Chapter Seven

Wang Fengxian –
A Leading Philosopher of Education

Wang Fengxian was born on the Changshan islands, to the northeast of the city of Dalian in 1928. His early life and history was greatly affected by the turbulent developments in this part of China over the first half of the 20th century. For Japan, Dalian was a crucial entry point for its incursions into Northeastern China, which it dominated and effectively colonized from 1931 to 1945, as it had done Korea from much earlier. Russia’s need for an ice-free port on its Eastern coast meant that rivalry between the two powers was an important part of the history of the region up to 1949.

Wang was growing up over these turbulent years, and he managed to find his way out of poverty into an opportunity for teacher education in remarkable ways. His university education spanned the 1949 Revolution, so that the last two years were spent at Northeast Normal University in the city of Changchun, Jilin province, the middle one of China’s three northeastern provinces. After graduation and some graduate study in Beijing, he returned to Changchun, and was to spend his whole career at Northeast Normal University. The first part of the chapter will therefore give an overview of this university.

My relationship with Professor Wang goes back to 1989, when we were planning a joint doctoral program in education with Chinese universities and Northeast Normal University joined the group of universities under the leadership of Beijing Normal University as our partner in the project. Professor Wang sent two of his doctoral students to Canada under the project. When we held our conference on “Knowledge Across Cultures” in 1992,1 he came and gave a paper. On

1 See Chapter Three, p.87.
that occasion, and at the project’s closing conference in Lanzhou in 2001, Professor Wang showed a delightful sense of humor which brought warmth to his passion for moral education and broader issues of education and social development. While he was visiting Hong Kong in March of 2000, I found the opportunity to talk with him, and was privileged to learn the details of his life and thought which are shared later in this chapter.  

The Story of Northeast Normal University
The story of Northeast Normal University is very closely linked to the story of the Chinese revolution. The Japanese occupation of the whole of Northeast China, from 1931 to the end of the Second World War in 1945, was one of the focal points for student protest and patriotism over this period. When the occupation of the Northeast was extended into a full-blown war of invasion in 1937, the whole of China was threatened. We have noted already the heroic stories of universities that made the long trek from major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Kaifeng and Xiamen into the hinterland, to continue higher education on temporary wartime campuses.

The Japanese were finally defeated in August of 1945 and departed from China. The Nationalist government moved its capital from Chongqing back to Nanjing, and attempted to re-assert its authority over all of the areas it had controlled up to 1937. It had never had full control of the Northeast, however, having had an uneasy truce with Japanese occupiers and earlier with the war-lord, Zhang Zuolin. Re-taking the Northeast was thus a strategic concern.

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2 Interview with Professor Wang Fengxian, Hong Kong Institute of Education, March 17, 2000.