

The Misconstruction of the Postmodern Curriculum at the Beginning of the 21st Century in Mainland China: From the Perspectives of Curriculum Culture

KAN Wei

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

The current paper contemplates a process of introducing the postmodernism in curriculum changes since the beginning of 21st century in China. During the 15 years, government sought to responding the rapid economic development and reducing the pressures of exam-oriented education, and then introduced the frames of postmodernism curriculum which went beyond the modernism stage of the curriculum development in China. The educational system had shown more intent to bring about change but has been hampered both by an inherited culture of inertia and lack of micro-culture in classroom, which led to the disconnection between the policy-making and the practices of implementation.

Keywords: postmodernism, curriculum reform, curriculum culture

Background of the Curriculum Reform From Perspectives of Social Background

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, China copied, for ideological reasons, the pattern of schooling systems from the former Soviet Union. As early as the 1950s, however, the contents of school curriculum had gradually become the "working handbook" of the compilation of educational policies and personal worship of Mao Zedong (Singer, 1971). "The radical policy current favored at least a temporary hyperpoliticization of education, by placing 'politics in command' over all aspects of learning, even if underdeveloped expertise resulted" (Sautman, 1991, p. 670). Education was viewed as serving "proletarian politics" and creating a "new socialist person", and was to be primarily political and socialism, rather than economic and social development. Education was to serve the general political purpose of the government.

It is essential to understand the context in which China's education reform started in the early 1980s. The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution. Formally the Proletariat Cultural Revolution, it was started by Mao in 1966 as a national-scale political campaign to eliminate all bourgeois influences in the country's "superstructure" (as opposed to the economic infrastructure). Among the revolution's consequences was the closing down of conventional schools. They were replaced with schools led

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KAN Wei, Associated Professor, Institute of Curriculum and Teaching, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

by political teams of workers, peasants and soldiers, and the curriculum was totally revamped to reflect the essence of “class struggle.” There were several attempts to resume schooling, but with little effect. Higher education institutions were suspended, replaced by new institutions admitting only workers, peasants and soldiers regardless of their academic merits. Professors and intellectuals were sent to factories, villages and remote places to be “re-educated.” The concept reflected a utopian ideal of egalitarianism, where everybody produces for the state and the state distributes its wealth equally among its citizens. But the reality was total stagnation of the economy, a society of “equal poverty”, as economists recognized in hindsight. It is no exaggeration to say that China had to rebuild the entire education system in the late 1970s and early 1980s from the ruins left by the Cultural Revolution.

To catch up and compete with the advanced countries, the national goals then had shifted profoundly from the traditional goal of class struggle and stressing ideological overtones, to the economic goal of modernization emphasizing competition, and then to the general goal of revitalizing China through education, science and technology since 1980s. Undoubtedly, tremendous transformations in China (especially in urban settings) are happening especially in fields related to finance, manufacturing, construction, telecommunications, science and technology. In contrast to the olden days when foreign culture was always considered an intrusion, China now makes room for more international exchanges. Postmodern trends can now be more easily seen throughout the multifaceted layers of society in China. Of all its characteristics, postmodern thoughts and values which are more inclusive and tend to be received by the general public may be the more accepted trends of modernization.

The planned economy and centralized governance of China did not change until the 1980s. China has entered a new era of reform and opening up with the heavy burden of history at the end of the 1970s. On September 10, 1983, Deng Xiaoping wrote an inscription for Jingshan School in Beijing, which emphasized that “education should be oriented toward modernization, facing up the world and the future” (Deng, 1998). This term was later referred to as “three orientations for Chinese education”, also was spread throughout the country by various media. It was written into the “Decision of the Communist Party of Central Committee on the Reform of Education System” in 1985. The conceptions of “modernization”, “world” and “future” provided a new expression for curriculum as the “modernization” links “Chinese education” with the world. In particular, when “educational modernization” was gradually moving to the center of education and speech, it became the mainstream discourse of educational researches and policy-makers. Emphasis had been laid on the fact that education must be adapted to the needs of social and economic development. Obviously, modernization had been regarded as the basic premise for educational changes when the Western modern academic and ideological resources were introduced to break the “Marxism” framework in mainland China in 1980s. Then the “traditional”/“modern”, “China/Western” was presupposed as the analytical framework for further discussion. As Chinese education represents more tradition, rather than modernity, so there was a problem of “modernization” and “transformation from traditional education to modern stage” during 1980s.

Following Deng Xiaoping’s call for economic reforms in the early 80s, China has become the world’s fastest growing nation and has captured the attention of the entire world. Market-oriented reforms have brought nearly 40 rapid economic growths to China’s economy. The total economic output of China increased from 376.87 billion Chinese Yuan in 1978 to 77.4 trillion Chinese Yuan in 2016. The share of China’s GDP in the

total world GDP has risen from 2.3% in 1978 to 14.84% in 2016. In 2016, China's per capita GDP increased to 8,866 US dollars per capita, entering the middle-income countries (Wu, Li, & Lin, 2017). With the policy of Deng's opening to the world and economic reform in the late 1970s, China also has experienced tremendous socioeconomic changes.

The benchmark of Chinese basic education was the modernized model of Western education. Therefore, the prevailing trend of thought during 1980s, especially among young intellectuals attempted to introduce the "modernism" ideas, which stressed on modern educational "productivity": curriculum of science and technology (especially the "new scientific" and "technological revolution"), also including rebuild the modern educational planning and administration in school system. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, entrance examinations at different levels were renewed in the late 1970s, the Ten-years School syllabus (1978) was revised according to the guideline "enriching elementary and middle schools' educational contents with modern science and absorbing advanced foreign teaching materials."

The curriculum reform of basic education, named as the eighth curriculum reform in mainland China, was launched on above economic development during the period in which China's economic and political systems were transforming the significant and profound change. The issue of the Decision on the Deepening of Educational Reform and the Full Promotion of Quality-Oriented Education in 1999. Different from the previous seven waves, which were limited to the textbooks, the basic concept of the new wave is both for the revitalization of the Chinese people and for the development of each student. Essentially, it touches upon the entire education system including educational thought, aim, systems, content and method. The Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline (trial) promulgated in 2001 specified six objectives as follows (Cui, 2001; Feng, 2006; Guo, 2012), including the following characteristics:

- respect for ethnic minorities and multicultural education;
- respect for different nations' cultures and the promotion of international understanding;
- advocacy of the recognition of multiple intelligences in education and of developing students' potential on the basis of respect for individual differences;
- emphasis on differences among schools and the development of school-based curricula; and
- stress on differences among regions and the development and management of place-based curricula.

To some extent, above points of the outlines on curriculum reform in China were consistent with the concepts of curriculum of postmodernism in 1990s in Western countries. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000), for example, argue that post-modernism curriculum is "hyper-individualistic", with an overemphasis on identity pluralism and choice, moving towards an open system with constant flux and complex interactions, which have close connections with ideas of new curriculum reform in China: process-oriented rather than focus on the product only, lays emphasis on the development of higher order thinking skills and fosters creativity, the teacher is no longer the authority in the classroom but a facilitator, helping children construct knowledge, meanwhile, knowledge is not simply transmitted, it should not be prescriptive and system-driven, foster self-organization. Also, as Doll (1989, p. 250) writes, "a post-modern curriculum will accept the student's ability to organize, construct and structure, and will emphasize this ability as a focal point in the curriculum".

However, it is interesting that the theories of postmodernism once became the significant ideas on guiding the process of curriculum reform and had been recognized among Chinese educators, which value had been

generally summarized as the following aspects, for instance, curriculum foundation (from closed status to open), curriculum content (from static to dynamic), curriculum implementation (from predetermined to equal), student-teacher relationship (from single to diverse) and curriculum evaluation (from single to diverse) since the beginning of the 21st century (Zhong, 2002; Li, 2012). Postmodernism had made an obvious impact on the policy and practice of curriculum reform in China.

The educational reform started “under the guidance of systematic theories of educational science and educational reform” (Jin & Li 2011), in which China chooses a postmodern approach to improve their educational system. They described China’s reform as “building its modernization with a postmodern spirit,” which had appeared in their politics, economy, and culture, with the idea that postmodern educational should flourish. The new theories of postmodernity change the thought and behavior educational organizations, with the former problem of being too mechanical, incomplete, and superficial. They found that a postmodern approach to the educational system provided: (a) both dynamic and internal conditions, which the curriculum before lacked; (b) a mix of both modern and postmodern rationalistic elements; (c) establishes a more harmonious, ideal world for the modern society; and (d) the new curriculum emphasizes human life in which connects the past, future, and present (Jin & Li 2011). Schools, even those rural area middle schools were regarded as ideal applications of postmodernism (Cui & Pan, 2008). Postmodern theories were identified to prompt the healthy development of curriculum studies in China. Zhang even asserts that the postmodernism helps Chinese curriculum researchers overcome the simplicity tendency, build an attitude of critical thinking and reflection, increase the social status of marginalized cultures, eliminate gender discrimination, and facilitate an equal conversation between curriculum researchers and the subjects investigated (Zhang et al, 2006).

Despite China’s emergence as one of the world’s most influential economies, China is still regarded as still confront the challenges of building the modern social and economic structure. Paradoxically, how such the postmodernism ideas of curriculum could be accepted by researchers and policy-makers, including some teachers, even the ideal of postmodernism curriculum had been debated among scholars. This study, then intends to reveal that how researchers and policy-makers gradually had recognized the postmodernism over the past twenty years, which went beyond the process of modernism stage of curriculum, why the postmodernism curriculum encountered the dilemma in the practices.

Forces Impacted on the Postmodernism Curriculum in Mainland China

There is a question which must answer when discuss the postmodernism curriculum in the context of educational reform in China: since the postmodernism curriculum is the product of late stage of the capitalism. Whether it went beyond the contemporary context of Chinese education is still the debate in the community of education. It is still doubtful that whether the postmodernism curriculum adapted to the situation of Chinese school education, which was the focus of debate. If we rethink the process of curriculum change since the beginning of 21st century, obviously, the postmodernism curriculum influenced by the wave of globalization and contemporary context of Chinese education..

Influences on the Globalization on Postmodernism Curriculum

The first force came from the influences of globalization. There were amount of the global circulation of educational reforms since 1990s. Simultaneously, large-scale national education reform had been launched in

many countries, which constituted the tide sweeping the globe, and continuously upgrading and deepening up to now. For example, in addition to NLNS (national literature and numeracy strategies) in the United Kingdom, Nordic countries such as Finland re-enacted the National Basic Education Core Curriculum in 2004, following the establishment of a national core curriculum in 1994. Meanwhile, Norway launched a large-scale reform of its national compulsory education curriculum in 1997 and 2006, it decided to start the reform again and establish a new national curriculum standard. In the Asia-Pacific region, the Republic of Korea launched the Seventh National Curriculum Reform in 1997, and Singapore started the nationwide curriculum reform in 1997, while Japan passed the amendment in 1998. “The Guide of Learning” was launched after it was issued by Japanese government in 2008. Without a doubt, above countries national curriculum program had an incalculable and global impact on the Chinese basic educational curriculum change.

The pursuit of education reform has a long history since 1950s in China. Reform is normal, widespread, constant, and optimistic. The opinions on the transnational flow of reforms were regarded as the one of the ways of solving the pressures of development on knowledge society. At the turn of the new century, Mainland China launched a nationwide curriculum change in basic education. The change was extended to the senior high school level and continues to be implemented presently. As promoted by the central government, the initiation of the new policy change can be traced back to 1997, when the basic education division of the Ministry of Education (MOE) organized a large-scale investigation of nine-year compulsory education on curriculum implementation and identified sets of problems in the curriculum system. In 1999, the state council adopted the “21st century education revitalizing action plan” developed by MOE. The action plan proposed a cross-century “quality education project” as one of the four major projects, and stated the urgent need for establishing a 21st century curriculum system in basic education with a new curriculum framework and standards as the first public articulation of the new curriculum policy.

In the 2003-2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education, the “Project for Quality-oriented education (the eighth curriculum reform) in the New Century” is described as follows:

With fostering students’ creativity and practical skills as the main focus, it aims to strengthen and further develop moral education in schools, deepen reform of the curriculum and assessment systems, make real improvements in the physical health, psychological health and artistic accomplishment of students and foster a new generation of well rounded people developed in morals, intellect, physical health and aesthetic appreciation. (Zhou, 2004, pp. 4-5)

The eighth curriculum reform in China then attempted to cultivate creative and independent thinking skills, integrated practical skills, team work and co-operation. Obviously, the curriculum reform attempted to borrow from Western educational methodologies. Some simplified characteristics of postmodernism in the field of education, such as de-centralization of curriculum administrative system, de-teaching and self-learning, anti-authority in classroom, were supposedly represented “best practices”, or “international standards” by policy-makers. As a utilitarian approach to Western educational strategies, the borrowing policy is not new. Since the nineteenth century, education had commonly been seen as a main means of national salvation and one of the first attempted solutions to China’s difficulties (Price, 1979, p. 96). The motto “Chinese learning for fundamental principles; Western learning for use” (*Zhongxuewei ti; xixueweiyong*) was coined by the self-redeem of the ancient Empire since 1860s who called for the adoption of Western technology and schooling system to strengthen regime of Qing Dynasty while retaining China’s superior civilization (Pepper,

1996, p. 55, quoted in Dello-Iacovo, 2009). The eighth curriculum reform was regarded as two assumptions that were in tension with each other: One was that schools need to respond to knowledge society and the second assumption was that it is the role of government policies to cultivate elites for the 21st century. So that there is a greater relation or harmony between social and educational changes.

Rethinking on the Human Nature: Origins of Postmodernism Curriculum in the Community of Educational Research

The second force of curriculum change came from the community of educational research. The researchers in this study intend to reveal more than merely interest in comparative policy-making on curriculum reform. We also have in common a similar interpretive framework and method of inquiry, that enables us to draw attention to the local meaning, adaptation, and recontextualisation of postmodernism curriculum that had been transferred. The analysis also adopts a lens to explore the contextual reasons for why the postmodernism curriculum reforms were regarded as the best practices. Indeed, ideals of curriculum reform from western countries are not necessarily borrowed for rational reasons, but for political or economic ones. Such an interpretation categorically refutes the common sense, yet naïve, assertion that reforms are imported because they have proven to be good or—even worse—because they represent best practices.

The origin of postmodernism curriculum could be traced back the 1980s. However, with the rise of discussion of cultural theme, which soon touched upon the spiritual-value issues of educational value and function, human subjectivity and historical reflections. Although the discussion on the issue of value of curriculum has taken a very abstract theoretical form, obviously, the awareness of potential problems had been revealed in official discourses system of curriculum, which firstly addressed in debates since 1950s. The critique of the realistic values of curriculum was surprisingly consistent, which were closely related to the issue of educational value of the subjectivity of education and the human beings. The curriculum changes had been criticized by some researchers that it was only serviced from political instrumentalism to economic instrumentalism, with only emphasis on the value of social tools for education. The subjectivity of education was based on the fact that human restraint in the external world and the absolute compliance of people with society, the overall development of curriculum has been transformed into the way of comprehensively shaping on individuals.

Therefore, some curriculum researchers advocated the curriculum should “returning back to the humanity” as the development of core of an all-round education had limited influences on the establishment of subjectivity for students. Therefore, it is under the modern discourse that China educational academic discourse continue to develop the themes on “humanitarian”, “independent”, transcend the single “doctrine” and escape from the mainstream ideology during the 1990s.

Reflections on education and curricular issues do not really reveal the Chinese experience of pedagogy. There is a real shortage of reliable curricula that really can be used as a guide for Chinese pedagogy, Chinese characterization and modernization. In particular, school education and curricula need to be improved or expanded. Therefore, the pursuit of scientization, modernization and modernization can only be solved by further borrowing and introducing Western theories. It is in this context that a series of foreign ideas related to post-modernism have been introduced into China.

During the period of 1990s, there were fierce competitions in primary and secondary schools as the unbalanced allocation of basic education resources, including facilities, quality of teachers, curriculum and enrollment of students, resulted in high quality of schools and universities becoming scarce resources. Despite the government called for improving the “quality education” in slogans, the competition still resulted the process of inculcating knowledge, promoting righteousness and training skills to learners at classroom. At a deeper level, the instructional-based curriculum paradigm was becoming the most important part of the mechanically rigid campus paramilitary culture from the inside out to the basic idea and mode of operation at the beginning of the 21st century.

Therefore, for the emphasizing on the post-modern knowledge type confirms the transition from modern to post-modern knowledge. The educational researcher’s attentions then focused on the marginalization, individuality, irrationality, difference and uncertainty, which are all concrete manifestations of the postmodernist ways of thinking in pedagogy texts on the school level. The historical context of postmodernism does have some similarities or similarities in China and the West due to the historical changes associated with the social and cultural structures in China. Thus, postmodernist ways of thinking then went beyond the educational system which was still on the stage of modernism. In view of the dualistic structure of urban and rural areas, the vast cultural and educational contrast formed between the developed eastern coast and the lagging western inland development and the incompleteness of China’s modernity planning, the postmodern and modern narratives in educational academy not only exist simultaneously but also in the trendy of mutual integration. Even Chinese scholars with an obvious postmodernist position have mostly adopted postmodernity instead of modernity. Therefore, the postmodern thinking and researching in China were both critical and constructive as far as their mainstream is concerned.

However, the resources understanding the western society mainly came from the limited translations of postmodernism in US and western European academic works. Therefore, Chinese researchers of curriculum had to borrow the theories from western countries. Due to the limited translation on postmodernism works in the field of curriculum studies in mainland China, the works of William E. Doll, Jr. and William Pinar almost became the only window of introducing the postmodernism curriculum in China. Their writings had the greatest impact on Chinese researchers’ understanding on the postmodernism. For instance, Doll’s work was regarded to Chinese researchers an effective way for thinking the curriculum system. Particularly, his pedagogical theory advocates the cultivation of students’ comprehensive ability in the process of teaching, thus it can bring positive effects to the transformation of the traditional perspectives on curriculum and instruction and help teachers solve the problems existing in the traditional Chinese teaching. In his view, a postmodernism curriculum must break away from the previous curriculum design, instead, he advocates a 4R Criteria for a postmodern curriculum, which includes Richness, Recursion, Relations and Rigor. It refers to the depth and layers of teaching contents and multiple possibilities or interpretations of a curriculum. Doll believes the “concept of developing richness through dialogue, interpretations, hypothesis generation and proving, and pattern playing can apply to all we do in curriculum” (Doll, 1993, p. 252) also provided the new perspectives for Chinese researchers. Meanwhile, post modernism underlying in William Pinar’s work *Understanding Curriculum*, which had great influences for Chinese curriculum researchers. Pinar’s own scholarship is presented in one of the chapters titled “Autobiographical/biographical text”. This approach has its roots in

Pinar's use of the term "currere", the Latin for "running the course", which was accepted by Chinese researchers. He elaborates a method by means of which curricularists can sketch the relations among school knowledge, life history, and intellectual development. The intent is to strive toward self-transformation. Even there were debates on the type of knowledge, some researchers put emphasis on "pluralism". That is, they accept ideas of various factions and put them in the same pot. It is thought that different views, after all, only come from different perspectives. Still, the debates on whether there is no absolute true or false nor is there truth caused a variety of controversies at the beginning of the 21st century. Undoubtedly, impacted by Doll and Pinar's works, the concepts of postmodernism curriculum, including individual's intuitive, subjective heart rather than the traditional objective, rational mindset of values or worldview had been gradually accepted and widely spread in mainland China.

Implementation of Postmodernism Curriculum: Lack of Micro-based Fundamental

Nearly 15 years later, the new curriculum goal, Core Competence (*hexinsuyang*) had been replaced original the eighth curriculum reform at the beginning of the 21st century, openness, diversity and individualism, such expression also had disappeared in the relative documents of government. With the implementation of state-edition mechanism of textbooks of Chinese literature, history and moral education, the previous three-level curriculum system only existed namely.

Since the beginning of the curriculum reform, on one side, some reports indicated that many schools have had significant problems implementing the new ideals of curriculum reform directives with the disconnection between educational administration directives and realities on the ground a major obstacle. Common complaints have been insufficient finance and inadequate support structures with little concrete guidance or support given to schools and local authorities as to how to implement these directives (Pang, 2004, p. 2). On the other side, some schools, particularly those schools located rural area school asserted that their classrooms had achieved the significant changes with postmodernism characteristics, such as Dulangkou middle school, a rural junior high school's experimental curriculum reform was regard as ideal applications of postmodernism (Cui & Pan, 2008).

Symbolic Curriculum Policy

Research on curriculum changes around the world indicates that many reforms in the field of curriculum designed to improve the quality of schooling have been more rhetorical than substantive in their impact on the organization of schools and classrooms. Schools and classrooms did change, but the extent and direction of change was not always consistent with the intentions of policy initiatives.

The philosophies of the postmodernism have a strong impact on the design of the eighth curriculum reform, leading to far-reaching consequences. There was a shift from traditional to modern education as it is discussed above; even since modernism curriculum has not been fully absorbed and implemented (Wang, 2003a). Policy-makers then hastily borrowed the "best practices" from the Western countries, then shift the curriculum system to postmodernism. It is understandable that there was an imperative requirement on keeping pace in the process of globalization, thus the postmodernist view assumes that the aims, objectives, content, pedagogy, evaluation and direction of the curriculum are not fixed, but fluid then were transformed into educational policies. In postmodern curriculum, there is no ideally set standard, no principle which serves as a

universal reference point. The teacher would play a central role in the evaluation process but would not be the exclusive evaluator; evaluation would be collective and interactive. It would be used as feedback, to help students to develop intellectual and social powers through dialogue and constructive critiques (Doll, 1993, cited in Dennis, 2002). But it requires highly professional staffs that are confident, resourceful and ready to meet the challenges for successful implementation of the curriculum.

Under the challenges of knowledge economics, Chinese government sought to avoid gaps between talent development and requirement of new economic, which might have resulted in competitive disadvantages with US and other international competitors. Therefore, Chinese government has shown more intent to bring about change but has been hampered both by limited investments on education and inertia of school system which have led to problems of implementation. Curriculum policy, consequently, was usually symbolic and often remained at the level of rhetoric. Those who write about implementation theory had strongly recommended the notion that “top-down” or control models of implementation in Asian countries, which can be used effectively to achieve social policy goals. According to history experiences of Asian country, within centralized educational system, there are often high efficiency on the transmission of policy intent from policy-making to the point of delivery. In particular, there are hierarchical teaching and researching system from each provincial level to school district level and classroom level, where teachers work as the nerves ending. Since 1950s, such system, which borrowed from the former Soviet Union played the vital roles on delivering educational policies, curriculum changes. Educational administration believes that are capable of implementation because of qualified teachers. In addition, both the empirical evidence (Huang, 2012) indicates that teachers will always be able to follow the simplified concepts of postmodernism curriculum, such as “knowledge is constructed instead of simply transmitted” (MoE, 2004a, p. 9) or “teachers are facilitators rather than the authority in classroom” (MoE, 2004b, p. 17).

Meanwhile, since subsequent new curriculum policies were made with relatively little consultation with those teachers who are charged with implementing them on classroom level. The government sees itself as responsible for the provision of resources, the formulation of programmes and the identification of key values in the education system. That is seen to be the responsibility of the teachers and administrators who run the schools who are expected to follow government instructions. As the result, under the pressures from government, schools and administrators had to amplify their effects of participation in the curriculum changes. “Engaging group discussion”, “challenging teachers’ questions” or “flipped classroom” were discovered in all level schools, including those rural area schools. In fact, classrooms and teachers of such background had obvious limitation on engaging the postmodernism curriculum. That is why there is only illusions in some classrooms.

Potential Contradiction Between Collaborative Culture and Collectivist Responsibility

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, and the school curriculum in particular, to the human capital requirements of the state. Nevertheless, these requirements have often been couched in postmodernism terms (“engaged students,” “project learning,” “peer assessment,” “student-centered learning,” etc.). Such effects have ranged from the

possible effects of cultural values on the developmental area that is often said to account for rapid economic growth in the region to the values teachers and students bring with them to the classroom.

In mainland China, 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 this study indicates 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. Implementation theory tells one that, if the problems of a top-down approach are not addressed or modified in ways which take into account the importance of bureaucrats, implementation of curriculum changes is unlikely to be successful. In the mainland education context, the problems generated by its “top-down” orientation have only been superficially addressed and policy has consequently remained largely symbolic. 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 “collaborative 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 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 curriculum 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.

Curriculum reforms had been expected to adapt to the development of rapid economic area with characteristics of de-structure, anti-authority and collaborative culture. However, examinations remain the single most significant influence on what taught, tested, and consequently valued in all Chinese school systems, especially in those underdeveloped areas. Also, the private tutorial schools remain a pervasive influence across the country (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. While examinations remain vital, a number of education systems have attempted to introduce more distorted forms of postmodernism and try to cater to the government’s requirement and 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 Chinese schools and parents for students to work hard and perform well, especially when cultural expectations play a role in such pressure. Just as the developmental area 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 Chinese 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, which are different with the culture context of origin of postmodernism (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. School-based curriculum development (SBCD) has taken some hold in the region. For the most part, SBCD does not influence the core curriculum. It also reported the progress that SBCD has been delivered in the mainland, but most of alternative forms of curriculum were on the surface of school curriculum system. Nevertheless, 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 postmodernism curriculum had to stay on the secondary position to the examined curriculum that remains the most potent force in the region's educational provision.

Teachers' Factors

The reform directives have aimed to make radical changes to the traditional orientation of Chinese education and need teachers to be active reform participants to be effective. There are many examples of enthused and vibrant teachers innovating in the classroom, no doubt having been assisted by some high quality teacher training. On a wider scale however, many reports have complained of inadequate teacher training marred by the faults of the traditional education it was meant to replace, with large groups of teachers listening to theory-based lectures. A common complaint has been insufficient training in the practical application of the postmodernism curriculum and in particular, a lack of specific guidance for integrated practical learning activities.

According to the Beijing report, many teachers simply did not attend the training which was divorced from reality and did not address their needs (Beijing Report, 2006, pp. 81-82). Yu Wensen commented that the guidance given to teachers was often overbearing and undermined teachers' independence rather than fostering their development as professionals (Yu, 2003, pp. 42-43). Marton found that the geography teachers in Shanghai had been left largely on their own to implement the new curriculum with little support from colleagues or district educational specialists and little conceptual, psychological or pedagogical preparation (Marton & Pang, 2006, p. 205). A survey conducted by the National Education Administration Institute found

that only about half of the 246 county education bureau heads surveyed thought that the teachers in their localities had received effective guidance and only approximately 43% of heads thought that the teachers in their locality were able to adapt to the new curriculum (Jin & Li, 2011, p. 27).

Consequently, “teacher quality” is often listed as an obstacle to implementation of postmodernism curriculum. Yu Wensen’s 2003 report into teaching in the pilot project areas found that teachers were having significant problems teaching effectively using the new approaches. For example, “group discussion” was sometimes little more than teacher-centered question and answer, with teachers pressuring students to agree with them. “Self-directed” learning often turned into some teachers letting students do whatever they liked, without giving guidance, feedback or setting requirements. Group work was sometimes ineffective, with teachers putting students in groups to discuss questions regardless of the difficulty or value of these questions with the purpose, conditions, time limits and processes of the discussion activity not set up by the teachers (Yu, 2003, pp. 41-42).

These observations highlight the problems with attempts to mechanically apply teaching methodologies with teachers who are divorced in spirit from imposed curriculum goals. This misapplication of new teaching methodologies was also highlighted in the Beijing survey of pilot project schools. The taskgroup were critical of two trends: methods were used blindly without consideration of their relevance to the educational content and traditional instruction was at times completely abandoned with little or no direct teaching. The report authors believed that insufficient teacher explanation and too much reading aloud and individual reading by students was directly responsible for the poor reading and comprehension test results of students in the pilot project areas (Beijing Report, 2006, pp. 79-80). In many cases, teachers are simply continuing to teach as before. According to a report from Shandong, although there were some student centred and inquiry-based activities being used in the pilot project schools, generally teachers’ teaching methods were in keeping with their belief systems and they tended to concentrate on the textbook rather than the curriculum standards (*ibid*, p. 80). Likewise, Marton found that the vast majority of geography teachers in Shanghai were disconnected from the development of the new curriculum and deeply ambivalent to the reforms which they did not see as relevant to their teaching practice. He found that there had been little change in classroom teaching with most teachers persisting with rote learning and memorisation methods (Marton & Pang, 2006, pp. 215-216).

Conclusion

Most of studies pay particular attention to the attempts of policy-makers to reach their objectives. The focus of the literature is principally on the constraints that face policy-makers, not on the overall curriculum culture inherent in the educational system and the processes of implementation new curriculum within that system. This study suggests that there are indeed problems in the relationship between policy-makers and implementers that have obstructed meaningful educational reform in mainland China. There are wider systemic constraints, problems relating to the symbolic policies expression, different culture characteristics of curriculum and limited training of teachers that have meant that education policies have often been framed in largely symbolic terms beyond the competence of both education policy-makers to rectify.

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