Zongyi DENG

On Developing Chinese Didactics: A Perspective from the German *Didaktik* Tradition

Abstract Over the last century, the development of didactics (教学论) in China has been profoundly influenced by Kairov's theory of pedagogics. The German *Didaktik* tradition, which can date back to Comenius and Herbart, remains largely unknown to educational scholars in China while they possess basic knowledge of Comenius and Herbart. This article expounds three basic tenets of the German *Didaktik* tradition—(1) the concept of *Bildung*, (2) a theory of educational content, and (3) the idea of teaching as a learner-content encounter—and discusses the implications for developing Chinese didactics. It argues for a rethinking of the purposes, content, and practice of teaching with respect to the subjectification aim of education (i.e., the becoming of unique individuals, with autonomy, critical thinking, and creativity).

Keywords didactics, German *Didaktik*, *Bildung*, self-cultivation, theory of content

Introduction

Pedagogics (教育学), or *Pädagogik* in German, refers to a distinct discipline or science of education relating to the work and practice of schooling, which is widely accepted in European countries as an important educational discipline for teacher education (Biesta, 2011; Deng, 2013). This tradition of educational thinking was first introduced to China in the early-1900s via Japan, and fundamentally shaped in the 1950s by Kairov's pedagogics imported from the then Soviet Union. Today, pedagogics is in serious crisis. On the one hand, it has been severely challenged by a multiplicity of educational disciplines, branches, and discourses imported from the US, the UK and other Western countries (Ye, 2004; Wu, 1995). On the other, the field has been in danger of dissolving into

Zongyi DENG (✉)

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 637616, Singapore

E-mail: zongyi.deng@nie.edu.sg

various branches like *didactics*, *moral educational theory* and *school administration* (Ye, 2009a). Furthermore, it has been questioned for its relevance in terms of educating open-minded, critical, and creative citizens for the 21st century (see Zhong & You, 2004). Many scholars have argued that Chinese pedagogics should be developed in a way that is rooted in the current social, cultural, and educational context of China, in the light of the issues and challenges facing education in China today (see Zhou, 2011; Ye, 2004).

This paper discusses issues concerning the construction of Chinese didactics from the perspective of the German *Didaktik* tradition.¹ As the central component of pedagogics, didactics, or *Didaktik* in German, stands for “a theory of teaching and learning” embedded in the societal, institutional and instructional context of schooling, addressing issues pertaining to state-curriculum planning, development and classroom enactment (Hopmann, 2007; also see Arnold & Lindner-Müller, 2012). Such a school of thought is largely non-existent in North America and English-speaking countries where similar issues are discussed within the tradition or paradigm of curriculum or curriculum and instruction (Westbury, 2000; Hopmann & Riquarts, 2000). The *Didaktik* tradition, which can date back to Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) and Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1814), remains largely unknown to educational scholars in China, although they possess basic knowledge of Comenius and Herbart. However, this tradition, as will be argued, challenges Chinese educators to rethink some basic concepts of didactics if they are concerned with the *subjectification* function or purpose of education (i.e., person-making, the becoming of a unique individual, with autonomy, critical thinking, and creativity), in addition to the *qualification* function (i.e., the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for jobs) and the *socialization* function (i.e., the development of values and norms necessary for becoming a member of existing social and cultural orders; Biesta, 2009).

To provide a context of the discussion, this paper starts with a brief historical sketch of the development of Chinese didactics. This is followed by an explanation of three basic tenets of the German *Didaktik* tradition—(1) the concept of *Bildung*, (2) a theory of educational content, and (3) the idea of teaching as a meaningful encounter between the learner and content—and afterward, a discussion of their implications for rethinking the basic concepts of

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 57th Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), March 10–14, 2013, New Orleans, LA.

Chinese didactics. The paper concludes by looking at “life-practice” pedagogics developed by Ye Lan which, while not influenced by the German *Didaktik* tradition, provides an instantiation of what is entailed in such a rethinking.

A Historical Sketch

The history of didactics in China began with borrowing Herbart's and Herbartian pedagogic theories from Japan at beginning of the 20th century. Hereafter, didactics underwent a century of ups and downs as other traditions of educational thinking found their way to China, and as China went through various political movements in different times. At the risk of omission and over-simplification, a brief historical sketch is presented of five distinct historical periods characterized in terms of: (1) borrowing from Japan, (2) Americanization, (3) Sovietization, (4) Cultural Revolution, and (5) reform and opening-up (see Lu, 2001; Ye, 2004).

- *Borrowing from Japan (and Europe; 1901–1919)*. The abolition of the imperial civil service examination system and the replacement of the traditional school system with a modern Western school system (adapted from Japan) resulted in an urgent need to train teachers for the new school system. The pedagogic theories of Herbart and Herbartians were introduced to China from Japan. Herbartian didactics, with its aims-means rationality and five-step method, was found to be particularly useful and relevant; it provided practical answers to the questions of what to teach and how to teach it (Zhang, 2006; Zhou & Ye, 2006). Starting from 1912, the pedagogical theories of Pestalozzi, Montessori, and others were introduced to China from Continental Europe, and had an impact on Chinese pedagogical thinking and practice (see Curran, 2005).
- *Americanization (1919–1949)*. The wave of borrowing from Japan (and Europe) eventually faded away as Chinese educators turned to the US for educational theory and inspiration. During the New Culture Movement (1915–1919) and the May Fourth Movement (1919), Chinese intellectuals called for the creation of a new Chinese culture largely based on American standards. With the two-year historic visit of John Dewey, American pragmatic educational philosophy became highly popular and influential in Chinese educational discourse. American curriculum and instruction theories were systematically introduced to China (Ding, 2001; Ye, 2004).
- *Sovietization (1949–1960)*. The American influence came to a halt after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Isolated by

Western capitalist countries (led by the US), China turned to borrow pedagogic theories and methods from the former Soviet Union. I. A. Kairov's pedagogics was translated into Chinese, and became the standard paradigm of pedagogic discourse and practice after the invited visit of Kairov and other Soviet pedagogical experts who gave lectures in universities across the country. However, the Sino-Soviet split in 1960 led to a wholesale criticism of Soviet pedagogic theories (Chen, 1998; Huang, 2010).

- *Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)*. Soviet pedagogic theories were completely denounced and repudiated during the Cultural Revolution. This 10-year period also “eradicated” the remnants of American influence on educational discourse and “wiped out” all traces of Confucian educational heritage (Yang & Frick, 2009).
- *Reform and opening-up (1977–2000)*. After China was reopened to the world, varieties of Western educational theory found their way to the country. Comenius' *Didactica Magna*, Herbert's *General Pedagogics*, and other related works were reintroduced from Germany and other European countries. Kairov's pedagogics was revisited and re-evaluated, together with the works of other Soviet pedagogues. Likewise, a vast body of curriculum and instruction theory was introduced, mostly from the U.S. Scholars in China had also endeavored to develop Chinese didactics and curriculum and instruction theory through writing and compiling their own texts (e.g., Cai, 2000; Wang, 2011; Zhang & Zhong, 2003).

This brief historical sketch brings to light three traditions of educational thinking imported to China over the last century, *German pedagogics* (represented by Herbart and Herbartians), *American curriculum (and instruction)*, and the *Soviet pedagogics* (primarily represented by Kairov). However, during the course of theory borrowing these three traditions have been treated as “discontinuous” and “mutually exclusive”; the embrace of one necessarily led to the rejection of another one (Zhou & Ye, 2006). As a result, the German pedagogic legacy has receded to the background, overshadowed, if not completely replaced, by Soviet pedagogics and American curriculum (and instruction), both of which have become rather influential traditions in educational theory and discourse in China.

Kairov's pedagogics has exerted the most influence on the development of didactics in China. Most contemporary didactics texts are written largely within the framework of Kairov's didactical theory, and significantly shaped by its basic

principles and concepts (Liu & Lin, 2008; Wei & Cai, 2002). While structured according to the ends-means organizing model of Herbart's general pedagogics, Kairov's theory of didactics in essence is a form of Herbartianism, characterized by a simplistic, mechanistic application of Herbart's thinking (Chen, 1998). Its primary theoretical underpinning is Marxist-Leninist philosophy. According to Kairov, the central aim of education is the formation of the all-round developed persons required of the communist society. This is achieved through helping students (1) systematically master basic knowledge of the physical, social and human sciences, (2) develop cognitive skills and abilities, and (3) cultivate the communist dialectical worldview (Kairov, 1953). Content refers to a body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes specified in instructional plans, syllabi and textbooks developed by the Ministry of Education. In classrooms teachers are required to follow a set of instructional principles and employ a body of instructional methods and techniques (Kairov, 1953; also see Deng, 2012).

As a result, Chinese didactics has been developed largely within the qualification and socialization domains, with a primary concern for helping students acquire disciplinary knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes deemed necessary for the political and economic needs of the country (Deng, 2012). A concern for person-making—in term of the formation of the self or cultivation of the individual—is largely neglected or undermined in current theory and discourse on didactics.

The German *Didaktik* Tradition

There have been attempts to re-discover and re-interpret the significance and implications of Herbart's general pedagogics for pedagogic theory and practice in China (see Zhang, 2006). However, the German *Didaktik* tradition remains largely unknown to the Chinese educational community. Standing for a reconceptualization of didactics, this tradition was developed out of a criticism of Herbartiansim near the end of the 19th century, together with a revisiting of the original thinking of Herbart and Kant (Hamilton 1999; Hopmann & Riqarts, 2000; Kansanen, 1999).

In this tradition didactics is construed within the realm of human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) rather than natural science (*Naturewissenschaften*), with the employment of a hermeneutic approach to understanding and theorizing educational phenomena. Its philosophical underpinning consists in the thinking of the European Enlightenment associated with Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schiller,

Pestalozzi, Herbart, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Hegel, Froebel and Diesterweg. Underpinning this thinking is the image of “the responsible and socially aware person contributing to his or her own destiny and capable of knowing, feeling, and acting” (Gundem, 2000, p. 242). While there are many traditions or branches of didactics in Europe, the German *Didaktik* tradition represents “the main tradition of didactics and has had the longest and most profound impact” (p. 242). It has been “at the center of most school teaching and teacher education in Continental Europe, but at the same time is almost unknown in the English speaking world” (Hopmann, 2007, p. 109).

All German states have a well-articulated state curriculum framework, the *Lehrplan*, which lays out school subjects and their contents to be taught in schools. However, it does not specify the educational meanings of content, which are to be interpreted by teachers in their classroom situations (Hopmann, 2007). Teachers have a high degree of professional autonomy to interpret the state-mandated curriculum in classroom settings; they are viewed as reflective professionals “working within, but not directed by” the state curriculum framework, informed by the idea of *Bildung* and the didactics way of thinking (Westbury, 2000). Three basic tenets are fundamental to the German *Didaktik* tradition: (1) the notion of *Bildung*, (2) a theory of educational content, and (3) an idea of teaching as a meaningful encounter between the learner and content.

Bildung encapsulates what it means to be educated and is clearly within the subjectification arena; it encompasses a set of educational aims and values centered on self-formation, including the development of intellectual and moral powers, the cultivation of sensibility, self-awareness, liberty and freedom, and the dignity of the individual (Hopmann, 2007; von Humboldt, 2000). To achieve *Bildung*, the individual seeks to “grasp as much world as possible” and to make a contribution to humankind through developing his or her own unique self, with its intellectual and moral powers (von Humboldt, 2000). Here the *world* refers to the natural, physical and cultural world “processed” through a variety of disciplines (humanities and sciences; Lüth, 2000).

In German *Didaktik* content is viewed as “a potential stimulus for human development” and “a means of expressing, exercising and intuiting powers,” and therefore, must be “used in the service of intellectual and moral *Bildung*” (Lüth, 2000). In other words, it is an important cultural resource for *Bildung* (Klafki, 2000). Contents, characteristically defined by curriculum designers as the contents of education (*Bildungsinhalt*), are the result of special selection and organization of the wealth of the conceivable knowledge, experiences, and

wisdom for *Bildung*. The content of a particular school subject is construed as comprising *educational substance* (*Bildungsgehalt*)—essential elements, aspects or structures—that could contribute to *Bildung* (Klafki, 2000). This content, by virtue of its educational substance, has a “formative potential” or a “possible value-laden impact” on the mind of the becoming person. In other words, it can lead to *fundamental* experience (Krüger, 2008). These four interrelated concepts, *contents of education*, *educational substance*, *essential* and *fundamental*, together constitute a *theory of educational content* (*Theorie der Bildungsinhalte*)—a theory of what content is, what educational value and significance content possesses, and how content is selected and organized for educational purposes.²

In German *Didaktik* teaching is largely conceived in the subjectification domain, having to do with human formation through participating in the world and culture (von Humboldt, 2000; also see Lüth, 2000). At the heart of teaching is a “fruitful encounter” between content and the learner (Klafki, 2000). Teachers are to understand the contents—more precisely, the theory of content—embedded in the *Lehrplan*. They are to be centrally concerned with analyzing and unpacking the educational meaning, value, and significance of content from the perspective of *Bildung*, when engaged in instructional planning in a classroom setting. As Künzli (1998) explained,

A didactician looks for a prospective object of learning...and he asks himself what this object can and should signify for the student and how the student can experience this significance...All other questions and problems—other than the significance of the learning content—such as class management, individual and social learning, learning control, individual learning speed, appropriate representation, etc.—are subordinate to this central concern and gain significance only when the question of educative substance (*Bildungsgehalt*) is at issue. (pp. 39–40)

In other words, teachers need to disclose the educational potential inherent in content through conducting *Didaktik* analysis. Klafki formulated a five-step set

² For issues concerning a theory of content, interested readers can be referred to W. Doyle (1992), *Constructing Curriculum in the Classroom*. In F. K. Oser, A. Dick & J. Patry (Eds.), *Effective and Responsible Teaching: The New Synthesis* (pp. 66–79). San Francisco, NC: Jossey-Bass; W. Doyle (1992), *Curriculum and Pedagogy*. In P. W. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Curriculum: A Project of the American Educational Research Association* (pp. 486–516). New York, NY: Macmillan; Z. Y. Deng (2009), The Formation of a School Subject and the Nature of Curriculum Content: An Analysis of Liberal Studies in Hong Kong. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41(5), 585–604. doi: 10.1080/00220270902767311; and Deng (2011).

of questions that assist teachers in exploring educational potential:

1. What wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner? What basic phenomenon or fundamental principle, what law, criterion, problem, method, technique, or attitude can be grasped by dealing with this content as an “example”?
2. What significance does the content in question, or the experience, knowledge, ability, or skill, to be acquired through this topic, already possess in the minds of the children in my class? What significance should it have from a pedagogical point of view?
3. What constitutes the topic’s significance for the children’s future?
4. How is the content structured (which has been placed in a specifically pedagogical perspective by questions 1, 2, and 3)?
5. What are the special cases, phenomena, situations, experiments, persons, elements of aesthetic experience, and so forth, in terms of which the structure of the content in question can become interesting, stimulating, approachable, conceivable, or vivid for children of the stage of development of this class (Klafki, 2000, pp. 151–157)?

Questions 1 to 3 explore the essential ingredients, features, and significances that constitute the educational potential of the content. Questions 2 and 3 necessitate an analysis or unpacking of the educational meaning and significance of those essential elements, an analysis which is crucial for disclosing the educational potential inherent in the content. By discerning the essential elements of the content and elucidating their possible manifestations or aspects, Didactics analysis unlocks the “organic power” contained in the content that could bring about fundamental experience leading to *Bildung*.

Rethinking Basic Didactic Concepts

The three tenets of the German *Didaktik* tradition carry important implications for the development of Chinese didactics. They challenge Chinese educators to rethink what education is for, how content should be conceived, selected and organized, and what teaching entails with attention to the subjectification function of education, in addition to the qualification and socialization functions.

The concept of *Bildung* foregrounds the subjectification function of education. It is fundamentally different from the notion of educational aims widely adopted

in didactic theory and discourse in China, a notion that, as already mentioned, construes the central tasks of teaching in terms of helping students master basic disciplinary knowledge and skills, develop cognitive and practical abilities, and cultivate attitudes and worldviews needed for the social and economic development of China (see Deng, 2012). In such a notion the subjectification function of education is largely undermined or ignored. *Bildung* privileges self-formation over the qualification and socialization functions of education. This is indeed resonant with the Neo-Confucian notion of self-cultivation concerning the development of self-worth, self-respect, self-understanding, and individual powers in relation to fulfilling one's social responsibilities and functions. As de Bary (1996) observed,

The Four Books with Zhu Xi's commentary gave the individual a sense of self-worth and self-respect not to be sacrificed for any short-term utilitarian purpose; a sense of place in the world not to be surrendered to any state or party; a sense of how one could cultivate one's individual powers to meet the social responsibilities that the enjoyment of learning always brought with it—powers and responsibilities not to be defaulted on. (p. 33)

Such self-cultivation is a precondition for developing the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfill social responsibilities and functions (de Bary, 1996; also Bai, 2013). Like *Bildung*, self-cultivation is achieved through the interactions with the physical and cultural world, entailing the investigation of natural and social phenomena and the advancement of knowledge (Bai, 2013; de Bary, 1996). However, self-cultivation is different from *Bildung* in that the former attaches greater significance to the community or society of which one is seen as an organic part rather than (as does the latter) the individual as an almost independent and self-sufficient entity (de Bary, 1996).

If learning to be human, either in the sense of *Bildung* or of self-cultivation, is to be taken seriously, Chinese educators would have to rethink the basic meanings and purposes of education in the subjectification vein. What constitutes self-worth, self-understanding, and self-respect? How could/should self-worth, self-understanding, and self-respect be developed? How could/should individual intellectual powers, moral dispositions, social responsibilities be cultivated vis-a-vis the development of self-worth, self-understanding, and self-respect? What role do scientific, natural, cultural and historical resources play in such cultivation or development and how?

The idea of a theory of educational content in German *Didaktik* provides an

important way of thinking about issues pertaining to content selection, organization and framing for educational, social, cultural, and pedagogical purposes, issues that are essential to curriculum making at the programmatic level and curriculum enactment in classrooms. Unlike in Chinese didactics, where content is largely taken as a body of stable, ready-made knowledge and skills for acquisition and mastery (see Deng, 2012), in German *Didaktik* content is construed as the indispensable resource for *Bildung*, with inherent educational potential to be disclosed and realized in classrooms (Klafki, 2000; also see Deng, 2011). Accordingly, content is selected, organized and framed in a way that supports and facilitates classroom teachers to interpret and transform content so as to bring out manifold educational opportunities in classrooms for the formation of self and cultivation of intellectual and moral powers and capacities.

Yet in Chinese didactics discourse the theory (or theories) of content (if any) is largely constructed for the tasks of qualification (the acquisition of pre-specified knowledge, skills and abilities) and socialization (the development of attitudes, beliefs and dispositions needed for the society; Deng, 2012). The educational potential inherent in content for the formation of self and the development of intellectual and moral powers and capacities has not received adequate attention. What should constitute the content of teaching and learning in view of the need to help students develop self-understanding, intellectual and moral powers? What educational value and significance does content possess with respect to the subjectification, qualification, and socialization purposes of education in the current social, economic, and educational context? How could/should content be re-conceived, selected, organized and framed in a way that not only contributes to the qualification and socialization aims but also facilitates the subjectification process of individuals?

The third tenet, the notion of teaching as a learner-content encounter, challenges Chinese educators to rethink the essence of classroom teaching from the perspective of subjectification. As indicated above, in German *Didaktik* teaching is not viewed in terms of transmitting knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes. At the heart of teaching is a “meeting” between learners and content initiated by the classroom teacher, an “encounter” that can give rise to the unfolding of the self and cultivation of intellectual and moral powers (Hopmann, 2007). This is a stark contrast to current pedagogical practice in classrooms in China which is largely driven by the qualification and socialization purposes, and which, as Levin (2010) observed, “focuses on the mastery of content, not on the development of the capacity for independent and critical thinking.” Yet, to a certain extent, the *Didaktik* notion of teaching is consonant with the Confucian

vision of teaching “recovered” by Wu Zongjie (2011) based on his analysis of *Analekts*, an image in which the teacher engages students in a “heart-to-heart” dialogue necessitated by an in-depth engagement with the meaning of a classic text.

How should classroom teaching be reconceived in light of the subjectification purpose, apart from the qualification and socialization purposes? How should a teacher analyze and unpack content in terms of educational potential with respect to these three purpose domains? How should a teacher facilitate the “encounter” between students and content in a way that renders manifold opportunities for not only the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences but also the cultivation of freedom, inner worth, intellectual and moral powers and capacities?

In short, the German *Didaktik* tradition poses a significant challenge for educators in China to rethink the purposes/aim, content, and practice of teaching. This rethinking is essential if they are to (re)construct Chinese didactics with a concern for the subjectification purpose of education, in addition to qualification and socialization purposes. How might such a rethinking be made possible in China? What might the rethinking entail in the current social, cultural and institutional context of schooling? As an illustration, I now look at the construction of “life-practice” pedagogics by professor Ye Lan and colleagues at East China Normal University, an undertaking that entails a fundamental rethinking of many basic didactic concepts pertaining to the subjectification function of education. This rethinking, while not informed by the German *Didaktik* tradition, in many respects reflects what is implied in the three tenets outlined above.

The Case of “Life-Practice” Pedagogics

As a new paradigm or school of thought, “life-practice” pedagogics was constructed by Ye Lan and associates over the course of planning and implementing “New Basic Education”, a reform program directed toward reforming elementary and secondary schools in the midst of the profound social, economic, and educational transition underway in China at the turn of the 21st century—caused by globalization, a fast-growing market economy, the emergence of information technology, etc. The reform was said to be motivated by the concern for developing students’ abilities to self-regulate, judge and think reflectively, and cultivate their self-confidence and courage to face challenges

(Ye, 2009a, 2009b). “Life-practice” pedagogics was also developed as a response to critical issues facing pedagogics in China discerned by Ye Lan based on her critical reflection on the historical development of the field, issues having to do with its undue reliance on imported Western theories, its adherence to political ideologies, its preoccupation with transmitting disciplinary knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for the society, and (as a result) its overlooking of the developing individual, among other issues (Bu, 2011; also see Deng, 2013).

In “life-practice” pedagogics Ye Lan attempts to redirect the concern for transmitting content (knowledge, skills and attitudes) to one for cultivating *individuals* who possess intellectual, moral, and spiritual potentialities, actively developing individuals. The central aim of education is defined largely in the subjectification vein, in terms of cultivating individuals with “self-consciousness of life,” the “inner power” for realizing the value of life (Ye, 2009a). It is “to help people to ‘own’ their consciousness and have the ability to lead their own destinies” (Ye, 2009b, p. 562). This aim is essential to New Basic Education reform, which is described as attempting “to cultivate future citizens with the qualities of independent thinking and independent personalities, and to also instill in them a sense of collective [social] responsibility” (Ye, 2009b, p. 584). In other words, the cultivation of self-consciousness is a necessary precondition for achieving the qualification and socialization purposes of education. This perspective is largely compatible with what is implied in *Bildung* and in the neo-Confucian notion of self-cultivation outlined above.

As in German *Didaktik*, in “life-practice” pedagogics content is held as an important “resource” and “means” for cultivating individual learners rather than a body of knowledge and skills for mere transmission or mastery (Ye, 2009a). A distinction is made between *explicit content* and *implicit content*. The former is embodied in instructional frameworks, syllabi and textbooks, consisting of the outcomes of human experience and practice selected and organized for the purposes of providing students with opportunities to understand and interact with the real world, developing their intellectual and moral abilities, and cultivating their self-consciousness of life. The latter is further differentiated between *implicit “process” content*—pertaining to the process and practice through which knowledge was developed and formulated by human beings—and *implicit “relational” content*—concerning knowledge relationships in and across school subjects. These three notions are essential for recognizing and appreciating the educational values and significance inherent in content—in terms of developing students’ self-understanding, intellectual capacities, and social responsibilities (Ye, 2009a). They can be seen as constituting *a theory of educational content* in

“life-practice” pedagogics.

Ye Lan construes classroom teaching as a “dynamic” and “generative” process organized around content and directed toward cultivating the life-consciousness, intellectual and moral potential of the active individual (Ye, 2009a). As in the German *Didaktik* tradition, in “life-practice” pedagogics teaching is seen as involving an active “interplay” between learners and content which could bring about a profound impact on learners. To facilitate such an interplay, classroom teachers necessarily analyze and explore the educational value and significance inherent in content in terms of explicit content, implicit “process” and “relational” contents, with attention to who students are, their interests, knowledge backgrounds and experiences. Teachers are to reorganize, frame and transform content in a way that allows the educational value and significance to be realized in classrooms (Ye, 2002, Ye, 2009a). Furthermore, classroom teaching is seen as an important phase of the “life journey” for both the teacher and students, which can have an impact on their current and future lives. In other words, it is not only a way of contributing to the development of students, but also an arena where teachers realize their life value, self-development and fulfilment (Ye, 1997).

Overall, the above brief discussion of “life-practice” pedagogics illustrates what is entailed in rethinking the aim of education, content, and practice of teaching within the current social and cultural context of schooling in China, with a primary concern for the subjectification function of education. This rethinking, albeit not informed by the German *Didaktik* tradition, bears a significant resemblance to what is implied in the three tenets of the German tradition.

Concluding Remarks

This paper explores the implications of the German *Didaktik* traditions for reconstructing Chinese didactics with a focus on the subjectification function of education. It argues for a rethinking and re-conceptualization of the purposes of education, content, and practice of teaching in view of the three basic tenets of German *Didaktik*, *Bildung*, a theory of content, and teaching as a student-content encounter. It is important to note that German *Didaktik* is not without issues and problems. Historically, the notion of *Bildung* has long been “charged” with the interest and sentiment of the middle class, the utopian hopes of enlightenment and the realization of those hopes (Hansen, 2008). It is a version of liberal

education that defines the functions of education exclusively within the subjectification realm, with a strong tendency to overlook the extant social, cultural, and political expectations and demands on the qualification and socialization functions of education. The German *Didaktik* tradition has been under severe challenge, however, in the context of globalization, standards and accountability (cf. Hopmann 2007, 2008).

Nevertheless, these issues and limitations can be addressed or overcome if Chinese didactics is to be constructed within the current social, cultural, and educational context of schooling in China, with a close attention to the expectations and demands on the subjectification, qualification, and socialization functions of education in today's world. A thorough understanding of these expectations and demands in turn calls for extensive theoretical and empirical investigations on the part of Chinese educators. Furthermore, apart from the German *Didaktik* tradition, other theoretical sources need to be eclectically brought to bear on the task of theory development. This way of constructing didactical theory can, on the one hand, take account of the insights and contributions of the German *Didaktik*, and on the other, overcome their inherent limitations. A new paradigm of Chinese didactics can be established when theory development is grounded in a sophisticated and thorough understanding of the demands and challenges facing today's Chinese education, together with an embrace of eclecticism that allows a variety of theories—Western, Eastern or Chinese—to be brought to bear on theory development in a productive manner (see Deng, 2013).

References

- Arnold, K.-H., & Lindner-Müller, C. (2012). The German tradition in general didactics: Its origins, major concepts, approaches, and perspectives. *Jahrbuch für Allgemeine Didaktik (Yearbook for General Didactics)*, 2, 46–64.
- Bai, L. M. (2013). Practicality in curriculum building: A historical perspective on the Mission of Chinese education. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 8(4), doi: 10.3868/s110-002-013-0036-1
- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 33–46. doi: 10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9
- Biesta, G. (2011). Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental construction of the field. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19(2), 175–192. doi: 10.1080/14681366.2011.582255
- Bu, Y. H. (2011). 叶澜 “生命实践” 教育学创建的思想路径 [The ideological path of Ye

- Lan's pedagogics of "Life and Practice"]. 高校理论战线 [*Theoretical Front in Higher Education*], (9), 19–28. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1002-4409.2011.09.005
- Chen, G. S. (1998). 重评凯洛夫“教育学” [Reevaluating Kairov's "Pedagogics"]. 河北师范大学学报 (教育科学版) [*Journal of Hebei Normal University (Educational Science Edition)*], 1(1), 42–48, 78.
- Curran, T. D. (2005). *Educational reform in republican China: The failure of educators to create a modern nation*. New York, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- de Bary, W. T. (1996). Confucian education in premodern East Asia. In W.-M. Tu (Ed.), *Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity: Moral education and economic culture in Japan and the four mini-dragons* (pp. 21–37). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cai, B. L. (2000). 传统教学论的产生及发展历程 [The origin and development of traditional didactics]. 教育研究 [*Educational Research*], (6), 60–65.
- Deng, Z. (2011). Revisiting curriculum potential. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 41(5), 538–559. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2011.00563.x
- Deng, Z. (2012). Constructing Chinese didactics: (Re)discovering the German didactics tradition. *Jahrbuch für Allgemeine Didaktik (Yearbook for General Didactics)*, 2, 108–128.
- Deng, Z. (2013). The practical and reconstructing Chinese pedagogics. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(5), 652–667.
- Ding, G. (2001). Nationalization and internationalization: Two turning points in China's education in the twentieth century. In G. Peterson, R. Hayhoe & Y. Lu (Eds.), *Education, culture, & identity in twentieth-century China* (pp. 161–186). Hong Kong, China: The University of Hong Kong Press.
- Gundem, B. B. (2000). Understanding European didactics. In M. Ben-Peretz, S. Brown & B. Moon (Eds.), *Routledge international companion to education* (pp. 235–262). London, England: Routledge.
- Hamilton, D. (1999). The pedagogic paradox (or why no didactics in England?) *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 7(1), 135–152. doi: 10.1080/14681369900200048
- Hansen, L.-H. (2008). Rewriting Bildung for postmodernity: Books on educational philosophy, classroom practice, and reflective teaching. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38(1), 93–114. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2007.00399.x
- Hopmann, S. (2007). Restrained teaching: The common cores of Didaktik. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(2), 109–124. doi: 10.2304/eej.2007.6.2.109
- Hopmann, S. (2008). No child, no school, no state left behind: Schooling in the age of accountability. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(4), 417–456. doi:10.1080/00220270801989818
- Hopmann, S., & Riquarts, K. (2000). Starting a dialogue: A beginning conversation between Didaktik and curriculum traditions. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 3–11). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Huang, S. G. (2010). 凯洛夫“教育学”在中国的理论辐射与实践影响 [The theory radiation and practical influence of I. A. Kairov's pedagogics in China]. 复旦教育论坛 [*Fudan Education Forum*], 8(3), 42–47.
- Kairov, I. A. (1953). 教育学 [Pedagogics]. 北京, 中国: 人民教育出版社 [Beijing, China: People's Education Press].

- Kansanen, P. (1999). The *Deutsche Didaktik* and the American research on teaching. In B. Hudson, F. Buchberger, P. Kansanen & H. Seel (Eds.), *Didaktik/Fachdidaktik as Science(-s) of the Teaching Profession* (pp. 21–35). Umeå, Sweden: *TNTEE Publications*.
- Klafki, W. (2000). Didaktik analysis as the core of preparation. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 139–159). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Krüger, R. A. (2008). The significance of the concepts “elemental” and “fundamental” in didactic theory and practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(2), 215–250. doi: 10.1080/00220270701332267
- Künzli, R. (1998). The common frame and the places of Didaktik. In B. B. Gündem & S. Hopmann (Eds.), *Didaktik and/or curriculum: An international dialogue* (pp. 29–45). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Levin, R. C. (2010). Top of the class: The rise of Asia’s universities. Retrieved June 7, 2013, from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66216/richard-c-levin/top-of-the-class>
- Liu, H. M., & Lin, D. (2008). Difficulties and outlets: On paradigm of China’s pedagogy. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 3(2), 163–177. doi: 10.1007/s11516-008-0011-9
- Lu, J. (2001). On the indigenouness of Chinese pedagogy. In R. Hayhoe & J. Pan (Eds.), *Knowledge across cultures: A contribution to dialogue among civilizations* (pp. 249–253). Hong Kong, China: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.
- Lüth, C. (2000). On Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theory of Bildung. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 63–84). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- von Humboldt, W. (2000). Theory of Bildung. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 57–61). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wang, J. (2011). 论中国特色的教学论学派 [On schools of Chinese didactics]. 华中师范大学学报(人文社会科学版) [*Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Science)*], 50(1), 140–147. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1000-2456.2011.01.022
- Wei, X. M., & Cai, B. L. (2002). 教学论的困境与出路 [The dilemma and resolution of didactics]. 教育研究 [*Educational Research*], (6), 54–59.
- Westbury, I. (2000). Teaching as a reflective practice: What might Didaktik teach curriculum. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition* (pp. 15–39). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wu, G. (1995). 论教育学的终结 [The end of pedagogics]. 教育研究 [*Educational Research*], (7), 19–24.
- Wu, Z. (2011). Interpretation, autonomy, and transformation: Chinese pedagogic discourse in a cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(5), 569–590. doi: 10.1080/00220272.2011.577812
- Yang, J. Z., & Frick, W. C. (2009). Will the leadership of Chinese education follow the footsteps of American education: A brief historical and socio-political analysis. *Journal of Thought*, 44(3–4), 23–48.
- Ye, L. (1997). 让课堂焕发出生命活力: 论中小学教学改革的深化 [Let classrooms exhibit

- life power: On deepening instructional reform in elementary and secondary schools]. 教育研究 [Educational Research], (9), 3–7.
- Ye, L. (2002). 重建课堂教学价值观 [Reconstructing value beliefs about classroom teaching]. 教育研究 [Educational Research], (5), 3–7, 16.
- Ye, L. (2004). 中国教育学发展世纪问题的审视 [The development of pedagogics in China: A review of century-long issues]. 教育研究 [Educational Research], (7), 3–17.
- Ye, L. (2009a). 基础教育改革与中国教育学理论重建研究 [Research on basic educational reform and the reconstruction of Chinese pedagogic theory]. 北京, 中国: 经济科学出版社 [Beijing, China: Economic Science Press].
- Ye, L. (2009b). “New Basic Education” and me. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 4(4), 558–609. doi: 10.1007/s11516-009-0031-0
- Zhang, B. X. (2006). 重新掀开被湮没的历史, 正确认识被曲解的传统 [Reopening a forgotten history, rediscovering a misinterpreted tradition]. 教育学报 [Journal of Educational Studies], 2(5), 3–11.
- Zhang, H., & Zhong, Q. Q. (2003). Curriculum studies in China: Retrospect and prospect. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 253–270). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zhang, X. L. (2006). 赫尔巴特教育学在中国的传播 (1901–1904) [The introduction and spread of Herbart’s pedagogics in China (1901–1904)]. 教育学报 [Journal of Educational Studies], 2(5), 36–41, 57. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1673-1298.2006.05.005
- Zhong, Q. Q., & You, B. H. (2004). 发霉的奶酪——“认真对待 ‘轻视知识’ 的教育思潮” [Moldy cheese: Review of “A critical reflection on the thought of ‘despising knowledge’ in Chinese basic education”]. 全球教育展望 [Global Education], 33(10), 3–7.
- Zhou, G. P., & Ye, Z. J. (2006). 赫尔巴特教育学在中国: 一个跨越世纪的回望 [Herbart’s pedagogy in China: Review of the study in the past century]. 教育学报 [Journal of Educational Studies], 2(5), 29–35.
- Zhou, Y. (2011). Reflections on modern China and the progressive power of educational studies. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 6(2), 167–181. doi: 10.1007/s11516-011-0127-1