

# Moral Education Curriculum Reform for China's Elementary and Middle Schools in the Twenty-First Century: Past Progress and Future Prospects

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article provides a historical overview of the progress made in the moral education curriculum (MEC) reform of China's elementary and middle schools in the 21st century and discusses its future prospects.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** The main methods used were textual and policy analyses.

**Findings:** While China's MEC reform is characterized by an openness and modernity achieved through international dialogue, it remains distinctively Chinese. The continued development and improvement of MEC reform can only occur through the careful handling of the various relationships between China and the international community, traditionality and modernity, central and local authorities, as well as theory and practice.

**Originality/Value:** In addition to providing greater insights into and understanding of China's new MEC reform, this article suggests several ideas for the further development of educational reform.

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## Keywords

Education reform, moral education curriculum, morals and values education

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## Introduction

In China, elementary and middle schools follow a specialized moral education curriculum (MEC) similar to social studies curriculum provided in countries like the U.S. and Australia. Moral education is intended to provide students with guidance on morality and values, improve their social understanding and capacity for social mobility, and thus ensure their development as responsible citizens. Given such objectives, moral curricula are invariably constrained by a country's sociopolitical and economic context, as well as its historical development.

Known as the new curriculum reform, China's eighth wave of national curriculum reform for basic education (1999–present) is its most ambitious attempt since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. This new curriculum reform champions moral and values education. Borrowing and learning from the social studies taught in the West, the MEC seeks to fully embody modernity, openness, and cosmopolitanism, while retaining distinctive Chinese characteristics. Providing an overview of China's MEC reform, this article elucidates both its cosmopolitan and Chinese characteristics. In doing so, this article addresses the future of MEC reform, emphasizing the importance of various relationships—including that between China and the world, traditionality and modernity, central and local authorities, as well as theory and practice—being deftly handled. Such relationships are crucial for the MEC to be effective in guiding China's progress toward social and educational modernity while better serving the growth of the young people.

## China's new MEC reform

### *Historical overview of the new MEC reform*

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the MEC has been a specialized curriculum for elementary and middle schools. Indeed, the name itself embodies China's traditional emphasis on moral education over the past millennia. Unlike Western countries, China has no religious traditions. As such, Confucianism lies at the core of China's moral education—the philosophy playing a role akin to that of religion in the growth of individuals' lives and the maintenance of social order. Moral education can also be understood as civic education centered on the teaching of morality and values, but including other historical, geographical, political, economic, cultural, and psychological content. In this sense, the MEC is similar to the social studies curriculum provided in Western countries. This article understands the MEC in terms of this broader definition of moral education.

In June 2001, the Ministry of Education of the PRC (MOE) issued *Guidelines for Curriculum Reform of Basic Education (Trial Implementation)* in officially launching the new curriculum reform for elementary and middle schools. This reform covered the entire K12 curriculum, with the original “Ideology and Morality” curriculum for the elementary school stage (Grades 1–6) separated into two courses: (i) “Morality and Life” for Grades 1–2 and (ii) “Morality and Society” for Grades 3–6. A course entitled “Ideology and Morality” (or “History and Society”) formed part of the middle school curriculum, while “Ideology and Politics” was integrated to the high school curriculum. The management model for the courses at the state, local, and school levels was established at the same time. In June 2002, the MOE officially published *Standards for the “Morality and Life” Course in Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)* and *Standards for the “Morality and Society” Course in Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)*. These were followed by the release of *Standards for the “Ideology and Morality” Course in Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)* in middle schools in 2003 and *Standards for the “Ideology and Politics” Course in General High Schools (Experimental Draft)* in 2004.

Following the introduction of these new curriculum standards, new textbooks were prepared based on the approach of “having multiple versions for one guiding principle.” Essentially, while curriculum standards were standardized at the state level, individual localities had the option of selecting which versions of the textbooks to use. Teams comprising moral education theorists, frontline teachers, as well as teaching and research staff cooperated closely in writing the textbooks—thus elevating the level of professionalism in textbook writing. At the same time, the Chinese government launched a large-scale training program for teachers so that they could adapt to the needs of the new curriculum reform.

In 2011, after the curriculum standards had been in place for nearly a decade, the MOE revised the standards for the MEC during the compulsory education stage, resulting in *Standards for the “Morality and Life” Course in Compulsory Education (2011 Edition)* and *Standards for the “Morality and Society” Course in Compulsory Education (2011 Edition)*. The new curriculum standards were more detailed and had stronger operability. In 2016, the courses for compulsory education—namely, “Morality and Life” and “Ideology and Morality”—were combined into “Morality and the Rule of Law.” Meanwhile, the approach to developing textbooks was changed from “multiple versions for one guiding principle” to “one version for one guiding principle,” with all textbooks standardized and prepared by the state.

The MOE initiated revisions of the standards for the general high school curriculum in 2013. This was followed by the release of *Standards for the “Ideology and Politics” Course in General High Schools (2017 Edition)* in January 2018. On the basis of retaining the original course name, the course structure was further optimized and the contents adjusted. The curriculum comprised compulsory, elective, and selective compulsory courses. There were four compulsory courses:

namely, “Economic Life,” “Political Life,” “Cultural Life,” and “Life and Philosophy.” These were later modified to “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” “Economy and Society,” “Politics and the Rule of Law,” and “Philosophy and Culture.” There were originally six elective courses: “General Knowledge on Scientific Socialism,” “General Knowledge on Economics,” “General Knowledge on State and International Organizations,” “General Knowledge on Scientific Thought,” “General Knowledge on Laws in Daily Living,” and “General Knowledge on Civic Morality and Ethics.” These were later modified to three modules: “Finance and Daily Living,” “Judges and Lawyers,” and “Philosophers in History.” In addition to the original compulsory and elective courses, a third category of selective compulsory courses was introduced in 2013. Three modules were offered, namely, “Modern International Politics and Economics,” “Law and Life,” and “Logic and Thought.”

As noted, the approach to high school textbooks has changed to “one version for one guiding principle.” In general, the problem with China’s nine-year compulsory education program is that the teaching materials were prepared prior to the issue of the curriculum standards. In other words, the teaching materials on “Morality and the Rule of Law” were already in use before the relevant curriculum standards were announced. As such, the MOE is currently organizing the writing and editing of standard ideological and political textbooks for high schools.

### *Reflecting on the new MEC reform*

Overall, the new curriculum reform reflects an unprecedented modernity and openness through international dialogue, while retaining distinctive Chinese characteristics. The former is characterized by the cultivation of modern civic awareness as an important training goal. In this regard, curriculum content is more comprehensive, and course implementation has emphasized proactive student participation and the practical application of lessons in their daily lives. In regard to the maintenance of an educational curriculum with distinct Chinese characteristics, the new curriculum reform has continued to focus on the status and role of moral education. Indeed, these aspects have been elevated to the primary goal and fundamental task of education in China. As such, while the MEC content emphasizes modern values, greater attention has been placed on traditional Chinese culture and virtues. State standards for and control over the MEC management model have also been strengthened. This section explores these developments in greater detail.

### *Modernity and cosmopolitanism of the new MEC reform*

*Cultivating civic awareness as an important goal of the new MEC.* The cultivation of civic awareness constitutes a historic shift in the development of China’s moral education. Certainly, there is no concept of “citizenship” in traditional Chinese society and education. However, with the acceleration of political democratization, economic marketization, and cultural pluralism since the

country's reform and opening-up, the cultivation of civic awareness had gradually become an important goal of Chinese education. The new MEC standards and textbooks clearly advance the objective of cultivating modern civic awareness. For example, *Standards for the "Ideology and Morality" Course in Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)* notes that

[T]he task of this course is to guide students to come to realize the meaning of life and to gradually form the correct outlook on the world, life, and values, as well as know what is fundamentally good and evil and right and wrong, thereby learning to be responsible citizens and leading positive and healthy lives. (MOE, 2003)

Moreover, published by People's Education Publishing House, the *Morality and Society* textbook describes the course as helping students "understand the forms of expression and the general procedure of democratic life in schools and classes"; "be able to exercise one's own rights in accordance with the principles of fairness, openness, democracy and equality"; and "actively participate in the democratic life in schools" (Li, 2012, p. 24).

In short, the course should instill in students a basic awareness of their rights, care for and knowledge of the state and society, civic responsibility, as well as global awareness and understanding of multiculturalism. These objectives reflect the modernity of China's curriculum reform and its integration into the global mainstream. China's education system also reflects the country's core values of freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law (Du & Cao, 2015, p. 34). Such core values reflect the spirit of modernity and highlight a more open attitude in the country's MEC reform.

However, contemporary China differs from countries that overemphasize the rights, individuality, and confrontational spirit of their citizens. Although the civic awareness advocated by the state respects and promotes civil rights, it also emphasizes civic responsibility, a sense of dedication, and national identification. Solving problems through consultation and dialogue is also advocated. These qualities are directly reflected in the MEC reform. For example, *Standards for the "Ideology and Morality" Course in Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)* claims that the course is intended "to promote the ethnic spirit and establish shared ideals of socialism with Chinese characteristics"; help students "feel the connections between personal emotions and the ethnic culture and the state's destiny, and enhance one's cultural identity"; as well as "promote and cultivate the ethnic spirit, understand the social responsibilities of contemporary youths, establish shared ideals of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and aspire to serve the motherland" (MOE, 2003). These qualities are communicated through particular modules or lessons. For instance, in *Morality and Society* for Grade 5 (Volume II), the theme for Lesson 6 of Module 2 is "I am a citizen of the Republic." It comprises four sections: "We are citizens," "What are my basic rights?" "Unavoidable obligations of citizenship," and "Valuing rights and fulfilling obligations."

As such, the goal of China's MEC reform is to cultivate cooperative and responsible citizens willing to enter a dialogue, instead of people who expect rights but refuse to undertake responsibilities or who care only for themselves and not others. These choices are in line with both China's historical traditions and its actual state-level conditions.

*Making MEC content more comprehensive.* Prior to the introduction of the new curriculum reform, moral education had a focus, namely ideological education and the teaching of moral qualities. Reform thus saw the expansion of MEC content. This is indicative of the ideology of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) and the desire to cultivate individual morality; the basic social common sense, skills, and attitudes that individuals need for socialization; as well as the spirit of civic mindedness, criticism, and innovation. In this respect, the MEC has become more similar to social studies taught in the Western countries. Indeed, the course names—"Morality and Life" and "Morality and Society" for elementary schools, and "Ideology and Morality" (or "History and Society") for middle schools—all refer to social development centered on moral values. They are also comprehensive; for example, "Morality and Life" integrates moral, life, social and cultural, as well as scientific education, while "Morality and Society" integrates morality, behavioral norms, the legal system, patriotism, collectivism, socialism, conditions of the state, history and culture, and the geographical environment (Zou, 2011).

Indeed, the "Morality and Society" course is not merely a combination of classes on morality and society, but a course encompassing society, life, geography, history, ethics, law, politics, economy, culture, environment, as well as the various knowledge and skills necessary for the cultivation of civic mindedness (Gao & Zhao, 2003). The course covers three elements of students' social lives, namely, the social environment, social activities, and social relations. The social environment comprises spatiotemporal aspects of life, as well as the human and natural environments; social activities cover student's daily lives, as well as culture, economics, and politics; while social relations include interpersonal relationships, social norms, laws, and social systems. Moral education courses are comprehensive. For example, "Loving the Environment" teaches children about time and space, as well as the human and ecological environments.

As noted, the coursework has also been adapted so that the information and skills are relevant to students' lives. Meanwhile, the Grade 4 "Morality and Society" textbook contains a module entitled "Communication" that incorporates content on history, communication, security, and law, while conferring civilized communication behaviors and the skills necessary for gathering and processing information (Du, 2009, p. 143). Taught at middle school, "Ideology and Morality" was similarly revised: The lives of middle school students—rather than the knowledge system—form the course's foundation. While the students' cognitive levels and real lives constituted the course's starting points, the course centered on their expanding scope of life to integrate politics, ethics, law, conditions of the

state, and mental health education. As such, the students were presented with comprehensive curriculum content similar to the social studies taught in the U.S.

In 2016, the names of the elementary and middle school courses under China's compulsory education system were revised and unified; that is, "Morality and Life," "Morality and Society," and "Ideology and Morality" were integrated into a single course: "Morality and the Rule of Law." This does not mean that the MEC content in elementary and middle school were simplified. Rather, this change sought to strengthen education on the rule of law and promote the idea of state governance according to the law. Although the curriculum is currently being revised, the comprehensive approach is not expected to change significantly.

*Linking implementation to student's daily lives.* Since the 21st century, the concept at the very core of China's MEC reform has been "a return to life." Prior to this, the country's MEC followed the subject logic—that is, focus was placed on the integrity of the subject knowledge system and the differentiation, analysis, and memorization of related moral knowledge. The connection between knowledge and the students' daily lives was largely ignored, as was the significant role of moral experiences in their moral growth (Ban & Tan, 2008). Such was China's "intellectual moral education" prior to the MEC reform, the main characteristic of which was the disconnection between the course content and forms, and students' cognitive characteristics and life experiences. Following the new reform, the MEC became more closely linked to students' lives in terms of the implementation method, reflecting a respect for life and student experiences. Indeed, according to the curriculum standards for "Morality and Life,"

[T]he "Morality and Life" course is based on children's lives and emphasizes the existence of morality in their lives. The formation of children's morality stems from their experiences, understanding, and perception of life. Only educational activities that originate from their real lives can trigger their inner (rather than superficial) moral emotions, and their real (rather than false) moral experiences and cognition. (Department of Basic Education, MOE, 2003, p. 3)

In terms of curriculum development, the MEC closely related the course content with students' living experiences and morality. For instance, "Morality and Life" specifically selected materials from the pursuit of four values: to live healthily and safely, happily and actively, responsibly and caringly, as well as intelligently and creatively. As such, students learn about morality through a process that is healthy, safe, active, enjoyable, intelligent, and creative. In revising "Morality and Society," content and materials were first organized according to students' ever-expanding living domains: family, school, hometown or community, the motherland, and the world. Efforts were made to ensure that the curriculum was based on the students' own life experiences (Gao, 2004). The presentation and layout of the new textbooks were also more in line with the students' cognitive and aesthetic characteristics. In this regard, where previous versions only contained text,

the new textbooks incorporated many of their favorite animations and cartoon characters. China also adopted a new source of teaching contents by generating educational topics and examples using problems that children frequently encounter in their daily lives. These were presented in the form of “life events” in the textbooks.

Next, China’s new MEC has replaced its indoctrination-based model for its implementation and teaching methods with a more activity-based approach. The goal was to meet student needs in terms of practicing a moral life. Various and diverse forms of activities leading to both direct and indirect learning—including role-playing, tracking and observation, storytelling, singing, games, visits, interviews, information checking, arts and craft, production, as well as discussions—were incorporated in a particular version of moral education textbooks. For younger children (Grades 1–2), at least one activity was included for practically every topic in the moral education textbooks. These included packing one’s school bag, introducing oneself, coloring the national flag, and talking about one’s home (Du & Lu, 2009, p. 141). These activities are familiar and close to the children’s experiences, thus providing a space in which they can practice and reflect upon morality.

#### *Chinese characteristics of the new MEC reform*

*Elevating moral education.* China has emphasized moral education for several millennia through Confucianism. Contemporary moral education remains centered on Confucian ethics. Family, school, and social education form a complete system that regards moral education as an important means for improving individuals’ cultivation and maintenance of social order. Moral education was still considered important following the founding of the PRC in 1949, and moral courses have been taught in primary schools and high schools. It was not until 1997 that the State Education Commission promulgated moral education in *Standards for the “Ideology and Morality” Course for Elementary Schools and “Ideology and Politics” Course for Middle Schools Under the Nine-Year Compulsory Education Program (Trial Implementation)*. Indeed, this was the first set of curriculum standards issued since the founding of the PRC. However, the formulation of these standards lacked professionalism and scientific basis, and the standards failed to address a series of critical issues related to the development of teaching materials and reform. As a result, this set of curriculum standards did not play any substantial role in subsequent curriculum reform.

Initiated at the beginning of the 21st century, the country’s new curriculum reform paid unprecedented attention to the MEC. The status and role of moral education in overall educational reform became more prominent. For instance, the teaching of morality to cultivate better people became the fundamental task of education. Indeed, at the Peking University Teacher–Student Forum held on May 2, 2018, President Xi Jinping even emphasized that “fostering integrity and promoting rounded development of people should be adopted as the fundamental standard for evaluating all work done by schools” (Xi, 2018a).



The state invested substantial amounts of people, power, and material resources in the formulation, revision, and improvement of the curriculum standards, preparation of teaching materials, supervision of teaching quality, and teacher training. In the process of doing so, the MOE established a specialized bureau responsible for the development and management of textbooks, while colleges set up research institutions on the MEC and related textbooks. Additionally, a professional MEC research team was formed during this round of curriculum reform. Its members comprised moral education teachers from elementary and middle schools, as well as professional researchers from colleges and research institutions. The team was dedicated to assessing the effectiveness and scientific basis of Chinese curriculum reform (Chen & Du, 2012).

*Emphasizing traditional values and culture in modernity.* Over the past century, the attitude of Chinese society toward its own historical traditions was generally derogatory. At one time, traditionality was even regarded as an obstacle to China's modernization, and the mentality of the majority was to learn from modern, developed, and civilized Western countries. However, China has achieved enormous economic development since the beginning of the 21st century. Having gained a better understanding of the West and modernity, China's attitude toward traditionality changed, particularly with the belief that certain aspects of traditionality can be positive forces for modernization. Certainly, the need for a renewed recognition of the significance of traditional virtues and the value of traditional Chinese culture, as well as the need to establish cultural self-confidence, were clearly emphasized in the new MEC reform. In 2014, the MOE published the *Guidelines for Improving Education in the Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture*, which stated its intention to integrate traditional Chinese culture into the curriculum and teaching materials of the education system. According to these guidelines, the proportion of content on traditional Chinese culture was to be increased when revising the curriculum standards for moral education, Chinese, history, art, and sports in elementary and middle schools. Moreover, schools across the country were encouraged to fully exploit and utilize local educational resources on traditional Chinese culture to offer specialized local and school-based courses (MOE, 2014).

Issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2017, *Opinions on Implementing the Project to Pass Down and Develop the Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture* expressed the state's intention to integrate traditional Chinese culture into all aspects of education. This was to be implemented in various areas of education across all levels, with a particular "focus on textbooks for preschoolers and students in elementary and middle schools, while establishing a system of courses and teaching materials on Chinese culture" (Meng & Wu, 2017, p. 27). The new moral education textbook, *Morality and the Rule of Law*, also emphasizes the incorporation of content on traditional Chinese culture at each stage of learning and in each textbook module. This constitutes a new trend in the reform of Chinese moral education textbooks.

Against this backdrop, some schools have been more proactive. For example, the Qufu Experimental Elementary School in Shandong developed a school-based textbook titled *Spirit of the Almond Platform (Xingtian Hun)*. In an effort to transmit traditional Chinese culture, the school also held activities such as reading competitions that enhanced students' moral education (Wang & Zhang, 2016). Meanwhile, tapping community resources, the Yaohua Elementary School in Guangzhou's Liwan District used jade culture as a means of transmitting Chinese tradition. The school established the ideals of moral education and the goals of running the school through the following lines: "Jade symbolizes the cultivation of morality. The forging and tempering of one's will is akin to finely polishing and delicately carving a piece of jade, with its eventual luster reflecting the glories of one's life." They also developed a school-based moral education course entitled "Knowing Jade, Appreciating Jade" (Lu, 2016, pp. 66–67).

*Enhancing state control.* Issued in 2001, the *State Council's Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education* proposed the "implementation of curriculum management at the state, local, and school levels." The Ministry of Education is responsible for the formulation of the overall plan for the curriculum development of elementary and middle schools, determining the categories of and class hours for the state curriculum, setting of the state curriculum standards, and provision of guidance at the macroscopic level for the implementation of elementary and middle school curricula. In addition to ensuring the implementation of the state curriculum, local regions are encouraged to develop courses adapted to their local contexts, as well as develop or select courses that match their respective characteristics (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2001). This system was elaborated upon in *Guidelines for Curriculum Reform of Basic Education (Trial Implementation)* as follows:

[W]hen schools implement the state and local courses, they should develop or select the curriculum after taking into consideration the actual situation in terms of the local socioeconomic development, their own school traditions and advantages, and their students' interests and needs. The educational administrative departments at the various levels should guide and supervise implementation and development of the curriculum. Schools have the authority and responsibility to provide feedback on the problems encountered when implementing the state and local courses. (MOE, 2001)

As such, the new curriculum reform propelled the redesign of China's curriculum management system, leading to the establishment of the current three-tier management model at the state, local, and school levels. However, local authorities and schools only have partial autonomy for decision-making related to the MEC. The state (i.e., the central government) retains the overall authority over curriculum management, including the formulation of curriculum standards and professional standards for teachers, as well as the development of teaching materials. This is especially true for the MEC due to its relation to ideology and the transmission of mainstream culture. Although the

new curriculum reform gave local authorities and schools a certain amount of autonomy in comparison to the past—including textbook development, teacher training, the formation of local and school-based curricula, and curriculum evaluation—the state’s control is authoritative and dominant. From 2016, the MEC textbooks are compiled and published by the state, while curriculum standards are standardized across the whole country. Consequently, the development of the MEC at the local and school levels, as well as that of local and school-based textbooks, are strictly controlled and can only serve to supplement the state curriculum and textbooks. For all schools, the main priority is fully implementing the state-prescribed curriculum and utilizing state-published textbooks.

## **Future prospects**

From a historical perspective, the new MEC reform has introduced numerous changes and is unquestionably progressive. Nevertheless, several deep-seated issues need to be addressed going forward, particularly in regard to the approach to managing the relationships between traditionality and modernity, China and the world, central and local authorities, as well as theory and practice. These have long been controversial issues in China, emerging in the country’s rapid transformation and modernization. Issues were either completely ignored or met with an approach too extreme, restrictive, or lacking in understanding. Moreover, these issues have been compounded by biases, which have always existed in one form or another. In contrast, the new MEC reform reflects a more rational, open, and steady spirit and attempts to transcend the traditional mode of thinking in which only binary opposites and a case of either/or are considered. Instead, the requisite tension and balance between opposing categories have been maintained. In the future, the balancing of the relationships between these mutually opposing categories must be further addressed to ensure that a suitable path for the modernization of China’s education system is identified through practice and experimentation. This section discusses these relationships in greater detail, focusing on the approach to and management of these relationships going forward.

### *The relationship between traditionality and modernity*

With a history and culture spanning several millennia, China has always been proud of its traditions. However, during the evolution of tradition into modernism, traditionality and modernity were once opposed to each other. At the time, many believed that traditionality would encumber modernization and must thus be abandoned if modernity was to be achieved. Since 1978, China has followed a policy of reform and opening-up, with various social experiments conducted in the process. Consequently, the attitude toward traditionality had changed by the turn of the 21st century. China has realized that traditionality and modernity are not necessarily antithetical but can coexist harmoniously. Indeed, some elements of traditional culture can even make up for the

shortcomings of modernity. Traditions need not be completely abandoned to achieve modernity and modernization. As such, it is more effective to constantly discover the beneficial aspects of traditionality and make use of and integrate traditions going forward. Moreover, the significance of traditional culture and values—as represented by Confucian culture—to both China’s modernity and cosmopolitanism has also been recognized. The traditions, ways of thinking, and values that originated in China several millennia ago have given China what it requires to hold international dialogues. Therefore, the positive aspects of traditional virtues and culture should be rediscovered on the premise of advocating modern values. In this respect, the MEC has the important task of developing new interpretations of traditionality.

### *The relationship between China and the world*

China once considered itself the center of the world, and at the apex of the hierarchy of global cultures and values. However, following contact with Western countries since the latter half of the 19th century, China realized that it lagged behind developed industrial countries and recognized the scope of cultural differences that existed. This produced a sense of ethnic inferiority and led to the Chinese revering the cultures and values of developed Western countries, resulting in a conviction that anything from the West was naturally the best. Over the course of the 20th century, officials and academics began reevaluating their understanding of the relationship between China and the wider world, although none examined Western culture and values with objectivity or the desire to enter a dialogue as equals. It was either a case of resolute opposition, ethnic arrogance, or ethnic inferiority. Most of the time, it was the case of looking at the world from China’s perspective and examining ways for it to manage its relationship with the West from its own standpoint and situation.

In the wake of tremendous sociopolitical, economic, environmental, and technological changes, both China and the rest of the global community must reevaluate and adjust their relationship accordingly. In regard to China’s reform of its education and the MEC, its relationship with the rest of the world must be viewed from a broader, more rational, and future-oriented perspective. First, China is a member of the global community and plays an important role in globalization. It should participate in dialogues with other countries, work together to build a global community of shared human destiny, assume global responsibility, and cultivate global awareness and international vision in its students. Second, there should be communication with Western countries in all aspects of curriculum development. This should be done from the position of holding dialogues as equals, and in the spirit of learning from and referencing one another. In doing so, China will cultivate both a consciousness of Chinese culture and international understanding, as well as a desire for national and international collaboration, in its citizens. Third, innovative and responsible talent must be cultivated for the future. Such talent can promote the creation and development of a new future based on mutual integration and intercommunication between China and the rest of the world.

### *The relationship between the central and local authorities*

A topic that must be addressed in China's curriculum reform is the relationship between the central and local authorities. On the one hand, as a centralized state, there are uniform standards and requirements in terms of the formulation of standards, development of teaching materials, teacher training, education evaluation, and education investments. The government-led, top-down promotion of curriculum reform facilitates efficient improvements to the curriculum and is conducive to both the implementation of the state's will and balanced educational development. On the other hand, there are significant regional differences across China, and over-standardization will lead to the neglect of diverse local needs. This is especially true for the MEC, for which it is necessary to incorporate the cultural diversity of different regions and actual characteristics of students' values.

Generally, top-down administrative promotion is not good at mobilizing enthusiasm at the grassroots level of schools. This has been addressed in the new curriculum reform model through the introduction of state, local, and school levels, with local authorities and schools allowed a certain degree of flexibility and autonomy in some aspects, such as course development, teaching materials, teaching, and teacher training. This is an attempt to combine top-down and bottom-up methods, as well as the state's need for standardization and local needs for diversity. Overall, this approach has achieved concrete results. However, the advantages of this three-tier curriculum management system should be further developed and related experiences should be investigated. This will allow the MEC reform to fully mobilize schools at the grassroots level, while ensuring attention to the cultural differences of various regions. While strengthening state standards, local governments and schools should be empowered with greater autonomy, motivation, vitality, and diversity. Ultimately, the deciding factors are participation and creation at the school and teacher level.

### *The relationship between theory and practice*

Current curriculum reform differs from that of the past in having a certain degree of theoretical consciousness. This has been achieved in two ways. First, new curriculum reform has involved the academic community, which had held detailed discussions of the various issues involved in reform. Professional and specific viewpoints were also advanced based on curriculum reform experiences in Western countries. Second, new curriculum reform has directly involved educational theorists in policy formulation and the actual process of curriculum reform. For example, college professors and researchers have played an important role in the formulation of curriculum standards, preparation of teaching materials, teacher training, and even classroom teaching instruction. Such efforts have greatly improved the quality and professionalism of basic education curriculum reform.

However, a gap between theory and practice persists, with the effectiveness envisioned by theorists not fully realized in practice. First, the progress of implementing curriculum reform in elementary and middle schools has varied substantially across different regions. There are

significant gaps between the urban and rural areas, developed and undeveloped regions, as well as eastern and western regions, and southern and northern regions. Curriculum reform in some of the more remote, undeveloped, and poor regions is far from ideal. Second, many teachers have continued using the original traditional concepts and methods, which means that classroom teaching and implementation at the school level has not undergone any substantial change. As such, the ideas, models, methods, and goals advocated by the new curriculum reform existed only in text, policy, and verbal statements and were not put into practice.

There are several reasons for this. One of the most direct factors is that the educational evaluation mechanism did not make fundamental adjustments to adapt to the new curriculum. For instance, the policy on college entrance examinations is predominantly based on the student scores. Consequently, teachers have ignored the comprehensive quality, moral development, and key abilities advocated by the new curriculum. As such, the Chinese government is currently pushing for a reform of the educational evaluation system. Indeed, President Xi Jinping has clearly advocated the need to further reform the education system, improve the MEC implementation mechanism, reverse unscientific aspects of education evaluation, and resolutely overcome the stubborn and recalcitrant views that good scores and entering a higher school are education's only objectives (Xi, 2018b). The education system reform represented by the evaluation mechanism has become the bottleneck blocking the further development of China's educational reform, including that of the curriculum. It also constitutes a significant obstacle for the effective communication between theory and practice.

## Discussion

Scholars have reached different conclusions regarding China's MEC. For instance, Lee and Ho (2005, p. 413) argue that, in the wake of its reform and opening-up, China's MEC reform has been more concerned with personal well-being and civic literacy. However, as this article has shown, although China's MEC reform emphasizes modern values, it retains distinctive Chinese characteristics and focuses on the teaching of traditional virtues and culture. While paying attention to individual and civil rights, the MEC also emphasizes individual responsibilities, obligations, and loyalty to the state. Meanwhile, Reed (1995, p. 99) has argued that the content of China's political/moral education primarily centered on core Confucian virtues. However, as observed in this article, modern Chinese society and its education system—especially following the founding of the PRC—actually held a derogatory attitude toward China's history and traditions. It was only after China entered the 21st century and gained a deeper understanding of the West and modernity that its attitude toward and treatment of traditionality changed, resulting in China making a decisive statement of cultural self-confidence.

As Tan and Reyes (2016, p. 43) have shown, China's curriculum reform has not involved the wholesale copying of policies introduced by foreign countries. Rather, reform has involved the

integration of Western ideas and practices with Chinese traditions and values, as well as localized transformations. In this regard, this article has provided a more in-depth discussion, concluding that China must not view the world through the narrow lens of its own development, but understand the way the rest of the world views it. China must adopt a broader, more rational, and future-oriented perspective when examining its relationship with the world. China must also assume the responsibility of cultivating cosmopolitan citizens with a global consciousness. Finally, this article agrees with Law (2014, p. 332) in noting that China's curriculum reform may not meet the state's expectations because of the influence of the curriculum itself, as well as other external factors. Nonetheless, further developments can still be made in China's curriculum and education reforms by means of internal adjustments within education and system reforms at the institutional level.

### Contributorship

Hanwei Tang was responsible for the study conceptualization and major manuscript writing. Yang Wang contributed by reviewing the related literature, and writing the abstract and the section of "Historical overview of the new MEC reform."

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