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Inheritance, Integration, Innovation: A Commentary on the *General History of Chinese Education*

中国教育通史 [*General history of Chinese education*]. 王炳照, 李国钧, 阎国华主编 [Wang Bingzhao, Li Guojun, & Yan Guohua (Eds.)]. 北京, 中国: 北京师范大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Beijing Normal University Publishing Group], 2013. XVI Vols., 7,752pp., 2,390 ¥, (hardcover), ISBN: 978-7-303-15611-5.

In August 2013, a very memorable year for Chinese education history, the *General History of Chinese Education* was published by Beijing Normal University Publishing Group. Amounting to seven million characters and printed as 16 volumes, this comprehensive and systematic work is set to become one of the greatest works on the history of education. Since the history of Chinese education became an independent discipline in the early 20th century, it has evolved into an important research area. As Professor Gu Mingyuan, honorary chairman of the Chinese Society of Education and academic consultant for this series, pointed out, “the publication of this series is a remarkable milestone. On one hand, it indicates a new stage in the history of Chinese education research. On the other hand, its publication marks the growth of a new generation of scholars of education history, as most of the revision was finished by young scholars.”<sup>1</sup>

The *General History of Chinese Education* is based on two earlier works of much renown in the field: The *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of the Chinese Educational System*.

In 1990, a Study of Chinese Educational Thought led by Professor Wang Bingzhao and Professor Yan Guohua was approved to be a project of the National Social Science Foundation of China and a key project of the Eighth Five-Year Plan of China Educational Science. The *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* comprises eight volumes and 3,200,000 characters, and was published by Hunan Education Publishing House in June 1994 after nearly four years’ of hard work by scholars of the historiography of education. The first volume

<sup>1</sup> M. Y. Gu (2013). Preface. In B. Z. Wang, G. J. Li, & G. H. Yan (Eds.), 中国教育通史 [*General history of Chinese education*] (pp.1–2, vol. I). 北京, 中国: 北京师范大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Beijing Normal University Press], p. 2.

focuses on the pre-Qin era (which includes the Xia, Shang, and Zhou). This was the foundation-laying phase which saw the burgeoning of ancient Chinese educational thought. The second volume considers the era of the Qin dynasty (221 BC–206 BC), Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220), Wei and Jin periods (AD 265–AD 420), Southern and Northern dynasties (AD 420–AD 589), Sui dynasty (AD 589–AD 618) and Tang dynasty (AD 618–AD 907). It is the phase of the establishment of ancient Chinese educational ideology. The third volume describes education in the Song and Yuan dynasties, which were periods of change and revision in ancient Chinese education ideology. The fourth volume narrates the stage of the retreat of ancient Chinese education ideology and the rise of modern education ideology in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The fifth volume depicts the period from the Opium War to the 1911 Revolution, in which modern bourgeois educational ideology came into being in China. The sixth volume describes the period between the 1911 Revolution and 1927, in which China's modern bourgeois education ideology flourished. The seventh volume narrates the period from the ten-year Civil War to the foundation of the People's Republic of China, in which Chinese modern bourgeois education ideology changed qualitatively and Marxist education ideology struggled for dominance. The eighth volume depicts the period from the foundation of the People's Republic of China to the 1990s, in which Marxist education ideology was dominant and developed steadily. The book tries to show readers how the development of Chinese education ideology has been dominated first by the Confucian tradition, followed by Chinese modern bourgeois ideas, and finally Marxist educational thought. It forms a complete historical overview of the development of Chinese education ideology. It is a process of elimination and selection in each historical era, in which the essence is accumulated and enriched and what might be considered dross is criticized and abandoned. Thus, the national characteristics of educational ideology in China are reflected.<sup>2</sup> After its publication, the *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* received extensive attention and praise in academia due to its abundant historical material, unprecedented time span and length as well as creative viewpoints.

Shortly after the publication of the *General History of Chinese Educational*

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<sup>2</sup> B. Z. Wang & G. H. Yan (1994). Introduction. In B. Z. Wang & G. H. Yan (Eds.), 中国教育思想通史 [General history of Chinese educational ideology] (pp.1–12, vol. I). 长沙, 中国: 湖南教育出版社 [Changsha, China: Hunan Education Publishing House], p. 11.

*Ideology*, another work, the *General History of the Chinese Educational System*, entered its preparation stage. Six years later, in July 2000, this work, edited by Li Guojun and Wang Bingzhao, was published by Shandong Education Press. The book also consists of eight volumes and more than three million characters.<sup>3</sup>

It can be said that this work is relatively weak on general history, topicality, and chronology, largely because “Chinese education has not been independent for a long period. The nation’s deployment and control of education were influenced by changing political structures. Thoughts about its development and consolidation were seen in a political, economic and academic light, and as a result, distinguishing historical data on the development of Chinese education system from other historical data has been difficult. The earlier the era, the more difficult it is to make the distinction.”<sup>4</sup> Based on this, the goal set by the two editors-in-chief was: “In the process of reconsidering the establishment, development, and changes to the Chinese education system over time, we will define the uniqueness of the Chinese education system as a historical entity and its relationship with the contemporary education system, there—by explaining the historical origins of modern educational issues. Following the historical principle of ‘making the past serve the present and drawing lessons from history,’ we will provide the necessary historical basis for reform of the modern education system.”<sup>5</sup> The *General History of the Chinese Educational System* greatly broadens the research range of the traditional “history of education systems” and includes the following details: Existing practical education systems or concepts before the systemization of history; education systems with recorded history; the process of implementing education systems, namely practical education activities based on education systems; other education activities or concepts along with the implementing system. Obviously, the authors hold that the key point of the education system is the establishment, content, traits and results of all kinds of systems, and the actual and potential effects on educational development

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<sup>3</sup> See G. J. Li & B. Z. Wang (Eds.). (2000). 中国教育制度通史 [*General History of Chinese Educational System*], vol. I. 济南, 中国:山东教育出版社 [Jinan, China: Shandong Education Press].

<sup>4</sup> G. J. Li & B. Z. Wang. (2000). In G. J. Li & B. Z. Wang (Eds). Preface. 中国教育制度通史 [*General history of Chinese educational system*] (pp.1–19, vol. I). 济南, 中国:山东教育出版社 [Jinan, China: Shandong Education Press].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

later on.<sup>6</sup>

The publication of the *General History of the Chinese Educational System* gained as much attention and praise in the field as the *History of Chinese Education Ideology*. As some scholars pointed out, the “*General History of the Chinese Educational System* not only completely sorted out the Chinese education system, but also made a great contribution to research on the theoretical side of the education system’s history....Thanks to the publication of this book, the relative backwardness of research on the history of the Chinese education system was largely changed.”<sup>7</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the two great pieces of research on the history of Chinese education appeared successively in the last decade of the 20th century. This not only has deep-rooted social reasons, but also the internal logic of the development of educational history as a field of study. As is known to all, Chinese society stepped into a new historical period of reform and opening-up since the late 1970s. Profound reforms, driven by the liberalization of thought, in-depth development of foreign exchange and the reestablishment of the goal of modernizing education, provided both the material and mental preparation, and higher requirements for the development of fields of study in the field of educational research.

In terms of the development of the history of education itself, according to a rough estimate, in the first 20 years of the reform and opening up period, historical educational data was collected, collated and published to the sum of more than 20 million characters. In total, more than 100 kinds of theoretical writing were published including educational history textbooks, histories of special subjects, dynastic history, general history, regional history, local history, school history, educational history. In addition, thousands of theses on educational history were published. Professional training in educational history has achieved remarkable success. It was in such a relatively relaxed and open academic environment, and on the basis of academic expertise and talent accumulation already existing in educational history, that the *General History of*

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<sup>6</sup> G. J. Li & B. Z. Wang. (2000). In G. J. Li & B. Z. Wang (Eds). Preface. 中国教育制度通史 [*General history of Chinese educational system*] (pp.1–19, vol. I). 济南, 中国: 山东教育出版社 [Jinan, China: Shandong Education Press].

<sup>7</sup> L. Ye (Ed.). (2005). 二十世纪中国社会科学 (教育学卷) [*Chinese Social Sciences in the 20th Century*]. 上海, 中国: 上海人民出版社 [Shanghai, China: Shanghai People’s Publishing House], p. 145.

*Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of the Chinese Educational System* came into being in the last ten years of the 20th century. Their publication separately reflected the pinnacle of academic study of Chinese education history and the history of the Chinese education system over the 20th century. They also laid a solid academic foundation for the writing of the *General History of Chinese Education*.

When it comes to the compiling of historical documents, Leften Stavrianos, a famous American historian and the author of *A Global History: From Prehistory to the 21st Century* argued that “each era requires the compiling of its histories, not because the previous version is wrong but because in each era new problems crop up and new questions are raised, and people seek answers to these questions.”<sup>8</sup> On 8 January 2011 when the Revision and Publication Conference for the *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of Chinese Educational System* was held in the conference room of Beijing Normal University Press, it marked 20 years of planning and compiling the former book and 15 years of the latter, a not insignificant timeframe for the publication of historical books. However, these 20 years saw China’s rapid development and some dramatic changes. The 21st century continues to witness the deepening of reform and opening-up in every area.

As to the compiling of China’s educational history, changes in perspective have had a profound influence. One aspect is that the Chinese government has begun to stress the importance of building culture and the enhancement of the cultural construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the development of the fine traditions of national culture, national spirit, and the absorption of cultural products of other nations to keep Chinese culture apace with the times. The other aspect is that it has become a consensus in academic circles to reassess China’s past 100 years of history by way of a modernized model. The changes in the first aspect provide a broader view and value orientation for research into Chinese educational history, especially in terms of how to analyze, judge, and reach conclusions about various issues in Chinese ancient educational history. The change in second aspect is in favor of the liberation of general education historians from the constraint of the analytical

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<sup>8</sup> L. S. Stavrianos (2013). 全球通史: 从史前史到 21 世纪 [*A Global History: From Prehistory to the 21st Century*]. 北京, 中国: 北京大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Peking University Press], p. 9.

framework of revolutionary history which has been dominant for a long time, and considering the development of Chinese ancient education history within a new analytical framework.

Of course, with deepening reform and opening up, and a freer and more open academic environment, a large number of historical documents have been found and utilized. Old historical documents may now be given new interpretations and understanding. This context is an important prerequisite for forming a true history of Chinese education based on the two existing thematic versions.

An editorial meeting in January 2011 produced the following revised principles:

I. The *General History of Chinese Education* would be based on the *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of the Chinese Educational System*. Li Guojun and Bing Chiu, and Bing Zhao and Yan Guohua would be editors of each part respectively. Gu Mingyuan would be the academic advisor and Bing Zhao, Li Guojun and Yan Guohua would be the chief editors, responsible for reorganizing and revising the content of the two original books under the new framework.

II. On the premise of respect for the editorial authority of each volume of the original book, the content was reordered from intellectual history to institutional history and divided into 15 volumes (later adjusted to 16 volumes). Each volume was assigned a director to coordinate the revision.

Later clarifications of these principles include:

Firstly, that this revised work would be based on the level of development of Chinese ideology and culture in the 21st century, with “inheritance, integration and innovation” as the guidelines. “Inheritance” indicates that the new work was to be based on the *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of the Chinese Educational System*, rather than being a completely fresh start. By “integration,” this work aimed to consider the arrangement of intellectual history and institutional history from the perspective of a “general Chinese history of education,” although discourse in each historical period was still to be divided into two parts, system and ideology. The significant departure was to no longer keep the history of thought and the general history of institutions separate from each other.

Therefore, in the revision process, those in charge were requested to consider each volume not in isolation but as a comprehensive study. The two books were to be fused rather than assembled. The theme of “innovation” referred to new

achievements in terms of viewpoint, historical material, and way of writing.

Secondly, the latest recognized achievements in the research of Chinese education history, including various new-found historical materials in domestic and international academic circles, were now fully absorbed in these major works of general history of education. The revisers' new knowledge and thinking about significant problems in this field were reflected. Some opinions that were formed under the influence of the political environment of the original books were revised and explained in novel ways.

Thirdly, in the original text, errors including choice of characters, punctuation, figures, and charts stood to be corrected and intellectual inaccuracies revised. It was necessary to check and standardize the original annotations and quotations. In order to make it convenient for readers to further research and study Chinese education, the editors compiled a bibliography and glossary.

The newly published work covers two special historical periods, and reestablishes an overall framework of the history of education in China. Specifically speaking, nine periods are covered from the pre-Qin all the way to the Ming, and Qing dynasty, and beyond, to the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China.

Firstly, comparing this book with the *General History of Chinese Educational Ideology* and the *General History of Chinese Educational System*, there are differences in the presentation of both the ancient and the modern parts. In the part regarding ancient history, a separation and consolidation of the pre-Qin dynasty and Qin and Han dynasties, and Ming and Qing dynasties was established. In the modern part, differences mainly lie in whether or not the Republic of China should be defined as a separate period. As a general history of Chinese education, its standards for historical periodization do not strictly follow those for educational ideology and educational system.

In this sense, the whole structure of the *General History of Chinese Education* fully reflects the actual situation of the development of Chinese education which has lasted for thousands of years, and better reflects the characteristics of the "general history education."

Secondly, the two volumes on special-subject history have been adjusted and further enriched, by adjusting and enriching the sections on education in the Qin and Han Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. Education in the Qin and Han Dynasty has not been reorganized as a separate part in *General History of Chinese Education*

*System and General History of Chinese Educational Ideology*. In the previous books, the Qin and the Han dynasty's education were compiled with the pre-Qin period; in the latter books, the Qin and Han dynasties' education has been reorganized into a larger history unit together with Wei, Jin and the Northern and Southern dynasties as well as Sui and Tang dynasties.

From the perspective of educational history, the Qin dynasty and the Han dynasty are very important periods in history, and one volume was given over to discussing them independently. In the *General History of Chinese Education*, the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty are not described in one volume, but each is dealt with independently. Education in the Qing dynasty comprises three volumes. One volume discusses educational ideologies in the Qing dynasty, broadening the study and understanding of educational ideologies in this period.

Thirdly, this book has modified and reinterpreted views and conclusions regarding some special subjects. Amendments in this respect reflect the period of the late Qing dynasty and the Republic of China and the great education reforms led by the government, important educational systems that were developed, significant educational events that occurred, as well as interpretations of important educational figures and thought.

For example, this book comments on educational reforms in the period of the westernization and reform movements, major educational initiatives of the ten years of the late Qing dynasty from 1901 to 1911, and policies of education and educational initiatives enacted by the Nanjing National Government during the war of resistance against Japan. Among other topics, this book analyzes general educational thought, mass educational thought, three principles of educational thought, democratic educational thought, and rural educational thought. The book investigates and evaluates the educational thought of certain figures including Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong, Chiang Kai-Shek, Chen Guofu and Chen Lifu. All of this shows a scientific attitude to the seeking of truth from facts.

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