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Caleb Zia

Linda Serra Hagedorn, *University of Southern California*



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## Postsecondary Educational Delivery in China

**Caleb Zia**

**Provost -- Sias University, Zhengzhou, Henan Province, Republic of China**

**Linda Serra Hagedorn**

**Associate Professor, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.**

China, a country with 5,000 years of civilization, has a culture that profoundly influenced its traditional education theories, classroom and lecture practices, and educational system (Lo, 1989). Chinese education has grown out of the Confucian teaching. This teaching is still highly regarded as the major guideline of educational development (Hao, 1993).

For more than 2,200 years, Chinese people have believed that a teacher should "spread morality, impart knowledge, and resolve doubts" (Kuo, 1995). Teaching morality, a principal part of education, means the teacher should set a good example for the students. Thus, erudition alone does not make a qualified teacher, but rather the combination of wisdom, knowledge, personality, spirits, and virtues, by which the teacher influences and cultivates students (Min, 1990). Therefore, Chinese people have traditionally preferred and have been practicing a face-to-face instructional strategy (Hao, 1993). A major task for promoters of distance education is to convince the Chinese people that distance education is at least as effective as traditional education in the acquisition of knowledge (Potashnik & Capper, 1998).

Under the feudal system, the compulsory texts in China were limited to nine books referred to as "the Four Books and the Five Classics". They were *the Book of Songs, the Book of History, the Book of Changes, the Book of Rites, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Analects of Confucius, the Analects of Mencius, and the Spring and Autumn Annals*. The emperors and educators believed that the Confucian doctrines in these books would make people loyal, obedient, kind, and useful to the empire and the feudal society (Hayhoe, 1996).

This "curriculum" was discarded early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the end of the Qing Dynasty, and efforts were made to introduce modern education to China. A significant change began after 1949 when a modern national syllabus of higher education was designed. It was characterized by a proliferation of academic majors and a narrow curriculum. Students were granted limited freedom to select a few courses outside of their majors and even from their own departments (Min, 1990). They could not change their majors because that would disrupt the predetermined enrollment and job assignment plans. In China there is a saying: "different trades are separated as by mountains" (Hao, 1993). Students majoring in one field know little about another.

Today, there is an increasing demand for people with a broad knowledge base. Distance education, with its diversified curriculum can enrich students and expand their knowledge base as well as meet their specific educational and professional needs (World Bank, 1997). The vast variety of distance education courses can serve as a beneficial component to higher

education. Because of the severe competition in labor markets, more and more adults will enroll in distance education to increase their knowledge and improve their professional skills (CPC, 1993).

As noted, teachers in China play an important role in traditional education. They are viewed as the owners of knowledge, the beacons of the next generation, and even the symbol of authority (Kuo, 1995). Since students had difficulty understanding traditional Chinese textbooks without a teacher's explanation, a teacher-centered, textbook-centered, and classroom-centered methodology evolved and prevailed over thousands of years (Hayhoe, 1996). "People trained in such a way inevitably become worshippers of books and authority. They lack creativeness and an enterprising spirit, for they have no thinking ability and are used to obedience" (Hao, 1993). This methodology has been under severe criticism ever since the late 19th century, but it still dominates instructional strategies in the current educational system (Hayhoe, 1996).

The traditional Chinese education also advocates teaching in accordance with a student's aptitude. A good teacher should take into consideration the different cognitive learning styles, intelligence, and abilities of his/her students, and structure a specific academic program for each (World Bank, 1997).

The current educational practice in China is exam-oriented, by which students are trained on how to pass examinations. The rigid educational system and the inequitable and unbalanced educational structure in China support and promote this phenomenon. The limited access to higher education institutions leads to severe enrollment competition among high school graduates (Min, 1990).

Chinese people connect education with employment. In feudal China, the purpose of education and learning was to become a government official (Lo, 1989). Confucius told people that a good scholar would make a good official. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the new government enforced a planned economy. Attendance at institutions of higher education was a part of the employment plan. Students would be assigned jobs upon graduation. For a long while, the entrance to a university was compared to the entrance to a "bank safe" (World Bank, 1997). Therefore, higher education meant a life-long employment. The College Entrance Examination, therefore, was considered a powerful tool to determine one's whole life (Hao, 1993).

One of the advantages of distance education lies in the fact that it has the potential to completely change the teacher-centered methodology and permit learners to control their own curriculum and studying pace. Thus, learners can study in accordance with their own aptitude. A distance education curriculum can provide more opportunities for high school graduates to further their education, and for adults to pursue continuing education and even life-long learning (Purdy, 1986).

Student learning is, in part, the direct result of what has been designed, intentionally or unintentionally, by teachers, schools, curriculum developers, and communities. Behind teaching and learning are beliefs about learning theories and instructional design practices that

directly influence what students experience (Purdy, 1983b). Producers of distance learning education base their work on a number of educational theories rather than on any one philosophy. Even though the theoretical positions for some of the distance learning courses are not articulated, nevertheless, they are vital aspects of the distance learning design (Purdy, 1986). These learning theories, integrated with instructional design in distance learning courses, should be as effective for students in China as they are for students in the United States.

The first attempt in China at higher education reform came in the 1950's, when the Communist Government introduced a higher education system geared to train students to meet the manpower needs of the government and the society at large. This was a deliberate intention to train higher level personnel as effectively as possible for service in all sectors of the new socialist state. The model was derived directly from the former Soviet Union with the assistance of Russian experts in both its design and implementation. This was intended also to counteract some of the past weaknesses of higher education. The new system was created initially between 1950 and 1955, with a complete reorganization of the old institutions and the creation of new ones around a national plan, which emphasized curricular patterns that would ensure close coordination between higher education programs and personal needs of the state as well as a rational geographical distribution of higher education. This included the introduction of correspondence education in 1952, which came to be known later as China's traditional distance education (CPC, 1993).

The country was divided into six major geographical regions, and, from 1950 to 1954, each of them had an educational bureau that coordinated planning for the region. At the core of the system were three main types of institutions that were directly administered by a new national ministry of higher education. These were polytechnic universities with a wide range of applied scientific and engineering programs, comprehensive universities with programs mainly in the basic arts and sciences, and normal universities with arts and science programs combined with education; which were also responsible for setting national standards for teacher training at tertiary and secondary levels (World Bank, 1997). Each region had at least one of each of these three types of institutions, and their role was both a national and regional one.

In addition to these core institutions, there were a large number of sectional institutions, in areas such as agriculture, medicine, steel, finance, law, railways, etc. They were managed by appropriate ministries and were distributed across the country, taking into account differences of regional emphasis by sector (Lin & Myers, 1996). Each institution was narrowly specialized in its programs, and its role was to train personnel for its specific sector.

Between 1950 and 1954, each region had the responsibility of enrolling students through entrance examinations, but in 1955 a national unified entrance examination was established (Lo, 1991). The recruitment was based on a selective and highly academic upper secondary education system, and competition at first was not as intense as it later became (Xie, 1994). A unified national job assignment system was put in place in 1956 and was managed jointly by the State Planning Commission, the sectional ministries, and the Ministry of Higher Education. This was to ensure that graduates were assigned a position as a state cadre in a

setting where their knowledge could be put to good use. It was the norm for graduates to be sent far from their homes, often to serve in the development of new institutions or industries in hinterland areas (Lin & Myers, 1996).

The main function of this new higher education system was for teaching, with a separate system for research established under the Chinese Academy of Sciences and various national ministries. A large number of research institutes developed, with research topics and funding assigned by plan from the state, and with very little connection to the higher education system, except for the fact that research staffs were drawn from its graduates (Lin & Myers, 1996). A few institutes under the Academy undertook programs of graduate training in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Xie, 1994).

In 1957-58, with the Great Leap Forward, a second important stage in the evolution of the socialist higher education system took place (CPC, 1993). It started with the vigorous development of new institutions at the provincial level and the decentralization of authority over some national institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education was merged with the Ministry of Education (Hao, 1993). Many provinces created their own comprehensive and normal universities, as well as various specialized institutions, during this period in order to serve provincial personnel needs. This was a time when a large number of graduates from the best universities in coastal areas were sent to remote regions as core faculty for newly established local institutions. Also some coastal institutions were moved to the inland areas (Lin & Myers, 1996). In a situation where the priorities were to build heavy industry as the basis for a modern economy and to establish a strong socialist governmental and education system, these patterns set in place in the 1950s worked well at first as there was a fairly high degree of predictability in personnel planning for these areas (Hayhoe, 1987). However, with a new emphasis on agriculture and light industry in the late 1950s and with the rapid growth of secondary education which increased the pool of graduates competing for entry to higher education, many concerns about equality of access and the suitability of the system to China's indigenous economic and cultural development came to the fore (Epstein, 1991).

The Cultural Revolution was a period in which some of these concerns were aired and strong criticism was expressed of the Soviet-derived pattern. For three years, from 1966 to 1969, all regular recruitment to higher education was halted (Hayhoe, 1989a). Between 1971 and 1976, much smaller numbers of students were enrolled. Almost completely destroyed by the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, China's higher education system was rebuilt in the late 1970's (World Bank, 1997). The Chinese Government quickly drew up a "four modernization's plan of 1980" right after the Cultural Revolution to revitalize the state of higher education in China and to increase the quantity and quality of skilled human resources (World Bank, 1997). The leadership of Deng Xiaoping opened up a new era of reform, which brought about fundamental changes in higher education.

In 1978, with the approval of Mr. Deng Xiaoping, a Radio-Television University, known as RTVU, was established which paved a new way for the development of China's higher education. With RTVU, courses are delivered mainly through video programs and radio broadcasting (Liao, 1989). In 1981, a system of self-study, self-taught examination was also introduced as a complement to the existing Chinese distance education. In an important

national conference for science and education held in the same year, clear goals of service to economic modernization in the four areas of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology were set forth. This national policy, with its emphasis on the economy, has resulted in dramatic changes over the 1980s (Lin & Myers, 1996).

In 1985, the Chinese government's new policy entitled "The Reform of the Education System" emphasized the implementation of a three-level school management system at the central, provincial, and major municipal levels. The same reform plan gave universities new powers, particularly with regard to the content and methods of teaching, as well as freedom to develop new programs and even new local institutions at the short-term level and in adult education (CPC, 1993).

On Oct. 1, 1986, the first satellite TV educational channel was opened. This marked a great breakthrough in the delivery of distance education (Hayhoe, 1996). During the period from 1978 to 1994, China experienced a remarkable proliferation of public higher education institutions, growing from 598 institutions to 1,080 (World Bank, 1997). These 1,080 regular public universities and colleges dominated the current Chinese higher education system.

Of the total student body of 2.8 million in the public institutions, 52% enrolled in degree-earning undergraduate studies, 44% in short-term, non-degree programs, and 4% in postgraduate studies (World Bank, 1997). In addition, there were 1,172 public adult education institutions at postsecondary levels, including radio and television universities, schools for workers, peasants, and cadres, pedagogical colleges, independent correspondence colleges, and correspondence or evening courses run by regular higher education institutions (World Bank, 1997). Furthermore, there were another 800 private postsecondary institutions currently in operation (Lin & Myers, 1996). In 1994, these institutions enrolled another 2.5 million students mostly on a part-time basis. About 90% of enrollees were in short-term programs and only 10% in regular undergraduate studies (World Bank, 1997).

In summary, the present educational delivery system of postsecondary institutions in China includes not only the typical teacher-centered, text-book centered, and classroom-centered methodology, it also consists of the traditional correspondence schools, a system of self-taught examinations education, and a system of radio/television universities. There are signs that China may some day utilize distance education modes. However, traditions and other long-serving cultural traditions make change difficult. Chinese education continues to place importance in face to face learning that blends with the imparting of personality, spirit, and virtues, juxtaposed with the wisdom and knowledge of teachers.

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