Chapter 12

Curriculum Studies in China
Reform, Culture, History

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The future of curriculum studies in China will unfold from its past, a century old. It is a past that is international as well as local. That temporal and cultural complexity is registered in current curriculum policy and classroom practice. China’s great “wisdom traditions”—Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism—comprise the ancient cultures now being invoked in contemporary curriculum research and development. Traces of an intense encounter with US progressivism—personified by John Dewey’s two-year visit—remain. Contemporary curriculum reform in China incorporates those traces as well as aspects of its own ancient culture within a dynamic economy, a vast society, set in a global village. From the interviews, essays, and exchanges, it seems to me that reform, history, and culture comprise three key categories in understanding curriculum studies in China.

Curriculum Reform

Realizing the “consequences” of a “unified education management system all across China,” Chen Yuting recounts, in 2001 the central government undertook “the New Curriculum Reform.” Chen provided a summary of the reform, referencing Zhong’s specification of its four key points. First, the curriculum is to be regarded not only as a systematic organization of knowledge, but also as an ongoing opportunity to cultivate students’
personalities, laying a solid subjective as well as social foundation for future national development. In keeping with that first point, the curriculum, second, emphasizes character education; third, it exhibits a humanistic quality; fourth, it includes a course of comprehensive practical activities, enabling students to learn interdisciplinarity. The core of the reform, Zhong explains, is curriculum reform. And the core of curriculum reform is the reform of classroom teaching, itself dependent upon the professional development of teachers. “One of a major agenda items of this round of curriculum reform,” Kang Changyun told Janet L. Miller, “is reducing the difficulty and intensity level of knowledge acquisition, eliminating the school subjects’ boundaries, as well as enhancing the connections between knowledge and students’ daily life.” Especially for “early learners,” given their “specific characteristics both physically and psychologically,” their curriculum should draw on “activities with which they are familiar, instead of knowledge-orientated or knowledge-based textbooks.”

Recall that, after reading Chen’s chapter, Tero Autio was “simply amazed” by the “avant-garde nature” of the reform Chen described, specifically its contrast with “current” and “perverted” Western curriculum policies. Except in Autio’s home country of Finland—where implementation has meant “translation,” not “gracious submission”—the West seems determined to destroy teachers’ academic freedom in favor of curricular conformity. In China, as Chen suggests, “it is at most the first light in the morning.” The reform encourages teachers to translate national policy according to local needs, but, as Chen tells us, many teachers lack the “tradition” or necessary “knowledge” that would enable them to take a more active role in everyday curriculum development. Despite the call of reform, teaching-to-the-test remains. Chen calls for more “light” so that teachers and students might find their own ways out of the authoritarian past wherein standardization and homogeneity represented not “reform” but political ideology. That changed when the Central Committee of the Communist Party endorsed educational reform, authorizing schools to develop distinctiveness (or “diversity,” as Chen put it). Chen emphasized that “there is still a long way” to go. Changing metaphors, Chen likened the current situation to “a big and very complex spider web and every step is influenced by others and can affect others.” She added: “In this era of internationalization: the webs within which we work are much bigger and more complicated than before.” Reform, the presence of the past, and internationalization: Chen has introduced these key concerns in the contemporary curriculum studies in China.

Within these webs there is a relative freedom. Chen cites several schools where “models” have been developed to encourage increased teacher autonomy and creativity. While there are also schools that have used the