



# ECNU Review of Education

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## From the Editors

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Chinese education, broadly defined as education in the greater China region and education under the influence of Chinese educational philosophy and culture, is a significant education phenomenon in the world for a number of reasons. First, the outcome of Chinese education has significant implications for the entire world and our common future as China schools the largest population of youth in the world today. Chinese students contribute the largest proportion to the international student mobility. Students in Chinese schools as well as Chinese students studying in the world today are the citizens and workforce tomorrow. What and how well they learn today affect not only China's future but also the future of the world in the already highly globalized human community. Second, Chinese education holds significant lessons for education in other countries and regions. How the world's largest education system in a developing economy tackles the common concerns of excellence and equity in education can offer insights for education systems around the globe. Third, the phenomenon of Chinese education, like any education phenomenon rooted in a long history, rich culture, super-sized population and vast geography, is extremely complex and difficult to understand. Moreover, the cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts of Chinese education are so different from those of the dominant Western education that Chinese education could offer vastly different perspectives, approaches and strategies for improving education in the world.

The significance of Chinese education has not gone unnoticed. Scholars from different fields have been examining this phenomenon from different angles. While abundant literature on Chinese education exists, the literature suffers from the problem of parallel play between outside and inside observers, who often have drastically and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the same phenomenon. There is a glaring shortage of ongoing and dynamic dialogues between scholars from within and without Chinese education, which result in half-truths, mischaracterizations, and misunderstandings.

*ECNU Review of Education* is developed to address this shortage. It seeks to create a unique platform for scholars to have dynamic and ongoing dialogues about significant topics concerning Chinese education. The journal makes deliberate efforts to present rigorously researched perspectives on the complexity, intricacies, and nuances of Chinese education of scholars from both inside and outside Chinese education. It seeks to advance knowledge, generate big ideas, induce deep changes, and bring about real impact for our common future.

This inaugural issue of *ECNU Review of Education* exemplifies the mission of the journal. The editorial team presents contributions of scholars from both within and without Chinese education. This issue consists of four sections. The first three sections are themed symposiums with seven papers. The last section provides a review of the latest higher education policy development in the “Double First Class” initiative.

The first section features the insiders’ theorizing of the changes and development in Chinese education. It opens with a historical analysis of the modern development of Chinese education by Professor Zhenguo Yuan. In *Dual Priority Agenda: China’s Model for Modernizing Education*, Yuan provides an insider’s examination of Chinese education by tracing China’s strategies and efforts to build a nation of powerful human capital through education in the last 40 years. Yuan proposes Dual Priority Agenda (DPA) as a theoretical framework to explain the rapid modernization of education in China and economic growth: the government prioritized education development, and this development focused predominantly on promoting national development. Yuan’s intimate knowledge and insightful theorizing of China’s education development make the article a significant contribution to not only the understanding of Chinese education but also the advancement of thinking about education in relation to economic development.

*Changes in School Curriculum Administration in China* by Yunhuo Cui, Hao Lei, and Wenye Zhou is another investigation of Chinese education from the inside. The article analyzes the evolution of school curriculum administration in China since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Over the course of more than half a century, China gradually moved away from an exclusively and excessively centralized curriculum administration and developed a three-tiered system that shares power over curriculum among the central government, local government, and schools. This article not only provides insights into the inner workings of Chinese education but also adds to the raging debates about the locus of control of curriculum in the world. The case of China, as the authors suggest, illustrates an alternative way of thinking about curriculum administration to the typical dichotomous approach of centralization vs. decentralization.

The second section stands as a potential dialogue on the possible way developed through education to the future. PISA, especially Shanghai’s performance in PISA is taken as an ironical starting point to drive the three papers. Andreas Schleicher takes a future-oriented perspective from the outside. In *Educating Learners for Their Future, Not Our Past*, the author presents challenges faced by education systems around the world today: educating children to succeed in a future world to be transformed by digitization. Schleicher argues that future citizens will need “a reliable compass and the tools to navigate with confidence through an increasingly complex, volatile and uncertain world.” But education in the past has focused on teaching knowledge and skills “that are easiest to teach and easiest to test”, but they also “are exactly the skills that are also easiest to digitize, automate, and outsource.” Thus Schleicher calls for massive changes to education today, which demands changes for teachers and policy makers to develop innovative learning environments. Schleicher encourages

education systems to look outward to learn from others as a way forward to develop new education for tomorrow, like China did. “When Deng Xiaoping took the helm in China and began its rise on the world’s industrial stage, he directed China’s education institutions to form partnerships with the best educational institutions in the world and to bring back to China the best of their policies and practices.”

Yong Zhao suggests a different path toward the future of education. In his article *Shifting the Education Paradigm: Why International Borrowing Is No Longer Sufficient for Improving Education in China*, Zhao shares the view of Schleicher about the need for change in education, but argues that borrowing from each other is unlikely to deliver the changes China or the world needs. Zhao presents evidence from within and outside Chinese education to suggest that efforts to borrow from each other have run out of their course because the future education needs to operate under a new paradigm, one that is drastically different from the one guiding education all over the world in the past and today. Zhao calls for China and others to stop copying each other. Instead, Zhao urges China and the world to start inventing a new education paradigm.

While not explicitly a study of Chinese education, *Calculating the Future: The Historical Assemblage of Empirical Evidence, Benchmarks & PISA* has everything to do with Chinese education. In this article, Thomas S. Popkewitz, Jingying Feng and Lei Zheng take on the notions of international benchmarking and empirical evidence that have become popular in recent years, especially with the advent of PISA. Specifically, the authors examine “the historical and cultural principles about educational change and its sciences embedded in these standards through examining OECD’s PISA and the McKinsey & Company reports that draw on PISA’s data.” They found that in its attempt to provide data and models to achieve educational excellence, PISA makes a promise of a future society that should be embraced by all. This promise “fabricates the universal characteristics about society and individuals.” China, with its stunning PISA performance, has in essence become a standard bearer of educational excellence according to the PISA fabricated universal characteristics of societies and individuals. This article provides an excellent framework for rethinking about Chinese education, and consequently, the meaning of the quality of education in general.

The third section provides alternative scholarly lens to revisit some perceived educational mysteries as well as a successful case of designed learning environments in Shanghai and Beijing respectively. Shanghai and Beijing cannot represent the whole China, but the cases of the two cities are demonstrating how and how well the educational sub-systems can do in the complicated contexts.

Rethinking about Chinese education is indeed the intention of *Exploring the Mysteries of School Success in Shanghai*. In this article, Allan Walker and Haiyan Qian provide a nuanced analysis of the conditions that have led to the success of education in Shanghai, which has been a top PISA performer. Discarding simplistic characterizations and superficial interpretations, the authors bring in deep knowledge of China and Chinese education to explain the common mysteries about the success of schools in Shanghai. They suggest that the Shanghai success is achieved under four general

conditions: values, reform, leadership, and teaching approaches. More importantly, the authors suggest these conditions are so interdependent that none, “taken alone, can explain, or dominate, pathways to success.” Furthermore, how these conditions “are woven together ‘on the ground’ in schools” matters. This re-examination points to new directions of investigating education in China and other places. It also points out the difficulties of transporting educational policies and practices across cultural and systemic boundaries.

Noting the declining power of policy, rising skepticism of public institutions and, more important, the eroding monopoly of learning by schools, Richard Elmore points out the urgent need for creating new learning environments that “stretch and (literally) re-form our understanding of what learning could look like, apart from the constraints and preconceptions of policy-driven reform and institutionally-determined definitions of learning.” Creating such new learning environments requires a different approach from traditional broad-scale solutions. The approach is a purposeful design using human imagination and creativity or “learning by design and design through learning.” In *Beijing Academy: Innovation, Design, and Learning*, Elmore presents an example of the approach in action: the development of an innovative school in China, the Beijing Academy. In this article, the author illustrates how the government of Chaoyang, a district in Beijing, creatively and purposefully created a new type of learning environments in China.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *ECNU Review of Education* collectively paint a complex picture of Chinese education. This complex picture in many ways resembles the picture of education globally, with patterns and themes shared by educational systems around the world. For example, the struggle between borrowing and indigenous development of policies and practices has been a common theme in educational reforms around the world. As well is the conflict between learning from the past and inventing the future. The concern about the importance of culture as an influential factor affecting the effects of educational policy and practices is also a global issue. The articles presented in this issue tackle these themes from various angles and perspectives.

More important, the authors or teams of authors have significantly different experiences and relationships with Chinese education. Some of them are deeply embedded within the Chinese education system; some are veteran outside observers who have a long history with Chinese education; and some interacted with Chinese education with much less intensity and frequency. This variation in experiences and relationships adds to the richness of the contributions.

We cordially invite you to engage your knowledge, insights, wisdom and enthusiasm in the ongoing scholarly dialogues concerning Chinese education in the global context and towards our common future. Please feel free to write to us through emails [roe@ecnu.edu.cn](mailto:roe@ecnu.edu.cn) if you have any suggestion, enquiry, or interest in submission. *ECNU Review of Education* will serve more than a traditional print forum. A global platform connecting Chinese education with you is coming soon. We are looking forward to meeting you there.