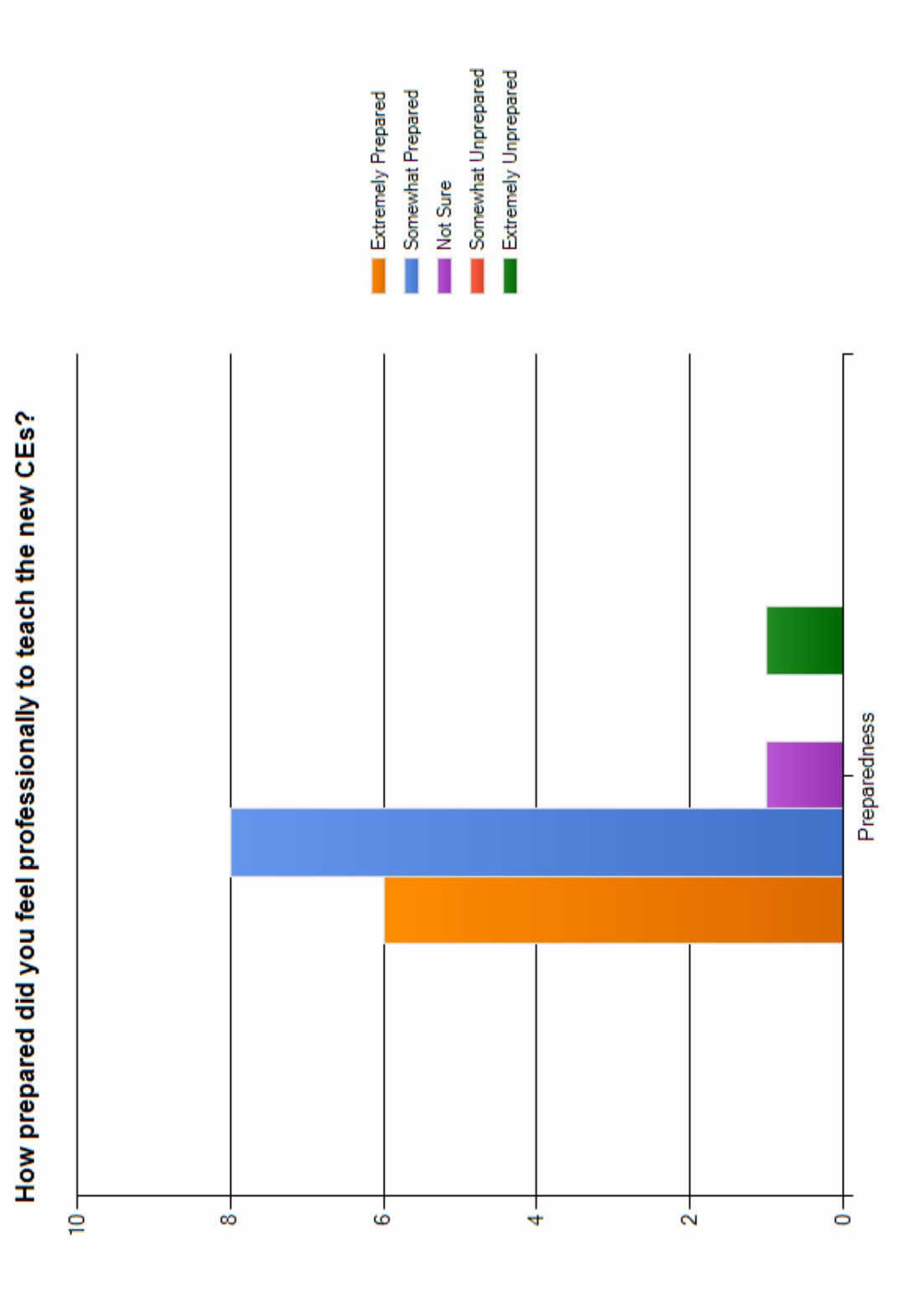


Figure2

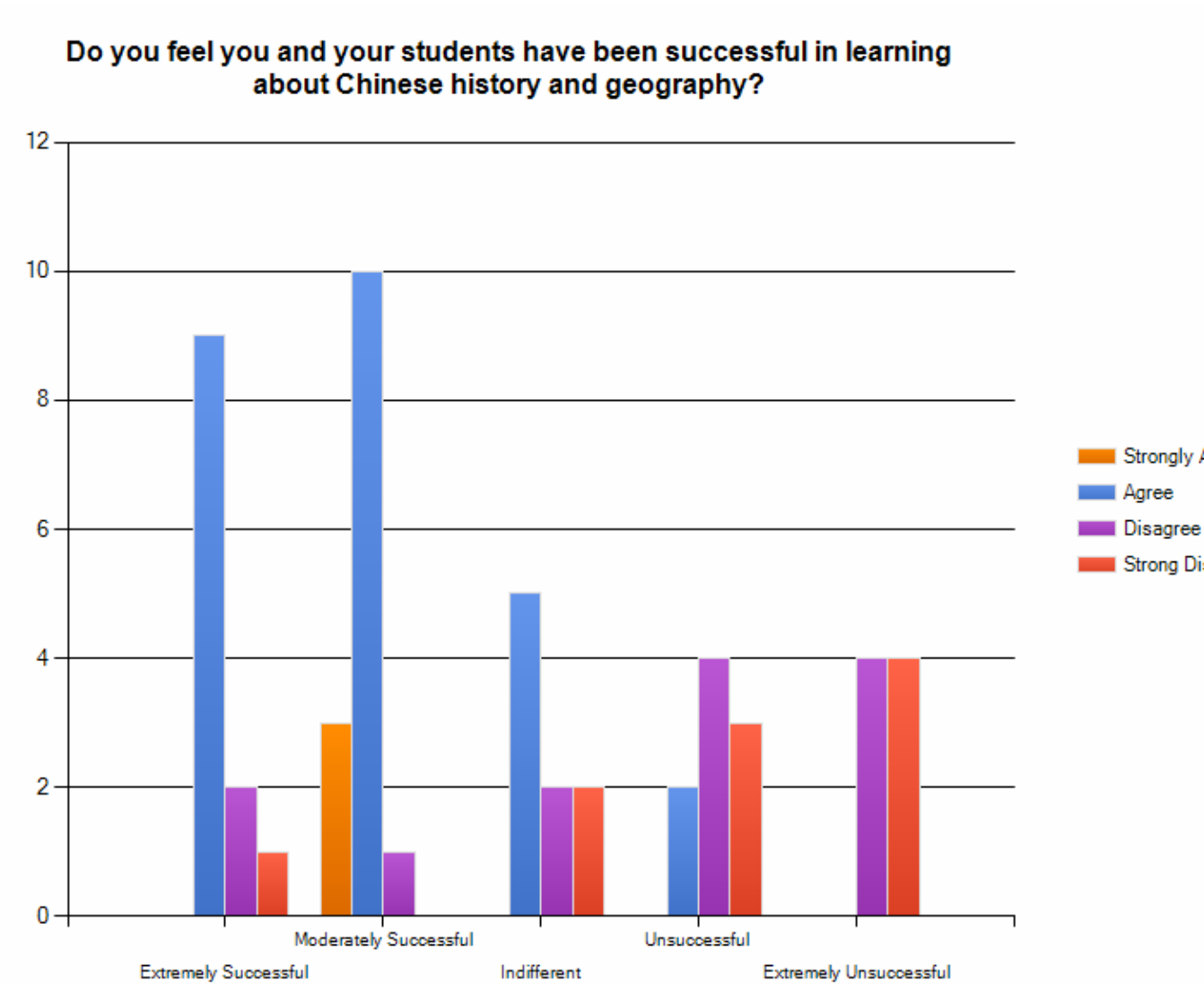


Figure 3

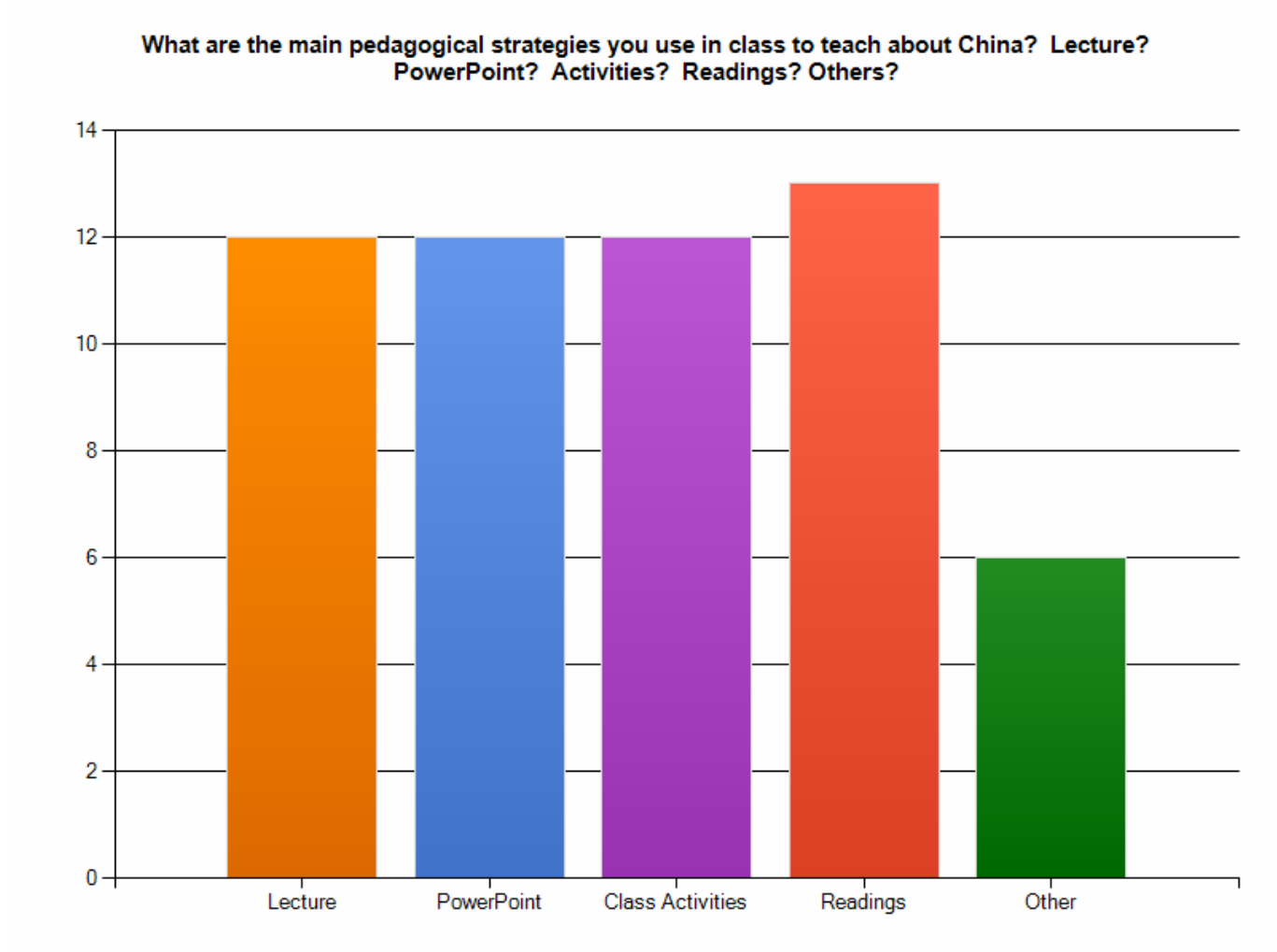


Figure 4

How do you assess your students in your social studies class? Essays? Multiple choice tests? Projects (group or individual)? Presentations?

