The Educational Development in China: Perspectives from the West

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Abstract

Background: Given the technological revolution and the social, political and economic changes, the Chinese educational system, an important factor to ensure that Chinese youth are prepared for the changing world, has undoubtedly become the focus of many conversations. It is especially beneficial to listen to various perspectives, including those voiced from the West.

Aims: To search for and understand the various perspectives about Chinese education development in scholarly works published in the West.

Method: Search on electronic education database yields some 70 academic articles, books and chapters which meet the selection criteria and published in the past three decades. These publications were read critically and analyzed for emerging themes and trends.

Results and Conclusion: Recognizing the rapid advancement and the effectiveness of education in China, the study points out the various challenges that China still faces in education.

Keywords: Chinese education system, education development in China, education reforms

西方關於中國教育發展的研究

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摘要

背景：當全球經歷一場科技革命，及它給社會、政治、經濟所帶來的巨大變化的關口，中國的教育體制能否培養出應付這場社會大變革的下一代，成了大家研究和探討的重點。在教育制度自我審視的過程中，傾聽各方面意見，包括西方學者的意見也變得非常重要了。

目的：瞭解西方學者對中國教育的研究、觀點及看法，並探討這些研究對中國教育改革有何深遠意義。

方法：本課題採用了分析現有資料的方法來回答其研究問題。作者分析了近三十年來發表的七十多篇科研報告及專著，找出了其相同話題及觀點，並探討、評論了這些研究對中國教育發展所持的不同觀點，及可能產生的影響。

結果及總結：這些研究指出中國教育的快速發展及其取得的成效，同時也揭示了中國教育所面臨的各種挑戰。

關鍵詞：中國教育體制、中國教育發展、中國教育改革
Introduction

As China moves into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the nation is experiencing drastic economic and social changes. Such social changes are having a profound impact on all aspects of life in China - the way people work, entertain, do business, communicate, and teach and learn, to name just a few. The educational system of China, being an important factor for the advancement of the country, undoubtedly becomes the focus of conversation on how to better prepare Chinese youth for the changing world. While examining the development of the Chinese education system, it is important to listen to various perspectives, including those voiced from the West.

In light of the old Chinese saying, “the spectator gets a better picture,” it is a good idea for Chinese educators to listen to what others have to say about Chinese education. Thus, through research done in the West, this study encourages readers to transcend the limits of their own educational experience, to think beyond familiar notions of schooling, instruction, and curriculum, and to consider how to best deliver the education that benefits future generations in China. This study encourages a deeper analysis of the existing Chinese education system and generates dialogues about future systematic reforms to meet the needs of the global economy in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Research Design

In order to answer these questions, the approach of secondary data study has been adopted. First, academic journal articles and books published in the West about education in China are reviewed and analyzed for emerging common themes and perspectives; and then, various perspectives, representations, and implications of the literature reviewed are discussed.

The search for academic and scholarly works about the development of education in China starts with the Ohio University library’s InfoTree (a subject-oriented gateway to various education databases, electronic journal collections, and millions of printed materials), OhioLINK, the Ohio Library and Information Network, a consortium of 88 Ohio college and university libraries, and the State Library of Ohio. Four main education databases searched are: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center); Education Abstracts Full Text; Education Index Retrospective; and Education Research Complete.

As the retrieved information turns out to be too extensive for the limited space in this study, only works published in the last three decades (1980-2011) are included. Since the primary goal of the study is to founding fathers of modern education in China. The influence of the U.S., British, French, German, and other European systems has been a driving force for the development of modern Chinese education. It is beneficial to find out what scholars in the West think about the current development of Chinese education.

This article aims to find answers for: What are some major areas that have been studied about education in China by scholars in the West? How does research in the West view the development of education in China?
see the perspectives from the West, only those works written and published by scholars in the West were included. Scholars in the West are defined as natives of Western countries and those with Chinese origin but live and work in the West. In an attempt to keep the selection criteria consistent, some very important research conducted in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan had to be left out. Also challenges arise when authors move to Hong Kong or Taiwan after the publication of their studies in the West, and when the researcher had to make decisions as to whether to include or leave out their works. The specific selection criteria for inclusion are:

- Generated by keywords: Education development in China/Chinese education
- Written in English and published in countries other than China, Hong Kong and Taiwan
- Authored by Western scholars (include those with Chinese origin and live in the Western countries)
- Published from 1980 to 2011

As a result, some seventy academic journal articles, books and chapters are included in the study.

The data are reviewed and analyzed by the author with the help of a graduate student. To ensure inter-rater reliability, they worked on the first 5 articles together, comparing and discussing their readings frequently for consistence and agreement. Afterwards, they reviewed the articles and books searching for major common themes, issues and points of views. Those appear frequently (at least in five publications) were identified. As a result, the analysis of the secondary data yields a wide variety of important perspectives and viewpoints, which are summarized and reported within nine themes.

### Results and Discussions

Nine focus areas of studies by Western scholars on Chinese education have emerged from this review. Table 1 shows the nine areas, the number of articles from which each area is derived and examples of these studies. The nine themes and Western scholars’ unique perspectives, viewpoints will be shared and discussed below as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>No. of Articles</th>
<th>Example 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Revolution Reforms</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Turner &amp; Acker, 2002</td>
<td>Han, 2000</td>
<td>Wan, 2001</td>
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<td>Minority Education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Johnson &amp; Chhetri, 2002</td>
<td>Tsung &amp; Cruickshank, 2009</td>
<td>Postiglione, 1999</td>
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<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Deng &amp; Guo, 2007</td>
<td>Lytle, Hui &amp; Johnson, 2005</td>
<td>Stratford &amp; Ng, 2000</td>
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Historical models and philosophies of Chinese education.

Lucid and succinct narratives (Wang, 2003; Pepper, 1980, 1996; Cleverley, 1985; Chen, 1981), surveys (Lee, 2000), and analysis covering the entire Chinese education history have been found. Collectively these studies provide readers with a picture of Chinese education from the Confucian schoolroom 2000 years ago to the current global Internet colleges, and the transnational higher education programs. The two major socioeconomic changes that affected Chinese educational development in the 20th century occurred when China’s semi-feudal and semi-colonial system was transformed into socialism in the 1950s and when its planned economy changed into a market economy in the 1970s (Guo, 2005b).

The Chinese education system evolved around the imperial examination period, more than a millennium ago. Although the imperial exam was abandoned during the early 20th century, Confucian orthodoxy (Lee, 2000) has been the leading force shaping Chinese culture and Chinese traditional education over the past several centuries. The goals of self-enjoyment and personal moral perfection from Confucian classical learning are the most important concepts of the Chinese educational experience. While Confucianism still dominates the Chinese educational philosophy, Western philosophy is gaining popularity, and Marxist theory still plays a role but is diminishing (Jin & Jau-Wei, 2004). Lee (2000) compares American Puritanism and Confucian ideology and their important respective impacts on society.

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed control in 1949, they inherited a country with a 20% literacy rate. Furthermore, only 20-40% of school-aged children were enrolled in schools (Hannum, 1999). Offering education to everyone became a primary goal of the government then. Thus, a law of nine-year compulsory education for all children was passed in 1985 (Wan, 2008). Despite its efforts to provide nationwide education, there were drastic disparities between the quality of education in the urban and developed coastal east and the rural west, a problem that still exists today. During this time, the government used education as a tool of indoctrination, encouraging students to love the communist state. Labor and political loyalty was valued over academic achievement (Hannum, 1999; Pepper, 1980). The advancement of Chinese education was slowed by factors such as China’s large geographical size, a diverse population, the presence of multiple languages, and social and political factors such as the Cultural Revolution.

Chen (1981) describes the development of Chinese education from 1949 to 1980 as oscillating between two main models, the revolutionary and academic models. He (Chen, 1981) explains that this zigzag path of development is caused by the twin priorities, revolution and development, of the country during that time. Education is governed by politics and social forces which swing between left and right, between revolution and development, which in turn makes different demands on education. Chen’s (1981) two opposing models of education bring to mind various education programs supported by the two extreme educational philosophies, the traditional vs. the progressive. The progressive education model is supported by the constructivist learning theory, which believes that children learn best when they construct a personal understanding based on experiences and reflecting upon them. John Dewey (1938) and Jean Piaget are two representatives of this theory. Evolving
from industrialization with focus on discipline, rigidity, and authoritarianism, traditional education refers to long-established customs found in schools that society has traditionally deemed appropriate.

The academic model is exemplified by the conventional educational systems of Western education, equating education with schools and schooling with classroom teaching and the acquisition of knowledge from books. The revolutionary model, or the Maoist style, has a much broader concept of education than schooling and the acquisition of book knowledge. According to this model, learning takes place in every corner of society, and its educational system embraces a wide range of formal and informal learning by participation (Chen, 1981).

Some practices of Chinese education during this time fell under the academic model, like the traditional model, which stresses basic skills learned from books and through rote memorization. At other times the practices more closely resembled the revolutionary or progressive model, with learning by doing and by changing the world as the primary goals. In this sense, educational development in China has experimented with the extremes of the two education programs. With deep Confucian influence in the society, the academic model was practiced to the extreme right of the spectrum, while the revolutionary model under the communist reign (during the Cultural Revolution) carried education to the extreme left. The abolition of the college entrance examination in 1966, which sent millions of school graduates to work on remote farms and factories and to learn from the society, was an example of the revolutionary model; and while in 1977, the academic model revived the college entrance examination providing opportunities for students to learn in classrooms. From 1949 to 1980, China learned the hard way that the revolutionary education model has serious shortcomings and the academic model proves to be effective in developing knowledge and skills in its citizens. A balanced model, with the salient features of both the revolutionary and the academic models, has been sought after since the 1980s. A potential example of such a model would keep teaching and learning within school walls but providing a variety of out-of-school experiences or work-study programs to enrich and broaden academic learning.

The impact of a market economy on education has generated heated discussions. There are sociological studies (Postiglione, 2006) focusing on the increasing inequality found in schools and children in disadvantaged and less developed areas in China. While economic reform in China has made it an economic giant, inequality resulting from government policies and the market economy is increasing. Knowledge and education are believed to be essential for social and economic mobility, but they are becoming less affordable for the poor. According to Postiglione (2006), a saying jokes that the Chinese Communist Party has overthrown the three old mountains for the Chinese people (imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism), but it has also created three new ones (problems in housing, education, and medical care). By examining the education of girls, migrant children in big cities, minority children including Tibetans in the West, studies (Postiglione, 2006) suggest “it is the rural poor, ethnic minorities, girls, and migrants that have the monopoly on low enrollment and high dropout rates…. (p. 5). Thus, ironically, “while socialist market economy has increased the educational choices available, it has made these choices more a function of poverty, gender, and ethnicity than
in the planned economy of the pre-reform period” (Postiglione, 2006, p. 5).

These studies suggest that China faces the challenge of providing equal educational opportunities for all children in its society, a global issue that all developed nations share, but have not found a solution yet.

**Education reform during the Cultural Revolution.**

This review found some very interesting studies (Turner & Acker, 2002; Wan, 2001; Han, 2000; Seeberg, 2000; Sautman, 1991; Pepper, 1980) about the impact of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) on Chinese education. It was a time in which Chinese society fell apart to a great degree, especially in the field of education. According to the majority in China and the West, an entire generation lost out on educational opportunity because of the social chaos during those years. However, some Western scholars (Pepper, 1996; Turner & Acker 2002) warn us not to “throw out the baby with the bath water.” While the Chinese have deemed it (the educational reform in China) worthless, the world sees it as a great experiment and implementation at the largest scale; as something that other countries have contemplated but have not been able to carry out for centuries (Wan, 2001; Turner & Acker, 2002).

The reforms abolished the old college entrance examination and high school graduates had to be selected from work for college. Policies were institutionalized to make sure children from disadvantaged families and working-class families received priority for higher education, while college and school curriculum were changed to better connect with the real world and jobs outside of the classrooms. These measures that emerged during the Cultural Revolution helped to open up opportunities of higher education to women and children from disadvantaged families (Turner & Acker, 2002).

Taking a postmodern perspective, Wan (2001) concludes that during the Cultural Revolution educational practices that were in line with postmodern curriculum were sound, while those deviating from it became problematic. Wan (2001) analyzes the educational reforms of the Cultural Revolution and finds “the intention to get rid of feudalist ideas in China, the idea of giving equal opportunities of education to everyone in the society, and moving away from traditional teaching methods and making learning more relevant to students” (p.30) to be well-grounded practices. However, it was the discarding of virtues such as diligence, collaboration, modesty, and respect of teachers along with Confucian male chauvinism, the breaking down of an old educational system without sound construction, the appearance of the new elites, and the politicized and violent nature of the educational reform that lead to its failure (Wan, 2001). The reform during this time liberated people because it showed them that the inequality existed in education and society, and it dominated them because it controlled people with politics (Wan, 2001).

The Chinese experience was being heralded internationally as a new model worthy of praise, and it was agreed that while revolution might be a heavy price to pay, its achievements deserved to be acknowledged and admired. Economist John Simmons commented that “China’s education system comes closest to the World Bank’s model program for a developing country” (Pepper, 1996, p.1) with its curriculum designed to meet the needs of a mass clientele; the widely promoted goal of 10-year-universal schooling; decentralized local administration; and tertiary-level selection aimed at
minimizing discrimination against the poor (Pepper, 1996). This claim echoes other reports (Turner & Acker, 2002; Wan, 2001) on the sound intentions in education reforms during the Cultural Revolution.

The educational reforms experimented by China during the Cultural Revolution provided the world with unique models and lessons of system-wide efforts to close the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. This is especially important in meeting the global challenge of closing the educational gaps between mainstream and non-mainstream families.

**Development of primary and secondary education.**

Studies applaud policies and strategies implemented by Chinese government to improve basic education for all. The enrollment rates of primary school and junior middle school students have increased; the differentials in primary school enrollment between genders have been reduced; the adult literacy rate has increased, and the illiteracy rate among young and middle-age groups has decreased significantly (Jing & Hu, 2007). Studies also point out existing problems.

In 1985, China passed legislation requiring nine years of education for all citizens, beginning at the age of six and ending at 15. Despite China’s legislation demanding increased education, the central state government has been unable to provide ample financial resources for it. Instead, education has been gradually decentralized since the early 1980s, and local communities have begun to help support their schools. In order to find ways to pay for basic education for all, many schools have been encouraged to begin economic endeavors, and frequently utilize student labor to make a profit (Tsang, 1996). Education is funded extensively by local entities (nearly 50%) (Mok, 1999), and trends exist to have families paying school fees, even at the primary and secondary levels (Tsang, 1996). Because of the localization of educational funding, many teachers are called *minban* teachers, and are employed locally and not by the state (Bastid, 1984). It is recommended that in order for China to substantially raise educational performance, financial investment in education must increase. Jing and Hu (2007) call for an increase of the education expenditure from 2-3% of the GNP (Gross National Product) (Law, 1995) to 4% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and claim that the UN (United Nation) suggested 6%. Presently, China has the largest basic education enrollment in the world (Tsang, 1996; Jing & Hu, 2007), and the financial burden on the state is substantial.

Vocational secondary schools provide alternative routes to the typical academic secondary schools. Vocational schools appeared in the 1960s and grew in popularity in the 1990s. In 1995, vocational secondary schools made up 57% of all secondary schools in China (Yang, 1998). However, the number of vocational schools in China is on a decline with 30% decrease from 1987 to 2009 (Starmass International, 2011). People’s lack of confidence on whether vocational schools would lead them to their desired salaries and job status might be the reason for the decline, and this trend is expected to continue (Starmass International, 2011).

Despite the increased access to higher education and drastically expanded primary education after the passing of the Compulsory Education Law in 1985, a shortage of secondary schools still exists (Lin & Zhang, 2006). Due to the limited spaces in secondary schools, competition for primary and junior high students to advance to the next level is strong. If they fail to advance, their long-term socioeconomic
standing will suffer (Lin & Zhang, 2006). This has, in part, led to a rise in private education, since the government funding for secondary schooling is limited. Over 60,000 private schools have emerged since 1978 (Kwong, 1997). There are two kinds of private schools: (1) traditional private schools are run by individuals with little or no governmental ties and are funded by fees and private sources; and (2) the “people-run schools” are sponsored and managed by communities or organizations, and are funded by community resources, fees, and some government assistance (Tsang, 2002, 2003). Private education helps to alleviate the shortage of secondary schools in the nation.

High stakes testing still epitomizes schools in China, as primary and secondary school students prepare for the ultimate College Entrance Exam (CEE). Success or failure on the CEE may determine students’ overall level of educational attainment and consequently their quality of life (Romanowski, 2006). Without a good score they can miss out on the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education in China.

Class sizes sometimes reach 90 or higher, and it is common to have classes with 40-60 students (Romanowski, 2006). Teacher education system requires urgent remedial action (Guo, 2005a). Among the issues are teachers’ low political and social status, poor living conditions (Guo, 2005a), low pay (Krajewski, 2006), and limited professional development opportunities (Lebans & Radigan, 2007).

Today the illiteracy rate among the general population is at 4% but is 10-15% among minority populations in China (Rong & Shi, 2001; Wan, 2008). The gaps between male/female and urban/rural illiteracy rates are substantial (Bauer, Feng, Riley, & Xiahua, 1992). However, the gender difference in primary school enrolment was reduced from 0.7% in 1995 to 0.04% in 2004 (Jing & Hu, 2007). Furthermore, economic and educational disparities between rural and urban areas are growing (Wei, Tsang, Xu, & Chen, 1999). In rural areas, students walk 2-3 hours to school at the beginning of the week and do not return home until the weekend, staying in stark dorms (Krajewski, 2006). Technology is very limited in rural areas, as computers are tucked away and Internet access is unreliable (Lebans & Radigan, 2007). In many cases, children double as custodial staff (Lebans & Radigan, 2007). School quality, in terms of facility and faculty, varies greatly depending upon local variables (Brown & Park, 2002). While eighty million RMB (about 10 million USD) builds one public primary school in Beijing, it could build 400 schools in western rural areas (Jing & Hu, 2007).

The decentralization of education has resulted in higher school fees, meaning rural families must take out loans in some instances to pay for their children’s education (Brown & Park, 2002). Educational spending in urban areas greatly outpaces spending in rural areas. During the reign of Mao, rural areas encouraged a “half-farming/half-study” approach, requiring less state funding (Unger, 1980).

**Expansion of higher education.**

The rapid expansion of higher education during the last three decades in China has been watched with great interest. Between 1998 and 2004, higher education enrollment grew about 26.9% annually while the total enrollment grew from 3.41 million to 13.33 million (Wan, 2006). Although college education used to be almost free in China until the early 1990s, by 1997 nearly all universities and colleges were charging students tuition and accommodation fees (Wan, 2006). This shift from
free higher education to tuition-paid higher education can be attributed to changing market forces in the Chinese economy. Higher education is paid for partially by students and partially by “end users” such as the labor market (Law, 1995). As a result, the labor market dictates student quotas and curriculum depending upon market needs (Law, 1995). Because the “market” has such a large effect on higher education, there is tension between the cultural and economic tasks of higher education (Law, 1996). This “marketization” of higher education essentially serves two purposes: (1) it releases some of the state’s financial obligation to higher education, and (2) it encourages growth in science and technology with the intended effect of economic modernization (Law, 1995). The market demands also affect students’ choice of study and government allocation of funds (Law, 1996). Social science and humanities courses are becoming much less popular than science and technology courses (Law, 1995).

Higher education remains unaffordable for 80% of the population, specifically the rural inland poor (Law, 1995). As a result, the percentage of rural students in higher education is actually shrinking (Wan, 2006). The cost-sharing in higher education has opened up education to all who can afford it, but many still lack the necessary financial resources. It helps the wealthy more than the poor. The gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is widening. Some possible explanations may be limited financial aid to support disadvantaged students in college and less quality secondary education for disadvantaged groups to become competitive for college.

In 1998, in order to expand access to higher education in China, the Ministry of Education approved the Internet college initiative, which is a unit within existing universities and dedicated to offering postsecondary-level educational programs online. Internet colleges have become the only institutions other than the China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) to offer higher education online (Zhao, Li & Zhang, 2006). Also “Many institutions have merged and/or diversified and new ones have opened. Growth in the private sector has been sizeable also, but this is not simply a matter of rising numbers of private colleges - state-run institutions themselves are increasingly adopting market driven strategies” (Timm, Hayes, Introna & Whitley, 2008 p. 5). As a result, by 2008 there are 4,000 higher institutions in China which enrolls 15 million students leaving 85% of the college-age cohort in need of college education (Robinson, 2008). China becomes one of the largest exporters of students to the industrialized west (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004). Robinson (2008.) calls for national efforts from U.S. higher education to benefit from the high demand of China through collaborations.

However, the higher education in China is regulated by the Higher Education Law, which sets out the guidelines and principles (Timm et al., 2008). The Chinese education system, with its administration, governing bodies, finance, laws, personnel, and various policies, proves to be complex (Wang, 2003) for people who are interested in entering the enormous Chinese educational market. Wang (2003) presents the procedure required to initiate collaboration and exchange between Chinese and foreign institutions, and highlights major differences in philosophies of education and school laws between China and the West. Despite the cultural differences and complicated regulations, it is still worthwhile for foreign institutions to invest in China because of its high demand. As the Ministry
of Education in China encourages private education and promotes local governing in education reforms, hopefully the management system will be simplified and become more user-friendly for transnational education partnerships and exchanges in the market economy.

The issue of equity and demand need to be addressed in higher education; and more exploration of technology, a broader use of the Internet in higher education, and international programs or partnerships with universities in other countries are potential measures to make higher education more accessible in China.

**Privatization of education in China.**

Since 2000 B.C., the overwhelming majority of schools in China had been private. This ancient tradition was changed when heavily centralized education at all levels was implemented after 1949. As a direct response to the market economy, in 1978 (Kwong, 1997) private education reappeared in China, spreading everywhere in many forms and generating heated discussions in educational journals and books.

Private education is generally welcomed as having changed the Chinese education system in terms of its administration and funding methods, promoting innovative instructional methods, and making schooling a social behavior rather than a state behavior (Lin, 1999). Private education as a pluralistic school system is regarded as being more compatible with the pluralistic economic system in China, providing more choices for families and reducing the stress from the over-burdened state education system for meeting the educational needs for all. It supplements and challenges the state education. Private institutions offer a variety of modes of learning: distance learning, formal full-time and part-time options.

In 1999, although outnumbering state universities since the mid-1990s, a limited number of private universities and colleges were approved to award state-recognized degrees. Out of over 1,200 private institutions of higher learning, only twenty-one grant degrees with official government approval (Lin, 1999), and 5% of these colleges were accredited by the state (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004). Private education is still not truly market-driven since credentials issued by these universities to students are still limited and tightly controlled by the state. To allow more development of private higher education, the state needs to loosen its control and let the market economy control it.

Lin (1999) argues that private schools provide decentralization and competition and produce higher achievement in students. Lin’s (1999) optimism for private education and arguments are fairly convincing until the government is asked to financially support private education: “…without an infusion of government funding, many private schools and universities will remain substandard. Government support should also come in the form of making clear-cut provisions of salaries, medical insurance, title determination, housing, and retirement benefits for private school teachers” (p. 184). The author believes the market-driven nature of private education decides that the state should not be expected to fund private education in any form.

A particularly interesting paradoxical theme emerging from some studies (Acker, 1991) on private education is that money is recognized as a way to attain educational opportunity and equality for women. As Turner and Acker (2002) say, “Money is one of the variables, which may be a force for developing gender equality in women’s education”
“No longer do political or class credentials” (Turner & Acker, 2002, p. 115) or connections provide the only opportunity to gain an educational advantage. “The ability to buy a place especially in a private sector school or college is one way to circumvent the uneven admission requirements that remain in the state sector” (Turner & Acker, 2002, p. 42). However, while this may be the case for some women, it is certainly not for the disadvantaged who do not have money. The question here is what the social consequences of this development are. Money in education may further divide and stratify Chinese society rather than make it more equal.

Future research is needed to investigate the long term contributions that private education brings to Chinese society. Also what impact private education may have on closing the gap or reducing the inequality between the advantaged and disadvantaged should be studied.

Gender and education.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women gained access to the public sphere, left home, and entered the workplace (Cheng, 2000; Liu & Carpenter, 2005). There has been an endless debate on women’s education since then. Girls’ education initially still focused on the Confucian-driven “Four Womanly Virtues” of morality, speech, appearance, and work (Cheng, 2000). Discussions focus on combining traditional virtues with modern knowledge to produce skilled, diligent, and efficient household managers and the self-sacrificing woman (Xian Qi Liang Mu) for the cause of family harmony, social stability, and national prosperity (Bailey, 2007). In post-1949 China, changing societal values dictated the socialist housewives in the “five-good” families that support gender equality, harmony of family life, thrifty, hard-working, and good community members). Since the 1980s, discussion on natural female attributes and proper feminine behaviors as well as the contemporary suspicion of the independent career woman (Nu Qiang Ren) has played a prominent role in female education.

Access to education in China is seen in reviewed literature as improved but still unequal for females (Hannum, 2002). The rise in female education happened mainly during the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, and is mainly attributed to increased access to primary education (Lavely, Zhenyu, Bohua & Freedman, 1990). As a result of the decentralization of state funding, high fees affect girls’ education more since many parents view the education of girls as less important than the education of boys (Brown & Park, 2002). Like the urban-rural inequities, the gender gap is most obvious at the university level (Brown & Park, 2002).

Some studies (Turner & Acker, 2002) paint a very bleak and pessimistic picture of education for women in China. They (Turner & Acker, 2002) claim, without providing any statistics that few women in China today have the opportunity to participate in education beyond the most basic level; for women whose families lack the funds to provide education, the chances of making a change to their situation remain remote; economic reform has slammed the door shut on increased educational opportunity and social mobility for most women; and the reform in the past 25 years abandoned the quotas, targets, and formal measures promoting equality of access to education for women instituted in the later years of the Cultural Revolution. Jing and Hu (2007) reveal that girls’ enrollment in rural areas and some minority areas is still low and often lower than boys. Many girls have to drop out and help do housework. Illiteracy rates for women are still significantly
higher than for men. Traditional Confucian gender stereotype could be a reason for the re-emergence of discrimination against women in work and schools.

**Comparative perspectives on pedagogy and learning.**

Interesting comparative studies have been found examining Chinese educational developments and their implications for educational reforms in other countries, especially in the United States, and efforts to understand and compare characteristics of Chinese with Western learners.

It is indicated that Asian education systems have centrally controlled administrations, rigorous college entrance examinations, over-standardized nationwide curricula with passive student participation in class activities, greater stress on academic content relative to creative skills, and a relatively weak level of higher education (Guo, 2005b). Although remarkable progress has been made in the 20th century, China continues to experience comparatively high dropout rates, low literacy, and low college enrollment rates (Guo, 2005b). Along with other countries, Chinese-born researchers, faculty, and students have contributed to the brain gain that makes the United States a global leader in science and engineering. Strong traditional reverence for education and the extensive training of high-level science and technology talent are among China’s strengths. Chinese higher education exceeds the U.S. in terms of total student enrollment, and it is becoming a leading nation of origin of international students and a center for international talents (Guo, 2005b).

Since the 1990s there has been an increasing interest in understanding Chinese learners (Chan & Rao, 2009; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001). Biggs (1998) formulated the paradox of the Chinese learners, who learn in fierce exam-dominated classrooms through a passive, uncritical, and reproductive method, yet in international comparisons, they greatly outperform western students learning in ‘progressive’ western classrooms. Many questions about Chinese learners are asked: How do Chinese students learn? How can Chinese learners be both rote and successful learners? Is there a distinct Chinese pedagogy? What makes Chinese teachers effective in teaching their students despite what are considered unfavorable conditions (e.g. large class sizes)? Biggs (1998) believes that Chinese learners appear to the Western observers as docile rote learners cramming for exams, but they use highly adaptive learning strategies (rote learning with deep understanding) and achieve better than most Western students in high level academic tasks. These studies focus on Chinese learners, but have obvious implications for understanding psychological, cultural and contextual influences on learning and development in other countries (Chan & Rao, 2009).

The conviction that accomplishment depends on dedication, hard work, and high expectations from adults are recognized as the key factors on how the Chinese have enhanced the achievement of their children (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). On the contrary, the presumed limits by innate ability held by some in the United States deprive children with potential opportunity to learn (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Also the different views about mistakes held by the Chinese and U.S. educational systems are compared; student error is regarded as an index of what still needs to be learned in China, contrasted to error as an index of failure in the United States (Stevenson & Stigler, 1982). Other strong points in Chinese education that are recognized include: national education guidelines and standards of teaching; non-repetitive, short lessons, and less prescriptive
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textbooks; and longer schooling with 240 days yearly (Stevenson & Stigler, 1982).

Some studies (Ma, 1999; Moy & Peverly, 2005; Zhu & Monroe, 1991) reveal salient differences among Chinese and U.S. mathematics education: (1) Chinese teachers receive better early training and good training produces good trainers; (2) Chinese mathematics teachers are specialists in math which increases the quality of mathematics education; (3) Chinese teachers have time for self-development during school days while U.S. teachers spend virtually their whole day in front of a class; and (4) Chinese students also spend more time studying mathematics in school and in the home than their U.S. peers. The combination of training, recruitment, and job conditions for teachers helps China produce higher academic achievement in math (Ma, 1999).

Other international comparative studies on math curriculum and instruction in China, Japan, the U.S., and Germany (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Zhou & Peverly, 2005) observe that: in Asian classrooms, the skills of argument and proof are taught as early as the first grade; Chinese teachers believe that learning to argue about mathematics is fundamental to understanding mathematics; and throughout the Chinese math curriculum, emphasis is placed on the development of logical, analytical, and abstract mathematical thinking.

Some interesting on-going comparative studies (US-China Center, n.d.) ask why Chinese students outperform their U.S. counterparts from perspectives of teaching, learning, curriculum, administration, and community, and examine how the U.S. school system fosters creativity, individualism, and professionalism in its students and allows teachers the freedom to creatively plan and teach. The uniformed curriculum, the Chinese exam-oriented education, and a single standard of student evaluation may result in a lack of intrinsic motivation, flexibility, and creativity (US-China Center, n.d.). These studies address the underlying social, cultural, and systemic reasons that drive the differences in U.S. and Chinese educational performance, and they analyze what contributes to the Chinese academic achievement and what makes U.S. education creative (US-China Center, n.d.). The results of these studies will be very interesting. Through scientific and well-designed research in China and the United States, these studies may bear great implications for identifying the strengths of both the Eastern and Western educational practices and systems. A good balance between the Eastern and Western models of education may be the answer for producing a highly creative workforce with solid and advanced science and technological skills.

The Chinese government is making every effort to reduce the emphasis on exams because it is believed that China must foster creativity and innovation to compete in the global economy (Preus, 2007). To meet the demands of globalization, Chinese education is becoming increasingly decentralized and learner-centered. The fairly recent education reform of 2002 is designed to move the Chinese education system toward: (1) the decentralization of elementary and secondary education; (2) a “quality-oriented” rather than a “test-oriented” system, with an emphasis on learner-centered methods; (3) an increase in the amount of pre-service education required of teachers, with greater emphasis on pedagogy; and (4) an increase in formal in-service education” (Preus, 2007, p.115). However, Preus (2007) points out that this is precisely opposite to the direction of recent U.S. educational reforms. Zhao (2009) echoes Preus’s voice (2007) claiming that what China wants is what America is eager to throw away in their education.”

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Zhao’s (2009) work impacts both Chinese and American educational reforms for globalization. He (2009) lauds Chinese reforms that aim at decentralizing curriculum and textbooks, diversifying assessment and testing, and encouraging local autonomy and innovations in order to cultivate creativity and well-rounded talents, and their unwavering desire to undo the damages of testing and standardization.

Minority education.

The Western research community, while acknowledging improvements over the past years in Chinese minority education through increased funding, legislation, and new strategies, points out that continued efforts and fundamental reforms are needed for minority education to catch up and for China to close the gap in learning among the 56 ethnic groups (Shimahara, Holowinsky & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2001). Various measures are identified as effective: (1) flexible schooling schedule to meet the needs of students, (2) building boarding schools in minority areas, (3) collaborations between developed and less developed regions, and (4) training and incentives for teachers to teach in remote areas (Wan & Yang, 2008). Lee (2000) claims “Flexibility, cohesiveness and inclusiveness are umbrella terms that capture, in shorthand form, much of what is good about minority education in China and much of what can be learned by the United States” (p. 2).

As social economic development in minority regions is comparatively lower than the developed areas in China, closing the gaps in economic development among the regions will boost minority education levels. With economic development, more funds will be available to build schools, hire qualified teachers, and provide needed technology.

The issue of preserving the language, religion and culture of minority students has been a hot topic of discussion (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002, Postiglione, 1999). Postiglione (1999) points out, “without mother tongue instruction, China cannot possibly enroll and keep monolingual linguistic minority children in school, but on the other hand, without providing minority children instruction in Mandarin the Chinese government cannot socialize these children into the political, cultural and economic mainstream of Chinese society” (Postiglione, 1999, p.124). Also the standardized Chinese curriculum causes some minority students to drop out of school because they do not see the relevance of what they learn in school to their lives (Postiglione, 1999).

Bilingual education beyond the elementary years is recognized as a way to infuse minority culture and language into the school system, to improve minority student achievement, and to enhance student self-confidence, specifically with regard to their origins. The Government’s bilingual education policy does have a very positive impact on minority areas. However, there are not enough qualified teachers who are bilingual, and teacher training in bilingual education is still weak (Jing & Hu, 2007). To be successful, the Chinese educational system needs to produce people who are both ethnic and expert.

For the past few years, efforts have been made to address the low educational outcomes of minority mother tongue education and the separatism of minority language schools by developing mixed schools of Chinese and minority students. In China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) many minority mother tongue schools are merged with Chinese schools in 2008 (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). Tsung and Cruickshank (2009) find mixed schooling does not address the disparity in educational outcomes. Minority children in both
schools have insufficient access to adequate education in their mother tongue, in the national language as well as in the third language, English. It questions whether either school provides genuine bilingual education.

Along self-governing policies and bilingual education, more autonomy of school curriculum is suggested to make schooling more relevant and meaningful to the life, religion, and beliefs of minority families and children (Wan & Yang, 2008). Developing minority education and curriculum that are truly relevant and meaningful to the culture, language and religion of minority families has been a complex task because it is related to two competing political visions of the nation - diverse societies made up of many cultures or one societal or global culture. While some praise diversity, others believe China will be divided by differences (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002). This dilemma along with economic development in minority regions decides how successful minority education in China will become.

Finally, the use of technology, satellite, computers, and the Internet to share resources among schools and all regions in China is suggested to better facilitate the growth of minority education (Wan & Yang, 2008).

**Special education.**

A few isolated studies (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001; Deng & Guo, 2007; Stratford & Ng, 2000; Lytle, Hui & Johnson, 2005), drawing a general picture of special education development in China, report that special education as an institution was not established until the 19th century, when Western missionaries introduced Western concepts of Braille and sign language to China. Special education in China has developed from non-existent to programs starting at birth, from minimal to large-scale special education, and from segregation to inclusion. By 1980, there were 292 special schools in China, mostly for students who are blind and deaf, serving 33,055 students. In 1992, special schools, classes, and students increased to 1,077, 1,550, and 129,400, respectively. By the end of 1998, the numbers reached 1,437, 6,148, and 358,372, respectively (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001).

Since the mid-1980s, the Chinese inclusive education initiative, *Learning in Regular Classrooms* (LRC), has played an important role in special education in China. LRC consists of government-supported programs for children with disabilities who attend neighborhood schools in regular classrooms. This represents a greater move towards inclusion (Potts, 1999), and provides a welcome alternative to special school as the only way to educate children with disabilities, it makes public education more accessible to children with disabilities, and it has greatly increased the school enrollment of these children. Between 1987 and 1996, the school enrollment rate of students with disabilities rose from 6% to 60% (Deng, Poon-McBrayer, & Farnsworth, 2001). However, out of the 8 million school-aged disabled children only 364,409 (4.6%) are in school (Jing & Hu, 2007).

Though big strides towards education as a right for all have been made over the past years, China still has a long way to go to meet the needs of all children with disabilities. First of all, the widely-accepted idea that it is not worthwhile to educate children with disabilities (Jing & Hu, 2007) needs to be changed, and then the training of special education teachers need to be followed.
Conclusion

While acknowledging the major advancement made in Chinese education, the effective learning happening in Chinese classrooms, and the contributions that China has made towards world education, these studies also reveal various challenges that China still faces in education, including the global issue of educational equity and allocating adequate funding to educate all. As Pultorak and Markle (2008) observe, some key issues facing Chinese education are poverty, isolation, and diversity in schools, with the main message being the disparity of learning opportunities in China. “We witnessed some very powerful learning as well as less than ideal situations” (Pultorak & Markle, 2008, p. 47). To further develop Chinese education, the following issues need to be addressed:

Studies (Wang, 2003; Pepper, 1996; Cleverley, 1985; Chen, 1981; Lee, 2000; Guo, 2005b) identify the impact of the two major societal changes on Chinese education since 1949 - the adoption of socialism and the market economy. A planned economy is seen to bring more equality to the disadvantaged population than a market economy (Postiglione, 2006). Privatization of education, while being acknowledged as helpful for providing literacy for all, also makes education less affordable for the disadvantaged. There is a need for China to continue to realize the benefits of a free market economy while ensuring equal education of all children through regulations and development. This may help reduce the disparity of education opportunities between the advantaged and disadvantaged population. This issue needs serious studies by researchers and addressed by policy makers.

Education for women in China is another area that researchers in the West are concerned about. They believe China has a long way to go to achieve equality in terms of women’s education. Formal strategies and policies implemented in the 1970s to protect women’s rights in education are said to have been lost during the past thirty years (Brown & Park, 2002). Confucian values in Chinese society are blamed partly for the unfavorable situation for women, and the market economy further complicates the matter (Hannum, 2002; Brown & Park, 2002). To ensure equal rights for women in China, continued efforts in educating the society about gender equality and implementing regulations to guarantee women’s rights for education are important strategies.

Further efforts to make higher education more accessible and more equal are called for (Law, 1995; Wan, 2006). International partnerships (Robinson, 2008) are suggested as alternatives to help meet the high demand for higher education in China. However, the complex system of educational administration must be simplified to encourage and attract more foreign partnership and investment in the Chinese educational market. Although transnational programs and partnership have become increasingly important in Chinese education, and they exist in a variety of formats, this review did not yield adequate academic studies on this trend. Thus, future studies are definitely needed to pinpoint the implications, contributions and directions for such transnational programs.

Publications in the West also raise concerns regarding the education of ethnic minorities in China. Researchers celebrate the efforts and strategies that China has implemented over the years while realizing the amount of work that remains to really bring minority education to the level of the majority (Postiglione, 1999; Jing & Hu, 2007; Johnson & Chhetri, 2002). Among the suggestions are: quality
minority teacher training, increased funding for minority education, and the development of truly culturally relevant curriculum for ethnic groups (Jing & Hu, 2007; Johnson & Chhetri, 2002).

The issue of basic human and equal rights surrounding disabilities is gaining awareness in China. Although the progress from zero special education to the early development of inclusion education in China is impressive, research in the West recognizes that many children with disabilities still stay at home without schools to attend. Even though the Chinese government tries to provide special education services, not all children are being reached, and the need for private facilities is apparent (Pultorak & Markle, 2008). More research, public awareness, government funding, teacher training will help improve the quality and accessibility of special education in China.

The development of Chinese education over the years has made important contributions to the world: the unique struggle to balance between two educational models, the academic and revolutionary models over the past 50 years (Chen, 1981). The reforms and practices occurred during the Cultural Revolution are recognized internationally as having sound intentions and as the largest failed experiment in dealing with the issue of inequality and opening up educational opportunities to the poor (Turner & Acker, 2002; Wan, 2001; Han, 2000). The educational world may draw lessons or learn from these reforms and experiences.

Another contribution of Chinese education comes from comparative studies. Western scholars have a vested interest in examining Chinese education in searching for ways to improve their own educational practices. Rich and abundant studies (Chan & Rao, 2009; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) regarding Chinese curriculum, educational philosophy, values, adult beliefs, learners, teaching practices, and their impact on children’s learning reveal unique characteristics and features of Chinese education. Among the most heralded aspects of Chinese education are: respect for education and hard work, high expectations from families, national standards, well-prepared teachers, and an emphasis on basic skills (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Also attempts are made to explain why Chinese students have higher academic achievement while American students are more creative (Zhao, 2009). It would be interesting to study how Chinese experiences would help solve some educational problems in other countries.

One final point of interest to note is how tightly Chinese education is linked to what happens in the whole world. For example, issues related to equity, the achievement gap, education for all, technology, funding, and even the two contrasting models of educational philosophy seem to exist in many education systems around the world. This might be an indication of how much we depend on each other in the global village, and it makes sharing experiences with each other even more important.

This study has some limitations. The reviewed studies are solid, serious academic work in terms of research methods, details, analysis, perspectives, and accuracy of information (up to the date of their publication). As the landscape of education in China changes every day with its economic development, this review makes no claim to cover the entire field of educational development in China. Rather, it presents to us some important areas that research in the West has focused on, and some unique and kaleidoscopic Western perspectives of the development of education in China. Certainly, more current studies...
are needed for a more up-to-date picture of Chinese education. Also as some researchers move back and forth between Western and Eastern countries after the publication of their works, there are some inconsistencies in inclusion or exclusion of their works. The author does not necessarily agree with every perspective presented here, and trust that readers will be able to make their own senses.

Also the information shared here may become rich resources and necessary knowledge for people who are interested in further developing Chinese education and for business personnel who invest in Chinese education. In short, it is hoped that the Chinese audience and public will find the study useful in improving the education for all children in the 21st century.

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Funding source of article: Self-financed

Received: 13.8.12, accepted 24.8.12, revised 21.9.12