

# Chapter 9

## High School Chinese Language and Literacy Curriculum Reforms

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### 9.1 Introduction

Even though compulsory education in China only covers grades 1-9, high school education (10th-12th grades) has become increasingly more accessible to a wider youth population. The most recent reform of high school Chinese language and literacy (Yuwen) education was initiated in 2000 when *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Revised Trial Version)* was published by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE 2000). This document and its subsequent revised version (MOE 2002) served as a transitional curriculum guide for the subject of Yuwen while the new curriculum standards were being developed. In 2003, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Curriculum Standards* (hereafter referred to as the *Standards*) was published as the formal document of the latest Yuwen curriculum reform (MOE 2003). Noticeably different from previous education reforms, which were mostly politically motivated, the current high school Yuwen curriculum reform is a direct response to the desire of the country to become a modern nation that can compete globally in the twenty-first century, the demand of the society for a more well-rounded workforce with the ability to think creatively and innovatively, and the need of students for greater freedom and individualism (Guo 2004; Qin 2004).

This chapter traces the historical development of Chinese Yuwen curriculum with a particular focus on various efforts to reform the curriculum since 1949, the year when the People's Republic of China was founded. This is followed by a discussion of how Chinese political and social factors have shaped the curriculum and reform efforts. Major highlights of the latest high school Yuwen curriculum reform are discussed, and the current and previous Yuwen curricula compared.

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The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues and challenges arising from the latest reform, as well as recommendations for continued improvement of the high school Yuwen curriculum.

## 9.2 Historical Development of High School Chinese Language and Literacy Curriculum

### 9.2.1 High School Curriculum Standards Before the 1950s

The earliest curriculum standards for Chinese high school education date back to 1904 when the Qing government issued *Zouding Xuetang Zhangchen* (奏定学堂章程), a landmark document that prescribed the rules and regulations for schools in China. Schools were required to offer two subjects: the Classics and Chinese literature. At that time, the Classics was considered a distinct subject area concerning the reading and discussion of the Four Books (四书) and Five Classics (五经), authoritative books on Confucianism. The Four Books include *The Great Learning* (大学), *The Analects of Confucius* (论语), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), and *Mencius* (孟子) while the Five Classics include *The Book of Songs* (诗经), *The Book of History* (书经), *The Book of Rites* (礼记), *The Book of Changes* (易经), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋). The subject of Chinese literature covered reading, writing, practicing Chinese characters, and Chinese literary history (cited in Jin 2006; Zheng 2003a). This document and its implementation established Chinese as a critical school subject and laid the foundation for the development of Chinese curriculum and instruction in modern and contemporary China.

The New Culture Movement began in 1919 and brought a flood of Western ideas to China, along with a call for educational reform (refer to Chap. 3 for more discussion on the impact of the New Culture Movement on Chinese literacy education). In 1923, *Required Public National Language Subject Curriculum Syllabus* (公共必修科国语科学程纲要) was published. The syllabus contained specific goals related to contemporary Chinese language and writing, ancient Chinese language and writing, arguments, and informational texts. Another important curriculum document entitled *Required Specialized Chinese Language Subject Curriculum Syllabus for Senior High School* (高级中学必修科特设国文学程纲要) was also published in the same year (cited in Jin 2006). This Syllabus identified language and literature as two important components of Chinese as a school subject. These two standards documents were built upon a subject-centered and teacher-centered educational philosophy and have left an indelible mark on the teaching and learning of Chinese. In terms of instructional practice, the five-step instructional sequence (preparing, prompting, making comparisons, summarizing, and applying) developed by the German educator Johann Friedrich Herbart was introduced to China and became popular among Chinese teachers. This instructional sequence is still seen in many Chinese classrooms (Jin 2006).

In 1932, *Senior High School National Language Curriculum Standards* (高级中学国文课程标准) was published. This document called for a change in curriculum goals from the acquisition of subject knowledge to the cultivation of students' ability to use the Chinese language. Such a change was influenced by John Dewey, who had visited China from 1919 to 1921. The document, however, did not result in significant changes to the existing practices of Chinese teaching in place at that time (Jin 2006). In the subsequent two decades, China experienced an 8-year long resistance war against Japanese invasion and a civil war. During those two decades, curriculum standards were influenced by the ideologies promoted by the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party, and political goals were added to the curriculum goals. No substantial effort in curriculum reform was made during those two decades (Jin 2006).

### 9.2.2 High School Curriculum Standards from 1950 – 2000

A watershed moment in Chinese modern history was the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The country went through a period of dramatic changes, politically and socially, and China's educational system changed dramatically. In 1950, the Chinese central government published *General Understanding of Editing* (编辑大意) to accompany two textbooks developed for middle and high schools. This was the first time the term Yuwen (语文) was coined to replace previously used terms such as Guoyu (国语 – national language) and Guowen (国文 – national script/writing) to better reflect the nature of the subject area. The document defines Yuwen as the following: "Speaking is Yu (语 – language) and writing is Wen (文 – writing). Spoken language and written language cannot be separated" (Guo 2005). In other words, spoken language is Yu and written language is Wen. When they are combined together, the term becomes Yuwen.

Traditionally, the main focus of Chinese education was on written language, with little attention paid to spoken language. The document *General Understanding of Editing* is groundbreaking because it moved the discipline away from its previous narrow emphasis on written language and re-conceptualized the subject matter of Chinese to include listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Guo 2005). The term Yuwen reflected the new thinking that overall competence in communication is the most important goal of teaching Chinese. Yuwen as a term for the subject matter has been used ever since. Based on this definition, the most appropriate English translation for Yuwen is Chinese language and literacy. The document, however, had a strong political orientation and treated Yuwen as a course to educate students on politics and the Chinese Communist Party's ideologies.

Between 1950 and 1996, there were five major high school Yuwen curriculum reforms. Table 9.1 summarizes the changes that occurred in the curriculum during this time and the highlights of each based on the work of scholars of educational reforms in China (e.g., Guo 2005; Hou 2010; Jin 2006). It is important to mention that in China, for a long period of time, schools were organized as primary schools

**Table 9.1** Major junior and senior middle school (junior and senior high school) Yuwen curriculum reforms and changes, 1950–1996

Year	Curriculum reform documents	Major highlights
1956	<p>(a) Junior Middle School Chinese Language Teaching Syllabus – Draft 初级中学汉语教学大纲(草案)</p> <p>(b) Junior and Senior Middle School Literature Teaching Syllabus 初、高中文学教学大纲</p> <p>(c) Initial Plan for Teaching Middle School Composition – Draft 中学作文教学初步方案(草案)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first nationwide standardized subject syllabi used to standardize the teaching of Yuwen</li> <li>• Divided Yuwen instruction into two separate focus areas: language instruction and literature instruction</li> <li>• The instructional focus for high school was on literature instruction, building on the language instruction students received in middle school</li> <li>• Major high school instructional content for literature included important literary works by Chinese writers and foreign writers; classics of literature and basic knowledge of literary theories and history of Chinese literature; language features of works in different historical eras in China</li> <li>• Curriculum goals for language included the development of students' reading ability and ability to understand archaic forms of Chinese (文言文) and to solidify their interest in and habit of frequent reading of literary works</li> <li>• Writing instruction focused on developing students' ability to observe, think, and imagine in addition to their ability to use spoken and written language to express their ideas, and to solidify the knowledge and skills previously obtained from their language and literature courses</li> <li>• The curriculum was influenced by the ruling party's ideology. Major mission included cultivating students' socialist political orientation, communist morals and ethics, patriotism, and collectivism</li> <li>• The syllabi for language and literature instruction were valuable attempts at treating Yuwen systematically and scientifically</li> <li>• The syllabi were short-lived and abolished in 1958. The government concluded that the syllabi did not align with the then dominant "class struggle" ideology and therefore did not serve the political agenda of the government</li> </ul>

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Year	Curriculum reform documents	Major highlights
1963	Full-Day Middle School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus – Draft 全日制中学语文教学大纲(草案)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was initiated and implemented in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward Movement (1958–1961) to remediate the damages done to Chinese Yuwen education. Yuwen classes had been turned into politics classes and as a result significantly decreased the quality of Chinese language and literacy instruction</li> <li>• It stated that Yuwen is the basic tool for learning, communicating, and work</li> <li>• The goal was to teach students to correctly understand and apply Chinese spoken and written language and to help them acquire the ability to read and write modern Chinese</li> <li>• It argued that Yuwen should not be taught as a politics class or a literature class and Yuwen instruction should return to the teaching of reading and writing</li> <li>• Selections in textbooks should have both positive thoughts and high literary qualities</li> </ul>
1978	Full-Day Ten-Year School Chinese Teaching Syllabus – Trial Version Draft 全日制十年制学校教学大纲(试行草案)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was developed to bring Yuwen education out of the state of utter confusion and chaos created by the decade-long Cultural Revolution</li> <li>• It recognized the primacy of Marxist ideology in the curriculum</li> <li>• It reflected the consensus that politics could guide Chinese language and literacy instruction but should not replace it</li> <li>• It established the understanding that Yuwen instruction had its own unique mission, which is to cultivate students' ability to master and apply spoken and written language</li> <li>• It reinstated the position made in the 1963 Syllabus that the basic nature of Yuwen should be a tool for learning, communicating, and work</li> </ul>
1986	Full-Day Yuwen Teaching Syllabus – Trial Version Draft 全日制语文教学大纲(试行草案)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It placed the acquisition of basic skills ahead of basic knowledge as the main purpose of Yuwen teaching</li> <li>• It recognized the function of Yuwen was to promote quality education and cultivate productive citizens</li> <li>• Testing should focus only on skills questions instead of knowledge questions and not require rote memorization</li> <li>• It deleted the previous requirement of universal textbook development so multiple textbooks issued by different publishing houses could be available for local textbook adoption decisions</li> </ul>

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**Table 9.1** (continued)

Year	Curriculum reform documents	Major highlights
1995	Nine-Year Compulsory Education Middle School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus – Trial Version 九年义务教育全日制初级中学语文教学大纲(试用)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yuwen began to regain its status as a separate discipline instead of a tool to serve political purposes</li> <li>• It was the first time when junior middle school and senior middle school had their own separate Yuwen curricula</li> <li>• Curriculum for junior middle school emphasized the development of basic language and literacy competence and included the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing</li> <li>• It was the first time the objective of cultivating good learning habits was added to the curriculum. This object has become a part of subsequent curriculum documents</li> <li>• It emphasized the development of students' intelligence and imagination and their use of comparison, analysis, induction, and deduction for observation, memorization, and thinking</li> <li>• It provided specific guidance for Yuwen instruction to promote student development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities</li> <li>• It was the first time after-school reading was added to the syllabus as a requirement</li> </ul>
1996	Nine-Year Compulsory Education Senior Middle School [High School] Yuwen Teaching Syllabus – Trial Version 九年义务教育全日制高级中学语文教学大纲(试用)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It established the notion that Yuwen is the most important communication tool and carrier of culture</li> <li>• It proposed six major principles for the teaching of Yuwen: the integration of Yuwen training and moral education; the symbiotic relationship between Yuwen training and cognitive training; the close connection between knowledge instruction and skills training; the comprehensive training of listening, speaking, reading and writing; teacher guidance and student personal initiative, and the integration of in-class and after-school reading</li> <li>• It specified that high school Yuwen curriculum should consist of three types of courses: required, electives, and free choice to allow greater student choice but it did not provide specific guidelines on how to do so</li> <li>• Information on assessment and evaluation and on instructional resources was added</li> </ul>

and middle schools. The term “middle school” is comparable to the concept of secondary school in the United States and included junior middle school and senior middle school. Senior middle school is the equivalent of high school in the United States. Oftentimes, school curricula for Chinese middle schools covered both junior middle school and senior middle school until the 1995 Yuwen reform. Unless pointed out otherwise, the term middle school in this chapter applies to both junior middle school and high school.

### **9.3 High School Yuwen Curriculum Reform in the New Millennium**

#### ***9.3.1 Social and Political Background of the Current Curriculum Reform***

High school Yuwen curriculum reform is an important part of the government’s reform initiatives to improve Chinese education. The central goal of the most recent education reform is to provide “quality education” and create well-rounded, creative, and innovative citizens of the twenty-first century (Hou 2010; Yu 2010). The current education reform is a direct response to globalization, an increasingly diverse population, a young generation that demands more freedom of choice, and advances in information technology.

Politically, for the past two decades the Chinese government has gradually moved from a Marxist political ideology with a focus on class struggle to a focus on maintaining social stability and improving China’s economy. Joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 also has served as a strong catalyst for China to be further integrated into the world community. In order for China to compete successfully with other nations in the global economy, its future citizens must be equipped with new knowledge and skills that were not adequately supported in the old school curriculum. The government has also realized the importance of creativity and innovation, so China can continue to sustain its current economic growth.

On the other hand, China has become an increasingly diverse society. With major improvements in transportation and its infrastructure, the Chinese people have gained unprecedented mobility within the country. This also has created challenges because people from different social and ethnic backgrounds must be able to communicate with each other effectively. Technological advances have brought a new set of challenges. People are bombarded daily with a vast amount of information generated in various media, including the Internet. The ability to search for relevant information and process and analyze that information has become a critical skill of the twenty-first century.

Socially, due to the One Child policy a substantial number of young people have been given great personal freedom and choices at home. They are more independent and willful in their thinking and decision making compared with their parents’

generation. As such, the long-held traditional teacher-centered philosophy of teaching and learning is no longer adequate for this new student population. Furthermore, since the 1980s, the Chinese government has sent a significant number of scholars to receive training in Western countries. These scholars have brought back with them a constructivist, student-centered educational philosophy. Such an influence can be found in the new curriculum standards for all subject areas, especially in the Yuwen standards.

All these changes and challenges have a direct bearing on Yuwen education because of its critical role in schooling. Under such a backdrop, starting in 1997, a heated debate surrounding the current status and future direction of Yuwen education took place across the nation. Specifically, major concerns included the following: the amount of content was too overwhelming and too difficult for students to learn; the curriculum was isolated and not integrated with other subject areas; the major mode of teaching and learning was drill and skill; too much emphasis was placed on grades and using assessments as a tool for differentiating good students from poor students; and curriculum management was one-size-fits-all and prescriptive (Hou 2010). Yuwen educators and government education decision-makers came to a consensus that the old Yuwen curriculum, including its content, goals, and implementation, was out-of-date and no longer adequate for the conditions and goals of the country (Task Force 2003). As a result, the Ministry of Education organized a group of Yuwen experts and charged them with the task of researching and developing a new set of curriculum standards. In 2000, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Revised Trial Version)* was published as a transitional document while the new curriculum standards were being fully developed. The document was further revised in 2002. In 2003, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Curriculum Standards* for grades 10–12 was formally unveiled, and the piloting of the standards began. Almost concurrently, a separate curriculum standards document was developed to guide the Yuwen curriculum reform for grades 1–9.

### 9.3.2 Implementation Timeline

The implementation of the new curriculum reform has been a long and deliberate process (Hou 2010; Task Force 2003). In order to achieve success, the MOE developed a three-stage timeline and gradually rolled out the new standards in one region of the country at a time.

The period from 2000 to 2003 was the preparation stage. In 2000, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus Revised (Trial Version)* was published to initiate the curriculum reform. It was a precursor of the *Standards*. Still, the teaching syllabus was teacher-centered and prescriptive. It focused on the scope and sequence of instruction, as well as the types of instructional activities and the amount of time to be allocated for each teaching objective. In 2002, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus* was published. Then, *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Curriculum Standards (Trial Version)* was published



in 2003 to replace the teaching Syllabus. The 2003 *Standards* officially marked the beginning of the latest high school Yuwen curriculum reform.

The piloting stage, from 2004 to 2008, began in four provinces in 2004 and expanded to ten provinces by 2006, 15 provinces and regions by 2007, and 21 provinces and regions by 2008.

After the piloting stage came the full implementation stage. The new curriculum standards were set to be implemented in all provinces and regions by 2010. Currently, the new curriculum standards have been implemented in all provinces in China except in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. This region is populated with numerous ethnic minority peoples. The complexity of the languages and cultures present in the region make it a challenge for the *Standards* to be implemented at the same pace as in the rest of the country.

During each stage of implementation, the MOE conducted rigorous, extensive research. However, the focus of such research was not on revising the *Standards* but on identifying the issues and problems (e.g., logistics and resources) that prevented the *Standards* from being fully implemented in a particular stage and on avoiding similar problems in the upcoming stages. The research results were also used to help the MOE, regional and local education bureaus, and schools to develop effective professional development programs for teachers, so they would be able to make a successful transition to teaching the new standards. As of this date, the *Standards* have not been modified.

### 9.3.3 *Major Content of the New Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Curriculum Standards*

The *Standards* published in 2003 by the MOE defines the nature of Yuwen as “the most important tool of communication and a critical component of human culture. The fundamental characteristic of Yuwen curriculum is the integration of its utility and humanity” (p. 3). The document serves as a guide to the current high school Yuwen curriculum reform and posits that high school Yuwen curriculum should lead to further improvement in students’ competence in language and literacy, knowledge application, aesthetic understanding, inquiry, and life-long learning.

Five major curriculum goals are identified in the *Standards*: (a) **accumulation and integration** (Students will strengthen their knowledge of the Chinese language and develop individualized learning methods.); (b) **experience and appreciation** (When reading exemplary literary works, students will consider authors’ use of language, experience the beauty of the artistic craft, and develop their imagination and literary appreciation. Students will possess a good sense of modern Chinese language and gradually develop understanding of the archaic form of Chinese.); (c) **thinking and understanding** (Students will select classics and other exemplary

literature to read based on their own learning objectives, and will establish positive goals for their lives, strengthen their sense of cultural mission and social responsibility, and develop the habits of independent thinking, questioning, inquiry, and critical thinking.); (d) **application and extension** (Students will be able to accurately, skillfully, and effectively apply the Chinese language in life and in their studies.); and (e) **discovery and innovation** (Students will carefully observe linguistic, literary, and cultural phenomena both within the country and abroad and will cultivate an awareness of inquiry and discovery.).

The *Standards* proposes a new structure for the high school Yuwen curriculum with five required core modules (courses) and five elective series. Specific objectives are provided for each module and series. The core modules focus on two main areas of Chinese language and literacy: (a) reading and appreciation and (b) expression and communication. Common core courses provide students with basic knowledge of Chinese language and literacy skills in reading and writing Chinese accurately, proficiently, and effectively, laying a solid foundation for their future learning. The elective series are designed to allow students to exercise personal choices for individualized development, and schools can offer multiple elective modules within each elective series (e.g., poetry and prose, fiction and drama, news and biography, language application, and research and reading on cultural works).

Guidelines recommend teachers actively promote independent, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning. Teachers should establish a positive learning environment and help students take ownership of their learning. In addition, teachers should flexibly use various teaching strategies and creatively use textbooks and other curriculum materials. Textbooks should promote Chinese culture and an understanding of and respect for diverse cultures and should be conducive to the development of hands-on skills and an innovative spirit. Textbook content should be open and flexible to allow local governments, schools, teachers, and students room for self-development and choice. The fundamental purpose of assessment and evaluation should be to promote students' overall language and literacy competence. Assessments should not be used for tracking students but to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and to improve teaching.

#### 9.4 Comparison Between the Current and Previous High School Yuwen Curricula

*Nine-Year Compulsory Education High School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Trial Version)* published in 1996 was the guiding document for high school Yuwen curriculum across China until *Full-Day Common High School Yuwen Curriculum Standards (Trial Version)* was formally published in 2003 and subsequently implemented. The documents are similar in some respects, but there are a number of major differences in the two documents.

### 9.4.1 *Similarities*

Both curriculum documents emphasize the importance of carrying out education policies set by the Chinese government. In addition, both require Yuwen teachers to pay particular attention to the unique nature and characteristics of the Chinese language, both spoken and written, and to follow important principles for the teaching and learning of a first language. Both documents consider applying knowledge and skills of Chinese language and literacy to real life situations an important goal of high school Yuwen education. Other common goals include the development of students' patriotic spirit, aesthetic appreciation, communicative competence in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and a love of the Chinese language and culture (Zheng 2003b).

### 9.4.2 *Differences*

The 1996 curriculum (MOE 1996) heavily emphasized knowledge and skills. The new curriculum, however, is more complex and multi-dimensional than the previous curriculum. In addition to knowledge and skills, the new curriculum covers learning processes and methods, as well as emotions and attitudes.

One of the most noticeable differences between the two curricula is the curriculum focus. The 2003 Yuwen curriculum focuses on students and their learning while the 1996 curriculum focused on teachers and their teaching. The new *Standards* changes the role of teachers and students in the learning process. Teachers are expected to be facilitators and guides, and students are owners of their learning. Learning is to take place through dialogue instead of spoon-feeding or passive learning. The old curriculum was teacher-centered. It carefully laid out the scope and sequence of teaching and suggested instructional activities to accomplish various instructional goals for teachers to follow. The amount of time to be spent on the teaching of specific content and skills was also prescribed. There was mention of the student's role in the process of teaching and learning.

The new curriculum reform initiates an unprecedented curriculum structure that provides students with more choices based on personal interests and academic goals. Although the older curriculum document also recommended schools offer core, elective, and free choice courses, the recommendation was only briefly mentioned, and no specific guidelines were offered. Therefore, most schools did not follow this recommendation. The new curriculum document clearly stipulates schools must implement a new curriculum structure that consists of core modules (courses) and elective modules (Zheng 2003c). Under the new curriculum, high school students are required to take five modules (ten credit hours) of common core courses in order to graduate. They are encouraged to further develop their own personal interests in specific areas of language and literacy through selecting elective modules from the elective series. The inclusion of both common core

and elective modules in the high school Yuwen curriculum reflects a more flexible, student-centered curriculum that allows for a more individualized high school Yuwen learning experience than provided in previous curricula.

In alignment with its goal to prepare students for the twenty-first century, the new *Standards* adds a technology component that was not included in previous curricula requirements. The *Standards* recommends students use modern information technology to present their writing, use computers for editing and interface design, and use email for communication. Teachers are also encouraged to use technology to support instruction.

Finally, the area of assessment and evaluation in the new curriculum emphasizes the use of multiple and ongoing measures to assess student learning and to inform teaching. Assessments should not only focus on the product but also the process of learning. In addition, assessment and evaluation should promote student motivation and positive attitudes towards learning. These recommendations about assessment and evaluation, in fact, are similar to Western views on the role and function of assessment and evaluation in teaching and learning (International Reading Association 2009). In comparison, the old curriculum primarily used assessment as a measure of student learning.

The new curriculum clearly signals a different orientation from the previous one. It is more student-centered and aims to promote collaborative, inquiry-based, and lifelong learning.

## 9.5 Impact of Current High School Yuwen Curriculum Reform

The new high school Yuwen curriculum reform is an extension and continuation of the curriculum reform for grades 1–9 (Task Force 2003; Zheng 2003c). The current high school Yuwen curriculum reform has created a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning of Chinese language and literacy in many high schools in China. In 2009, Chinese students from Shanghai participated in the highly recognized Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) for the first time in the program's history and ranked number one in the subject of reading, as well as in math and science (OECD 2011). Their performance shocked the international education community. Such results to a certain extent reflect the success of the latest Yuwen curriculum reform.

Significant progress has been made in several areas. First of all, a shift has occurred in teachers' thinking of Yuwen teaching. The traditional knowledge- and skills-oriented teaching is no longer a highly regarded mode of instruction among high school teachers of Chinese. Communicative competence, creativity, inquiry, problem-solving, and lifelong learning are topics of increasing interest among teachers. Second, teacher and student roles are redefined. More teachers have begun to view themselves as facilitators and guides, and they see their students as the main agent in the learning process. Teachers and students have become partners in educational dialogues. Third, Yuwen learning has become more individualized.

Students are given more freedom and flexibility in selecting elective reading modules that fit their personal interests. As a result, they are more motivated to learn Chinese. Fourth, group learning and cooperative learning activities are more popular now among teachers and students. Furthermore, an increasing number of schools and teachers have adopted student-centered, diverse, integrated assessment practices to improve their teaching (Zheng and Yin 2005).

## 9.6 Issues, Challenges, and Implications for Chinese Literacy Practices and Policies

A review of literature on Chinese Yuwen curriculum reforms suggests changes to the Chinese Yuwen curriculum have been closely tied to political movements. The changes also mirrored the social and cultural conditions of the country and the main agenda of the government and its ruling party. Yuwen was often treated as a political tool of the Chinese government and its ruling party to carry out their ideological agenda and to indoctrinate students. It is not surprising that during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Yuwen courses were treated and taught as courses in politics (Wang 2005; Zheng 2003a). In the new *Standards*, even though there is still occasional reference to the ideological aspect of the curriculum, the function of Yuwen is redefined as a tool for lifelong learning and a carrier of culture and humanity (Zheng 2003a; Zhu and Liu 2005). This can be viewed as progress in curriculum reform. However, in order for Yuwen to grow into a true academic discipline, it is important to continue to further minimize the influence of political ideologies on the curriculum.

It is easy to detect the influence of Western educational philosophies on the new curriculum standards. In particular, views on the role of teachers and students and the need for more student-centered and individualized personal interpretation of texts come very close to Western educational beliefs. Furthermore, in multiple places throughout the *Standards*, there is a repeated call for critical reading and individualized interpretation of texts. This has the potential to change political and social conditions when students grow up and become independent and critical thinkers. This curriculum reform can hopefully lead to a society that is more open to individualism and diverse perspectives.

The current reform, however, has generated heated debate among educators and teachers and has even encountered resistance from some local governments, as well as teachers. Teacher resistance has been found to be a problem that impedes full implementation of the new *Standards* (Hou 2010; Wang 2007). Such resistance comes from the top-down nature of the reform, drastic changes in educational philosophy and beliefs, lack of a coordinated teacher evaluation system, and lack of inservice education. First and foremost, this reform is a top-down effort to transform Chinese language and literacy education (Wang 2007). Schools and teachers do not have ownership of the reform initiative, and some have strong

feelings about the new curriculum being imposed on them when they are not ready to implement it.

The dramatic shift from a teacher-centered curriculum to a student-centered curriculum is a steep learning curve for many teachers. Furthermore, such a shift in teaching philosophy also involves changes in instructional practices that teachers have had no experience with or exposure to previously. In order to implement Yuwen instruction that truly integrates knowledge, skills, learning processes and methods, and affective factors, teacher quality and teacher education need to be addressed. In fact, the *Standards* recognizes this need and calls for teacher professional development.

Second, schools and teachers are confronted with the dilemma of implementing the new reading curriculum versus teaching to the college entrance examination, which has been a longtime tradition of high school Yuwen education. The evaluation of teacher effectiveness and high school quality are largely based on how well their students do on exams, college entrance exams in particular. In order to successfully implement the curriculum reform, a systemic approach should be taken, and the existing system for college admissions should be changed simultaneously. Reform of the college entrance exam is needed, as well as a fundamental change to the testing culture so deeply rooted in the Chinese education system (Sang 2005; Wang 2007).

A key feature of the new curriculum is its requirement to provide core courses and electives to high school students for a more individualized curriculum. However, several issues prevent this goal from becoming a reality or from being fully implemented (Wang 2009b). First of all, in order for students to do well on the college entrance exam, many schools only offer electives that contain content related to the exam. Second, schools that are limited in resources cannot afford to hire additional teachers to offer additional electives. Therefore, the good intentions behind this change to the curriculum are in danger of not becoming a reality in many schools. For the reform to be successful, schools should carefully examine their own resources and develop elective modules that are both connected to local conditions and fit student needs and interests (Zhu 2005).

Inequality in Yuwen education between urban and rural areas is also a challenge. Major concerns include textbooks that are not connected to the real life experiences of students in rural areas, poor teacher quality in rural schools, and a lack of educational resources to implement the changes (Hou 2010; Huang 2009). The Chinese government should take action to ensure such inequality is addressed.

Under the new curriculum, high school teachers struggle to achieve a balance between teacher explicit instruction of critical knowledge and skills and student-centered, inquiry-based instruction, between effective Chinese traditional instructional approaches and Western approaches to the teaching of Chinese Yuwen (Sang 2005; Wang 2009a). In addition to providing teachers with high quality professional development, teacher reflection and teacher action research may be a powerful way to help teachers become successful in implementing the new standards.

## 9.7 Summary

This chapter describes the current high school Yuwen curriculum reform from historical, political, and sociocultural perspectives. Several important themes that guide the implementation of the curriculum reform are identified in the new curriculum document. The reform is encouraging and moving in a positive direction. However, the reform has also brought about several challenges and issues that need to be addressed. Teacher paradigm shift perhaps is the most difficult obstacle to overcome in order to successfully implement the reform. Professional development has to keep up with the reform, and supports have to be provided to teachers making the transition. The testing culture and the college entrance exam also need to be reformed to align with the new curriculum. Curriculum reform is a long, exploratory process. However, the current Yuwen reform is a worthy effort to align high school curriculum with the demands of Chinese society and individual students. It will have a lasting impact on Chinese Yuwen education.

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