China: Adult Education and Learning from Mao to Now

Roger Boshier

Abstract This chapter focuses on people who developed imaginative forms of adult education in early and late communist eras in China. It traces contours of the 2001 learning initiative and analyses impediments to its success. The chief impediments to learning and education in China arise from four critical issues—contradictions, campaign scepticism and fatigue, limits on intellectual freedom and a psychology of converging on 'correct' answers. By 2016, there were nationwide calls to give up the notion China is the 'workshop of the world' and build a culture of innovation. The author is a good friend of China but has reservations about the top-down, authoritarian, non-participatory and flaccid nature of 'teaching' in China's leading universities. Moreover, dumping a black bag over Ai Weiwei's head sends a stern message to citizens whose notions of learning and innovation deviate from the Party line. At the same time, Chinese are avid learners and there is an active group seeking to convince 82 million communists to build a 'learning Party'. In many places—but particularly Shanghai—learning is a code for a democratic (Communist) Party. It is encouraging to know this initiative is coming from within the Party—and is endorsed by high officials.

Learning for Revolution

Despite Party preoccupations with its history, few Chinese people know about creative adult education methods and techniques that helped bring communists to power. Instead of learning about Republican-era innovations or participatory Communist Party methodologies of earlier periods, too many contemporary

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M. Milana et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning*,
https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55783-4_30

advocates of adult education are rendered docile and silenced by slideshow snoozefests.

There were plenty of innovative attempts to foster learning in the Republican era. After 1949, China deployed massive adult education and literacy programmes but, regrettably, was isolated behind a bamboo curtain. Hence, when Lengrand (1968) was promoting lifelong education, Ivan Illich (1971) advocating deschooling and Edgar Faure and Majid Rahnema travelling the world gathering material for *Learning to be* (Faure 1972), they avoided China. Mao's alleged 'thoughts' provided the mandatory map for the road ahead, there was a compelling inevitability concerning the superiority of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the theatrical cult-of-Mao was in full swing. So why listen to Lengrand, Gelpi, Rahnema, Hutchins, Cropley, Kidd, Thomas, Faure or other foreign advocates of lifelong education? In China, foreigners have always been part of the problem, not the solution.

Despite the bamboo curtain of the Mao era, by 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and President Jiang Zemin launched a learning initiative, there was no organised resistance to Party plans. In China, even a marginalised street-sleeper or cave dweller will do anything to get a book, magazine or newspaper because, after so much deprivation, learners are highly motivated. Nearly everybody likes learning and our favourite informants are formally uneducated, illiterate rural women who, despite a lack of schooling, know about climate change, agriculture, animals, official malfeasance, dodgy politics and the fragility of food production.

After 2001, policy analysts at the Central Party School (the university of the Communist Party) worked on theory about lifelong learning and municipal leaders were expected to apply the ideas in a manner congruent with their local context. Work arising from these partnerships rarely transcends the Party line. Hence, a lot of education research is crippled by self-censorship and focussed on government pronouncements. Human beings are mostly invisible. To help redress this situation, this chapter deliberately focuses on human actors in the fascinating drama of Chinese politics, adult education and lifelong learning enacted against the backdrop of ancient traditions.

After he unified China, the first emperor (Qin) banned private schooling and permitted only tutorials conducted by imperial officials. Later, there were Taixue schools to teach Confucianism and groom civil servants for imperial service (Yang 2012). There were lectures and self-study but not much discussion and no argument. Even now, 2000 years after Taixue, there is a preoccupation with innovation but no official appetite for open discussion. 'Serving the emperor' is an enduring tradition and, in recent years, it has become unlawful to criticise the Communist Party. However, the situation is not all bad. During early republican and communist eras, theatre troupes, puppet shows and drama presentations drew on ancient Chinese traditions. After 1949, the Chinese adult education system became the biggest in the world and, before being eroded by Human Resource Development (HRD), involved high levels of humour, improvisation, creativity and learner participation.

Learning for Nation-Building

On 31 January 1949, units of the People's Army marched into what was then called Beiping. The civil war was finishing more quickly than either side had imagined. On 1 October 1949, Mao appeared above the 'Gate of Heavenly Peace' (at Tiananmen) and, in his thick Hunan accent, announced formation of the People's Republic. 'China has stood up', he said. Regrettably, China then opted for isolation. Foreigners had to leave, there were no family visits and few tourists. Having relatives abroad was dangerous and ordinary Chinese could not travel. The Party was not ready to run a town or city, let alone a vast country of regions enfeebled by war. Authorities needed capable people but illiterate Red Army soldiers did not have (and, in too many cases, still do not have) public administration skills. Nationalist officials had fled to Taiwan, were incarcerated or in hiding. The solution was adult education.

After 30 years of war, there was an urgent need to rebuild a battered nation and leaders launched mass literacy programmes. Because he was an army officer, modest, politically safe and an experienced adult educator, Yao Zhongda was invited into the Zhongnanhai leadership compound (at the Forbidden City). In 1953, 28-year-old Yao became Chief of the Bureau of Workers' and Peasants Education in the Ministry of Education (Boshier 2013). Zhongnanhai is adjacent to the Forbidden City and ordinary citizens cannot go there. Few people (Chinese or foreign) have seen inside. Farms throughout China produce food for those living there. To avert poisoning, tasters screened what Mao ate.

Despite being at the apex of politics in 'new' China, Yao Zhongda's family did not live like emperors. Assigned only one room of less than 12 m^2, there was no space for daughter Yao Lili so she lived with a nanny in another section. Yao lived (and worked) near Premier Zhou Enlai and others involved in the huge task of persuading exhausted citizens to get a notebook and go to a class to learn Chinese characters. There were teacher shortages, authoritarianism, anti-rightist campaigns and much controversy concerning remedies for illiteracy. From the start, literacy campaigns were derailed by logistical difficulties and shortages. Book production was inhibited by paper scarcity and central government takeover of publishers and printing plants. Most Chinese people were illiterate and lived in the countryside. Chinese publishers were used to producing reading material for urbanites but knew little about rural life. From 1949 onwards, there were bottlenecks in the publishing industry. Because of their higher production value and content relevant to daily life, only about one-third of available books were suitable for poorly educated rural people. By 1954, of 950 million books printed, two-thirds of them were mostly useless. Despite squabbles involving publishers and party officials, whether they liked it or not, peasants were required to learn 500 and workers 2000 Chinese characters. All regions needed literacy organisations and Yao spent a lot of time travelling but was usually happy to be in the countryside.

Peasants did not like being cajoled into literacy programmes only loosely linked to farm life. Many older people considered themselves incapable of

learning. This 'would make the teacher angry', said Yao with a chuckle (Z.D. Yao, personal communication with the author, December 10, 2009). As a former farm boy from Tangxian County near the Wutai mountains, Yao (1981, 1994) understood peasants, knew how to interact with animals and cheerfully encouraged reluctant learners. But despite the efforts of Yao and others, peasants got shunted into the background. Then, as now, urbanites were the priority.

There were bitter disputes about literacy theory. One group (inside the Party) was infatuated with Soviet literacy models; another wanted to retain the revolutionary zeal of 1930s and 1940s Yan'an. For them, the task was to continue the struggle for political mobilisation. But opponents described Yan'an yearnings as romantic 'guerrilla education' not suitable for nation-building. A third faction wanted to develop decentralised (local) minban village schools without the authoritarianism and uniform curricula of formal (Ministry of Education) schools.

In 1953, China embraced a Stalinist model of industrialisation and Premier Zhou Enlai stunned peasants by saying no more money would be spent in the countryside because it was needed for heavy industry in urban areas. This announcement was a clear warning of what lay ahead and continues to this day. Urbanites would get richer while rural people endured a 'country hick' social stigma and languished in poverty. From 1949 to 1955, rural literacy was 'repeatedly forced to take a back seat' to more urgent 'mass education' in urban areas (Petersen 1997).

The most concerted literacy campaigns occurred from March 1956 to 1960. This coincided with Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward wherein citizens were forced into communes, ordered to run backyard steel foundries and, as experienced by Yao Zhongda's brother, endure punishment for non-compliance. Officials needed to curry official favour by producing positive food production or literacy results so they cooked up false data or resorted to extreme, 'all-out', military methods such as 'storming'. Great Leap food production statistics were fabricated and there is no reason to think literacy 'achievements' were any better (Petersen 1997).

About 40 million Chinese people died in the Great Leap famine of 1958–1960 and, to this day, an ominous shadow hangs over Mao-era grain harvests and literacy campaigns tarnished by lies and inept governance (Dikötter 2010). Fakery and fibs still obscure many aspects of life in China (Hessler 2006) and on 18 December 2015, in the middle of a 'red alert' triggered by Beijing smog, *China Daily* reported '10 executives suspected of faking pollution data'.

Despite the trauma of 1950s famine, for adult education, it was not all bad news. Knowing it was impossible to meet all learners in face-to-face settings, correspondence education started in the 1950s. The Shanghai radio and television university started in 1960 but, like everything else, was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. However, after Mao died in 1976, radio and T.V. universities restarted in 1978.

Despite difficulties, respected adult educators launched careers in radio or television universities and, particularly in Shanghai, did interesting research and craved contact with foreigners. In 1984, when Ingrid Pipke and the author visited a T.V. university in a Shanghai tobacco factory, Roger Boshier was invited to question a large class. Pointing at a worker in the front row, the author asked 'What have you learned today?' After a gruelling hour watching text (about hydraulics) scrolling across a small screen, there was considerable laughter but, for the hapless victim, grave doubts about the 'correct' answer to this question.

After 40 million people died in famine triggered by the (1958–1960) Great Leap Forward (Dikötter 2010) and Mao purged Minister of Defence Peng Dehuai on Mount Lu (Lushan), the Communist Party was in turmoil. However, in 1960, Yao Zhongda was transferred to the Office of Culture and Education in the State Council (equivalent to the cabinet in a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy). Chastened by challenges to his authority, Mao decided to eliminate threats to his leadership and the so-called 'cultural revolution' would soon begin. Nobody could escape its madness and even the State Council was 'rectified'. There is an old tradition in China where regime enemies (real or imagined) are banished to border regions. Emperors in the Qin dynasty did it and so did Mao Zedong (Lary 2007). Despite being a loyal communist and hard-worker, Yao the adult educator would get his turn.

Ningxia is a remote border region north of Gansu. From late 1957 to early 1958, more than 300,000 rightists and right-opportunists were hauled off to border regions. In his autobiography *Grass Soup*, Zhang (1994) vividly described life in Ningxia labour camps. In December 1968, Yao Zhongda and other State Council employees were dropped into a former prison farm on Helan Mountain in Ningxia. Yao's wife was sent to a cadres school in Henan province. Their son (Yao Xiaojun) was left with his big sister in Beijing. Yao Lili, their daughter, was sent for re-education in Neimeng (Inner Mongolia), described in the extraordinary autobiography by Ma (1995). Like most others, the Yao family was fractured and, for Zhongda, it would be years before he would see the city again.

In the mid-1970s, Mao Zedong had motor neuron (Lou Gehrig's) disease. On 9 September 1976, Yao was in Shijiazhuang when news of the Chairman's death arrived and 'unlike others, I did not cry', he said. After being harassed for 30 years, intellectuals could now assume their 'proper place' in Chinese society (Fewsmith 2001) and there would be huge audiences for adult education. Yao died just before this book was published but in 2016 (when this was written), was 91 years old and showed the author and Xu Minghui five albums of photographs taken at adult education events. He did not have a computer but had no need to worry about Facebook, Twitter or Google. All are banned in China.

Madame Li Li

In Jiangsu province, January 1949 was a defining moment in the Chinese civil war. On 25 January, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) captured the Grand

Canal and by the 31st, most land north of the Yangtse was in communist hands. From November 1948 to January 1949, the 'vicious and brutal' Huaihai campaign decimated Jiangsu (Lary 2015: 143). However, by the time PLA soldiers reached Shanghai, nationalist troops knew the situation was hopeless. Marshall Chen Yi became the mayor of Shanghai and had to create a government.

Li Li was born into a large family in Huai'an, Zhou En Lai's home town in Jiangsu. She joined the Communist Party in 1940 and, at age 14, became a soldier in the New 4th army fighting Japan. During the civil war, along with the rest of the New 4th Army, Li Li crossed the Yangtse River. On 20 April, she got involved in a Monty Python-like drama involving the British Royal Navy sloop *Amethyst* which, in an attempted rescue of Nanjing nationalists, had grounded on a sandbank separating Kuomintang and communist armies (Murfett 1991; Boshier and Huang 2009a).

Li Li later headed the Shanghai Bureau of Adult Education. From 1958 to her retirement, she built programmes for the education of workers and peasants. Along with Yao Zhongda and Fang Jing, Li Li was a key participant in negotiations which led to the 1984 Shanghai symposium on adult education (Boshier and Huang 2009a).

Foreign Devils

In March 1974, 25 Canadians visited China under auspices of the Canadian Association for Adult Education but minders controlled them. Four years later, Americans arrived. After Mao died, many curious foreigners were keen to see China. Imperialist lackeys were now waiting in Yao Zhongda's outer office in Beijing! Foreign delegations would typically call on the Minister, be taken to Yao and then to farms, factories, a T.V. university or community centre. In 1978, Yao was working as Deputy Chief of the Department of Adult Education in the Ministry of Education and was Secretary-General of the Chinese Adult Education Association.

In 1977, the Cultural Revolution was still vivid when Deng Xiaoping told educational leaders to 'speak-up … you are over-cautious and afraid of making mistakes … you should work freely and boldly, and think independently instead of always looking over your shoulder' (Deng 1977: 82). It was good advice but citizens had heard this before and, just like now, there were good reasons for caution.

Those denied education because of the Cultural Revolution are known as the 'lost-generation'. After Deng took power, damaged citizens hoped for a better life and there was an enormous demand for adult education. When adult education centres reopened after the Cultural Revolution, there were millions of eager learners. Hence, when Boshier et al. (2005) surveyed senior citizen learners in Shanghai about why they engaged in adult education, significant numbers said it was to 'make-up' for earlier disruptions in their lives.

1984 Shanghai Symposium on Adult Education

Despite displays of exaggerated grief, there were enormous sighs of relief when Mao died in 1976. Soon after the Chairman's death, Deng Xiaoping's 1978 'reform-and-opening' was underway and during 1980s 'cultural fever' (Wang 1996; Barmé 1999), the International Council of Adult Education orchestrated a successful meeting of Chinese and foreign adult educators (Boshier and Huang 2005; Boshier and Huang 2009b).

The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) was founded in 1972 but, despite effort, unable to penetrate the Middle Kingdom. But with Deng Xiaoping calling for reform-and-opening, Roby Kidd sensed an opportunity. He and Tanzanian Paul Mhaiki went to Beijing in May 1978 where they found Yao Zhongda. Both sides realised new opportunities lay on the road ahead.

Yao had to be careful and 5 years passed before China joined the ICAE in 1983. These arrangements took time because Yao needed permission from numerous officials above him in the Beijing hierarchy. In 1983, a Deng faction in Beijing favoured reform but, like now, others worried about Marxism being eroded by Western values. In 1983–1984, Beijing politics involved 'swerves, retreats and sudden jumps' (Spence 1990). Fortunately for the ICAE, Yao had the right class background, was a respected civil servant and skilled negotiator.

The International Council handed Chris Duke the 'China file' and he worked with Charles Wong of Hong Kong. They needed to turn small talk and time-consuming banquets into commitments (C. Duke, personal communication with the author, November 3, 2005). The ICAE wanted an international meeting of Chinese and Western adult educators. Why certain people were invited and others told to stay home is a continuing mystery. But, considering language, cultural and other barriers, the symposium was a landmark event. Charles Wong (personal communication with the author, November 3, 2005) felt putting it in Shanghai was significant. 'Yao was opened-minded. In Shanghai there was more freedom from prevailing protocol and ideological restrictions. Yao took it very seriously'. There were capable participants on both sides of the discussion and 'the right people were in charge'.

Organisers insisted presenters provide only a brief overview of papers after which a 'reaction panel' made comments and raised questions. Then, in plenary or full symposium sessions, there was more discussion. The Shanghai symposium would consider adult education theories, applications and systems. The indefatigable Chris Duke (1987) turned notebook scrawlings into *Proceedings*. As well, he edited 'lead' and 'tabled' papers and summarised group discussions. In Shanghai, editors of the *Adult Education Journal* produced a parallel *Proceedings* in Chinese (Chinese Adult Education Association 1985).

Papers by Chinese presenters contained little (or no) theory and all sat on a Party line midway between the end of the Cultural Revolution and Deng's not yet fully opened door. Learners were not in the foreground of Chinese presentations which spoke of the need to formalise non-formal settings! Yet, there was a strong desire to find communalities. 'Especially for participants from the

West, themselves of widely differing ideological persuasions and forced to be on their best behaviour in front of strangers, the experience doubtless stirred in many an unusual level of critical self-awareness … . There was a lot of thought-provoking disorientation' (Duke 1987: 233–234).

In 1984, there were 92 institutions offering adult/higher education in Shanghai and Madame Li Li (Boshier and Huang 2009a) felt the 1984 symposium had important consequences:

- It was a 'big eye-opener'. Chinese had a chance to learn about adult education theory and processes from other countries. 'After having little access to the West, this was a revelation'. It was a 'grand event' which led to a general mobilisation of Shanghai adult educators. 'We had to do a good job and be open to international influences'.
- 'It stimulated Shanghai adult educators to do more and different kinds of research'.
- 'It tested the abilities of Shanghai people to organise a big international event. Delegates visited 26 sites. It was a formidable challenge'.
- 'It fostered continuing collaboration with overseas adult educators'. After the symposium, the No. 2 Institute of Education stayed in touch with Westerners (some of whom came in the wake of the symposium). The Hongkou Sparetime University set up multimedia classrooms with help from Australia.
- It stimulated a national imperative in Chinese adult education research and practice.

Meetings were held at the historic Jin Jiang hotel and delegates tumbled out of bed when an earthquake disturbed their slumbers. After the symposium, exuberant Fang Jing wrote a history of Shanghai adult education (Wang et al. 1991; Fang 1999) and helped create a Jossey-Bass collection of Chinese material (Wang et al. 1988). Yan Huang and the author visited Fang Jing at home in Ganyu where his 1984 photograph album showed Chinese and Westerners laughing and dancing. In a burst of excitement, Wang Wen Lin had said, 'we are unifying the contradictions' (Duke 1987). This was unquestionably the Shanghai, not Sydney, Stuttgart or San Paulo symposium on adult education.

Chinese Learning Initiative

The 1989 Tiananmen massacre poured cold water on goodwill generated by the 1984 Shanghai symposium. Joint projects were abandoned within minutes of gunfire ricocheting down Chang'an Avenue, blood appearing on T.V. screens or troops massing in Fengtai. By the end of the twentieth century, there had been no apology for state-sanctioned violence but memories of Tiananmen atrocities had subsided.

In 2001, 12 years after the Tiananmen tragedy, China joined the WTO and President Jiang Zemin said the government wanted a 'lifelong learning system leading to a learning society'. Jiang had probably not read the Faure (1972) Report but, at Beijing Normal University, Professor Gu Mingyuan was familiar with it (Gu 2001). In addition, Shanghai professors and advisers at the Central Party School were excited by Senge's (1990) work on learning organisations. Hence, in October 2002, the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party confirmed a proposal 'to promote lifelong learning so as to ensure the all-round development of citizens' (Jiang 2002; Report of the 16th Congress 2002).

At first, the focus was on learning organisations. Later, it switched to learning cities, districts, villages (Boshier and Huang 2006b, 2007), hospitals (Boshier and Qi 2008; Huang and Boshier 2008; Boshier 2011) police stations, streets and learning mountains (Boshier and Huang 2006a). By 2015, learning cities had been linked to the quest for innovation (Department of Vocational & Adult Education 2015).

In Beijing, Tsinghua University launched 'TusPark' in a major effort to marketise university knowledge. The Tsinghua University Science Park is supposed to produce social and economic benefits for China (Rhoads et al. 2014). In Yangpu district, Shanghai, there have been energetic attempts to build a learning district by fostering collaborative relationships between 14 universities, businesses and the 'community' (which, in China, means Party created and supervised social organisations (Boshier 2015). At the same time, Chinese government researchers openly acknowledge the fact many utopian ideas about learning cities are not compatible with economic development (see Department of Vocational & Adult Education 2015: 29). The most revolutionary proposal—still waiting for action—is the plan to build a learning (Communist) Party.

Out in the countryside, Shuang Yu learning village is a triumph of imagination at the intersection of tradition and modernity and contains a dazzling array of learning activities for poor and formally uneducated Chinese (Boshier and Huang 2007). Just like people in Shuang Yu, Y.F. Wang of the Shanghai Ming De Centre for Learning Organisations stressed the need for holistic perspectives and claimed accidents (such as the Wenzhou railway crash) and environmental catastrophes (such as the Three Gorges Dam) arise from atomistic thinking. As well as dismantling borders between learning and life, the learning initiative ought to foster ecological thinking. Teaching and learning processes should be flexible, participatory and informed by local conditions (Y.F. Wang, personal communication with the author, April 21, 2005).

By 2016, there was still plenty initiative of enthusiasm for Jiang Zemin's learning initiative and more than 400 companies had settled into Tsinghua's science park. Official enthusiasm for the learning initiative was also demonstrated when the Chinese Ministry of Education and Beijing municipal authorities co-hosted the 2013 UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning conference on learning cities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2014).

As a clear sign of importance Beijing attaches to the learning initiative, the central government sent Vice-Premier Liu Yandong to present a keynote speech. Madame Liu, a jovial chemical engineer, became Vice-Premier after the fall of Bo Xilai. Official speeches in China often focus on money. Instead, Vice-Premier Liu cheerfully spoke about human needs and desire to build a more open, humane, learning-oriented society. After her speech, Roger Boshier (2014b) and Peking University student Jade Zhao interviewed the Vice-Premier about transforming Beijing into a learning city. What are the biggest barriers to getting the job done? 'The biggest barrier? That would be my colleagues', she said with a chuckle. 'How come?' said Boshier. 'They think it's all about money', she said. The Vice-Premier considered the learning city a human, not just an economic problem! She is a graduate of Tsinghua University and only woman in the current Politburo.

The seriousness of the Beijing commitment to learning cities was also signalled by the energetic Chinese delegation to the second UNESCO conference on learning cities held in Mexico City, 27–29 September 2015 where Beijing won a UNESCO learning city award. According to China's Ministry of Education (2014), 100 Chinese cities have embraced learning as a fundamental pillar of development. The seriousness of the Beijing commitment to learning is in no doubt but continuously derailed by hard-to-ignore critical questions.

Critical Issues

Despite Vice-Premier Liu's good manners, what happens inside the Chinese learning initiative occurs against the backdrop of tense discussions about whether China should adopt universal values (like democracy or human rights) or stick with the relativism of 'Chinese characteristics' involving political authoritarianism and grave doubts concerning the rule of law (Kelly 2013) in a Leninist state. Learners are not the problem. Instead, impediments to the Chinese learning initiative tend to be political, not personal.

Each impediment points to the need to better theorise lifelong learning and deploy critical (maybe even Marxist) perspectives in twenty-first-century China. The chief impediments to the learning initiative concern contradictions, campaign fatigue, limits on intellectual freedom and the prevalence of a psychology of convergence.

Contradictions

Beijing says they are committed to open forms of learning and 'innovation-driven development' (New engine for development, *China Daily,* 25 October, 2013: 8). In late 2015, innovation became a central pillar of the 13th 5-year plan. But do high officials realise there is more to innovation than pouring concrete or ordering underpaid rural migrants to build dams, airports or roads?

Columbia University's economist Edmund Phelps (2015)—who won a Nobel Prize in 2006—has hard questions for Chinese capitalists and Beijing notions of innovation. In his view, capitalism should not be unduly focussed on making money. Nor should it spawn top-heavy organisations headed by bullying, egocentric, devious, corrupt and over-paid Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) incapable of fostering grassroots innovation.

Phelps claims modern capitalism requires creativity, innovation, democratic forms of organisation, a culture of consultation, an absence of fear, respect for human rights and willingness to tolerate (and learn from) mistakes. Along with struggling corporations in the United States and Japan, rapacious Chinese capitalism (or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics') is not headed in the desired direction (Phelps 2015). In China, top-down governance, self-censorship, bullying, distrust, a culture of fear and unwillingness to consider new ideas are the antitheses of innovation.

China is a low-trust society and human rights are constrained. Nobel prize winner Liu Xiaobo is 7 years into a long prison sentence and Professor Ilham Tohti (44-year-old former economics professor of Minzu University—see Rhoads et al. 2014) got life in jail for running a Uyghur-focussed website. Uyghur are the indigenous people of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Locking up the Minzu professor and his graduate students caused worldwide consternation (Ilham Tohti should get a Nobel Prize, not prison, *The Guardian,* 24 September, 2014); hence, Amnesty International and others continue to agitate for his release. At the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Canada, questions have been raised about the viability of nurturing academic projects with China while Tohti (and others) are incarcerated.

Corruption, surveillance, stringent media controls and disregard for the law amongst local Party officials are all part of everyday life in China. In Guizhou, educational authorities installed cameras in classrooms to 'build an all-round oversight system for teaching quality control' (Guizhou province orders its universities to install cameras in classrooms, *Caixin,* 12 March, 2014). The Ministry of Education cited 'making remarks or performing deeds that are against the Party's principles and policies in teaching' as one of seven behaviours 'strictly forbidden for university instructors' (Ministry issues stern warning, *China Daily,* 10 November, 2014: 1).

None of this is congruent with open, democratic and dynamic forms of learning in formal, non-formal or informal settings. Although key concepts in the Faure Report (e.g. learning society) are in Beijing discourse, the social democratic politics of *Learning to Be* were ditched long ago. In too many Chinese settings, lifelong learning is a narrow, techno-rational, applied and pragmatic matter rife with contradictions.

Mediocre Teaching

In 1997, 400,000 students graduated from four-year university programmes. By 2015, Chinese universities were producing more than three million graduates a year. But are they innovative and seriously engaged with their studies? As

a university field of study, higher education struggles to establish a foothold. Because Chinese higher education lacks an empirical basis (Yang 2016a; Yang 2016b), policy is instead cooked up in Ministry of Education or Party offices.

Chinese researchers rarely look at what occurs in university classrooms. Part of this chapter was written while the author was at top Beijing universities (e.g. Peking University, Beijing Normal, Renmin, Tianjin Normal, Tsinghua) and others in the Shanghai or Yangtze delta region. The author visited classes in 'teaching blocks' and saw numerous students fiddling with phones and snoozing through media presentations crammed with text. Several multi-storied teaching blocks have recently been built and are used for lecturing at sullen, silent and disempowered undergraduates. On successive days, the author visited lower, middle and upper floors of teaching blocks at elite universities but need not have bothered because the teaching 'style' was the same in every room.

The author's modus operandi was to enter at the back of the room (or look through the glass panel of a door) and watch classes already in progress. Sometimes, an instructor stood on their own feet but, more often than not, sat in the 'teaching station' up front and talked to a computer screen. If of small stature, the instructor was barely (or not) visible from the back of the room.

Even at Peking (PKU) and Tsinghua—the top universities in China—so-called 'teaching' involved little (if any) learner participation and no hints of innovation. All over the world (but particularly in China), media projectors silence learners, kill dialogue and shield lazy teachers by ensuring there are no opportunities for learners to challenge (or even clarify) orthodox—often out-of-date—'wisdom'.

The architecture in Chinese university teaching blocks is strongly tilted towards boredom, docility and reinforcing the authority of the emperor (and Communist Party). Because seats are fixed to the floor, it is difficult for the instructor to do anything other than show slides and talk. Walk into a teaching block and it is abundantly clear who is in charge. Dreary (and out-of-date) media presentations put learners to sleep or ensure their silence. There is almost no chance anything innovative will arise from this kind of teaching and learning. However, teaching blocks accurately reflect the political economy of power relations nested in twenty-first-century Chinese higher education. If power corrupts, Powerpoint corrupts absolutely!

In social surveys, Chinese university students repeatedly recall 'favourite' teachers as being kind and warm-hearted (Boshier 2014a; Boshier and Ogawa 2015). Reading text from a screen is not an attribute of good teaching. By early 2016, Tsinghua and Beijing Normal universities were experimenting with chairs on wheels that could be pulled around to form discussion groups for graduate students. But there were no signs of relief for undergraduates sentenced to the silencing technologies of slideshow tedium.

During interviews conducted with students at Peking University, Renmin, Tsinghua and other places, the author confirmed the fact slideshow tedium was the norm. Although leading universities compete for high places on Times, Jiaotong and other rankings, Chinese university 'teaching' needs radical reform.

High officials are familiar with the problem. Three cheerful and well-educated Chinese ambassadors (to Canada) appeared at a 12 November 2015 UBC event to celebrate the 45th anniversary of Canadian engagement with China. During wide-open question-and-answer sessions, the ambassadors (Lu Shumin, Zhang, H.E. and Lan Lijun) all acknowledged the lack of teacher–student interaction in Chinese universities and expressed doubts about the chances of anything innovative coming out of teaching blocks filled with undergraduates.

Punishing Innovation

By 2016, Beijing wanted to ditch the idea China is the workshop of the world. From now on, innovation would be the leit motif—the organising principle—of Chinese economic activity, education, culture and science. It is a worthy goal but citizens will be hard-pressed to reconcile this idea with treatment meted out to China's most innovative citizens.

Sculptor and public intellectual Ai Weiwei is an intelligent, patriotic and innovative Chinese and co-designer of the National stadium (the Birds Nest) used for the 2008 Olympic Games. On 3 April 2011, plain-clothes Beijing police hauled Ai out of Capital Airport (at Beijing) and hustled him into a van where they dropped a thick black bag over his head (Martin 2013: 81). After an hour-and-a-half in the van, Ai was carried to an interrogation room where the bag was removed but he was handcuffed and forced to sit in prolonged silence. Having two police or soldiers guard a manacled prisoner by sitting very close, staring and saying nothing is intended to confuse and immobilise Chinese prisoners. The black bag was not as terrible as United States of America's (USA) torture methodologies (such as water-boarding, mock executions, attack by dogs, forced medication, sleep deprivation and assault by loud music) but, along with an 81-day incarceration, profoundly damaged Ai Weiwei.

The problem for China's best-known contemporary sculptor is having a head filled with ideas about innovation that do not fit the Party paradigm. Ai Weiwei's jailers could not understand why someone would make 2 million sunflower seeds (and display them at the Tate Modern gallery in London) but, after noting international outrage, and realising Ai was no ordinary criminal, released him on 22 June 2011. No charges were laid and, to this day, the sunflower seeds are a puzzle. However, if Ai Weiwei could endure torture by silence and have a black bag dumped over his head, Chinese learners and academic staff have good reasons to eschew innovation. Stay safe and stick with orthodox wisdom. The Ai Weiwei situation was a clear example of the ancient Chinese idiom 'kill the chicken to scare the monkey' (make an example of someone to scare others).

Campaign Fatigue

In China, complex issues are reduced to slogans extolling the virtues of the learning society, innovation and the Communist Party. Political slogans on billboards are a tradition stretching back to 1930s Shanghai, Jiangxi, the Long

March and Yan'an. Yet, without exception, every grandmother and taxi driver we have asked (since 1984) was sceptical of billboards and slogans erected by the Party state. Scepticism arises from fatigue created by campaigns causing widespread social harm.

The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution created permanent consternation concerning Party campaigns. Even when displayed on beautiful buildings like Shanghai's Jin Mao tower, twenty-first-century slogans about innovation or lifelong learning are waved off as 'rubbish' or 'more-of-the-same'. Like old pro-smoking billboards featuring respected leaders, citizens know today's slogans will soon disappear; others will be erected in their place. Because of campaign fatigue, lifelong learning activists trying to recruit learners too often meet resistance, apathy, even hatred.

Limits on Intellectual Freedom

Once citizens commit to lifelong learning, there is a chance they'll grow critical of one-dimensional exhortations and demand freedom to follow their interests. Genuine learning requires intellectual space. But Chinese history is choked with situations where citizens were urged to learn and then punished for doing so. For example, older Chinese remember Mao's 1957 100-flowers campaign where criticism (of the Party) was encouraged and then ruthlessly punished. This is only one of the numerous examples of why prudent Chinese keep quiet (and do not raise or answer questions in class). It is why educators did not have much confidence when President Deng Xiaoping told them to stop 'looking over your shoulder'.

In April 2013, President Xi climbed on a hackneyed but familiar bandwagon when he attacked Western values such as constitutional democracy; universal values (like human rights); media independence; civic participation; and nihilist criticisms of the party's past. After this official assault on Western values, universities were warned to get tough on professors (Yeung 2015) and the Ministry of Education launched a nationwide investigation of textbooks (Probe starts into textbooks with western values, *MarketWatch*, 20 March, 2015, Issue No. 359). Textbook inspectors should be careful because Western (enlightenment) values were in China before the West existed and, in 1993, Chinese university planners opted for Western (American and European) models. President Xi will need an impressive magic show to imitate prestigious Western universities but make their values disappear.

Academic freedom and university autonomy are controversial issues and influential Chinese university presidents are fed up with dancing around forbidden topics. Tsinghua colleagues insist that, 'after doing a few projects supporting the party, they leave you alone'. Academic freedom has to be earned. But, in their analysis of what makes a world-class university, Altbach and Salmi (2011) were not so sanguine. First, there is the problem of a Party secretary telling the university President what to do. Second, the lack of academic freedom, 'certainly hinders the ability of social science scholars to conduct scientific

inquiries on issues that are politically sensitive' (2011: 339). After interviewing faculty members and senior administrators at Peking University, Tsinghua, Renmin and Minzu Rhoads et al. (2014) exposed deep concern about the lack of academic freedom—even at research-intensive institutions committed to improving their position in the Shanghai Jiaotong list of world-class universities.

A salient plank in campus culture at Beida (Peking University) is the pursuit of knowledge 'with scepticism' (Rhoads et al. 2014); yet, graduates writing theses and dissertations about the politics of the South China Sea are told to conform to the Party line (e.g. on the Spratly Islands) or expect to fail their degree (J. Li, pseudonym for a PKU student, personal communication with the author, December 17, 2015).

Along with corruption, influence peddling, plagiarism and falsification of scientific data, the lack of academic freedom creates what Yang (2016a) labelled a 'toxic academic culture'. If Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds are a puzzle, by 2016, university autonomy and academic freedom were an even bigger challenge for high-party officials. In university classrooms, 'remarks' contradicting Party principles are strictly forbidden. Party critics are accused of "historical nihilism."

The Party has a long-standing tradition of vilifying foreigners and, when Beijing is insecure, anti-foreigner rhetoric increases and a week will be devoted to denouncing Japan. In 2014, the *People's Daily* published more than 42 articles blaming China's domestic problems on the 'black hand' of foreign forces (China turns up rhetoric against the west, *The New York Times,* 12 November, 2014). For example, just like for 4 June 1989, Beijing claimed the September 2014, 'Hong Kong umbrella movement was orchestrated by foreigners'.

Psychology of Convergence

China's entry into the WTO stimulated the 2001 learning initiative and, since then, *Study Times,* the *People's Daily* and other media have stressed the need for open and creative thinking capable of nurturing innovation. However, silence, docility, conformity and relentless searches for the one-right-answer will not get the job done. Nor does conformity erode toxic culture or build world-class universities (Zhao 2014).

The habit of converging on 'correct' ideas will not change in a hurry. For at least 2000 years, rote memorisation and good test scores provided government jobs and professional esteem in China. Today, rote memorisation is aided by plagiarism, sophisticated cheating devices and expensive cram schools preparing people for tests. Zhao (2014) felt China has the worst education system in the world because test scores 'are purchased by sacrificing creativity, divergent thinking, originality and individualism. The imposition of standardised tests … is a victory for authoritarianism'. On the positive side, although many adult education activities occur in traditional (child-oriented) classrooms with give-'em-hell teachers or instructors reading notes from a screen, there are plenty of cheerful and open-minded educators in libraries, seniors centres, community facilities and other nooks and crannies of the learning initiative. For example, in

imaginary Shuang Yu village, residents happily teach each other (Boshier and Huang 2007).

The ability of China to become an innovative, technologically sophisticated and modern nation will partly depend on ditching convergence in favour of a psychology of divergence. Instead of insisting on 'correct' answers, how about producing divergent alternatives? But already there is a problem. The Party secretary does not like divergence that could be headed for the same black hole as civil society and other Western values. Here is where isolated rural learning activists have an advantage. For example, in Shuang Yu learning village, problem-posing outstrips problem-solving and there are few 'correct' answers. In echoes of the Yan'an era, even the chain-smoking Party secretary gets into buzz groups, draws on flip charts, sings and participates in role-plays. Shuang Yu wisely 'lost' their two media projectors in a local river. For them, cards, felt pens and sticky tape are the high-technology of twenty-first-century learning. Beijing could learn lots from Shuang Yu but the villagers do not want to become a curiosity, tourist venue or "model" for others. Older villagers have vivid memories of Mao-era "learn from Dazhai" fakery and foolishness. Besides, as an act of imagination, Shuang Yu can be elusive.

Barren Research

Chinese citizens are rarely asked to explain their lives and, despite millions of willing (and interested) respondents, university researchers are reluctant to talk with ordinary people. This is because China is a low-trust society characterised by high levels of suspicion and superstition. Citizens are wary because Chinese researchers might be doing surveillance—like nosy neighbourhood committees of the Mao era.

Because Chinese university-based researchers typically show little interest in old comrades, other residents took note when Roger Boshier and Xu Minghui turned up for a 10-day talk with Yao Zhongda on the 9th floor of retired cadres' accommodation in Fengtai (Boshier 2013). After Liberation, Yao directed one of the biggest adult education programmes in history. But, for twenty-first-century scholars, tales of rural hardship, ill-fitting army uniforms, book shortages or exuberant adult education theatre troupes or poster campaigns are an embarrassing reminder of a tortured past.

As an academic field of study, Chinese adult education is in steep decline. The small number of professors who once taught it at universities have retired, defected to HRD or opted for lifelong learning. The number of doctoral students studying adult education has shrunk to almost none. There are numerous relevant academic journals—such as *Open Education Research* (published in Shanghai) and *Lifelong Education* (published in Fujian). Almost every province has an adult education journal. But too much research has weak empirical foundations, no theory and nothing resembling a critical perspective.

'Research' is too often a regurgitation of prescriptions in government policy papers, choked with flawed statistics or involves an atheoretical descriptive 'case

study'. In Chinese higher education, the gross enrolment rate jumped from 9.8% in 1998 to 24.2% in 2009. However, the massification of Chinese higher education has not produced better research. Instead, the focus is on producing a large numbers of articles. 'A culture of junk research and academic corruption has resulted' and, as in many Western universities, the education of students 'has become a secondary concern' (Minzer 2013). University teaching staff are under immense pressure to publish in journals with high scores on the Chinese *Social Science Citation Index*. A well-placed department head at Tsinghua university (Zhou 2016) estimates 20% of articles published in 'good' journals involve an exchange of cash (e.g. in gifts or bribes) or goods (e.g. a flash dinner for the editor).

Research-for-its-own-sake is an alien concept. The pragmatic vocationalism of Chinese learners flows from the collapse of danwei (work units), disdain for 'useless' theory and anxiety about job prospects. Nagging parents urging children into 'useful' subjects like computers and engineering are part of this theory/practice problem. In addition, too many students are not in high-trust relationships. Women and girls have a double burden. Conversation with parents turns into exhortations about studying something useful, finding a husband and producing a son. But, in the marriage game, women with a Ph.D. risk being leftover or dismissed as inferior 'yellow pearls' (Zhou and Fang 2014).

Chinese research is inhibited by dislike of theory and a strong preference for quantitative methodology. This is because subjective ontology was discredited by Maoism and replaced by fondness for so-called objectivist science and number-crunching. Everywhere, there is a pronounced aversion to qualitative enquiry because of the 'statisticalisation' of Chinese life (Liu 2009). Statistics are a mode of discipline and governance. Hard data are considered less hot to handle than the messy politics of human subjectivity. Even if the researcher cannot explain what the numbers mean, they look more 'academic' than other forms of data. Official statistics are not trustworthy and many citizens assume somebody makes up numbers for the purpose of concealing problems (like air pollution or water purity). Just about every taxi driver (with whom we have discussed it) is certain there is an office for making up numbers. Some even claim to know where the 'making-up-numbers' office is located—over there, next to the noodle shop!

Research lacking statistics is deemed not scientific, will attract lack-lustre (or no) funding and few publication opportunities. Human subjectivity and qualitative methodologies reek of bourgeois self-indulgence and recall the Mao era when evidence was trounced by ideology. Hence, there is a well-developed affection for statistics but profound lack of sound theorising.

Road Ahead

China is a large and fascinating place of 1.3 billion people keen on learning. Because of the collapse of educational institutions and cruelties of the Cultural Revolution and a large motivated population, China has the biggest adult

education system in the world. As a field of practice, Chinese adult education will endure. But, as a field of university study, adult education has been knocked off its perch by HRD, the struggle for innovation and notion technology can solve all problems. Much like in the West, space vacated by the decline of adult education as a field of university study in China is now filled by techno-utopian ravings involving the word 'digital'.

Some of the Chinese learning initiatives exude enthusiasm and creativity. Yet, other parts are rife with contradiction, deeply utilitarian and wander far from what foreign architects of lifelong learning have been talking about. In most countries, lifelong learning is a loose, deliberately uncoordinated master concept for educational reform. Majid Rahnema (1989), a Faure (1972) Report author, clearly opposed coordination. For him, lifelong education was an unsystem. In China, there is a long-standing focus on control and coordination (Ministry of Education 2014). Fortunately, China is a vast country and it will be a formidable challenge to coordinate all the multifarious nooks and crannies of lifelong learning. Moreover, as always, many of the most innovative and best places in China are a long way from Beijing!

In the meantime, regional differences should be celebrated and it is exhilarating to stumble across rural people singing in a choir, learning to fix a tractor, fussing over a sick pig, learning to operate a gadget to harvest corn, get water, excavate a cave or stop snow crushing greenhouses filled with tomatoes. It is also good to see senior citizens at elder universities in Shanghai (Zhang and Xu 2015), youngsters learning about ecology on Lushan (Mount Lu in eastern Jiangxi) (Boshier and Huang 2006a) or Lo Ping cave dwellers (Shaanxi) coaxing tomatoes from snow-covered greenhouses, making art or listening to Grannie Wu describe her childhood.

Despite positive energy poured into China's learning initiative, it is a worrying contradiction to urge citizens to learn new things and harass (or jail) them for doing so. Yet, as Chairman Mao was apt to say, and Ai Weiwei demonstrates on a daily basis, within contradictions lies potential for change. Despite the history of arduous struggle and serious threat of an environmental catastrophe involving millions of casualties, Chinese people have always been avid learners and this is not likely to change.

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