EDITORIAL

On the Applicability of Western Models to China

IAN WINCHESTER
University of Calgary

For some time now the world's most populous nation, China, has been engaged in a variety of educational reforms as central cultural and political policy. These reforms are comprehensive and involve the full range of educational experiences from kindergarten through university graduate studies. They involve the potential transformation of Chinese education, admittedly influenced by outside forces for over a hundred years, into something which looks rather like the system of education in Canada and the United States. To help them in this reform process many Chinese institutions are forming alliances with outside educational institutions in countries around the world, though especially in Europe and North America. (For example, a number of institutions in the province of Alberta, Canada are involved via the Canadian International Development Agency working with the Chinese in upgrading elementary school teachers in remote western regions of the country.) Thus China forms one giant case study of the applicability of educational reform inspired by one set of local conditions (those of the West) to another (those of China). China cannot be ignored any longer, as it now possesses perhaps the world's second largest economy and one of the most comprehensive economic systems on the planet. It can boast that it will go to the moon in 2008, the year that it also hosts the Summer Olympics in Beijing. It is true that this is an economic system that largely affects only about 300 million of the 1.3 billion who live there. But those 300 million are enjoying a very rapidly rising standard of living and an approach to Western standards unprecedented in the history of the world. For the rest, the peasants in the countryside, their workaday life is much as it has been for the last 2000 years, but at least they are watched over by a government that is concerned for their education, their health care, and their longevity, as well as their food supply.

There is some sense in which the methods at all levels toward which the Chinese are moving are of the "progressive" or Deweyan kind. Dewey, you will recall, was not in favour of waste in education.

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 36, No. 2, 2002, 105-110.

He thought that whatever was learned should lead naturally to something else, and that in turn, to something further. And so on and so on. It is partly a vision of life-long learning, so popular a notion in our own time in the West, and partly a vision of genuine educational progress, rather than of stops and starts and dead ends. This is a very pragmatic view and Dewey was a pragmatic man. So are the Chinese. Of course in Dewey's name many sins have been committed in the United States, in Canada, and elsewhere. Also in Dewey is a vision of the relationship between democracy and education, something about which the Chinese do not speak. But this is a linkage which their educational system is, in this writer's opinion, rapidly building whatever their actual intentions.

At a UNESCO conference on education in the 21st century held in 1989 in Beijing, Li Peng, the then Premier was asked when China would encourage democracy of a more comprehensive kind. He replied that he thought that democracy of the western kind would only be possible in China when the economy was much stronger. He suggested that this might be about 50 years hence, 2040 or so. Perhaps he is right. Though one cynical Chinese friend now back teaching in China recently remarked to me that the problem with the old leadership in China is that they are concerned first for their own future, and perhaps that of their children. But they leave the long term future to others, after they are dead. Their encouragement of educational reforms suggests that this cannot be completely true. And if my own suspicions are correct the kinds of educational reforms now ongoing in China will speed the day to a fresh Chinese version of democracy, not necessarily looking much like our own.

The first major educational reforms date from about 1986 or so at the early stages of Deng Xiao Ping's influence. The most recent comprehensive reforms, involving both curriculum and method, date from only a year or so ago and will be expected to come into force by 2005 for the early school grades, progressing thereafter upwards through the grades and, presumably, the post-secondary system as a whole. The reforms which have been encouraged these last 15 or 20 years have largely been reforms of method. The assumption has been that the educational methods of the West produced thinkers of the imaginative, scientific kind which enabled scientific progress to be possible. On the other hand, the authority-based traditional system in China, even in its post-1949 form, has tended to make Chinese students deferent to authority and respectful of the past. And both of these traits, while encouraged by thousands of years of Confucianism, are not helpful in a scientific age.

Perhaps not surprisingly the Chinese graduate students we tend to see in Canada are of two main kinds: those students oriented towards natural science who are able to progress rapidly in their research, without much pausing or stumbling; and the humanities and social sciences oriented students who are weighted down by the system of deference to authority, both dead and alive, which governs their success or failure in their programs in China. For the latter students there is often a period of transition during which they learn the ways of the humanities and social sciences here in the West, not necessarily happily. Much of their written work is often judged by us to involve plagiarism, because nearly all of it involves copying the exact text from other authors without acknowledgment. This suggests that the Chinese have a pretty much the same picture of natural science and what is involved in its progress as we do, while they have a very different picture of the humanities and social sciences from us. This may be a function of their very long and strong literary tradition. Or perhaps it may be related to the role that Marxism, Mao's thought, and Deng's theory play in some of what they do in the humanities and social sciences. Certainly some of my Chinese friends have mentioned in passing the importance which correct political thinking played in their educational development, from a pretty early age.

Methods, of course, applied to a centrally determined national curriculum standard, do not appear to be very threatening. Methods are apparently neutral. If they work, they work. If they do not, they can be readily discarded. Or at least this seems to be the kind of thinking behind the embracing of educational methods which are common in the West. Thus the emphasis of the new curriculum in China on student-oriented, or centered, methods appears to be value neutral and unthreatening. Perhaps it will develop youth with minds of their own, able to think creatively in a scientific age – youth with a different attitude to authority than that which is traditional in China. If successful, there may be unanticipated consequences. Or perhaps, such consequences are exactly what the leadership in China is actually after.

But are methods really neutral in all the appropriate ways? The biggest educational hurdle in China, for all students, is mastery of the written Chinese language. For most western scripts, once early mastery of the alphabetic character of the script is managed, reading new words and texts is simply a matter for the child her or himself. It is true that some of our methods, especially the "whole word" system, introduces some of the difficulties which a Chinese student faces, namely, the memorization of a new word as whole and independent of its alphabetic character. Not surprisingly, where such methods are

common, so is illiteracy, unless teachers are extremely diligent in making sure that their pupils learn new words each day for years and years. If the neglect of a new character or two a day, in an imbedded, memorized text, were neglected in China, illiteracy would, I expect, be widespread. At a rate of 200 or 300 characters a year, six years are needed before an ordinary Chinese student can read a newspaper. Something like the mastery of 2000 characters permits this. To be a scholar, perhaps six to ten thousand characters are needed. And each new character is an act of brute memorization. There is nothing comparable to sounding out a new word and then having it ever after and effortlessly. Also a character forgotten is a real possibility. In our system a written word known may be something the meaning of which we have forgotten, but we can still read it aloud with correct pronunciation. This is practically impossible in Chinese.

One extraordinary benefit of the traditional Chinese methods of teaching reading and writing is that in the process formidable memories are also developed. Our methods tend to disregard or ignore the memory entirely, unless something remembered occurs "naturally" in the process of our child-centered or oriented instruction. Thus modern memories in the West are often not developed. No classic texts are known and memorized by all, whether prose or poetic. Thus intellectual conversation often involves much more explaining in the West, especially North America, than is necessary in China, as classical and historical allusions there are widely shared.

The educational systems of the west presuppose early mastery of reading and writing skills of the elementary kind. The Chinese system does not. Thus, in Sweden, for example, a child who has finished the first grade would be expected thereafter to be able to read more or less any text that came along, including a newspaper. Perhaps the context may be unfamiliar, but most children would be able to make out most of the text of Svenska Dagbladet or Expressen with considerable understanding after one year, and certainly after two years, of school. A comparable feat would not be possible for a Chinese child, who would by then only know a couple of hundred characters. It is true that a system of alphabetization is taught in China: *pinyin*. But this system is not a system for which serious reading is expected. There are no pinyin newspapers, for example. It is an aid to the pronunciation of standard Chinese (for there are many dialects) initially. And today, it has some use in inputting written Chinese in order that the correct character can be picked out when PC's are used, usually using predictive systems, though simplified written stroke systems are often preferred.

A child-centered system involves, among other things, the teacher's sensitivity to the educational strengths and weaknesses of each child, the finding of ways to help a child learn necessary and unnecessary things, both in spite of the child's natural tendencies and because of them. It also involves mastery, from a great height, of the things which the child either must learn or wants to learn. Such teacher knowledge and insight, despite our pretensions, is relatively rare among us and are likely to be even rarer in Chinese circumstances, where most teachers are undereducated and under-equipped in the extreme.

At the university level, equally widespread reforms are afoot in China, both in method and in university organization. Also the impact of modern multi-media technology, broad-band information transfer, and the ubiquitous cell phone are very great. Among the most important reforms at the university level is the movement to make the universities more comprehensive. After the victory of the Communist Party in 1949, the Russian organization of higher education became the model in China, with the result that "com-part-men-tal-iz-a-tion" (as one Chinese scholar put it) became the vogue. Thus institutions of higher education specialized in one or two things and were not articulated with other disciplines or interests as they had been before 1949. This vogue has lasted for 50 years, but now the government is encouraging universities to be more broadly based, as it is believed that this is one of the reasons for the world-wide research dominance of the universities of North America and Europe.

The two most prestigious universities in China, Peking University (a humanities and social sciences institution affectionately known as *Beida*) and Chinghua (an engineering and science institution), which share an old Imperial Park as a campus, are now sharing libraries and courses. The medical schools in Beijing are now reattached to Peking University. The remaining key universities (that is, universities funded centrally by the Ministry of Education), of which Hunan University in Changsha (*Huda*) is perhaps typical, are uniting with others to make much larger and more comprehensive units. Hunan University has united with a university of business and finance, doubling the size of the institution overnight and requiring the building of many new buildings and facilities, new roads, and new student residences. So is Nanjing Normal University, which is devoting its old and beautiful campus to its graduate students, the number of which will increase sixfold to become six or seven thousand, while moving its ten thousand undergraduates to a brand new site. But similar developments are occurring over the entire

expanse of China, including universities in the north in places like Shenyang and Dalien.

Along with such changes are reforms of curriculum, teaching methods, and even graduation traditions. (Some Chinese universities are having graduation ceremonies which look like ours – gowns, mortarboards, and all.) Distance education, on the pattern of North American models, are now implemented in many of the key universities, with tremendous enrollment numbers. For example, a course run by Hunan University in business English stressing how to negotiate with foreigners in joint ventures has 60,000 enrollees, as part of a diploma program. Such enrollments are not unusual. Hunan University, interested in expanding its research understanding in the social sciences and the humanities, is inviting foreign experts to help them with that work and courses in research methods are springing up across the country. Peking University is also trying to broaden its international research reach.

Chinese official policy always stresses that whenever China takes on foreign models that it is its intention to turn these into Chinese models. Thus, for example, when China decided to go into a market economy, it became a "socialist market economy." To some degree this is a remnant of 3000 years of national pride. But to a considerable degree it is an accurate description of what is actually happening. Chinese "businessmen," for example, are largely party cadres, often local party secretaries, who have effective command of local resources, including land and personnel. The fact that the remaining party members are "businessmen" leads to a very Chinese solution to the problem of how to get on with the joint ventures and economic development, while maintaining continuity with their recent past, their socialist ideals, and their desires for economic development. Thus Chinese "businessmen" seem a little odd to us, unused as we are to the businessmen being also active and important members of a governing party. What we would see as conflict of interest, they see, after our own 19th century fashion, as confluence of interest.

Are our models applicable to China? Only time will tell. China is certainly taking what it wants as rapidly as it can, largely with Western help and connivance. As a pragmatic nation, they will keep what works, reject what does not and banish what threatens. The result may very well be a new and powerful hegemony, within the next quarter century, to rival Pax Americana.

Ian Winchester
Editor