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# Introduction: education in China

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This *Handbook* is offered as a timely and scholarly collection of historical perspectives, theoretical reflections and empirical evidence that contributes to our knowledge and understanding of the development of education in the People's Republic of China. Although many scholars from around the world have written extensively about education in China over the twentieth century, most have focused on the nature and significance of specific aspects or phases of education. This volume brings together distinguished Chinese and Western scholars to provide a detailed account of and reflection on the social, cultural, economic and political influences that have shaped the historical and current transformation of education in China in all its many dimensions.

## EDUCATION IN CHINA: THE GLOBAL INTEREST

Since 1979, when China was officially opened to the outside world, the country has undergone a profound political, economic and cultural transformation. In the past decade especially, global attention to China as a 'rising power' intensified dramatically, because of the country's exceptional political system and bumpy ride of economic revolutions and slowdown. The development of education in China is a significant example of such transformation. It is seen by the Chinese themselves as the means to the nation's rapid modernization, economic growth and social welfare. The development of the educational system in China has again attracted international attention, explained by its resilient record in international assessment league tables, in improving access to basic education, in reducing adult illiteracy rates, and in its burgeoning position in the world market for education. The evidence is clear: 15-year-old children in Shanghai have consistently outperformed their global counterparts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. The urge of Western politicians and their school-improvement policy makers to 'surpass Shanghai' (Tucker, 2011) has resulted in frequent officially organized visits to Shanghai schools, together with concerted efforts to 'borrow' pedagogies and practices, not noticing perhaps that

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Shanghai's success is underpinned by values rooted deeply in Chinese culture and society.

There are other successes to note. Greater investment in early childhood care and education, stronger policy interventions ensuring more equitable access to nine-year compulsory education, and a significantly increased lower secondary gross enrolment ratio – by at least 27 per cent according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) – each contributed to the considerable reduction in illiteracy rates in a country which has the largest population in the world.

Over the last decade, China has also played an increasingly important role in the internationalization of higher education. The latest statistics from UNESCO (2016) show that the total number of Chinese students abroad had reached 712 157. In 2013, among the 3 million international students enrolled in OECD countries, 23 per cent were from China (OECD, 2016). At the same time, the country has been successful in competing for its own share of the intellectual capital of internationally global students. In February 2016, it was noted that China had hosted 213 347 international students, equivalent to 2 per cent of the global population of mobile students. This placed it in the top ten of destination countries in the international market for higher education (UNESCO, 2016).

China's drive to reconnect with the world through education, and higher education especially, should be understood in the context of the country's long-term commitment to research and development (R&D) and, by extension, science and technology innovation. Education is 'an impetus for developing science and technology, and subsequently accelerating growth in productivity' (Gu, 2001, 71). China doubled its expenditure on R&D between 2008 and 2012, equivalent to 1.98 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and is now a major driver of global research and development (OECD, 2014). In 2012, the Chinese government's expenditure on education reached 4 per cent of GDP; an important step towards accomplishing the *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development* (Ministry of Education, 2010). The gross enrolment ratios for bachelor's degree programmes have also increased more than ten times over the past four decades (UNESCO UIS, 2014). China's higher education has moved from being an exclusively 'élite' system to one of 'massification' (Trow, 2006). The China Scholarship Council (CSC), founded in 1996, is another example of the Chinese government's commitment to support and nurture senior Chinese talents, promote research and training partnerships with overseas institutions, and thus meet the nation's demand for high-quality human resources necessary for sustained and sustainable development in the world's knowledge economy. The period since 1979 was one in which there was a dramatic transition from

the egalitarianism of the Maoist years that followed People's Liberation in 1949. This saw a move by which education policy was integrated with public policy, according to a managerial rather than a political ideology, albeit still under the control and direction of the Chinese Communist Party (Morgan and Li, 2015).

## EDUCATION IN CHINA: THE CHALLENGES

However, although China's effort to reform its education system has achieved remarkable success, there remain strong educational, cultural, and social justice challenges to be met. As the evidence collected in this *Handbook* shows, sustained efforts are necessary if equal access to quality education at local, regional and national levels is to be achieved. Ensuring educational equity in terms of access and quality has been one of the most pronounced and persistent challenges facing Chinese policy makers. This is largely because the benefits of economic growth have not been shared equitably or distributed fairly among different administrative regions or between urban and rural areas. For some decades now, the distribution of financial resources from the central government has favoured the more developed coastal and eastern areas. This has meant that schools, colleges, and universities in the poorer provinces or regions, especially in the west and north of China, encounter greater financial and human resource problems which affect the extent and quality of educational provision.

Higher education is an example. The national key universities, which are of high status, are in socio-economically more advanced regions. Their students are more likely to have the opportunity of better-quality higher education and better career opportunities, than students in other parts of the country. Despite the government's initiatives to support talented students in such socio-economically disadvantaged areas, the now ubiquitous tuition fees mean that going to university is an unachievable dream for many. In a similar way, Chinese international student mobility, with its potential personal and professional benefits, despite the growth in absolute numbers, is reserved for a select few, about 2 per cent of the equivalent student populations (UNESCO, 2016).

Access to higher education and to career opportunities has been and still is inherently unequal at individual, institutional and regional levels. The unprecedented internal migration from rural to urban areas in recent years has also put tremendous strain on education system planning for school education. In 2004, one-fifth of the 120 million migrant workers had less than a primary education (UNESCO, 2016). The challenge to improve equitable schooling is intensified by the Ministry of Education's

unsuccessful attempts to consolidate the provision of education in rural and remote areas. The most commonly cited problems are increased drop-outs, overcrowding in town schools, increased burden on teachers and higher financial pressures on the rural poor (UNESCO, 2016).

One of the Chinese government's most profound change strategies for increasing equity and quality is decentralization. This reform focus has led to substantive structural change in education systems, by which control is released by the state to provincial and local governments and more autonomy is given to universities. The promulgation of the national '211 plan', designed to provide structural and financial support for regional and local collaborative research and innovation centres, is a recent example of official determination to embed this reform within a system of mass higher education.

However, the problem facing the policy reformers in the Chinese Communist Party and State is that structural change efforts alone are unlikely to succeed. Historical evidence and current research show that they need to be accompanied by ideological and cultural changes at central, regional and local levels if autonomy is to take root. This is especially so in China because, fundamentally, such structural change towards decentralization challenges the Confucian basis upon which the Chinese education system was founded and which survived the Maoist challenge of the Cultural Revolution. This promotes respect for centralized political and intellectual authority. The question, as Gu (2001) asks, is how to achieve the modernization of the Chinese education system in ways which ensure that Chinese culture and traditions can be 'used to the fullest advantage', providing a basis for, rather than barriers to, the balanced and equitable development of Chinese education.

## THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The *Handbook of Education in China* provides a current review and an original interpretation of the structures, processes and outcomes of key aspects of education in the People's Republic of China. It has four parts: 'The Historical Background', 'The Contemporary Chinese System', 'Problems and Policies' and 'The Special Administrative Regions'.

Part I comprises two chapters exploring the historical and ideological origins that have shaped the structure and governance of the education system in China. In Chapter 1, Muchu Zhang and Ruth Hayhoe offer insights into the intense struggles that Chinese education experienced during the late Qing Dynasty and the period of the Republic of China. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of the cultural and global influences

on the modernization of China's basic education, higher education and teacher education. It concludes that Chinese education has grown from its cultural roots, and should explain the educational dimensions of the Confucian heritage to a world that has become increasingly interested in its language, culture and society.

In Chapter 2, W. John Morgan provides an analysis of the key features of Maoist ideology and considers how Mao's ultra-left social, cultural and educational ideology influenced the development of education in modern China. This is a fundamentally important historical issue and the chapter considers the considerable literature devoted to it. It shows that the transition in Chinese education from egalitarian ideology to public policy is important in ways other than for educational practice specifically. Morgan concludes with the argument that traditional and established cultures: 'should be recognized as the bases from which people throughout history and across the world have interpreted, accepted or rejected possible exogenous alternatives'.

Part II comprises eight chapters addressing the successes and challenges that the Chinese education system is experiencing currently. The chapters again highlight the importance of historical contexts and cultural values in understanding the development of the different aspects of education in contemporary China. In Chapter 3, Xianan Hu and Fengliang Li provide a succinct and authoritative introduction to the structure, governance, and finance of the Chinese education system. The chapter explains the ways in which elementary, secondary and higher education in China relates to the politics, economy, and culture of society, and the various issues that each phase needs to address if it is to achieve educational fairness and equality.

The next three chapters focus on the development of specific educational phases: early childhood education, primary education and secondary education. A common challenge identified is the need for effective policy interventions to address the substantive gap in access and the quality of provision. Early childhood education is not yet a compulsory provision in China, and Xin Zhou argues in Chapter 4 that, although the provision of early childhood education has recently improved considerably because of policy and funding support from the central government, there are still significant differences in provision between urban and rural areas. Given the significance of early childhood education to the development of human capabilities later in life, ensuring equal access and quality provision of early childhood education for all children has become an urgent policy responsibility for the government to assume.

A system of nine-year compulsory education in China was introduced in 1986, covering six years of primary education (age 6–11) and three years of secondary education (age 12–14). John Lee and Huan Song provide a

detailed account of primary education in China in Chapter 5. They argue that the Chinese government's enhanced financial investments and centralized curriculum reforms have improved the quality of provision and access to primary education significantly. However, the stark disparity in terms of resources provision and teacher quality between schools in urban and rural areas remains a persistent cause for concern. It has a marked negative impact on the governance and accountability of primary education at different administrative levels.

In Chapter 6, Yu Zhang focuses on similar issues of equity, or rather the lack of it, in the provision of lower secondary (part of compulsory education) and upper secondary education. She attributes these to the disparity in economic development and to inequality in top-down financial support across different geographical regions in China. She emphasizes that the specific functional purpose of secondary education is to prepare a qualified labour force and educate high-performing students so that they may enter tertiary education. She concludes with optimism that the central government's recognition of the importance of secondary education will ensure that it is committed to addressing issues of equity and quality in a systematic way.

The quality of provision of education reflects the quality of the teaching workforce. Providing such a link, in Chapter 7, Ping Zhao, Jun Zhou and Qiong Li examine the transition of teacher education from what was previously a single-purpose teacher preparation system, where student teachers were trained in 'normal' schools and institutions, to the current system where the responsibility of preparing future teachers is shared between normal universities and general-purpose (or comprehensive) colleges and universities. The reform of teacher education has improved the qualification profiles of teachers in China. However, the increasingly diverse and fragmented education system, and that of teacher education poses a challenge to the quality of the curriculum and pedagogy of teacher preparation programmes. Unless this quality assurance challenge is met, it is unlikely that teachers trained at different institutions and in various parts of the country will be supported and assessed according to comparable standards.

Higher education in China has also experienced profound structural changes over the last 20 years. As Chapter 1 shows, the initiatives for reform in basic and school education were largely 'home-grown', while higher education was modelled on Japan and on the West. The entire system was damaged severely during the Cultural Revolution, as explained in Chapter 2, and in practice had to be rebuilt. In Chapter 8, Yuzhuo Cai and Fengqiao Yan provide a detailed account of the major structural changes in Chinese higher education since the turn of this

century, focusing especially on governance, finance, and priorities and responsibilities to serve the social and economic modernization of the country. Enhancing Chinese universities' social engagement and international research and development profiles is a necessary means to enable China to integrate with a global knowledge-based economy.

In Chapter 9, Zhiqun Zhao and Xueping Wu draw attention to the historical and current development of technical and vocational education. The modernization and reform of the system has shown the importance of technical and vocational education to skills development in the labour market. However, Zhao and Wu observe that the Confucian maxim that 'Those who do mental labour rule and those who do manual labour are ruled' has instilled a long-standing prejudice against the value of apprenticeship to society. Such prejudice continues to constrain public participation and engagement in technical and vocational education, irrespective of the central government's policy commitment and interventions.

Compared with schooling, higher education and even vocational and technical education, distance education and lifelong learning are relatively new concepts and practices in China. In Chapter 10, Fengliang Li, Nianchun Wang and Xianan Hu provide a succinct account of how lifelong learning in China, encompassing broader avenues and opportunities for learning, has accelerated the development of distance education and promoted the status of adult vocational education and training in Chinese society. The exponential advance in modern communication technology plays a defining role in the rapid expansion of distance education, and has challenged and modified traditional concepts and modes of education in China.

Part III comprises 11 chapters exploring a wide range of deep-seated social, cultural, economic and global influences that shape the policy and provision of education in China. In the first of these, Chapter 11, Wing-Wah Law examines the complex relationships between curriculum, citizenship and nation-building since the founding of New China in 1949. The chapter argues that, irrespective of the profound social changes that China has experienced over the past 40 years, the school curriculum continues to serve as a state device with two essential functions: equipping students for the country's development and modernization, and socializing them into values and norms prescribed by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. Over time the content of the citizenship curriculum has been revised occasionally to reflect and support the changing nuances in official ideology. As China has become more engaged in the world, the most recently revised curriculum is faced with fresh challenges, especially in terms of its role in preserving and promoting cultural identity and national solidarity.

As earlier chapters indicated, the socio-economic disparity between urban and rural areas and among different regions of China has become more prominent. This means that achieving educational equity in terms of access, quality and performance has become an increasingly urgent issue. In Chapter 12 Yanbi Hong and Yandong Zhao provide a critical account of the constantly evolving concept of 'educational inequality', together with its impact on the provision and outcomes of education. In conclusion, they argue that educational policies and measures alone cannot eliminate educational inequality, and call for greater attention to be paid to equality of social resources generally.

In Chapter 13, Sarah Dauncey provides a comprehensive examination of the development of special and inclusive education in China. The chapter draws upon detailed analyses of the conditions for the development of an inclusive system, and provides convincing evidence that China: 'has made great strides towards providing enhanced educational opportunities for its disabled population' because of state-led initiatives and policy making. The problems, however, remain formidable, not least because of their complexity, and can be enduring because of the multi-level and multi-form barriers that the chapter indicates.

Another aspect of educational inclusion is that of opportunities for the children and adults of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China. Chapter 14 by Miaoyan Yang reviews the policy and funding initiatives that the Chinese government has put in place to support and improve the access and quality of education provision for ethnic minorities in different parts of the country. Although there is evidence of success, there are also persistent problems rooted in the disparity of socio-economic development among different regions, as well as differing and sometimes conflicting cultural and religious values. In Chapter 15, Peggy Kong, Xiaoran Yu and Xia Zhao examine the role of paid private tutoring or 'shadow education' in relation to the provision of the mainstream education system. The chapter raises concerns about variability in the access to and the quality of private tutoring across the country, and calls for policy interventions to address ethical concerns and allegations of corruption among teachers participating in 'shadow education'. The chapter also shows the tension between individual aspirations in education on the one hand, and social provision on the other.

The concern of parents to secure educational advantages for their children, as shown by 'shadow education', is motivated by a perceived need to compete in the contemporary Chinese labour market. In Chapter 16, Yongpo Tian and Wenwen Ji consider the opportunities and challenges that influence the relationship between education and the labour market. For example, the so-called 'massification' of higher education has raised

questions concerning its effects on graduates' employability, income distribution and labour mobility, the provision of vocational education, and tensions between labour supply and demand. In a closely related chapter, Litao Lu, Li Yuan and Feng Gao, in Chapter 17, focus on an increasingly prominent group in China's labour force: migrant workers. China's economic and social development has seen a sharp rise in internal migration from rural to urban areas. The chapter emphasizes that improving the living conditions and raising the educational levels of migrant workers and their children is now a pressing social responsibility for both government and society because of the implications for the economic and social stability of the country.

The development of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education should be considered in relation to the Chinese government's drive for mass innovation and entrepreneurship. Su Wang, in Chapter 18, provides a detailed description of the latest curriculum change in these curriculum areas in both formal and non-formal settings. The chapter concludes with observations on the need to improve efficiency and coherence in national planning, in the consistency of curriculum standards and in the quality of teachers.

In a related chapter, Qing Tian, Yu Huang, Gerald McBeath and Jenifer McBeath, in Chapter 19, provide an account of the development of environmental education in schools and in higher education. Environmental degradation is now a matter for concern in China, especially in connection with the country's rapid economic growth. The chapter argues that environmental education has benefited from the traditional Chinese concept of social learning or *tianren heyi*, which regards humanity as an integral part of nature. It has also benefited from a concerted effort from both government and non-state environmental organizations. The authors conclude with the optimistic observation that sustainable development of both Chinese society and economy should continue to see greater government investment in environmental education.

The next two chapters focus on the phenomenon of Chinese students studying abroad. In Chapter 20, based on an extensive review of the literature on student choice of destination, Dan Liu and W. John Morgan identify push and pull factors that influence Chinese students' decision-making about the country of destination for overseas study. They argue that in addition to push factors, which are largely concerned with general issues regarding the country of origin, and pull factors, concerned similarly with the country of destination, students' personal capabilities and 'influencing others' in their personal and professional lives also play an important role in decision making.

In Chapter 21, a companion chapter that draws upon research findings

from studies led by the authors, Qing Gu and Michele Schweisfurth consider the processes and consequences of Chinese students' study abroad and return to China. The chapter concludes with two observations. The first emphasizes the social and relational nature of Chinese students' study abroad experience; and the second, a far-reaching process of change (rather than transient) that many Chinese students experience in both their host and home countries.

Part IV comprises two chapters that deal with China's two Special Administrative Regions (SARs). Stephanie Lee and Tsz Cheng provide an authoritative review of educational development in Macao, from when it was under Portuguese colonial rule to the most recent introduction of regulatory regimes reinforced by the Ten Year Plan (2011–2020). Over the last ten years, economic growth in Macao has led to substantial investment in education; a process accompanied by the SAR's efforts to consolidate the legal framework for education and to foster greater civic engagement.

Finally, in Chapter 23, Kai-ming Cheng explains the education system and its evolution in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. He describes it as a place which 'has integrated its colonial past with the Chinese cultural heritage'. The chapter provides an authoritative account of the political and societal changes and transformations in Hong Kong since it returned to Chinese sovereignty. These have determined, in fundamental ways, how the education system has responded and evolved. It concludes with an indication of the continuing political tensions that are found in education policy in Hong Kong, as in public policy generally.

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