

# Chapter 6

## Globalisation and School-Based Curriculum Movement in China

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### SBCD and the Chinese Experience

Educators in China commonly believe that SBCD was first introduced by British and Australian school reformers in the 1970s (Liao 2004; Tan 2006). But Malcolm Skilbeck writes that he put SBCD at “the center of his professional concerns and ways of thinking about educational reform since the late 1950s” (Skilbeck 2005, p. 109). Whether or not Skilbeck was the first promoter of SBCD, he provides valuable conceptualization for constructing and understanding its praxis.

Skilbeck defines SBCD as “the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of a program of students’ learning by the educational institution of which those students are members” (Skilbeck 1984, p. 2). Since Skilbeck first proposed his conception, it has been accepted and further developed by the numerous SBCD advocates, experimental programs, and movements in Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong, and other countries and areas of the world influenced by the British (see also Zajda 2006; Zajda and Gamage 2009).

Since the 1990s, with the increasingly intensive pressure of “globalization,” more and more educational institutions and experts in various countries have joined the flood, promoting school-based educational reform. An expert from Hong Kong asserted that “in the past 10 years, school-based management became a major international trend of school reform that emphasized decentralization to the school level as the major means to promote effective decision making and use of resources to meet the diverse school-based needs in education” (Cheng 2001).

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Literature, from Skilbeck to Cheng, shows that, in the last four or five decades, SBCD is not simply an experiment conducted by professional educators, but has gained official acknowledgement from many nations and international organizations. Nevertheless, it was only after 1999 that China witnessed the central government's adoption of SBCD. And just as the British SBCD movement was boosted by national support (Eggleston 1976), the sponsorship of the central government of China has also accelerated the SBCD movement in that nation.

At present the Chinese SBCD movement is probably the biggest and most complicated in the world. However, educational scholars outside China haven't paid much attention to it. In 2001, Colin Marsh dipped his toes into China's SBCD movement, but he did not conduct any concrete research. And, with regard to the few foreign scholars who have studied these developments, due to language difficulties and lack of fieldwork, it has been easy for them to draw overly idealistic conclusions.

David Halpin recently published his comparative study on Chinese and English curriculum reforms; the author was very disappointed that, compared with the more systematic knowledge base of China's national curriculum reform, "ENCR (refers to the English national curriculum reform) has no theoretically informed notion of either curriculum development or curriculum implementation," but "outlines merely a curriculum structure to be adopted without stating how this is to be best achieved and over what time-scale, other than immediately or soon after" (Halpin 2010, p. 261)!

According to Halpin's observations, the knowledge base of China's reform is so thorough and comprehensive, that it has resulted in a highly professionalized operating system, one that a Western audience can hardly miss recognizing as a paradise for SBCD. As Halpin writes:

China's central state sets the reform's "macro-goals;" provincial administrators work out how best to reinterpret these, meshing them sensitively with local needs; while individual schools are charged with exploring and selecting appropriate curriculum resources, including textbooks, and developing specific schemes of study relevant to the students they teach and the circumstances in which they live out their daily lives. Running through this approach to curriculum planning and implementation is an implicit commitment to the principles of school-based curriculum development (Halpin 2010, p. 261).

But it appears that the essential problem with this picture results from limited knowledge of China's SBCD movement. In fact, it is based on the very limited and fairly idealistic descriptions found in two articles (Zhong 2006; Xu 2009). With this limitation, the author had no possibility of studying the reality of China's SBCD movement, a reality in which there are too many non-professional "provincial administrators" and "individual schools."

Ever since Skilbeck first put forth his ideal of SBCD, Western educational scholars have produced many analyses that can be used as theoretical mirrors to examine China's SBCD. Western conceptions played a role in shaping this movement in China. But the ideal is not the whole reality. Adopting western conceptions of SBCD as analyzing tools, this article will give special attention to the leading Chinese advocates from the perspective of their professional influence. This

influence is composed of their professional knowledge, actions, networks, and the less definable, but nevertheless influential, trait of charisma. The expansion of the SBCD movement within the complicated Chinese educational and social context will also be addressed.

## **Key Professional Influence and the Emergence of China's SBCD Movement**

Like other East Asian countries, China has been well aware of the 'pressing' globalization challenges of the new century, and showed its concern in the 1990s, with education reform. As to the reconstruction of the curriculum system, in 1996 the State Education Committee (now the Ministry of Education) proposed an experiment, which stated that "the high school must develop randomly selected courses and activity courses in a rational way, and these two kinds of courses should form 20–25 % of the week class hours" (Basic Education Bureau 1997, p. 146). That is, the school was required to develop courses and activities, which the student could elect, or not.

Three years later, a firm decision was made was to "deepen educational reform" and the central government's State Council issued an order launching national curriculum reconstruction. The strategic goal of this national reform was to "try out a new curriculum system which is composed of national curriculum, local curriculum, and school curriculum" (State Council 1999). The project of developing school curriculum thus became a nation-wide priority. The Ministry of Education felt the desperate need for an effective professional mechanism to implement new curriculum reform. This vision provided schools of education with an opportunity for vast expansion. Just as, at the end of the nineteenth century, their predecessors, who were almost all from southeast China, successfully established a nation-wide school system for China (Zhou 2008), their successors, professionals from the very same region of China, were poised for another breathtaking achievement,

It was in the same year, 1999, when the State Council stated its concern for curriculum reform that the professors of education at East China Normal University (ECNU), whose educational studies held first position in the domestic college ranking system, quickly set up China's first Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and the first Institute of Curriculum and Instruction (ICI). The outstanding strength of these new institutions in the nation was acknowledged by the central authority. The Ministry of Education put ICI on its list of the 100 National Key Institutions for the Humanities and the Social Sciences. These institutions annually receive additional funding from the central authority and are granted key national projects. Among China's thousands of universities and colleges, ICI at ECNU became the only institution in the area of curriculum acknowledged by the national authority.

ICI deserves this national trust. Since the early 1980s, at a time when China was still reluctant about adopting the "Reform and Open Door" policy, Zhong Qiqian,

the founding director of ICI, had been struggling to reform China's traditional test-oriented education with his vision of a "modern curriculum" (Zhong 1985). It was Zhong's most current expression of his vision that led David Halpin to praise Chinese national curriculum reform in his review. As one of the first batch of intellectuals to regain access to the west after decades door-closing, Zhong's consistent and courageous voice for reform did not reach audiences until 1999, when he was already 60 years old. When China launched its many new economic initiatives and decided to rebuild its rigid educational system, it was Zhong's unique professional life experience and persistent devotion to modern curriculum based upon democracy, freedom and innovation that made him known as a professional leader with the highest prestige. Zhong Qiquan's educational ideal eventually received an attentive ear from the new national education authority. He and his energetic faculty at ICI were now being widely praised as the "National Team" for the new curriculum reform. In the last 10 years, they have produced numerous drafts, reports and lectures, drawing the blueprint for national curriculum reform, in order to make it understood by the teachers throughout the country. It is this "National Team" that has played the key role in forming China's SBCD movement.

ICI had good division of labor based on field of specialization. Cui Yunhuo, an ambitious young professor of curriculum, chosen by Zhong Qiquan, concentrated on SBCD. Cui has the typical personality of Zhejiang men <sup>[1]</sup> who are not only keenly innovative, but also expert at finding practical ways to implement their innovations. Such personalities had been well exhibited by Cui's Zhejiang predecessors in republican China's first efforts to establish the modern education enterprise (Weston 2004, pp. 116–128). Now Cui Yunhuo and his colleagues earned the opportunity to reform that system through the channel of SBCD.

Hearing of Cui, *Curriculum, Teaching Materials and Methods*, the most influential journal of curriculum in China, invited him to begin to publicly express his ambition to promote SBCD. This was at the beginning of 1999, the key preparation year for every informed Chinese curriculum innovator. In his first journal article on SBCD, Cui and his partners provided the teachers with a general "student interest" oriented framework, based on their understanding of the Tyler Rationales <sup>[2]</sup> (Cui et al. 1999).

With an invitation from another influential policy-oriented educational journal, Cui addressed a pressing issue of implementing the new national curriculum reform: how to define the roles of the national, local, and school authorities in the new management system? This time he outlined a plan to regularize the turbulent and exponential increase in the number of SBCD experiments (Cui 1999). He hoped that all schools in China would understand and perform their duty, developing a school-based curriculum. This hope was strongly expressed again in his book, published several months later, which contains a systemized framework for SBCD (Cui 2000).

This was China's first monograph on this revolutionary period of reform. However, Cui wasn't alone in the circle of professional curriculum scholars. Three months later, Wang Binhua authored a second monograph on SBCD (Wang 2000). Wang is also from ICI and once, as a visiting scholar, spent 2 years at two British schools of education. He introduced many British and Australian SBCD experts to

the Chinese audience. Among them, John Elliot and Colin Marsh visited ECNU. Elliot's ideal of "action research" impressed hundreds of doctoral and master's students, among whom some, like Liu Lianghua, became leaders in the Chinese action research movement. Marsh was especially welcomed by the ICI members; his knowledge of SBCD spread widely among them (Zhao 2001).

Wu Gangping, at that time a doctoral candidate at the department of education, was also dedicated to meeting "the opportunity and challenge of SBCD". He did very well and very soon after his graduation was invited to join the ICI to shoulder the heavy burden of boosting SBCD. The voice of the professors from ICI was heard throughout Chinese schools of education. Numerous masters and doctoral dissertations were written around the issues of curriculum reform and SBCD. Many ambitious graduates found ways to establish many new departments of curriculum at their subsequent universities.

By the end of the twentieth century, there was a movement to establish departments of curriculum. Nevertheless, the most productive advocate was still Cui Yunhuo. In 2000, he published almost ten articles in China's most prestigious education journals in which he discussed many constructive issues, such as the conditions of SBCD in mainland China, the progress of SBCD in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and a more concrete student-oriented framework prepared for the immediate future: the implementation of national curriculum reform throughout China (Cui 2001).

The timing of the official announcement of the reform, to some extent depended on the work progress of ICI; most ICI professors were members of the national "group of experts", chaired by Zhong Qiquan; the first task was to draft the General Outline for implementing national curriculum reform. Many other professional institutions also played an important role in preparing for this huge national project. When, in June of 2001, all work of preparation was finished, the national authority issued the General Outline, attached with a comprehensive introduction edited by ICI members (Zhong et al. 2001). All that Cui Yunhuo and other SBCD advocates had struggled for – special national support for SBCD, a new three-level management system, and official regulations for the role of the school – fell into their hands.

Thus, using the tool of SBCD, professional advocates gained the authority and a vast arena in which to reform China's education. However, this is an obscure flaw: in the pronouncements of the central authority the informal term "school curriculum" but not "school-based curriculum" is used: the professional advocates of SBCD must explain the difference. Some teachers feel that the former "national curriculum" is the "school curriculum" because that is what has been taught in the school. During the early period, Cui and his colleagues suffered much from this conceptual confusion on the part of the teachers and worked hard to keep them better informed (Cui 1999; Wu 2006). However, clearly, this sort of suffering also reflects the quick expansion of China's SBCD movement.

Hank Johnston, an expert of postmodern social movements, reveals that the first concern of the classical social movement study is "organization" (2009, p. 3). This implies that we can't define a national movement until we see the leadership of the influential nation-wide "organization". This also explains why we regard 2001 as the beginning year for China's SBCD movement, since it was in that year that the

Ministry of Education and ICI, the only professional institution with national rank in the field of Chinese curriculum reform, joined in and took on the responsibility of leading China's new enterprise. This leadership lifted the earlier SBCD experiments created in many local schools up to a true national movement.

The relationship between China's central authority and China's leading academics deserves some further discussion. In contrast with the strong criticism of central power produced by Michael Apple, William Pinar, and other world renown professors of curriculum that aims to deconstruct national policy (see, for instance, Apple 2000); Zhong Qiquan, Cui Yunhuo, and other "nationally recognized" curriculum professors in China are inclined to value cooperation with national authority. This orientation can be explained in terms of a cultural tradition which emphasizes that the intellectual should pursue personal realization and social progress through accepting the trust from the central government. The central government can't deal with a huge educational reform alone, and the academics must contribute in accordance with their values and traditions.

## **The Function of Professional Leadership and Its Typical Way of Working**

Once they received the trust of the central government, the value the Chinese intellectuals place on tradition was a stimulus to the academics to exercise their influence to reform the national curriculum. Meanwhile, it is very clear that the purpose or the essential function of these professional leaders could be summarized: to professionalize China's SBCD movement, regardless of the inevitable controversies on how this goal should be attained.

Since 2002, many professors and their graduate students have taken part in constructing a professionalized model of SBCD. These efforts have resulted in a very great number of journal articles, as well as two new books (Wu 2002). Moreover, in teacher training programs throughout the country, there have been hundreds of lectures on the topic. These all express the strong desire and will to professionalize every aspect of China's SBCD. The differences lie in the formats for this will: some are based purely on theoretical imagination; some are based on local case studies. Both assume western conceptions to a greater or lesser extent.

Cui Yunhuo was well informed about Western models, particularly the Tyler Rationales named after Ralph W. Tyler. One of Cui's important professional mentors, Shi Liangfang, another typical modern Zhejiang man [1], translated Tyler's *The Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* into Chinese [2]. Shi was the best practitioner of the Tyler Rationales in China. In the 1990s, Shi frequently led Cui in professional travel between their university and the local schools, to help the teachers to create better school curricula for the students. Shi worked very hard, paying little attention to his constantly exhausted body, and he passed away in 1997

at the early age of 46. Ten years later, Cui still freshly remembers that day when Shi, who had devoted his professional life to curriculum reform, suddenly fell into a dead faint in the classroom. The dedicated efforts of Shi may be easily forgotten, suffering unjustifiable neglect in today's noisy field of curriculum reform, but the power of his sacrifice has melted into the tough, reforming brains of Cui and many other colleagues and students (Cui 2007).

This profound experience provides another important clue to explain why Cui Yunhuo has become the most active professional advocate of China's SBCD movement; he is determined and thinks, "there is no excuse not to develop school-based curriculum" (Cui 2010). His unique personality and experience lead him to believe that it is more important to create good curricula in local schools, as Tyler, and Shi have done, than to study sophisticated theory in an ivory tower. To Cui, the theory of a good school-based curriculum is not the difficulty, since Tyler and Shi, his two favorite professional examples, have provided clear descriptions many times. His primary professional function is to go to the school and guide the teacher in developing SBCD in a professional manner.

How many teachers have the same training and practical background as Cui? How can Cui professionalize the teachers in line with his ideal? As a professional SBCD leader of national rank, these are some of the big problems with which Cui has to struggle. Other curriculum professors, from provincial to national rank, are also alert to this problem, and some of them throw up their hands and in the end turn to the scholarly life and concentrate on expressing their theories by writing papers, which are under their control.

Cui also has written numerous papers, but they all come from his explorations in local schools around the country. The model behind his papers and his field work can be regarded as the essential model playing an influential role in the professionalization of China's SBCD movement. Its basic structure is composed of two aspects: one is the problems which Cui and his partners have encountered during their explorations in the local schools; the other is the answers that Cui and his partners have given in addressing these problems (Cui 2000, 2004).

Since the model grows from practical problems, it can be called a type of "action research model." At this point, the model shares much in common with that of John Elliot. But compared with Elliot, Cui has much more authority, derived from the central government, as well as national scope for implementing his model. Cui has two basic methods to professionalize China's SBCD movement: one is writing articles or reports in order to inform the understanding of national authorities; the other is to go directly to the schools and advise the school staff as they develop their own curriculum.

Between them, the more reliable method definitely is to go to the school, since it is even more difficult to go through the huge bureaucratic system of the central authority, keeping it really informed and able to take quick action. It is not a surprise that, since late Qing Dynasty, all modern educational reform initiatives have been originally raised by local elites, particularly by those, like Cui and Shi, from

Southeast China. But at any time, the central authority can easily get access to professional leaders and ask them to take on scheduled, or unexpected, national tasks, such as, the large-scale investigation of the status of new curriculum implementation.

These activities, assigned by the central government, benefit and strengthen Cui's personal professional authority. But his favorite method of working is to bring his influence into full play in his partner schools in the Yangtze River Delta area. One example is the Xishan High School in the city of Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. Xishan High School began its SBCD experiment in the middle of the 1990s with professional guidance provided by Shi Liangfang's working team. Since 1997, under the leadership of Cui, who was carrying on Shi's efforts, the school has established a professionalized producing, implementing, and managing system for its SBCD (Cui 2000; Cui et al. 2003). The school not only makes good use of Cui's professional knowledge but also takes advantage of his nation-wide ties and authority. Tang Jiangpeng, the principal of the Xishan School, has become a leader in the forefront of China's SBCD movement. His school has been celebrated as the "Cradle of SBCD in mainland China", and as one of the "Nation's Five Most Successful Examples of SBCD." The school has hosted numerous domestic and foreign visiting delegations (Xishan High School 2009).

To some extent, Cui is trying to establish some mechanism like a school-based professional institute of curriculum in his partner schools. This favored way of working has also been adopted for another experiment, Anji Road Primary School in the city of Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province. Luo Lingfang, its ambitious young principal, first met Cui at a conference in the winter of 2003, and there made a warm agreement to develop "school curriculum planning" based on careful thought about the real situation of her school. After 3 years of research supported by Cui's team, the school built a comprehensive curriculum plan which aims to professionalize all its curriculum activities from a Tylerian school vision (Luo 2006). Now this school has also produced many impressive "stories of curriculum development". Its school curriculum planning has been recommended by the most influential daily educational newspaper in China (Zhao 2006).

In the past 10 years, Cui has conducted many field experiments for building a professionalized SBCD, or school curriculum system; these are recorded in a series of books, entitled "Cases of China's SBCD" (Cui et al. 2007–2010). After more than 10 years of continuous struggle, there is no argument that Cui has become the most productive and influential leader of China's SBCD movement. His action research can be seen as an essential method adopted by the professors of education. There are many other professors of curriculum in this struggle, but there is no one else like Cui, who not only holds the highest national professional rank, but also, at the same time, can penetrate into the most detailed working of the school. Cui even has done a great deal of field work in developing a systematic model of classroom observation and evaluation (Shen and Cui 2008).



## Social Recognition and the Strengthening of the System of Professional Influence

Cui's books on the issues of SBCD have been widely read by teachers throughout the country. For example, his latest book, about classroom observation, sold out within one month after it appeared. The publisher had to reprint it twice more to meet the crying demand; over 100,000 copies have been sold. Despite such nationwide influence, we don't know the real impact of his efforts, or that of other academics who take part in this movement. It is true that many principals of primary and middle schools, like Tang Jiangpeng and Luo Lingfang, have become very professional in developing and leading school curricula. However, the professionalization of China's SBCD movement is such a huge task that there are literally millions of teachers who are still waiting for enlightenment from its leaders.

The journalists of *China Educational Daily* are alert to this fact. Not long ago, they invited Cui to write his answers to questions encountered by all the suffering principals and teachers who are developing a school-based curriculum, but are frustrated by numerous problems. For instance, what is the rationale behind SBCD? What is the first need for school curriculum planning? How can they evaluate school-based curricula (Cui et al. 2008)? The invitation from the *Daily*, once again shows that Cui has nation-wide access. But the most urgent problem probably is that more than professional influence, he and other leaders need tools to overcome the unfavorable, and even destructive, powers from the world outside the community of curriculum reform. These powers include the parents, the general public and the media, who do not yet understand the value of the SBCD.

The restrictive working milieu of the professional leaders, ranging from the national educational authority, to the professional institutions, and to the local schools, clearly implies that Cui and other professional leaders do not have consistent and effective channels for developing a mutually acknowledged and supportive relationship with the outside world, and with its even more powerful institutions and their agents, who will take action when they feel their interests are being damaged by this new curriculum reform. This hidden social pressure once exploded violently in the "Accident of Nanjing College Entrance Examination."

As the capital of Jiangsu Province, the city of Nanjing is widely known for its consistent and excellent efforts toward new curriculum reform. In 2004, some local journalists who specialize in making use of parents' educational expectations, reported, with fiery words, that the total number of high school graduates who attained scores qualifying them for entrance into the university system fell by 600, compared with 2003, and that the capital city of Nanjing was defeated soundly by the northern cities in Jiangsu province. The northern schools had tried in every possible way, including removing the newly established school curricula, to get the best possible performance of their students on the fatal college entrance examination. This report led millions of parents to impose critical pressure on the municipal authorities. These municipal authorities were forced to shift their attention from

new curriculum development to the satisfaction of the educational expectations of the public.

Wu Fei, an outstanding teacher from the Adjunctive High School of Nanjing Normal University, the city's most influential fighter for the new curriculum, said that the inaccurate report was "a bucket of cold water" from the utilitarian and uncivilized public. Through *Nanfang Weekend*, the most democratic and neutral public media in China, Wu criticized the vicious reports and expressed his firm decision to go on with the course of curriculum reform, regardless of its poor support from the public (Wu 2004). It is rather a pity that Wu's argument did not evoke a supportive response from the circle of professors of curriculum, who instead are absorbed with conducting action research inside the schools.

Without doubt, the academics should not disappoint teachers like Wu by ignoring the vast non-professional and anti-reform forces hidden in the public. The essential problem apparently is that the public doesn't understand the value of SBCD; meanwhile, it is also difficult for the professionals to find suitable access and a way to inform the public about the value of this new curriculum. To bridge this gap, the professionals need to ask for more policy and resource support from the national authority, and at the same time, to try to strengthen their influence with new mechanisms and tools.

Cui Yunhuo has suggested recently, that there is a need to establish a "deliberative assembly" in the school, whose duty it is to examine, discuss, and adopt SBCD projects inside the school (Cui 2010). Apparently, the national authorities and the professional community also need to develop this kind of mechanism. Its main function would be to reach an agreement between professionals and the public on the value and content of the SBCD. Moreover, the professionals need to develop new tools, acknowledged by the public, for evaluating and confirming the value of SBCD, and needs to report the results to the public audience, showing them that the students really do attain a valuable education and qualifications that cannot be gotten from the existing national curriculum. Maybe the most direct way to strengthen SBCD lies in the reform of the college entrance examination. The professional leaders of the SBCD movement might persuade those universities that have autonomous authority over student enrolment, to acknowledge the performance of the students based on what they have learned in SBCD programs.

## Conclusion

Whatever the case, something must be done for the continued growth of SBCD. Cui recently has shifted his attention to evaluation and has been appointed by the national authority to chair the Curriculum Evaluation Group. While he will take new initiatives to strengthen SBCD by exploring a more professional evaluation model for the teachers, it is not clear that he will think about the larger social context of SBCD. Through an authoritative and more comprehensive system of evaluation and reporting, a larger and more powerful tool can be developed that would invite

the public to understand and recognize the value of a school-based curriculum. This ‘child’, China’s SBCD, has now nearly reached the age of adulthood, calculated from the time Shi Liangfang gave birth to her by means of his professional life. Now she needs not only the better growth environment of a professionalized school, but also, so that her value will be recognized and appreciated by the public, some good preparation for entering society.

## Notes

1. Zhejiang, near the city of Shanghai, is one of the most prosperous provinces in China, with the reputation of producing people with ambition, energy, and a strong work ethic.
2. Acknowledged as “The Educators’ Educator” by John I. Goodlad, Ralph W. Tyler is a modern American expert of curriculum and instruction. Prior to 1950, his contributions to evaluation and curriculum development have been central to educational discourse. Tyler’s genius was present in the development of the National Academy of Education, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and numerous educational initiatives.

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