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## Chinese Educational Reforms: Transition of an International Powerhouse

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Chinese Educational Reforms: Transition of an International Powerhouse

Jane Powell

It has been almost everywhere in the media: The People's Republic of China has a powerhouse of an education system. Only a few years ago were Americans being bombarded with advertisement campaigns, outlining the vast disparity between American and European or Asian testing scores in math and science. Now, there is a new discussion. Although the current Chinese system is effective for producing excellent test scores, many project that the rigidity will eventually only hinder China, that a lack of encouragement and space for creativity in Chinese students' educational careers will result in a lack of creativity in their working careers, which is seen as a vital need in a growing, changing economy. There are many aspects of the current education system that are contributing to these issues, such as the emphasis on memorization, or the over-use of examination. This paper concludes that the most effective route of improvement will stem from further reforms to the teacher education system, through the consideration of educator relationships to the nature of Chinese education, individual students, and Chinese society as a whole.

For many years, there has been a growing assumption that China possesses a powerhouse of an education system, and rightfully so. For example, with the 2009 PISA testing scores (known as the "Program for International Student Assessment"), it was clear that China boasted one of the most effective educational systems. According to an article from The New York Times, titled "Top Test Scores from Shanghai Stun Educators," students tested from Shanghai, China, placed top scores in math, reading, and science out of 65 countries. In comparison, the United States scores did not fare as well, placing 20<sup>th</sup> in science, 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, and 31<sup>st</sup> in math (Dillon). However impressive these scores seem to be, though, they also come at a cost: while the current system in China provides effective results in tests similar to PISA, it also ignores many of the needs that are seen as vital to the country (Song 140).

One of the main causes for the flaws of the education system, is the large-scale use of examinations.<sup>1</sup> The examination system has become one of the mainstays of Chinese education;

in many ways determining a child's future based off a series of examinations, which in turn decide what high schools and colleges the student is able to attend. Because of this, it is not surprising that Chinese parents and teachers emphasize preparation for these tests, and so memorization becomes key. The use of memorization as a teaching method, another mainstay of Chinese education, is spawned by the examination system, as memorization of information is an ability critical for doing well on these exams (Xu and Connelly 225). Furthermore, the roles of Chinese teachers play a major contribution to this process: not only are teachers being forced to follow this process in order to produce results, they are also being molded by the process of their own education to favor the exam system.<sup>2</sup> While conformity to the system in this aspect may be desirable, it is also producing some unwanted effects, i.e. the fear that passive students who learn to only absorb information, become passive adults who have not developed creative skills.

Although there are many proposals for reforms to this process,<sup>3</sup> some of the most prominent are reforms in teacher education. For the majority of discourse surrounding the Chinese education system, the main point of discussion has been the clear impact that teacher education has over the system as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Of course, there is some contention here on how much impact is made, which will be discussed in greater detail later. What I argue now is that while the extensive use of memorization in the classroom and over-emphasis on the use of exams in the system are cited as the main issues faced, these problems cannot be directly changed. While I agree that the current exam-heavy style of education needs to be gradually changed, I argue that the deeply ingrained processes surrounding exams cannot be easily removed.<sup>5</sup> Rather, by changing the style of teacher education, as well as the in-service teaching structure, these issues may be indirectly and slowly changed. Here I propose that through teacher program reforms, which hold direct ties to the

ideologies and methodologies of the Chinese educational practices, it is possible to achieve effective changes to the overall system. These changes will then encourage individual growth of both students and teachers, creating further reforms and a growth in creativity (Song 140).

From the outside, the results of China's education system have been outstanding. A country that was once perceived as third-world, now boasts some of the world's highest math and science test scores. As the nation grows in influence, the results of the People's Republic of China's education system have drawn ever more attention by other nations and their educators. However, these results come with a price: many scholars, such as Hongzhuan Song, Yimin Wang, Heidi Ross, Shijing Xu, and Michael Connelly see major issues with the methods used to gain these results. Some of the main issues cited are the overemphasis on exam-based education, strict classroom structures and curriculum that hinder creative development, and most importantly a perceived lack of teacher development. For example, Hongzhuan Song notes in his article, "Sleeping Giant: Chinese Teacher Education System Past, Present and Future," that teachers may not be getting the skills necessary to be effective, as junior colleges and normal schools (two to four-year schools which cater specifically to teacher training) are a more popular choice for teacher education, rather than four-year universities (138). Through these issues, many see a system that is ignoring the needed results of education, such as individual, societal, and work skill development necessary in a growing economy (Song 140).<sup>6</sup> Scholars point to some changes already being made, such as inter-cultural programs and stronger teacher education, such as the Finnish and Chinese cultural exchange program discussed by Kirsi Kettula, Maija Lampinen, Fan Fei, and Dan Jiang in their article, "Chinese University Teachers' Experiences of a Finnish University Pedagogical Workshop." However, there are still calls for even more reforms, such as

by Yimin Wang and Heidi Ross in their article, “The College Entrance Examination in China: An Overview of Its Social-Cultural Foundations, Existing Problems, and Consequences.” There is not a strong agreement on how these reforms should be met, for example Kettula et al. and Irene T. Ho show a strong preference for international collaboration: improving the system through Western models. However, other scholars argue against this adoption, such as Wang and Ross, seeing this idea as ineffective in reality, as it ignores the deep-seated practices present in the Chinese context (8).

The issue cited by many researchers as the main contributor to the flawed system is the overemphasis on exams. This is because many other issues are created through this, such as memorization-focused learning. Of course, the exam system is also one of the main contributors to the overall success in math and science in standardized tests, encouraging competition and longer study hours from students. However, many scholars, such as Wang and Ross, believe that while the exams are successful, they are encouraging the wrong type of success, “[College Entrance Examination] is criticized as a force that hinders system-wide reform, hamstringing institutional autonomy and knowledge innovation, reducing schooling to soulless competition” (5). Furthermore, educators like Song see this emphasis on examination as also leaving educators unprepared for “ever faster changes taking place both inside and outside the classroom” (139). Wang and Ross see the exam system as failing the students in this way, creating inequality of opportunity as “the CEE defines who has the right to access higher education and what kind of higher education” (3). While some students may be succeeding in an examination context, they may not be gaining the tools to become good citizens and employees after graduation. Because of these issues, many are calling for reforms in the exams themselves: not a total phase out, but a

less of a deciding factor in the goals and methods used by the system.

There are many other flaws, such as teacher subject specialization which prevents inter-subject collaboration as discussed by Song, or teacher-focused classrooms that discourage student collaboration as discussed by Kettula et al. Similarly, while there is largely an agreement that the exam system is flawed, there are many smaller debates as to how this issue should be addressed. Wang and Ross argue that although the exam system can be harmful, the process of change must be brought slowly in order to work with the ideas of education already present (8). Zhuran You and Fenran Jia take a very similar stance in their article, "Do they Learn Differently? An Investigation of Pre-service Teachers from US and China," citing China's long history of Confucian educational styles and examinations as a major prevention of effective exam reform. Some such as Qiong Li and Yu-Jing Ni in their article, "Debates on the Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Teacher's Challenges in China" even argue that the current system of education is actually favorable, and that the emphasis on examination is critical for strength in mathematical study. Despite this, a majority of scholars notice a theme of issues, such as the focus on memorization-based learning, as ignoring the needs that should be addressed by a student's education; individually, socially, or even economically. Shijing Xu and Micheal Connelly specifically assert in their article, "Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development: Focus on English as a Foreign Language in China," that the system is "overemphasizing learning of disciplinary knowledge and being isolated from the needs of the times, social development, and student's individuality" (220). In essence, while the system produces excellent results in the examinations, the results are seen as having little help in other contexts. For example, because of the perceived lack of creativity in graduates, Song notes that

“employers nowadays are looking for potential employees full of creativity and originality that is, with skills of creative thinking, problem solving, and decision making” (140). That is, employers are not looking for those who can do well on tests, but those who can make active, creative contributions to the work environment. For many, education is meant to reflect a need by society or individual: to be able to adapt to changing environments and needs.

Because of the lack of consensus on what issues should be focused upon, there also seems to be a lack of consensus on how these issues should be addressed. In any situation, it can be almost impossible to try and solve a problem when there is little certainty of what is causing the problem in the first place. For example, Kettula et al. consider the reactions and ideas brought about through an international educator training program, and there is a clear notion that reforms should be created through adoption of Western practices. Here, classroom discussion, group collaboration of students, activity- based instruction, and the concept of teachers as guides are all considered mainstays of the Western model of education. Many Chinese teacher participants were pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness of Western methods, such as teacher-student collaboration, and discussion or activity-based instruction (Kettula et al. 375). Xu and Connelly discuss adoption of more Western practices in English education, tending to avoid “teacher-proofing,” which references the method of strict learning structures that prevent individual teacher creativity and contributions to student learning (221). However, Western practices cannot alone provide an answer. Without delving too deep into the issue, it can be generally stated that Western education practices entail their own set of flaws. While some scholars, such as Kettula et al., seem to focus on what Westernization of education can provide, even they note these flaws. As many of the Chinese teacher participants comment, many Western practices are “time



consuming, not suitable for bigger classes, not suitable for all subjects” (376). There is actually a consensus that the changes need to be met with a balance of both cultural ideals; “work in harmony with the traditions in their efforts to modernize and internationalize China's educational system” (Xu and Connelly 225). In other words, while Western education practices can provide useful ideas in the changing Chinese education system, there needs to be a focus on adaptation, not blind adoption (Kettula et al. 371, You and Jia 839).

In these proposed changes, another important part of the discourse is that classroom, student, and teachers' contexts also need to be considered in these changes. Many authors here cite the current system as being an ancestor of Confucian values, as well as a long tradition of testing for governmental positions in Chinese society (Wang and Ross 4; Xu and Connelly 220).

Considering this context, despite the flaws of the examination-based system, it can easily be seen that the examinations hold high value in society. In this sense, Wang and Ross feel that the system cannot be so greatly overhauled, that “the ubiquitous sentiment seems to be that something has to change- but not significantly and not overnight” (8). This seems to be contrary to what Song, Kettula et al., or even Xu and Connelly suggest: while they see this issue as neither easily nor quickly solved, they are regardless calling for larger reforms.

As are many areas of study, the ideas and commentary on the Chinese education system are not unanimous. While there is a general agreement that changes need to be made, especially concerning the over-emphasis on examination, there are many disagreements on how these issues should be addressed. Although there is a growing dialogue between Western and Eastern-based education systems, this trading of methods is far from the perfect solution. The key seen by many educators is in adaptation, not adoption of programs: flexibility and a growth in discussion of

education needs to become a part of the system, in order to create reforms without a total overhaul of a system that produces some excellent, yet flawed, results. For China, the question is balancing culture, test results, and individual and societal needs.

When discussing the current issues of the Chinese educational system, the impact of the exam system must be addressed first. This is because the exam system plays such an important role in the overall educational system, and can be attributed as the root of many of the issues discussed here. In order to understand the critical role of the examinations, it is important to also understand the role of examinations in the lives of Chinese students. The exams often can decide the fate of students' futures: what school or college they can attend, and thus future job prospects. As Wang and Ross note, “the [College Entrance Examination] defines who has the right to access higher education and what kind of higher education” (4). As if this idea was not stressful enough for students striving for better prospects, Ann Hulbert notes, “a single point difference can spell radically different life options”. It is not difficult to infer that such gravity of results will therefore have an effect on the education system. Based on the demands of students in order to succeed in this testing style, the classroom will logically be drawn to focus on test preparation.

The effects of the examinations are not only reflected in the classroom, but also in the habits of the students themselves. Hulbert describes the current student as “the sort of stressed-out, test-acing drone who fails to acquire the skills — creativity, flexibility, initiative, leadership — said to be necessary in the global marketplace” (Hulbert). Clearly, it is not the goal of education to create “drones” out of students, and yet adherence to the system almost dictates its necessity. In a sense, education can be defined as preparation for independence, giving students critical skills

for use one day outside the classroom. However, in programs such as described by Dale Foster and Donna Stapleton in their article, "Understanding Chinese Students' Learning Needs in Western Business Classrooms," they notice a clear shortfall in the growth of these skills. For example, through many of the experiences by the Chinese students in the Western-style classrooms, there is a common theme that there is a lack of confidence in individual ability, regardless of whether the ability is there or not. For example, one student in Foster and Stapleton's study expressed a fear that "if you ask some silly question you are very embarrassed and all the students will laugh at you" (307). In essence, there is a fostering of the idea that "it is a tradition for Chinese students to be low key [rather] than to be in the spotlight" (307). The absorption, rather than the production of information becomes key here. Student action and thought are directed by the outlines of the examinations, and the value of self becomes downgraded in order to emphasize the importance of this absorption of information, in order to express that information effectively within the exams.

While the current style of examinations is capable of producing extraordinary results, especially in standardized international tests, such as PISA, it also produces a system that is ignorant of the needs placed upon it, a common theme throughout the current system. For example, the current exam-based system is ignoring the needs of the students themselves. Irene T. Ho notes that in order to maintain control, "personal needs are not addressed in the classroom and both teachers and students share these expectations" (112). Teachers are pressured to teach information pertinent to the examinations, and so the individual needs of the student become irrelevant, such as the adaption of learning materials to each student's learning style. While certain types of test-proficient students may thrive in this style, many students have much different reactions. As You

and Jia outline, the majority of educational philosophies hold that the “biological, developmental and personal traits that made the same instruction method effective for some students and not so effective for others” (838). While standardized tests succeed in providing objective measures of learning, they fail to be standardized observations of the learning process, due to the fact that the students themselves are not standardized. There is a diverse base of learning for students, and even teachers, as educator learning habits can dictate classroom structures.

Although the examination system plays a critical role in the current flaws of the Chinese educational system, it should not be the exclusive focus of reform. Rather, I argue that based on the current nature of the issues faced by Chinese educators, the best course of action is to address the habits and constructs of the educators themselves. This discussion on the values of changes to teacher education and practices versus changes to the exam system will be discussed later, but in this outline of the current issues the priority is to discuss the nature of the issues faced by educators. First of all, the accepted style of classroom set-ups presents restrictions on the autonomy of the educator, as well as for the students. It is generally accepted that teachers and classrooms in China tend to favor a teacher-focused structure, with an emphasis on lecturing rather than student interactions. A Chinese teacher participating in research done by Kettula et al. in a pedagogical workshop in Finland, explained the set-up “as a usual lesson in China, teacher will explain many. Students sit there silently and listen,” which is in contrast with the experience of Western teaching constructs, “the main function for teacher is to guide the students” (375). It can be inferred here that although the student teachers of this program may have previously been aware of Western practices, without the first-hand experience of this sort of practice, there is a strong possibility that this option would not have been considered. In other words, without the

exposure to this program (and therefore the Western student-based model), these student teachers may not have found reasons to reflect on the style of teacher-based education to which they were accustomed.

This idea reflects a second issue stemming from flawed teacher education programs: a vicious cycle of education. Students that thrive in the exam-based, memory-heavy, and teacher-focused style of education graduate and become teachers that follow the same system. Thomas Tang pay special attention to this issue in his article, “The Influence of Teacher Education on Conceptions of Teaching and Learning.” As Tang notes, “the correlation probably results from the strong influence of the experience of learning on both the conceptions of learning and teaching” (237). In this way, the issues of the current system have become entrenched and difficult to change, as educators have come to value memorization as a classroom tool, based on their own personal experiences and success by using this technique. This concept will play a key role in the importance of teaching program reforms, as opposed to examination reforms, as the reforms to the examination system can have little effect while entrenched values once created by the exams are still being kept alive by educators.

With the growth of discussion of China's education, many new policies have emerged. It is clear that the issues have been recognized by the Chinese government, and so new guidelines have been created in order to facilitate change. One notable policy would be the *Outline of Basic Curriculum Reform* implemented in 2001.<sup>7</sup> By creating standardized lesson plans, this outline attempts to create a change in classroom structures, promoting more emphasis on individual students. Furthermore, it is hoped that these practices can “reduce the tendency to overemphasize

textbook knowledge” (Li and Ni 10). Although this policy is not a direct reform to teacher education, changes like these can help promote the use of improved teaching techniques.

Similarly, *The New Curriculum System for Basic Education* takes a similar approach to education reform, promoting changes in Chinese classrooms to lessons focused on usefulness to the individual students.<sup>8</sup> As Xu and Connelly note, the new system “is designed to replace a curriculum that was seen by Chinese authorities, as overemphasizing learning of disciplinary knowledge” (220). Here, we see a shift of standards in education: memorization and “disciplinary knowledge” were once seen as critical tools of education, but a new value for individual development and “real life applications” of knowledge have emerged in the system itself (Li and Ni 10).

Although the exam system has presented serious issues in the evolution of Chinese education, it is important to note that the majority of reforms being practiced focus on teacher development and teaching methods. Although examinations present their own set of issues, such as the over-emphasis on memorization as a tool for exam success, reforms to examinations cannot provide the effectiveness that changes to teacher education can. This is because reforms to teaching methods are capable of radically changing teaching and learning conceptions. Take for example the vicious cycle of education: teachers who become successful through a flawed system are more likely to teach by this flawed system. By creating new teacher education programs, student teachers can be exposed to improved classroom and educational structures, which will in turn create more meaningful learning to the student (A.S.P. Ho 240). In this way, a cycle of growth can be facilitated, as students who are exposed to a greater variety of teaching methods are likely to use these methods and become more open to improvement ideas if they become teachers.

Considering the complexity of educational relationships and practices shown here, it is also clear that changes to the exam system itself cannot provide such reform. The exam system has become so critical to the current overall system, that any attempts to reduce its importance would be futile. This is because the exams are extremely valued in Chinese society, as they are seen as a way of guaranteeing success in a child's life (Wang and Ross 4). It has also been noted that historically, Confucianism has promoted a very similar standard of education: using examinations to determine civil service positions (You and Jia 838). In other words, the use of examinations has been ingrained for hundreds of years, and so it has become a valued tool for success. With such a great emphasis on exam success by the Chinese people themselves, it would be an incredibly difficult task for the government or educational system to change this conception. Similarly, the Chinese education system would face incredible hurdles to the organizational system, as the exams are currently used to decide high school and college acceptance (Wang and Ross 4). Instead, conceptual ideas of learning need to be changed directly, and so changes in teacher education and teaching methods are critical to effective reform.

Because of the critical role teacher interactions play in changing the educational system, many of the reforms that are starting to be implemented in China focus on the growth and development in teacher education. One of the ways in which this is being addressed is through in-service teacher training programs. Although these programs are relatively small-scale in comparison to other reforms, such as reforms in undergraduate teacher education, this can still help by slowly changing the conceptions of teaching for those who already have become educators. For example, in Angela S.P. Ho's article, "A Conceptual Change Approach to University Staff

Development,” she describes such a program which aims to improve the concepts of learning for educators already in the field. Although this study affected relatively few educators, it was able to demonstrate the success such programs can have on teaching practices. Angela S.P. Ho states that, “all those who espoused more advanced conceptions of teaching after attending the Programme were perceived as providing significantly better teaching by their students in the year after the Programme” (248). The surveys for this study were considered before and after the completion of a teacher training course, and even in this short time, Angela S.P. Ho found very positive results. This shows that even small changes, as simple as adding more programs for training and improvement of teacher practices, can have a noticeable effect. Part of the reason that programs such as this can be so effective is that they aid educators in analyzing their own practices, by allotting time and giving prompts for this analysis. As Angela S.P. Ho points out, “the tendency towards consonance would blind professionals from seeing the mismatch between their ideal and their actual practice” (243). Certain ideas on the ideal classroom and teaching style, as mentioned before, have become entrenched in the thought process of educators because of their own experiences. Through analysis of practices, which may have otherwise been kept as a status quo, these preconceived ideas may be questioned and eventually adapted for the reality of the classroom and student needs.

With the reforms to teacher education, there is also a growth in international teacher programs. As Foster and Stapleton note, this is “driven by increased global interconnectedness that extends to all organizations and enterprises” (301). These programs may play a critical role in the reform of teacher programs in China, as they facilitate greater analysis of practices, through the exchange Western and Eastern educational ideologies. For example, one of the main goals for



Kettula et al. in their study was to “reflect on strengths and weaknesses of different teaching methods” (372). The importance of international programs to educational reform is held in the ability to allow reformers to pick through effective or ineffective ideas from other cultures, adopting or abandoning as needed. This can come as a great advantage to reform, as it will allow Chinese educators to observe the pros and cons of other models, without directly experiencing the drawbacks of that model. Take for example the common topic of exchange: group discussion. In the Western model, group work has become a major tool in the classroom, encouraging discourse between the students or even with the teacher, as group activity can aid in the development of skills. When comparing Chinese students to their native counterparts in Canada, Foster and Stapleton note that many of the Chinese students had difficulty understanding lessons due to the language barrier. In dealing with this issue, many students found small group discussion beneficial because it allowed them to ask for further, detailed clarification. One student commented it was much easier to understand when in a small group, as “there is just a few people and they will say slowly and clearly, it is... not easy to make the whole class speak slowly and clearly” (Foster and Stapleton 307). This cannot only be applied to language learning, but also to other complex ideas, as it allows students to focus on specific, individual trouble spots and gain a better understanding of the subject matter.

The usage of group discussion can be considered a manifestation of the more fluid design of Western classrooms. International programs allow educators to compare these ideas, and understand how the Western model works, and therefore how the benefits of this model can be applied to their own teaching habits. From research by Kettula et al., it was clear that the ideas were fairly new to the participants. A common theme of participants’ comments showed surprise

that the Finnish teacher was more of a “guide” than an authority, and that this created a much more friendly and relaxing environment (Kettula et al. 375). This positive environment can be very beneficial to the student, giving motivation for learning rather than fear of failing. Irene T. Ho compares the two models, citing authority and punitive practices as the main difference between Western and Chinese classes. She states that “this strictness in discipline is the little use of praise and encouragement, which stands in sharp contrast to practices in Western schools” (I.T. Ho 106). While strict, teacher-focused classrooms are necessary for exam preparation, it does not provide the encouragement of learning that can be achieved in Western classrooms, such as respect for the individual students or rewards and honors based on academic performance. Through international programs, reformers hope to adapt these ideas and benefits to ensure that education is meeting the needs of society.

The importance of analysis is not just confined to the needs of teachers already in service, but also applies to the experiences of student teachers. Here, it is even more critical to cause reforms, as it is likely more effective to shape teaching conceptions as they develop in student teachers, rather than try to change these conceptions after graduation, or after practices have already become ingrained into their teaching styles. One of the ways in which this is being addressed is through the encouragement of university education for student teachers. Song discusses this issue, showing that around the year 2000, four-year colleges were only capable of producing about a third of the teachers that normal schools and junior colleges could produce (138). While normal schools are capable of producing qualified teachers, the Chinese Government is encouraging these schools to upgrade their programs to four-year degrees, in order to produce more well-rounded teachers (Song 138). With the growth of higher education for student

teachers, the hope is that with the greater level of pre-service experience, and exposure to more of a variety of subjects outside of their teaching focus, teachers will one day be able to use these developments to create more meaningful learning for their future students. Xu and Connelly note that the educational experiences of teachers and student teachers can help students find more meaningful and useful information from their lessons, that “tacit teacher knowledge overwhelms prescribed policies and memorized formal knowledge as teachers work with students” (223). While memorization is important to success in the examination system, many scholars such as Xu and Connelly, and Angela S.P. Ho believe that the more effective learning can be facilitated by more interactive practices.

There are some difficulties in determining the role of pre-service teacher education. Xu and Connelly contend that “The impact of pre-service teacher education and of teacher development work-shop and education programmes, is, while important, only a small part of teacher development” (226). However, pre-service education may be more influential than Xu and Connelly contend, and this is for two reasons. First of all, pre-service programs can play a critical role in creating change. While individual teacher experiences are important in considering how education reform should be addressed, it is also important to remember that individual teacher experiences may have been greatly affected by the “vicious cycle” of education mentioned before. Teachers that experience and are successful through memorization as a learning tactic, will likely advocate for its continued usage, despite the flawed education it creates. It would be difficult to demand change from a group that may already have preconceived ideas of education, while not providing adequate training in new processes. Secondly, even in-service teacher programs could prove to be a very effective route of reform. Considering Angela

S.P. Ho's study, even teachers who had already had experience in the education field itself found improvement in their education conceptions (248). Pre-service education programs for student teachers may have an astounding effect on the future of the Chinese educational system, changing ideals of learning, and the role of the teacher within the classroom.

Despite the efforts made by educators, reforms have met with many difficulties, and some proposed reforms have been found to be near impossible to implement. One of the major issues facing these reforms is the relative lack of teacher input into the process of these changes. As Xu and Connelly simply put it, "Chinese teachers are not blank slates" (225). Although implementation of reforms in teacher education may provide a route to improve the Chinese education system, the issue is not so simple. The system is controlled and changed by a complex network of teacher and student experiences, in addition to the ideologies of learning inherent to China. In essence, changes in teaching theories cannot provide an easy solution, as the process is affected by many more complicated issues. For example, the adoption of teaching theories carries further issues, because these theories are abstracted from reality. Angela S.P. Ho notes that "discrepancies between espoused ideals and actual practices are common" (249). It is easy to consider what should be done for the education system, but the reality of actual practice is another thing entirely. Furthermore, Chinese educational theories, and even theories outside of China for that matter, tend to hold assumptions of classroom dynamics, and although this can prove to be helpful generalizations in some contexts, in reality these ideas overlook the intricacies of practice in both educational models. As You and Jia comment, "these theories attempt to explain student learning as solely isolated, universal, and individualized cognitive process... neglecting the influences of the actual learning contexts" (837). Every student learns

and every teacher teaches differently, while educational theories assume that they are uniform.

This discrepancy in practice greatly relates to “teacher proofing” attempts in reforms. Xu and Connelly argue that “in [teacher proofing] teachers are not so much teachers as they are transmitters of external purposes and materials” (221). Considering the *Outline of Basic Curriculum Reform* as well as *The New Curriculum System for Basic Education*,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that this style of reform, although having the correct intentions, is taking education reform into a new set of problems. By promoting uniform teaching styles and learning materials, the Chinese government may actually be taking a step backwards, as teacher proofing ignores the context of the learner as well as the teacher. For example, a large amount of Chinese educators have found difficulty implementing this curriculum into their classroom contexts, especially in reforms to math education. The teacher proofed lesson plans, implemented because of the *Outline of Basic Curriculum Reform*, showed special difficulty as it was greatly abstracted from the teaching context. As Li and Ni note, “all [the lesson plans] are repeatedly interrupted by the practice and comprehensive application module” (15). The lack of uniformity in Chinese schools is also present in the materials available to educators: not every school has access to every technology. With the incredible access to outside technology, “students can find many other ways to have their assignments done apart from the instructions given by their teachers. In this case, it is not uncommon that students feel bored” (Song 139). Schools with relatively wealthy students may find that students have great access to technology, and so educators here may feel hindered by the lower level multimedia use in standardized lesson plans. Conversely, in rural or lower income school districts, the amount of technology needed to accurately use standardized lesson plans may not be present. For example, one teacher found that the lesson called for cutting cubes, but

because the material used for this was not available to the teacher, the class was forced to use potatoes, resulting in a “complete mess” (Li and Ni 15). Teacher proofing does not truly provide a way to equalize education as it is intended, and so here it is important to distinguish this concept as a separate idea from teacher development. Teacher development (including teacher education and international exchange programs) is a much more effective process by creating better teachers, rather than attempting to remove teacher input from the education process.

While it has been generally accepted that adaptation of some Western education methods can be a great aid in Chinese educational reforms, there is still difficulty in defining the fine line between adaptation and blind adoption. Exposing Chinese educators to Western concepts may be easy enough, but also training educators how to adapt them effectively is another issue. For example, consider again the growth of the use of group discussion. While there are many benefits for this teaching style, it also brings a new set of issues into the classroom. Foster and Stapleton note that in some contexts, such as accounting classes, “discussion was not perceived as valuable” (305). Of course, group discussion could prove helpful to some students through individualized learning, but understanding when this tool would be appropriate to use would be difficult for educators. Student teachers interviewed by Kettula et al. produced similar concerns, that group work was “time consuming, not suitable for bigger classes, [and] not suitable for all subjects” (376). Similar issues can be applied to other practices of Western education, as some of the practices (such a group discussion) that provide benefits, when used incorrectly, can also cause more problems. Therefore, the task is to not only change the system, but also to maintain a balance between effective Chinese methods, and effective Western methods.

A second issue faced by education reforms is that the current notions of learning and teaching are deeply entrenched into Chinese culture, for students, teachers, and even society as a whole.

Similar to Xu and Connelly's comment, mentioned earlier, that "Chinese teachers are not blank slates" (225), Chinese educational systems are also "not blank slates." The most widely accepted reasoning for Chinese resistance to education reform is the influence of Confucian ideals. You and Jia comment that, "Confucianism stresses on education's value for success in future life and career" (838). With the emphasis on examinations in the current Chinese system, the value of success can be said to be rooted in the success of test-taking capabilities. The problem here is that, although Chinese culture can be said to have an admirable seriousness of educational thought, the "success" (or end goal) of education needs to be directed away from measuring by exam. As stated before, Wang and Ross note that "the CEE defines who has the right to access higher education and what kind of higher education" (4). While the importance of exam success for career success is still held, it will prove to be extremely difficult to change the educational conceptions of teachers and students who see exams as the ultimate measure of educational success.

In a similar sense, it is also possible that resistance to educational reform is also rooted in every society's desire for consistency. Despite the flaws of a system, humans have a habit of resisting change simply because they have grown comfortable with the situation. Even though they are generally considered more flexible because of their youth, Chinese students themselves can show resistance to changes in the system. Foster and Stapleton outline the Canadian college experiences of Chinese students, and in doing so provides numerous examples of the difficulties Chinese students face when entering Western style classrooms. For example, many students from

the survey expressed difficulty in classroom participation, as “Chinese students don't like to say wrong things... about things we are not so sure we hesitate to speak out” (Foster and Stapleton 305). The entire point of group discussion as a way for students to share ideas or questions is lost when the students do not participate. A similar issue is seen by Kettula et al. of Chinese student teachers. For example, one student complains in the survey that when their group attempted to describe the ideal teacher, there was a disagreement “because everyone want to be group leader” (Kettula et al. 375). Even as the participants of the program used Western-style approaches to the assignment (group discussion), they were still focused on following the more Chinese model, which explains the perceived need to find a leader for the group. If a leader had been found here, it can be inferred that the leader may take on a sort of “teacher” role within the group; although there may still have been some group discussion, there is a strong probability that the discussion would be focused on this “teacher.” Again, it is clear that the education system and reforms are complicated, and so it becomes important to consider how the ideas brought by teachers and students can affect the reform process.

The current state of the Chinese educational system has produced some astounding results in testing scores. However, this system is far from perfect. While memorization and test-taking skills have been perfected in classrooms, there is a perceived lack of development in other aspects of education, such as individual development, or more meaningful learning practices. There has been some progress by way of reforms to the system, mainly through both pre-service and in-service teacher programs. Although the exam system plays a major role in the creation of these issues, one of the main targets of these reforms is through the teachers themselves. The hope is that by changing teachers' conceptions of learning, gradual changes can be made to



educational practices. This will in turn lessen the stress on exams; while they are still valued as a tool for measuring student success, exams also need to be balanced with other goals of education.

The reforms currently implemented have found surprising success, and yet have little effect on the overall system due to their small scale. Furthermore, without the proper research and implementation of these reforms, their success is limited by overwhelming resistance in many aspects. Not only is the system itself resistant to change due to the emphasis on examination, but teachers and students as well due to their own concepts of education. Reforms that have not found success, such as the *Outline of Basic Curriculum Reform* as well as *The New Curriculum System for Basic Education*, have done so because they only reinforce the issue of a system that has become too standardized. While it is promising that reforms are at least being made, further attention needs to focus on balancing structured change and necessary flexibility for those changes to be effective.

Based on this information, change, while slow, is possible. However, this change needs to be generated by more, well-planned reforms. First of all, there needs to be further encouragement on individual learning. This must be differentiated from individual study. Individual study is already common in Chinese classrooms, in that students are expected to work on their own and not depend on group interaction, in contrast with Western models that emphasize group interaction. Rather, individual learning references the adaptation of learning to the individual. As You and Jia note, “matching teaching styles with learning styles could promote learning and foster students' academic success” (838). Each child learns differently, and has different talents.

By accepting this, and developing a more responsive system, teachers can enable a variety of students to succeed. The children at the top of the class are not the only ones who can make a contribution. Like Tang Meijie, a Harvard student interviewed by The New York Times, not all the talent is the best test-takers: she was not even in the top 10 of her school, and yet became wildly successful in other areas (Hulbert). Secondly, there needs to be more classroom interaction. Group discussion as a teaching method can provide many interpersonal skills absent from memorization-based education. Even when the tool is ineffective, it can provide opportunities for students to learn conflict resolution skills. Chinese students in Canadian business classes were at first disinterested in group discussion, but one student later commented, “when [I] cooperate with group members, I learn a lot” (Foster and Stapleton 306). These reforms, while difficult at first, given time can be accepted. Once new methodologies are attempted, these ideas are more easily adopted, and even valued.

By no means will these changes be quick. The current system is rooted in years of traditional ideas, as well as individuals own ideals and conceptions of learning. While balancing the success of examinations, China must face reforms in order to improve its education system. It will not be easy, but with determination and cooperation, it is quite possible that these goals can one day be attained.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For more information on the current discussion of the flaws of the exam system, see “The College Entrance Examination in China: An Overview Of Its Social-Cultural Foundations, Existing Problems, and Consequences,” and “Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development.”

<sup>2</sup>See “Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development” and “The Influence of Teacher Education on Conceptions of Teaching and Learning” for more on the effects of exam-based

instruction.

<sup>3</sup>See for example “Debates on the Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Teacher's Challenges in China” and "Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development: Focus on English as a Foreign Language in China" for more information on the proposals for reform.

<sup>4</sup>See “Sleeping giant: Chinese Teacher Education System Past, Present and Future,” “Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development,” “The Influence of Teacher Education on Conceptions of Teaching and Learning,” and “Do They Learn Differently?” for discussions of the large number of educator-based reforms.

<sup>5</sup> See “The College Entrance Examination in China” for more on exam influence on the Chinese education system.

<sup>6</sup>Also see “Understanding Chinese Students’ Learning Needs in Western Business Classrooms” for more on the processes of skill development.

<sup>7</sup>See “Debates on the Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Teacher's Challenges in China” for further discussion of this reform.

<sup>8</sup>See “Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development” for further discussion of this reform.

<sup>9</sup>See “Debates on the Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Teachers’ Challenges in China” and “Narrative Inquiry for Teacher Education and Development” for further discussion of this reform.

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