

# From the Finnish Experience to the Chinese Path: Review and Reflections on Chinese Research on Finnish Education

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is (1) to provide a critical analysis of the Finnish experience of education reforms based on published Chinese research on Finnish education and (2) to discuss how such experience can serve as a model as China embarks on its own path toward educational reform.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** This article is based on an analysis of the research on Finnish education contained in the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure database from 2000 to 2017.

**Findings:** The analysis shows that although the various aspects of Finnish education have been extensively studied in China, the content of prior studies has generally been similar and is insufficiently in depth. In particular, current research (1) lacks effective exploration of the successful experience of Finnish education reform and (2) devotes insufficient attention to the social culture perspective and core concepts that serve as the basis of education in Finland.

**Originality/Value:** This article extends the authors' recent review of Chinese research on Finnish education and places special emphasis on the discussions regarding how China can learn

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from Finland's experience with educational reform. It also identifies gaps in the current research in the field and calls for a change in the future research agenda from examining the successful elements of Finnish education to focusing on how the experience of Finnish education is relevant to reforms in China.

## Keywords

Comparison of education in China and Finland, education reform, Finnish education

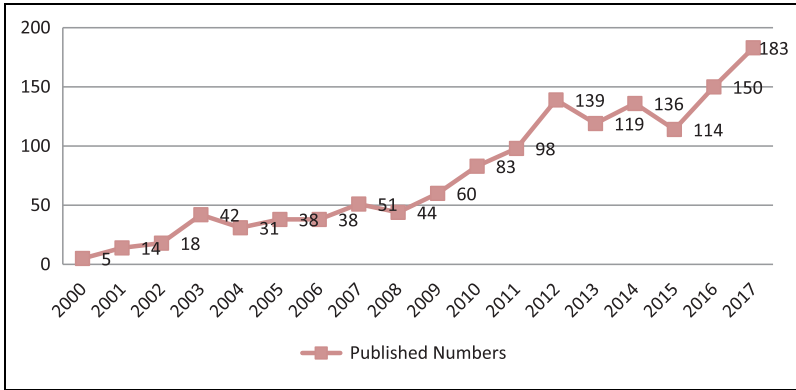
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Since Finland's outstanding performance on the OECD PISA test in 2000, there has been an upsurge in interest in Finnish education among Chinese scholars. This article uses articles published on Finnish education since 2000 and available in Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI; the most authoritative Chinese-language database) as a research sample and analyzes the current situation of Chinese research on Finnish education, focusing on how Chinese educational research scholars interpret the experience of Finnish education. Based on such analysis, this article provides new perspectives for the future and makes suggestions on how China can effectively learn from the Finnish experience in order to forge its own path for education reform.

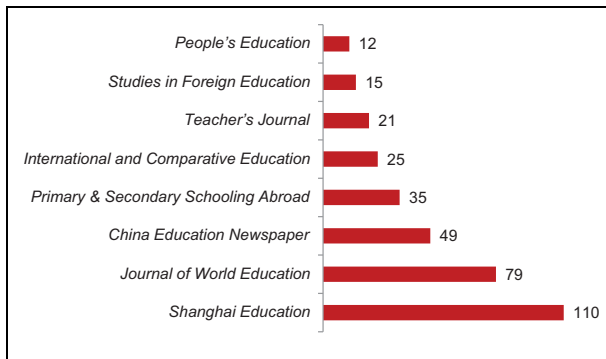
### *An overview of the research by Chinese scholars on Finnish education*

The following overview of Chinese scholars' research on Finnish education is based on a recent study by the authors (Zuo & Cai, 2018a). In our study, published in December 2018, we reviewed and analyzed academic articles on Finnish education available in CNKI for the period from 2000 to 2017. The CNKI database is currently the primary platform used for academic research searches in China. We used "Finland" and "education" as the "subject" for an approximate string ("fuzzy") search within the scope of "Social Science II." We obtained a total of 1,431 search results. We then removed certain unrelated comments, notices, interviews, and so on and were left with a total of 1,342 valid documents. The main results of our analysis of the literature on Finnish education are as follows (Zuo & Cai, 2018a).

*Since 2000, the number of articles on "Finnish education" has increased annually and Chinese academic attention to "Finnish education" has been steadily rising.* From 2000 through 2017, the number of Chinese articles on Finnish education increased year by year (see Figure 1). There were only five papers published in 2000 while there were 183 papers published in 2017. This increase occurred despite the fact that Finland's PISA ranking dropped to 6th place in 2009 and fell to 12th place in 2012, while Shanghai's PISA scores ranked first in the world for both years. These numbers reflect the growing enthusiasm Chinese scholars have had for the study of Finnish education.

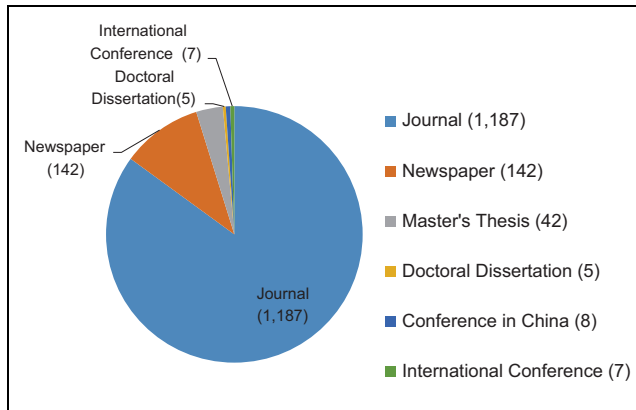


**Figure 1.** Trends in the number of published papers from 2000 to 2017. *Source.* Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure Database.



**Figure 2.** Paper published by journals. *Source.* Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure Database.

Based on the type and scope of published papers, the academic influence of Finnish education in China continues to expand. Figure 2 demonstrates that over the past 18 years, among the top 10 academic journals that published articles on Finnish education, *Shanghai Education* published the greatest number, with a total of 110. After further searching, we found that since *Shanghai Education* published its first article on Finnish Education in 2002—“The Student-Centered Approach of Finnish High Schools” (Lu & Ren), it published at least one paper on the topic in each subsequent year. The 35th issue of *Shanghai Education* in 2012 was a Finnish education edition, with a total of 38 papers published. *Journal of World Education* and *China Education Newspaper* published 79 and 49 articles, respectively, from 2000 to 2017, most of which were introductory in nature. *International and Comparative Education* and *Primary & Secondary Schooling Abroad* published relatively fewer articles on Finnish education, but the articles published in these journals were highly academic in focus.



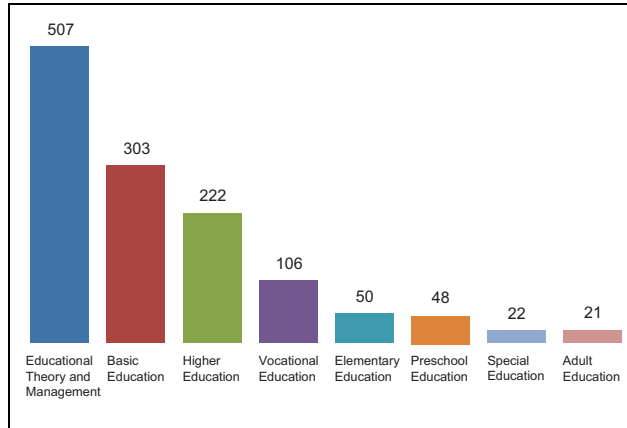
**Figure 3.** Published types.

*Chinese research on Finnish education spans a depth of different publication types.* As can be seen from Figure 3, there were 1,187 articles on Finnish education published in journals between 2000 and 2017, accounting for 86% of the Chinese academic output on Finnish education during the period. There were 47 published master's theses and doctoral dissertations during the period, accounting for 4% of published work on Finnish education. These figures demonstrate that China's research on Finnish education has gone beyond more popularized academic work and has attained a certain depth of research characteristic of graduate-level theses and dissertations. At the same time, we found that among 42 master's theses, there were 30 devoted to Finnish teaching content, curriculum, vocational education, and higher education; however, the five doctoral dissertations covered by our search were only partially focused on topics relating to Finnish education.

*Chinese researchers have studied Finnish education from a variety of fields and levels of education.* Figure 4 demonstrates that Chinese scholars have covered various fields of Finnish education. The most widely covered field has been educational theory and management, with a total of 507 published articles. The second most widely covered field has been basic education, with a total of 303 published articles. There have been relatively fewer articles in the fields of special education and adult education (22 and 21 published articles, respectively). Recently, Finland has undergone a series of university mergers and university governance reforms. Chinese scholars have been mindful of these developments, publishing 222 articles on higher education in Finland.

### *The Finnish experience in the eyes of Chinese scholars: The primary research content and characteristics of Finnish education*

Zuo and Cai's (2018a) analysis of the current research on Finnish education shows that Chinese scholars have mainly focused on basic education, higher education, vocational education, and



**Figure 4.** Publications in various fields.

teacher education. Most scholars' research has centered on the promulgation and implementation of education policies and reform measures in Finland. Their studies analyze and summarize the successful experience of Finnish education from various angles and may provide a useful and enlightening reference point for China's own education reform.

*Finnish teacher education reform and experience.* An important factor in Finland's success in education lies in the quality of its corps of educators. Chinese scholars have conducted a range of studies on teacher training in Finland. Their work has examined topics including preservice teacher training, the teacher education curriculum, the teacher qualification system, teacher professional development, and teacher policy reform (He, 2014; Rao & Li, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2014; Yu, 2015b; Zhang, 2016; Zhu & Zhang, 2017). Many Chinese scholars have attributed Finland's success in education to its outstanding teachers and its high-quality teacher training system (Li, 2006; Xie, 2010; Yang & Zheng, 2011; Yu, 2015a).

In these studies, Chinese scholars have identified eight universities in Finland primarily responsible for the task of cultivating teachers. In designing their teacher-education curriculum, these universities require teachers to be familiar with and understand the knowledge of society, students, and subject areas. Teachers must possess the skills and techniques necessary to carry out daily teaching, to collaborate with their school and colleagues, to communicate effectively with parents, and to guide students' cognition and help students overcome difficulties. They must also be optimistic about the development prospects of education. At the same time, Finnish teachers must possess a master's degree before entering the teaching profession. Teachers in Finland enjoy deep respect within Finnish society and are afforded a high degree of professional autonomy (Teng, 2013).

Teachers in Finland are subject to a strict qualification system. In Finland, aspiring teachers must pass a two-step certification procedure in order to be enrolled in teacher education programs in universities:

first, they must take university entrance examination, and then, they must participate in an interview based on their examination results. The core question of the interview is why the individual wants to be a teacher. The requirements for each of these two steps are very high. Prospective teachers face fierce competition and layer-by-layer screening. The idea is that each person who enters the Finnish teaching profession should be a leader (Zuo & Cai, 2018b). The prominent feature of preservice education for Finnish primary and secondary school teachers is its research orientation. This orientation is developed in the context of academic reform for teacher education to promote academic study and professional education. The aim is the organic integration of theoretical learning and practical learning, and the characteristics of “research standards” are reflected in the main dimensions of goals, content, and methods of teacher education (Rao & Li, 2016).

*Finland's primary and secondary education reform and experience.* Finland ranked number 1 in the world consecutively for PISA 2000, PISA 2003, and PISA 2006. This record caused the world to pay attention to basic education in Finland. Chinese scholars have conducted extensive research on the teaching methods, teaching models, flexible curriculum, and quality evaluation methods used in Finnish basic education (Zhang & Wang, 2009). Chinese scholars have also analyzed the various social, cultural, institutional, and historical factors that contribute to the success of basic education in Finland (Zhao & Li, 2008; Zhao & Mei, 2016). These Chinese scholars believe that education equity is the most prominent feature of Finnish education.

Following Finland's education reforms in the 1970s, comprehensive school (grades 1 to 9) reform has had been introduced with the greatest overall impact on the current success of Finnish education. Chinese scholars believe that comprehensive schools are able to succeed in Finland largely because of the nation's essentially nonsegregated society and homogeneous Protestant culture (Peng, 2012). At the same time, to promote fairness and individuality in education, Finnish high schools has implemented a nongraded system. Under the framework of the National Core Curriculum, students choose their own course study plan based on their individual interests and developmental needs. This provides students with great autonomy in learning (Li, 2014).

In addition, Finland provides a favorable guarantee for the smooth implementation of the nongraded system through the reform of its modular curriculum, flexible academic system, flexible evaluation system, complete counseling and guidance system, and the cooperation mechanism between different educational institutions (Tian, 2003). In the Finnish curriculum system, curricular objectives center around students' all-round development and lifelong learning ability; curricular structure gives weight to the foundation and increases the selectivity of the curriculum; curricular content focuses on the basic and elective; curricular implementation focuses on independent learning and promotes interschool cooperation and the effective integration of curricular resources; and curricular evaluation focuses on developmental evaluation (Zhang & Wang, 2009).

Chinese education scholars eagerly anticipated Finland's implementation of its 2014 Core Curriculum beginning in August 2016. Chinese researchers were enthusiastic to learn about certain new elements in curriculum reform, for example, those relating to phenomenon-based learning. However, it should be noted that since the 1970s, Finland has implemented curriculum reform every 10 years. The 2016 reform was not fundamentally innovative (as was often reported by the media) but was based on best practices from the previous curriculum and a prediction of future needs (Cai, Tian, Tang, & Teng, 2016).

*The successful experience of Finnish higher education.* With the continuous increase in the international standing of Finnish colleges and universities, for example, Finnish higher education and training being ranked the second in the World Economic Forum index of 2017–2018,<sup>1</sup> and Finnish higher education reform has become a topic of interest for Chinese scholars. Higher education in Finland employs a two-track system consisting of research universities and universities of applied sciences. Finland has also implemented a series of higher education reforms in connection with the Bologna Process. The focus of Chinese scholars mainly includes the internationalization of Finnish higher education and the introduction of market mechanisms accompanying globalization in the higher education system (Cai, 2012a; Zeng, 2002) and the reform of Finnish higher education under the Bologna Process (Ma & Li, 2008; Tan, 2010). Certain scholars believe that internationalization is the cornerstone of Finnish higher education policy. Factors such as sluggish economic development, the gradual reduction of government funding, the shortcomings of the bureaucratization of higher education administration, and decreasing employment prospects for college students have promoted internationalization reforms in Finnish higher education (Cui, Wei, & Zhang, 2006). In order to enhance the competitiveness of Finnish higher education and to respond more flexibly to the international market, Finland embarked on a series of university legal reforms in 2011. These reforms changed the legal status, financial systems, internal management systems, and employment practices of universities in Finland. Universities have been granted greater administrative autonomy. The government provides sufficient funding for each university based on the degree, quality, and impact of the university's teaching and research accomplishments (Chu, 2010). Additionally, Chinese scholars have conducted in-depth research on the framework, content, review procedures, student participation, and other aspects of the quality assurance system behind higher education in Finland (Chen & Sun, 2004; Wang, 2010; Xue & Yan, 2008).

Chinese scholars have found that the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture plays a coordinating and supervisory role in the governance of higher education institutions. It decides on the funding level of each university based on the university's performance-based assessment results. Finnish higher education institutions establish their own internal quality assurance mechanisms based on their own development orientation and goals. These institutions actively participate

in funding negotiations with the Ministry and attach great importance to quality review activities. The quality assurance systems and reviews focus primarily on 10 items, including the purpose of the quality assurance system; the overall structure and internal consistency; the comprehensiveness of quality assurance; the participation of faculty, students, and external stakeholders in the quality assurance system; the channels through which internal personnel obtain quality assurance information; the channels through which external stakeholders obtain quality assurance information; and the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and structures and their impact on other activities (Wang, 2010).

Chinese scholars have also studied the background, development status, school characteristics, faculty, academic system and credits, design of academic majors, and other aspects of Finland's universities of applied sciences (Li, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2005; Zhou, 2011). Finland established universities of applied sciences in the 1990s to meet the labor market demands for more profession-oriented graduates from higher education (Yang, Jing, Cai, Lyytinen, & Hölttä, 2015). The development of Finland's universities of applied sciences has gone through three stages: (1) the launch of pilot institutions, (2) the transition from pilot to permanent institutions, and (3) an undertaking to improve school level and quality. Finland's universities of applied sciences currently represent nearly half of Finnish higher education in terms of enrollment. After more than 30 years of development, Finland's universities of applied sciences have matured considerably and currently serve the following focused missions: (1) cultivating talent in line with societal, economic, and labor market demands; (2) matching students' areas of study with the country's regional industrial structure; (3) promoting student diversity; and (4) establishing reasonable and scientific admissions standards (Zhao, 2017).

In response to China's regional university transformation launched in 2014, Chinese scholars have devoted particular attention to exploring the experience of Finnish universities of applied sciences. These scholars have determined that the following lessons may be particularly useful to China (Yang et al., 2015): enhancing the equal status of polytechnic-type institutions and traditional universities through legislative change, while maintaining a distinction between academic and nonacademic higher education institutions; strengthening cooperation with industry through joint curriculum development, teacher training, and research and development; and enhancing capacity through international collaboration.

*The successful experience of Finnish vocational education.* Vocational education is an important component of the Finnish education system. Finland shares certain similarities with China in terms of vocational training models and reform background (Yang et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, the amount of research on Finnish vocational education in China has been rising in recent years. Chinese scholars have studied the attractiveness of secondary vocational education institutions and teacher



development in such institutions (Cao, 2007; He, 2010; Liu, 2011). They believe that teacher preparation training and teacher on-the-job training in Finnish secondary vocational education have certain key characteristics, such as an emphasis on the practical operation of vocational education and the close connection between vocational education and industry. Secondary vocational education has different training requirements for vocational subject teachers, core subject teachers, vocational instructors, and enterprise instructors (Cao, 2010).

Finland has opened up a channel between academic and professional (vocational) tracks of studies. Students from vocational schools can take courses from high schools and vice versa. At the higher education level, universities not only recruit high school graduates, but also recruit graduates from vocational high schools based on their academic merits. After completing a bachelor's degree at a university of applied sciences, students can choose to apply for master's degree programs at universities (Li, 2014).

### *Understanding the Finnish experience*

In their research on the successful experience of Finnish education, Chinese scholars have focused on three broad areas of study to different extent. First, the vast majority studies tend to understand Finnish education as what it is. Second, there is an emerging research attention on how Finland has learned from other countries in creating the Finnish model. This leads to the third area of research, which centers on the core values underlying the success of Finnish education.

*Finland's experience with education in the demonstrative dimension.* In researching the Finnish experience, Chinese scholars have primarily focused on the facts of Finnish education. Dissecting the factual experience provides China with an operational reference in the learning process as they develop their own reform measures and practices. In the literature, most discussions of Finland's technical experience typically center around teacher training and education equity.

With respect to the selection process for new teachers, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture regularly adjusts its enrollment plan to adapt to changes in Finnish demographics. Table 1 presents the admission statistics for teacher training programs at Finnish universities from 2007 to 2010. As can be seen from Table 1, competition for admission into such programs is very intense, and only 10–15% of applicants are accepted. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture periodically forecasts the demand for teachers for different grade levels. Since 2007, the enrollment plan for teacher training at universities has been adjusted and reduced year by year. On the one hand, interest in applying for teacher training programs remains strong, and on the other hand, the number of admitted students has decreased. It can be seen that in the past decade, Finnish teacher education has become a highly competitive major. Successful applicants for these positions are all highly qualified.

**Table 1.** Finnish university teacher application and admission statistics.

University	Number of applicants				Number of accepted students (based on government quotas)			
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2007	2008	2009	2010
1 University of Helsinki	1,373	1,254	1,432	1,578	100	120	120	120
2 University of Eastern Finland								
Joensuu Campus	367	371	359	467	80	83	81	80
Savonlinna Campus	192	142	149	146	69	45	41	40
3 University of Jyväskylä	1,006	964	1,020	1,103	96	93	86	80
4 University of Lapland	317	296	316	345	68	67	66	64
5 University of Oulu								
Kajaani Campus	305	305	293	295	72	60	69	60
Oulu Campus	629	604	554	677	24	22	22	20
6 University of Tampere, Hämeenlinna Campus	808	679	789	774	64	64	53	64
7 University of Turku								
Rauma Campus	435	312	427	438	65	62	58	60
Turku Campus	635	586	660	763	88	83	74	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,067</b>	<b>5,513</b>	<b>5,999</b>	<b>6,568</b>	<b>726</b>	<b>699</b>	<b>670</b>	<b>661</b>

Source: Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen (2011).

Note. There are eight universities in Finland for teacher education, seven of which are listed in the table. The other is Åbo Akademi University, which has a separate admissions system and therefore was not included.

In addition to maintaining a highly competitive teacher training system, Finnish education is characterized by fairness, an attribute that has garnered the attention of many scholars. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey data, among all participating nations, Finland has the smallest student achievement gap in terms of different regions, different schools, and different family backgrounds. This is the legacy of the comprehensive school reform undertaken in the 1970s. The establishment of a comprehensive school system marked the end of Finland's dual-track education system. Students are no longer diverted to secondary or vocational schools at the age of 11. Instead, they are afforded an open choice to improve their social status (Kuusilehto-Awale, Lahtero, & Hu, 2012).

*Finland's experience of learning from other countries.* In its implementation of educational reforms since the 1970s, Finland has learned from other countries' experiences and has melded the acquired insights into its own practices. For example, Finland studied curricular models in the United Kingdom, California, and Ontario, cooperative learning in the U.S. and Israel, science and mathematics education in the United Kingdom, the U.S., and Australia, and leadership training in Canada and the Netherlands (Sahlberg, 2014).

In curricular reform and teaching model reform since the 1980s, Finland combined the experience of the United Kingdom and the U.S. with its own practices, making full use of constructivist learning theories, emphasizing and respecting students' interests and needs, discovering students' interests and needs through guidance, and stimulating students' creativity and imagination based on their interests (Vulliamy & Nikki, 1997). Such ideas have been carried out in the succeeding curriculum reforms.

For example, the "High School Education Curriculum Outline" promulgated by Finland in 1994 has carried out a major reform of the curriculum used by high schools. In addition to 45–49 core courses, each high school is required to offer around 60 limited electives. Each student is permitted to take 10 such courses. In addition, students also take certain applied elective courses. The applied electives are courses developed and implemented by each school and are an important part of the Finnish high school curriculum (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006). The promulgation of the new "High School Education Curriculum Outline" in 2004 requires an increase in the proportion of science and technology courses. In the 2014, "National Core Curriculum Standards for Basic Education," the government proposed the concept of "Transversal Competence," which emphasizes the ability of students to learn for life, as well as the cultivation of social participation and sustainable development.

In addition, the High School Education Act enacted in 1999 stipulates that all high schools in Finland implement a teaching model of "no grade levels and no fixed classes." This model sets flexible course plans based on student personality differences, including course settings, subject content, teachers, course evaluations, and more. Students can choose their own courses, customize their learning content, and even choose their teachers. In this regard, the Finnish curriculum and teaching model reflect the principles of constructivist learning theory in Finnish education.

Our review of the literature shows that, over the past 17 years, Chinese scholars have rarely examined the issue of how Finland has learned from other countries' experiences in order to improve its own educational practices. This, however, is exactly what China should focus on when it comes to learning from Finland's experience with education, as recently called for by Cai (2015). To proceed in this direction, it requires deeper understanding of the core values underlying Finnish education.

*The core values behind Finland's success in education.* Finland's core national values help explain both its success in education and its ability to learn from others. The core concept of the "Finnish Experience" not only preserves the essence of the country's traditional culture, but also combines the innovative spirit of other countries' experiences with national practice. This means that Finland's experience with education is well inherited in practice. As observed by OECD experts evaluating the Finnish education system,

At the core of this country's success and sustainability is its capacity to reconcile, harmonize and integrate those elements that have divided other developed economies and societies—a prosperous, high performing

economy and a socially just society. It has also done this in a way that connects the country's sense of its history to the struggle for its future destiny. (Hargreaves, Halász, & Pont, 2007, p. 12)

Specifically, the core values underlying Finland's education success include the following four main aspects:

*The spirit of nationalism and the spirit of pursuing freedom and equality.* Finland's spirit of pursuing freedom and equality is derived from its long-term struggles for survival. Over the course of its history, Finland has generally been controlled by Sweden and Russia. In more recent history, the Soviet Union posed a major military and political threat to Finland. In order to maintain national independence and survive under the threat of the Soviet Union, Finland was required to accept a certain degree of compromise and concession. This imparted a distinct mix of obedience and independency in Finnish social culture.

*Sisu.* *Sisu* is a Finnish term. It refers to the strong will and determination of the Finns, their courage and fortitude in the face of challenges, and the calm, gentle spiritual qualities in their hearts. In the social political process and the practice of government reform, Finnish culture, as an important symbol of national consciousness and national identity, plays a vital role in the construction of the nation-state and the effectiveness of government reform (Sun, 2016). Regardless of societal changes, the concept of *sisu* has continued to play a strong role in the reform of education in Finland.

*Culture of trust.* Trust is the most important social and cultural foundation of the Finnish education system. Trust supports the sound functioning of the entire education system in Finland. In Finland, the government, as the maker of education policy and the promoter of education reform, has granted schools great autonomy in their administration. As institutions for the implementation of education and teaching, schools—in turn—have afforded their teachers great freedom in the classroom. Teachers are the core figures in the implementation of education and teaching. Finnish teachers fully respect and trust their students, discover and develop their students' special strengths and potential, and also improve their students' abilities and qualities in order to help them to realize their own value in society. The stakeholders, who share common educational goals, rely on trust to demonstrate and implement the essential attributes of Finnish education practice (Zuo & Cai, 2018b).

*Finnish society attaches great importance to education.* In Finland, education has always been considered a symbol of higher sociocultural status. In the 1960s, the scale of education in Finland expanded rapidly in order to increase the opportunities of individuals to improve their social status. At the same time, from the perspective of economic development, Finland is a typical "catching up" country that faces a resource disadvantage. Accordingly, Finland has implemented a variety of measures such as: focusing on education in its national development strategy, creating a national

innovation system, successfully incubating high-tech under this system, attracting highly skilled scientists and engineers to make up for domestic deficiencies, and committing to research and development initiatives with other countries (e.g., China and India) to cater to global innovation. The purpose of these initiatives is to maintain Finland's competitive advantage.

### *From the Finnish experience to the Chinese path: Suggestions for future research*

While providing important insights and contributing to the Chinese understanding of Finnish education, current studies have paid inadequate attention to how the Finnish experience can be utilized to contribute to Chinese education reforms. Cai (2015) argues that the most essential Finnish lesson is about how the Finns were able to learn from the experiences of other countries and then adapt that knowledge to serve their own purposes in accordance with their local context. In other words, the success of Finland's education reforms lies in its capability to reconcile external reform proposals with domestic education reform traditions (Hargreaves et al., 2007). As such, we propose a shift in the research agenda away from analyzing the Finnish experience itself toward exploring how the Finnish experience can help in developing a Chinese path of education reform. Specifically, we provide the following suggestions for future research.

*Focusing on comparing the cultural foundations of both countries' education systems.* Understanding the respective cultural foundations of Chinese and Finnish education is the key to harnessing translatable insights; success in learning from the experience of another country lies in matching that experience with domestic value systems (Cai & Zuo, 2018). Therefore, studying Finnish education and learning from its success first require Chinese scholars to understand Finland's core values and cultural and historical traditions. While learning from the experiences of developed Western countries, such as Finland, one cannot ignore China's own experience.

To map out a Chinese path with Chinese educational characteristics, one must not start from scratch, nor is it appropriate to mechanically copy foreign practices. Instead, it is necessary to first turn to China's rich history. China cannot leave its own history behind and use Western standards to measure its own reality (Cai, 2012). China's original educational thinking must be rooted in the country's unique history and social contexts. The historical background of Chinese education is the premise and basis for the development of China's education reform. The process of education reform in China must incorporate an objective and comprehensive understanding of the history of education, combined with insights into current sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and educational factors. Only then will education reform meaningfully address the many demands posed by the underlying societal transformation taking place in China, and only then will the Chinese government be able to embark on effective reform measures in education.

*Pursuing a deep understanding of the nature of education in the Chinese context.* Education reform is largely based on a shared societal understanding of the nature of education. However, certain scholars, including Gu (2016), have argued that China has long lacked a national awareness of the nature of education. Indeed, a nation's concept of education can serve as an important guide for education reform. Regardless of his criticisms, Gu (2008) also believes that education in China has made great strides since the launch of reform and opening-up 40 years ago and that the transformation of the concept of education is one of its biggest achievements. Two points of Gu are particularly salient in this transformation. One is the shift from a focus on class struggle to a development strategy for rejuvenating the country through science and education. The second is a shift from anti-intellectualism toward a recognition that intellectuals play an important role in any society. These two developments have changed education in China and Chinese society as a whole. At present, when studying the Finnish education experience, Chinese scholars must explore the Chinese way of reconciling advanced education models with China's own unique traditions.

### **Authors' note**

This article is partially based on the authors' recent review of Chinese studies on Finnish education, which was published as a Chinese-language article in the journal *University (Academic)* or 《大学》(研究版) in December 2018 (Zuo & Cai, 2018a). However, in the current article, the authors have extended their focus from identifying the main features of Chinese studies on Finnish education, as the emphasis of the article published in *University (Academy)*, to a discussion of the experience of Finnish education reform and the approaches China may take in learning from such experience. The use of the analysis results of Zuo and Cai (2018a) has been authorized by *University (Academic)* and acknowledged by *ECNU Review of Education*.

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### **Note**

1. Retrieved from <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017-2018/competitiveness-rankings/#series=GCI.B.05>.

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