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## 1. SHAPING THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN CHINESE SOCIETIES

Whether we look across or within societies, the importance of the school curriculum is unmistakable. School curriculum takes many forms—a social construct, an official document, a teacher’s plan, or a student’s experience. However, it can be all of these things at once, which is why separating these different forms of curriculum is not always easy. This book, through its comparative focus, raises important questions: Are these forms of curriculum universal? Or, in Schwab’s terms, are there curriculum “commonplaces”<sup>1</sup> that transcend geography, history, and cultures? The comparative perspective here is on Chinese societies. Therefore, the following chapters provide an opportunity to consider culture in particular as a factor in defining curriculum commonplaces. As students from this part of the world generally outperform those from elsewhere, scholars are also given the opportunity to identify the characteristics of the curriculum that might account for this level of performance. This chapter is an exploration of curriculum commonplaces in the context of curriculum development, change, and reform across three Chinese societies particularly on cultural issues and student performance.

To pursue this exploration, five broad areas will be discussed:

- Curriculum control
- Forms of knowledge and the curriculum
- Ideology and curriculum change
- Teachers and the classroom
- Culture and the curriculum

### CURRICULUM CONTROL—THE SETTING OF EAST ASIAN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Curriculum theorists understand that curriculum experiences may be shaped by teachers but are responded to by students in their own ways depending on their attention, motivation, and inclination to engage in planned activities. However, this view does not reflect that of the government, as is evident from the collection of articles in this book, especially in chapters, such as Ye (Chapter 13) who looked at moral education in Mainland China and the local and central issues that have shaped it in recent times. In each society represented in this collection, governments have undertaken definite steps to shape the curriculum to provide a set of common

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experiences for students. Across societies, the curriculum is commonly viewed as an instrument of nation building, which is largely economic in nature but is also political. The beneficiary of this form of curriculum is the state itself, although well educated graduates who have experienced these curriculum forms also benefit. The “developmental state” (see Wong, 2004 for an analysis of the way the developmental state is seen to operate in East Asia) is often considered as the driver of change in East Asia, and the articles in this book indicate that such a term is appropriate in describing the role and function of the school curriculum as an instrument of state rather than personal development. Should this be regarded as a normal function of all systems or is it a unique feature of the school curriculum in East Asian societies?

Governments, regardless of political ideology, recognize the importance of school curriculum whether in promoting liberal democratic values as in the United States or a “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as in China. Hence, the control of education is certainly not outside the realm of developmental state. The school curriculum is never neutral. The concept of “collectivist culture” and “collectivist responsibility” (Hofstede, 2001) is a distinctive cultural characteristic in East Asia but is not prevalent in the West. Given the collectivist nature of East Asian societies, the state undertakes a more specific responsibility for its citizens compared with the individualist culture in the West. This is not a popular explanation for East Asian development (Abe, 2006) but it has found support (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) and may to help address Öniş’s (1991, p. 116) statement about “how to explain the single-minded commitment of the state elites to growth, productivity, and international competitiveness.” Öniş himself poses possible solutions in terms of external threats and internal reforms, but an equally plausible solution is a commitment to a common cultural value related to responsibility for the collective—a Confucian value—with widespread appeal in East Asian societies (Tu, 1996). When this collectivist value is applied to the development of meritocratic education systems capable of providing requisite human resources and opportunities for the best to succeed, such a value may be a part of what Öniş (1991) calls “the logic of the developmental state”. At the very least, it remains an intriguing area that curriculum scholars in the region can explore further.

#### FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE CURRICULUM

Curriculum reforms in the region have resulted in a more liberalized curriculum (Kennedy, 2008), but it is no less academic. Examinations remain the single most significant influence on what is taught, tested, and consequently valued. Private tutorial schools remain a pervasive influence across the region (Bray & Lykins, 2012) as students and their parents strive to be included in meritocratic advancement that can come to those who succeed in these pressurized education systems. However, liberal curriculum reforms should not be underestimated.

While examinations remain vital, a number of education systems have attempted to introduce more relaxed forms of classroom assessment to try to minimize the

pressure of examinations. Although a number of curriculum forms remain outside the examination-dominated system, none can totally eliminate the real pressures that come from schools and parents for students to work hard and perform well, especially when cultural expectations play a role in such pressure. This view is particularly important. Just as the developmental state is influenced by basic Confucian values, so too are students and their parents. Working hard, especially to please parents and the family, is a basic Confucian value that has not disappeared in the twenty-first century. This value appears to be equally strong regardless of social class, and it may well account for the success of East Asian students in international assessments. Students work hard and perform well to honor their families, which is a striking difference between students in this part of the world and their Western peers. The idea was popularized in the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua and has also been the subject of a significant number of research which identifies how and why many Chinese students perform well. Such reasons are deeply rooted in cultural values (Watkins & Biggs, 1996; 2001).

Despite the distinctive cultural contexts that influence Chinese students, actual school subjects, such as mother tongue and second languages, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Physical Education, are fairly standard and could be recognized easily by any observer. Another common feature across the region is related to civic, moral, or political education depending on the political orientation of the government. As Kennedy (2008) has emphasized, while the school curriculum in general has been liberalized, this does not apply to civic and moral education whose purposes remain deeply cultural and some would say conservative. “Good people make good citizens” is a popular aphorism in civics literature of the region and has remained an important rationale for moral education programs.

School-based curriculum development (SBCD) has taken some hold in the region, and this book provides examples from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland. For the most part, SBCD does not influence the core curriculum but as Law (Chapter 18) and Wan and Wan (Chapter 15) reported, SBCD can address important issues in Hong Kong. Zeng and Zhou (Chapter 14) also report the progress that SBCD has been in the mainland, but alternative forms of curriculum have not appeared to have taken a strong hold in Taiwan (Hwang and Ting in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, in all three places, local curriculum, which is distinct from system-oriented curriculum, retains core peripheral activities which are examinable and count towards university interests. Thus, the liberalized elements of the curriculum are always secondary to the examined curriculum that remains the most potent force in the region’s educational provision.

#### IDEOLOGY AND CURRICULUM CHANGE

There is little doubt that curriculum reform has been a feature of the region in the current century (Kennedy & Lee, 2010), and this reform has been driven by the ideology of the developmental state as outlined above. This has linked education,

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and the school curriculum in particular, to the human capital requirements of the state. Nevertheless, these requirements have often been couched in progressivist terms (“engaged students,” “project learning,” “peer assessment,” “student-centered learning,” etc.) so that Kennedy (2005, p. 12) referred to this amalgam of human capital objectives and progressivist pedagogies as “neo-progressivist.” This draws on a broader strand of progressivism such as that of David Snedden<sup>2</sup> who championed a social efficiency version designed to both engage students and ensure a steady stream of labor to provide for social stability. Curriculum documents in the region do not require close reading to see how the two strands, namely, human capital needs and progressivist pedagogy, are often intertwined.

Curriculum documents can convey a sense of the official curriculum, which is what governments and policy makers intend. A number of chapters in this book also examine implementation, such as what happens to these official documents on the ground. A national curriculum in a country as large as Mainland China must respond to local needs, whether the quality of teachers is responsible for the implementation process, the specific needs of students in places as far as Shanghai on the east coast and Kashgar in the west, and even the physical and financial resources that are available in different parts of the country. Reports on policy implementation on the Mainland (Zhong & Tu, Chapter 2) or widespread reform in Hong Kong (Kennedy, Chapter 3) in this book tend to be somewhat more positive than similar reports from Western contexts, although the road to reform described in Chapter 3 seemed somewhat more unstable than that described in Chapter 2. Taiwan’s reform process (Hwang & Ting, Chapter 4) encountered more problems than Hong Kong’s or the mainland’s, but nevertheless, many major changes are reported. Ideology may create the curriculum but cannot ensure the same implementation in every school. Although Hong Kong conducts stringent quality assurance assessments and school inspections to ensure consistency with the reform agenda, variation in curriculum delivery is still observed as different schools seek to meet the needs of their students. Lv, Ye, and Cao reported similar issues in Mathematics in Mainland China (Chapter 7), and Huang and Mao reported the same for Integrated Science in the mainland. These findings indicate that variation is intrinsic in the implementation of curriculum.

Therefore, implementation is the most significant challenge for reform agenda in the region. In Taiwan, for example, more liberal reforms, such as the use of multiple textbooks, created resistance from parents who were concerned that their children would not be well prepared for examinations if a single prescribed textbook was not used. Developing a reform agenda is one thing, and implementing it is another. More details about implementation processes need to be learned not only in the region but beyond as well.

#### TEACHERS AND CLASSROOMS

Students from Shanghai, Taipei, and Hong Kong are known to perform well in international assessments. However, the reasons for their satisfactory performance

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are not yet well known. Two possible factors can be considered. Students from these cities work hard, and the literature indicates that they themselves attribute their success to their hard work rather than to their native ability (Mok, Kennedy, & Moore, 2011). Yet hardworking students need hardworking teachers, and McKinsey and Company (2011) reported that many of these teachers work in the region. Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong were included in the McKinsey study which indicated that teachers played a crucial role in sustaining high levels of student performance. However, a key factor remains missing in the analysis, and this factor is the recognition of cultural influences which give the teachers in the region a special status that cannot be replicated.

Why do teachers in the region work hard to achieve excellent results for their students? One way to understand the contribution of teachers in Chinese contexts was articulated by Kennedy (2011, p. 13).

We hear little about “developing the mind” and more about becoming a “good person”. We hear less about engaging students and more about students’ responsibility to themselves and their families for doing well. We hear less about problems with the teaching profession and more about respect for teachers. That is to say, the values underlying education in East Asia are almost opposite of those in the West.

Teachers and students in Chinese societies work in distinctive cultural contexts. While these contexts are not a ‘magic bullet’ for instant success, they do provide a platform for learning and achievement. Sun, Grant, and Stronge (Chapter 26), for example, reported differences between exemplary American and Chinese teachers. A major difference is that Chinese teachers stay on task with a particular activity even if students are having problems. American teachers are more likely to explore alternative activities for students, whereas Chinese teachers will try to solve the particular problem that the student is experiencing. This contrast is an issue of differentiation and instructional method, but may imply that in Chinese contexts, teachers persevere with a particular learning outcome rather than adopt multiple outcomes for different students in their classes. This is likely because achievement itself is valued, not only in school but at home and in society as well. Learning is not optional for Chinese students. Rather, it is embedded in a set of social processes that make the educational enterprise an important part of social development. Fueled by hardworking teachers, hardworking students are given a good start in learning which can pave the way to success and social well-being.

## CULTURE AND THE CURRICULUM

Throughout this introduction, many references have been made to culture and its apparent effects. Such effects have ranged from the possible effects of cultural values on the developmental state thesis that is often said to account for rapid economic growth in the region to the values teachers and students bring with them

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to the classroom. In making these suggestions, I do not want to imply that culture is some kind of monolithic phenomenon that inexorably affects the individuals in the region or that individuals have no control over these influences. As Mok, Kennedy, Moore, Shan, and Leung (2008) showed, Chinese cultural values can work quite differently for boys and girls; hence, the so-called “myth of the Chinese learner” may be more complex than originally envisioned. Culture is important, but its effects will be moderated by individuals and groups when conflicting values and influences resist what might often be seen as mainstream cultural values.

In revisiting the work associated with the so-called “Chinese learner,” Chan and Rao (2009), has made the valuable point that new curriculum and learning new demands are integrated or at least coexist with local cultural values and beliefs, which means that while the West remains an important resource for influencing educational reform, local values are not abandoned when adopting new Western values. Indeed, the opposite is probably the case. Asian societies are very good at adapting new ideas to suit their own ends and environments. This hybrid of Western-inspired ideas and Chinese characteristics is the real hallmark of the changes reported in this book. The emphasis on traditional moral education, for example, along with the recognition of the importance of so-called twenty-first century skills is a good example of the kind of hybrid thinking that can be found in the curriculum of Chinese societies. In the end, this hybridity may account for the successes of these societies as they negotiate a globalized world. Learning to change and what not to change perhaps best characterizes what is happening in Chinese societies as they develop curriculum for the twenty-first century.

#### CONCLUSION

Many scholars, such as Zhong and Tu (Chapter 2), Liu (Chapter 5), and Lv and Ma (Chapter 6), who have contributed to this book, advocate an ongoing curriculum research agenda. In addition, various curriculum research forms are reported in different chapters, including the use of surveys, case studies, and advanced statistical modeling, among others. For example, Liu and Ma (Chapter 6) used Decker Walker’s curriculum model to report the deliberative processes used in the national curriculum development in Mainland China, while Liu (Chapter 5) called for more localization of curriculum research rather than the adoption of Western methods. The following question identifies the challenge for future curriculum research in Chinese societies: what would be considered indigenous forms of curriculum research that could open up possibilities for exploring and better understanding milieu, subjects, students, and teachers?

The chapters in this book, as reflected in the analysis in the previous section, show the focus of cultural assumptions that influence schools, curriculum, students, and teachers. Any research agenda must consider these assumptions so cultural analysis becomes an integral part of indigenous research activities. Culture, of course, is linked to politics, values, and social norms, thus providing extensive agenda for

researchers. Yet it seems clear that to ignore cultural assumptions that underlie the curriculum is to ignore a key aspect of what the curriculum means.

The commonplaces of milieu, subjects, teachers, and students remain important in the cultural contexts described in this book. A number of chapters also dealt with assessment (Gao, Chapter 25; Hung & Lee, chapter 25). Therefore, adding an assessment of the commonplaces, at least for the study of Chinese societies, does not seem unrealistic, especially because assessment plays such a central role in the lives of students, teachers, and parents that it can hardly be avoided. At times, certain ideas seem conflicting. For example, examinations remain in place, but formative assessment is considered to enhance student learning. Evidence from Hong Kong indicates clearly that teacher practice is guided by examinations despite assessment reforms (Brown, Hui, Yu, & Kennedy, 2011). Although elements of formative assessment have been introduced into classrooms in Hong Kong, they still have not replaced tests and examinations. The pedagogical uses of assessment are highlighted when formative assessment is introduced and when assessment is not performed simply by conducting a weekly test. If, as Schwab suggested, a commonplace is viewed “as a body of experience necessary for curriculum making and revision” (Joseph, 1986, p. 127), then assessment, as described in these contexts, is a fundamental curriculum issue that likely influences basic curriculum assumptions.

Therefore, any indigenous curriculum research agenda must include assessment as an area for investigation. The connections between assessment to different settings, subjects, teachers, and students can be explored in multiple ways because no single method can answer all the possible questions epistemologically. Methods in themselves are tools. Questions shape the research agenda and should be generated from local experiences. Questions are the foundation of an indigenous research agenda because they arise from what is important in local contexts. How to answer such questions is a second-order process; getting the questions right is a first-order priority for a research agenda that addresses real needs and issues.

This book is an excellent start on building such an agenda. Each chapter generates multiple questions that can become the basis of further research. Scholars who have called for ongoing curriculum research agenda are correct to do so because inquiry is the core of academic work. This book provides the foundation for new work in curriculum studies. All we need to do is to ask the right questions and continue conducting research on this matter to better understand the commonplaces—including assessment—that shape not just the curriculum, but also the societies in which they are embedded.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Schwab (1969) defined four curriculum “commonplaces” relevant to consideration of any curriculum: subject matter, students, teachers and milieu
- <sup>2</sup> See David Labaree’s chapter, “How Dewey lost: The victory of David Snedden and social efficiency in the reform of American education”. In D. Trohler, D. Schlag & F. Osterwalder (Eds.), *Pragmatism and Modernities* (163–190). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, for an excellent analysis of competing strands in early twentieth century progressivism.



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