

## CURRICULUM CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN CHINESE SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION SINCE 1980

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With the policy of opening to the world and economic reform in the late 1970s, China has experienced tremendous socioeconomic changes. To catch up and compete with the advanced countries, the national goals have shifted profoundly from the traditional goal of moral inculcation stressing cooperation, to the economic goal of modernization emphasizing competition, and then to the general goal of revitalizing China through education, science and technology. Concurrent with this shift, education policies and practices also change. To respond to the national goal and to answer the call of Deng Xiaoping that education must be oriented to the four modernizations, Chinese education has undergone a series of reforms, led by the State Education Commission (SEC), since the 1980s. To this end, since the 1980s, quite a few important education documents were issued, including:

1. *The Central Government's Decision on Education Reform*, 1985
2. *Compulsory Education Law of People's Republic of China*, 1986
3. *The Outline of Chinese Education Reform and Development*, 1993
4. *Basic Education Reform toward 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Quality Education*, 1998
5. *Decision on Deepening the Educational Reform and Improving Quality Education in All-Round Way*, 1999
6. *The Action Plan to Revitalize the Education Towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 1999

Most noticeably, since 1996 the most important part of Chinese educational reform has focused on a quality education, which aims to cultivate all-around, well-developed citizens who are more creative, independent, and capable of dealing with challenges in an increasingly competitive world. These educational reforms, as well as the resumption of the university matriculation exam in 1977, have triggered a great change in the educational arena and will continue to generate radical reforms in many other aspects of society impacting the nation's economic growth and competitive competence.

Needless to say, the new education laws and documents continue to endorse the long-standing political task of education to preserve the political ideologies of Marxism-Lennism, Mao Zedong's Thought, Deng Xiaoping's Theory, Jiang Zheming's "Three Represents," as well as socialist construction as the basic principles for the development of socialist education in China.<sup>1</sup> However, these documents have focused on the cultivation of young citizens who are productive, competitive, creative, and competent.<sup>1</sup>

In schools, various new educational values and practices are replacing those that are no longer consistent with the new ones arising from the market reform and world development. And as always, the political task, the new education ideas, and new values are reflected most obviously in school curriculum, especially in social science curriculum.

### Socialization and Social Science Education Curriculum

Ever since the founding of New China in 1949, the Chinese educational system, the largest in the world, has played the most important role in the Chinese socialization process. Curriculum, especially that for the social sciences which is compiled by the State Education Commission (formerly the Ministry

of Education), is a major tool of this socialization, and has had profound influence on the formation of students' views about humans, society, and the world. The advantage of this highly centralized, unified curriculum is that it helps effectively implement top-down policies and reforms concerning education.

Since 1980, the national school curriculum was revised four times in response to the specific needs of politics and socioeconomic development: first in 1981, then in 1988, in 1993, and the most recent revision in 2003. As in other cultures, curriculum change was deeply situated in social, political, and historical context. This series of revisions of the national curriculum was born in this changing period of politics, economics, and culture, and intended to meet the needs of economic reform and increasing globalization.

Because of the educational reforms of the 1980s, more social science courses were added, including Moral Education and Social Studies at primary schools, Citizenship Education, Political Ideology, Social History, Common Knowledge of Socialist Construction in secondary schools, Western Culture and Society, and Western Politics and Philosophy in higher education.

No doubt, adding these courses are the results of the changing of social and economic system, the change in educators' perspectives of the world around us, the influence of globalization, and the requirement of social adaptability. These courses continue to expect students "to follow given rules and regulations, to obey the laws, to maintain social stability, and to acquire attitudes and behaviors complementary to changes in the political system."<sup>2</sup> However, for the first time, they begin to promote individual student's healthy development, both physically and psychologically, and to emphasize the cultivation of students more fit for changing society and able to face challenges. Also, for the first time, the educational goals begin to focus more on producing citizens that are more competitive and concerned with the nation's scientific and economic prosperity, as well as protection of the environment, as evidenced in "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party regarding the Further Strengthening and Improvement of Moral Education Work in Schools 1994":<sup>3</sup>

We must conduct education in personal attributes consistent with the development of the times, with social progress, and with the new requirements and urgent needs that have merged during the establishment of the socialist market economy. We must attend to cultivating students in the spirit of initiative, self-reliance, and painstaking pioneering.<sup>4</sup>

This article explores these changes through the analysis of Chinese social sciences textbooks, both past and present, at the primary and secondary levels. "Textbooks bear a strong imprint of the political cultures of the societies producing them...they form an integral and important aspect of educating the young, providing them with values fundamental to the society's political structures and cultures."<sup>5</sup> Content analysis is used to describe the changes of values and ideas taught in schools since the 1980s.

## Changes in Social Science Textbooks

### *Language Arts*

Language arts is one of the three most important courses in China; the other two are mathematics and politics, with English becoming equally important in the past decade. It has always accepted the dual task of teaching new words and teaching culture, habits, political values, and beliefs through stories, poems, fables, pictures and the like.<sup>6</sup> Lin's investigation shows that compared with other courses, the language arts curriculum is less politically oriented and "values taught tend to be more tolerant and neutral."<sup>7</sup> This is certainly the case. Compared with the strong tone of political propaganda which emphasized class struggle and godly worship to top political leaders, the Chinese language arts curriculum of the 1980s deserted the notion of class struggle and included numerous articles praising common people, especially scientists, who are hard-working, love the country, and are constantly pursuing knowledge even in unfavorable circumstances. Given the specific situation of the early 1980s when China had just recovered from the ten-year turmoil and was starting to reform its economic system and attempt to revitalize China through scientific knowledge, this change was reasonable and understandably reflected in the curriculum. As the 1980s slogan "Knowledge is power" indicates, intellectuals who used to be despised and

persecuted during the Cultural Revolution were given very positive and encouraging portrayals in the textbooks of the 1980s.

More than ten years of economic reform has greatly spurred economic growth and the individual living standard. With these changes especially during the 1990s have come more content in language arts that reflects the changes brought about by the economic reform in urban and rural areas, and in ordinary daily life. There are more articles describing how a person bravely and intelligently handled difficult situations, and how goal setting and perseverance helped one succeed. Most noticeably, more articles expounding on morality have appeared.. Morality was always an important theme in language arts, but a close examination of the language arts textbook published in the 1990s shows that morality was given greater emphasis. The one-child policy, exam-oriented educational system, and the social pursuit of economic success had led to widespread moral decline among the youth and the students' one-sided development. This was the primary reason morality was given new emphasis. In fact, now the most important educational reform is to strengthen moral education at all levels and attach greater importance to activation of creative awareness and cultivation of overall competence of students. Topics reflecting these ideas have largely appeared in textbooks published before 1999. More content reflecting these thoughts and this educational trend appear in the new textbooks published in 2002.

Generally speaking, in language arts, the "five loves" (love of the motherland, people, labor, science, and socialism) are dominant themes, but contents are much less of political sense. They reflect more the changes generated by the economic reform in all walks of life, attending to the development of students' moral character, creativity, and overall competence.

### *Political Science*

As is well known in China, political study is required of all students, from the primary to secondary levels and to the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition, it is tested at all grade levels. The political science courses include Ideology and Politics, Marxist Philosophy, Political Economy, the History of the Chinese Communist Party, the History of World Communist Movement, and Social Development History. The purpose of these courses is to espouse Marxist/communist/socialist ideology and to develop in students desirable attitudes and behaviors necessary for the stability of the government and the security and prosperity of the country. These political ideas are still prominent there, although changes have taken place in some of these courses.

The middle school course Ideology and Politics, which is surprisingly different from our common sense view of its political orientation and political statement, deals exclusively with students' healthy physical and psychological development. The course content is listed below:

#### Seventh Grade: Content for *Ideology and Politics*

##### ***Chapter 1: Right Perception of Oneself***

- Individual is a member of society
- Society influences the development of individual
- Know more about yourself
- Be a person useful to society

##### ***Chapter 2: Healthy Psychology***

- What is healthy psychology
- Positive and negative effects
- Cultivate good psychological quality

##### ***Chapter 3: Learn to Adjust Your Emotion***

- Negative and positive emotion and its impact on your life
- Cultivate and keep good disposition

#### ***Chapter 4: Build Up a Strong Will***

- Will—source of strength
- Display of strong will
- Will—sword of success
- Learn to build up a strong will

#### ***Chapter 5: Learn to Face Challenges***

- Challenges are inevitable in life
- Attributes to face challenge
- Adversity nourishes success
- Deal with setbacks with positive attitudes

#### ***Chapter 6: Be a Pioneer and Creator***

- Initiative—precious gift
- Road to success
- Sources of being pioneer and creator (holy pursuit, interest, enthusiasm, competitive spirit, risk taking)
- Be a person of initiative mind and struggling spirit

A brief glance at the content reveals that the emphasis on students' psychological health and the importance of struggle and success have replaced the long-standing political indoctrination. A number of role models are used to illustrate how one should face challenges, persevere, and succeed. These content changes perhaps result from China's urgent need for social economic reform, and the urgent demand for more competitive and constructive talents, as well as the increasing influence of globalization.

#### *Social Studies and Moral Education*

Unlike social studies in the United States, which covers a wide range of disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, psychology, and economics; social studies in China traditionally includes only history and geography. While history serves as the primary vehicle for inculcating patriotism and providing a historic overview of human society from a Marxist perspective, geography generally focuses on geographic and demographic features of China and world countries. Quite often, prior to the 1980s, the content tended to present a negative image of capitalist countries, attacking the economic and political systems in these countries rather than describing historical or geographic facts. In both of these courses, ideological orientation was straightforward.

A careful examination of history and geography textbooks published in the late 1980s and early 1990s indicates that history is still taught using a Marxist framework. Geography, however, is much different. There is no longer a negative portrayal of capitalist countries. Instead a more neutral, even positive presentation of geographic features, economic resources, and economic development is presented. There are more topics dealing with how geographic features impact human development and world culture, how the relationship between human and environment influences economic development, and how the world becomes more interdependent. It is obvious that the notion of environment protection begins to appear in the textbook. This remarkable change, no doubt, comes from the realization that China cannot be sustainable without solving the serious environmental problems brought about by excessive economic development since the 1980s, and that China must confront this as well as cooperate with the rest of the world.

Perhaps the greatest change is brought about by the introduction of a new course into the K-6 curriculum, "Society," introduced in 1993. The course plays a major role in the nine-year compulsory education curriculum. The objectives and requirements for inclusion of this course is to ensure that students have a rudimentary understanding of common phenomena in society, that students have a general knowledge of all aspects of social life so that they can improve their abilities and skills to adapt to this fast changing situation. The following is the social studies content in China for grades four to six:

## Elementary School “Society” Curriculum

### Fourth Grade

Family—our family, be a little master of the family, safety at home, family and neighbors, family and society, self-protection

School life—our school, the way to school, our class, school environment, school and family and society

Life around us—neighborhood, different social life environment, social changes around us

Business and life—business and our life, various markets, learn to shop, sellers and buyers

Industry and life—industry and our daily life, various factories and productions

Agriculture and life—agriculture and our life, produce, source of grains, agricultural development, reform in the countryside

Transportation and life

Communication and life

Saving and insurance

Traditional holidays and cultural life

### Fifth Grade

Chinese culture and heritage

Brief history of our hometown and China, physical features of our hometown and China, local famous figures, famous people in many fields, historical events

Political administration, minorities, national condition, basic laws, and national policy

### Sixth Grade

Our World—different nations, languages, and people

Ancient civilizations—Egypt, India, and Babylon

Industrial Revolution

Continuing development of Science and Technology

The Changing World—founders of communism: Marx and Engels

World War II

The UN and the Olympic Games

People’s lives in different parts of the world—Japan, Southeast Asia, Arabian countries, Africa, West Europe, Russia, the United States, Latin America, Australia, the Arctic and the Antarctic

Love the Earth—our shared homeland

Environmental Protection

For a long time, content in almost all the Chinese textbooks was far removed from students’ lives. The society curriculum offers students an opportunity to know more about the people around them, their communities, and makes them more prepared for their future lives. Compared with the long-standing political preaching, this new course provides students with quite a number of life-related activities. This represents great progress.

Although in practice less regarded by students and teachers, officially moral education is one of the most important additions to the social studies curriculum of the past two decades. While moral education in the early and mid-1980s placed more emphasis on patriotism (i.e., the love of the party leaders and socialism, in a word, still political and ideological education); in the 1990s moral education began to cover more tasks and focus more on how to foster students’ character, in an attempt to better prepare them to deal with people, community, and society. Typically it included political, ideological, moral, and psychological education. Its primary task was to develop students into citizens with a sincere love for the motherland, social ethics, civilized behavior, and respect for the law. Although a separate course, moral education in China is in fact always seamlessly integrated into every discipline and almost every page of

social science textbooks. To accompany moral education in schools, a series of codes have been issued and pursued, such as “Code of Conduct of Primary School Pupils,” “Code of Conduct of Secondary School Students,” and the “Norms of Daily Behaviors for Primary School Pupils.”

From the above analysis, we can see that curricula in China, especially the social studies curriculum, are aligned with the shifts in the CPC’s ideology, and the content changes in social science textbooks are the direct result of social and economic changes in China since the 1980s. It is also the result of individuals’ new way of looking at and dealing with the changing world, as well as the result of the need to be more adaptive to social life and globalization. The changes in the Chinese curriculum are for the better, and we are confident that even greater changes will be made to cultivate twenty-first century citizens who are more capable of solving personal and social problems, as well as who are more creative, competitive, and cooperative.

#### NOTES

1. Jing Lin, *Education in Post-Mao China* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1993).
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. “Opinions of The Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party Regarding the Further Strengthening and Improvement of Moral Education Work in Schools,” *Chinese Education and Society* 32 (1999).
4. *Ibid.*, 88.
5. Julia Kwong, “Changing Political Culture and Changing Curriculum: An Analysis of Language Textbooks in the People’s Republic of China,” *Comparative Education* 21, no. 2 (1985): 197-208.
6. Jan L. Tucker and M. Eugene Gilliom, “Education in China Today: Social and Moral Preparation for the Year 2000,” *Social Education* 48, no. 5 (May 1984): 312-23.
7. Lin, 12.