The fact that intense competition has become a central issue in Chinese education is rather intriguing. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes interpersonal harmony and encourages restraining personal desires to address the needs and interests of others. This emphasis was still reflected in empirical studies of Chinese youth in the early 1990s. Research during that period consistently found that Chinese children and adolescents displayed more cooperative and compliant behaviors than their Western counterparts (Domino & Hannah, 1987; Domino, 1992; Orlick, Zhou, & Partington, 1990). How have individualistic competitive values taken root in a society that has a long tradition of emphasizing the virtue of practicing self-restraint and a recent history of encouraging self-sacrifice for the greater good? In this chapter, I examine the discourse of competition among Chinese educators in the last three decades, aiming to provide a historical and cultural background for my discussions in the following chapters of this book.

My analysis is based on a systematic review of 101 commentary articles published by Chinese educational scholars and practitioners across the 28 years from 1986 to 2014. The articles were retrieved from the online China Academic Journals Full-Text Database. The articles were mostly written in response to major educational policies issued by the Chinese central government during that time. The majority of them either provided a conceptual argument about competition in education, or introduced personal experiences from classroom teaching. Two-thirds of the authors were educational researchers working in universities and research institutes. One-third of them were practitioners in secondary schools. Details about the criteria I used to select the articles, and the procedure I followed to analyze them are provided in the Appendix on Methodology.
I took a textual approach to analyzing the articles, looking into the major themes and patterns of change in their central arguments. Four themes emerged from this process: arguments about competition, perceptions of the major problems facing education, proposals of policy solutions, and suggestions of teaching strategies. I discovered three different views of competition, with one dominating across the 28 years. I also found that the contents of the other three themes changed over time. Based on their differences, I divided the 28 years into three periods of time: 1986–1989, 1990–1996, and 1997–2014. In the following section, I first present the different views about competition. I then show how the authors’ arguments on the other themes, namely, the major problems facing education, potential policy solutions, and classroom strategies, differ across the three periods of time. In the end, I locate the findings in the sociocultural and historical context of contemporary China, as well as in the broader international and theoretical context.

Three Views about Competition

(1) Competition is desirable and inevitable. This view of competition was supported by over 80 percent of the articles. It is based on the idea that competition is “natural” and beneficial for the progress of society. The authors argued that competition exists in all human societies at all times (Feng & Jing, 2011). “Survival of the fittest” is a natural law, and it is the law underlying social phenomena (He, 2002; Li, 2005). Competition is a driving force in scientific development and social progress (Mei, 2001; Yang & Zhan, 2000; Zhang, 2003). Without competition, human civilization and society will not progress. Competition is also a key characteristic of market economy and knowledge-based economy. It is wrong to see competition as a social illness of the capitalist system and to link competition to selfish behaviors, as perceived by Chinese tradition and the ideology during the collectivist era (Tao, 1988).

At the individual level, competition is human nature and a motivating force of human development. Even though all human beings have the desire to compete, this will is stronger in some individuals than in others. Competition motivates individuals to build a strong will, realize their potentials, develop their wisdom, and increase the quality and efficiency of their work (Huang, 2004; Luo, 1993). Competition consciousness is the basis of individual creativity and is a necessary quality for the modern individual (Wang, 1996). In highly competitive modern society, only competitive individuals can survive (Mei, 2001; Qian, 2004). Noncompetitive nations and groups will not survive; noncompetitive individuals will have