

### CHINA'S RECENT CURRICULUM REFORM: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

In China, the most recent curriculum reform of basic education<sup>1</sup> began with the National Congress of Education held by the Chinese central government in 1999. Since the decision to implement well-rounded quality education nation-wide, which was made by the central government at that congress, curriculum reform has been emerging as a centerpiece of basic education. This is seen in the key documents issued by the State Council (State Council, 2001) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) (MoE, 2004a). Stated another way, the central government has seen curriculum reform as a vehicle for holistic reform of education.

Although the curriculum of basic education in China has experienced several waves of change since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the past changes have never been as profound as this recent one (Zhong, Cui, & Zhang, 2001, p. 3). The essential rationale for this assertion is that the momentum for this current curriculum reform results from the changing economic and political contexts of China over the past 20 years (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Changes in China's Economic and Political Sectors*

Type of condition	Condition before 1984	Condition after 20 years of change
Economic	Planned economy	Market economy
	GDP fluctuation at low level	GDP continually increasing
	Isolation from the world	Acceding to World Trade Organization (WTO) and access to and interaction with global economy
	Little demand for creative, innovative, and self-motivated work force	Substantial demand for creative, innovative, and self-motivated work force
Political	Centralization in governance	Move towards decentralization in governance
	No legal system for education	Emerging legal system for education

When The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, China copied, for ideological reasons, the pattern of economic and political systems from the former Soviet Union. The planned economy and centralized governance of China that resulted did not change until the 1980s. In 1984, the Chinese central government made a historic decision to shift China's economic system from the planned economy to the market econ-

omy. This change in the economic system, inevitably, called for a relevant change of China's political system because the new market economy would not operate well if there was not a suitable political system to match it. Consequently, the political system of China started to step toward the new orientation of decentralization and democracy (Yang, 1999, p. 7). The changes in its economic and political sectors (described in Table 1), which occurred from the 1980s through the 1990s, gradually accumulated in a high demand for a profound reform in education, especially in the curriculum of basic education. In this sense, the most recent curriculum reform of China is really a fundamental and systematic change. It is based on a framework of policy formed by eight components: purpose and objectives, curriculum structure, curriculum standards, learning and teaching process, development of instructional materials, evaluation systems, teacher preparation and development, and implementation of curriculum reform (MoE, 2001).

After laying out this policy framework, this article discusses the progress and problems associated with its implementation over the past four years in 38 pilot districts that span China's 27 provinces. The author argues that the foremost challenge to the current curriculum reform in China is to find solutions to the implicit, rather than explicit, problems such as the problem of cultural dilemmas for school leadership that result from conflicts between Western and Chinese values and practices.

### **The Policy Framework for the Curriculum Reform**

The Ministry of Education issued the *Compendium for Curriculum Reform of Basic Education* (trial edition) in 2001 after long preparation and review. In this compendium, the framework of the policy was given and the eight components of the framework were described in detail. The underpinning assumptions and values of this curriculum reform can be read between the lines of the text (MoE, 2001; China Education Research Network, 2001).

#### *Description of the Eight Components*

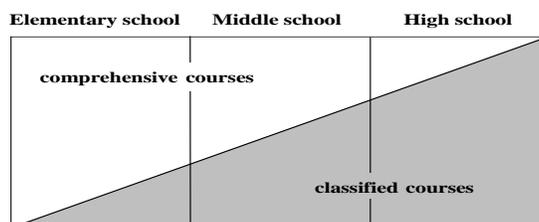
*Component 1: Purpose and objectives.* There is one purpose: educating students by implementing well-rounded quality education. There are six objectives:

1. Shifting from a narrow perspective of knowledge delivery in classroom instruction to a perspective concerned with learning how to learn and developing positive attitudes
2. Shifting from isolation among subjects to a balanced, integrative, and selective curriculum structure
3. Shifting from out of date and extremely abstruse curriculum content to essential knowledge and skills in relation to students' lifelong learning

4. Shifting from students learning passively to students developing capacities to process information, obtain new knowledge, analyze and solve problems, and communicate as well as cooperate with others
5. No longer viewing the exclusive functions of curriculum evaluation to be identification and selection, but adding the promotion of student growth, teacher development, and instructional improvement as additional functions of curriculum evaluation
6. Shifting from centralization in curriculum control to dividing curriculum into three levels of control: central government, local authorities, and schools

*Component 2: Curriculum structure.* The curriculum is classified into two course categories—comprehensive and classified—that are distributed differently in elementary, middle, and high school levels. In China, the comprehensive course refers to a course that combines the contents of several subjects (e.g., “Science” is a comprehensive course which combines the contents of Physics, Chemistry, Geology, etc.) while the classified course means its content only covers a single subject or a sub-subject (e.g., “Reading,” “Geometry,” “Algebra,” etc.). By the end of the 1990s, the classified course had absolutely dominated over China’s course system for basic education. Quite a few findings of research and exploration on Chinese student learning effectiveness have recently suggested that the ratio of the two course categories should be differently distributed for elementary, middle, and high school students according to the different cognitive characteristics and learning abilities of different ages (Huang, 2003; Liu, 2005). To improve student learning effectiveness, the ratio of classified courses should be gradually increased from elementary to middle and high schools while the ratio of comprehensive courses gradually decreased from elementary to middle and high schools (as Figure 1 shows). The policy change on curriculum structure is based on these findings.

The curriculum is also divided into three levels ranging from national level to local and school level. They are the so-called national curriculum, local curriculum, and school curriculum.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of comprehensive and classified courses at each school level.

*Component 3: Curriculum standards.* This tripartite curriculum is controlled by the central government, local authorities, and schools respectively, but the curriculum at all levels must be developed in the light of national curriculum standards formulated by the central government.

*Component 4: Learning and teaching process.* By innovative instruction, a teacher should create a positive climate in the classroom, stimulate students' motivation for learning, and develop students' attitudes and capacities for mastering and using knowledge. One of the focal issues in the learning and teaching process is to shift the role of the student from a passive receiver to an active explorer in the learning process.

*Component 5: Development of instructional materials.* For national curriculum and local curriculum, the instructional materials shift from a unitary version (so-called one size fits all) to various versions that meet the different needs of provinces, cities, towns, and rural areas. At the same time, the quality of instructional materials must follow the requirements of official curriculum standards and be reviewed by the experts in the same subjects. After the instructional materials are developed, a client (i.e., a district or school) will choose one of the versions based on its real needs and conditions. School curriculum is developed by schools themselves to reflect the unique characteristics or to meet the unique demands of local communities.

*Component 6: Evaluation systems.* Three kits of curriculum evaluation tools will be developed. The first one will assess the learning process and outcome of students. The second one will help teachers to reflect upon and improve their teaching behavior. The third one will be used to evaluate the curriculum itself by identifying problems in curriculum implementation and analyzing them so as to adjust and improve the curriculum continuously.

On the other hand, the format and content of the High School Entrance Exam (HSEE) and the College Entrance Exam (CEE) will be changed. The HSEE and the CEE are two selective exams in China. According to MoE statistics in 2003, 43.8% of middle (junior high) school graduates got the chance to enter (senior) high school after the HSEE and 83.4% of high school graduates got the chance to enter college and/or university after the CEE. Although the ratio of college acceptance for the high school graduates is high, the quality universities, which satisfy parents and are respected by potential employers, are still a small group (MoE, 2004b). Hence, there is always strong competition among examinees of the HSEE as well as the CEE. The purpose in changing the format and content of HSEE and CEE is to have them match the orientation of this curriculum reform since these two exams always act as a key "lever" to adjust the behavior of both teachers and learners.

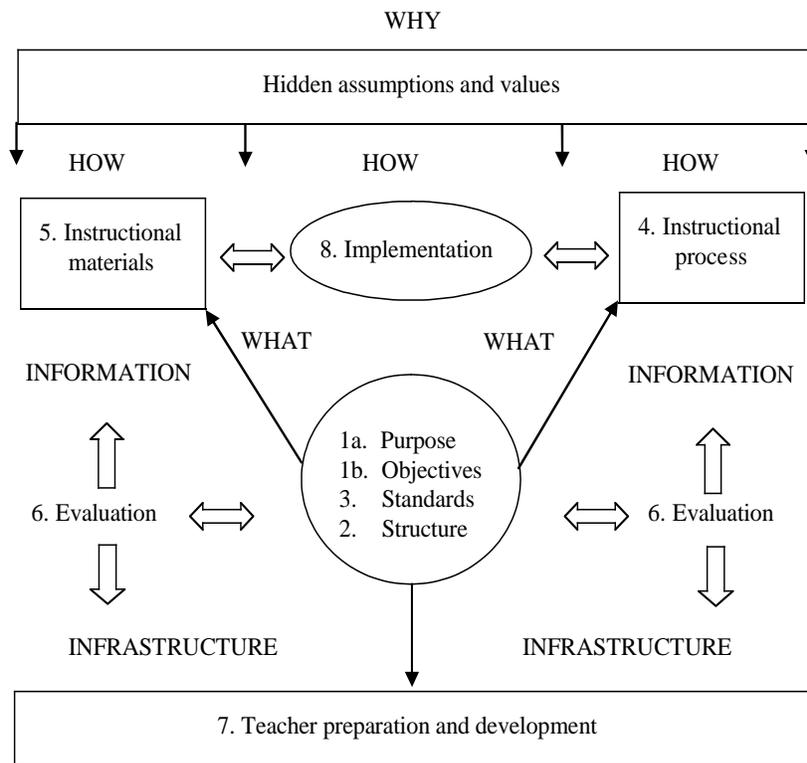
*Component 7: Teacher preparation and development.* The universities for teacher education should restructure their objectives, programs, curriculum structure, and instructional approaches for teacher preparation and development to keep the pace with the curriculum reform in basic education.

*Component 8: Implementation of curriculum reform.* The Ministry of Education plays the role of leader and coordinator in the implementation of national curriculum reform while local authorities of education act as leaders and planners in the implementation of local curriculum reform. Nevertheless, educators, researchers, parents, as well as people from other sectors of the society are encouraged to be actively involved in the curriculum reform.

The principal strategy of implementing curriculum reform is to establish a pilot district in each province to implement the pilot program of the curriculum reform. The curriculum reform will be gradually extended to other districts as the positive evidences from the pilot district amass.

*Policy Framework*

As shown in Figure 2, the policy framework for the curriculum reform is mainly formed by the eight components, but the hidden assumptions and values (see Table 2) underpinning the framework play a pivotal role as well.



**Figure 2.** Policy framework for the current curriculum reform.

**Table 2**

*The Hidden Assumptions and Values of the Policy Framework*

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<b>The hidden assumptions and values as overarching philosophy</b>
A young generation with originality and creativity will be the most likely foremost human resource for the development of the nation in the future.
Providing students with meaningful experience and developing students' positive attitudes, healthy personality, and responsibility for their family, community, and society are as important as delivering knowledge to them.
For students, learning how to learn is more important than merely learning the content of the curriculum.
Curriculum reform is a vehicle for overall reform in basic education.
Achieving the ultimate purpose and goals not only depends on the policy and policy-maker but also on the people who are closer to the classroom, particularly the teachers and students.

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These assumptions and values not only act as an overarching philosophy but also state the rationale of the curriculum reform (i.e., explaining “why to do” it). In this sense, the hidden assumptions and values set the orientation for “what to do”(i.e., the purpose, objectives, standards, and structure) and “how to do” it (i.e., development of instructional materials, patterns of learning and teaching, responsibility sharing, and implementation strategies). “Teacher preparation and development” play the role of infrastructure to support and assure the essential quality of the reform while they are guided by the “what to do.” “Evaluation” acts as the means of feedback by informing other elements as to “what is happening and what adjustments need to be made.”

**The Progress and Problems**

*Positive Outcomes*

The 38 pilot districts in 27 provinces have been established since September 2001 (Song, 2002). At the moment, the curriculum reform is being implemented in the light of the trial edition of *The Compendium for Curriculum Reform of Basic Education* (MoE, 2001), and 35 million students are studying under the new curriculum system in these pilot districts (Li & Zhao, 2004). Some positive outcomes of the reform have emerged though implementation of the reform has been limited to the pilot districts thus far. These positive outcomes can be summarized as follows:

1. *The administrative style of government has more or less changed.* In the past, both the central government and local authorities would govern education by the demand style. This style has been moving toward the new style of servant administration with the recent develop-

ment of the curriculum reform. One of the typical evidences of this is the website, named the New Century Curriculum Network (NCCN), which the MoE's Center of Curriculum for Basic Education (CCBE) established a few years ago. Through this website, the CCBE is able to collect related information about curriculum reform nationwide and to pool quality human resources for consultation through official channels, because it is an agency of the MoE and receives special funding to operate NCCN. Through the web pages of "news," "forum," "research findings," "recent developments in pilot districts," and "resource center," the NCCN provides local authorities and individual schools with information services by collecting and dispersing information about the progress occurring in individual pilot districts and successful individual schools. It also offers consulting services through its "expert mailbox." (MoE, 2005).

2. *The ratios of local and school curriculum have been increased.* Prior to this recent curriculum reform, the ratio between local/school curriculum and national curriculum was 7:93% (Zhu, 2004, p. 108). Today, the schools are authorized to develop their curriculum up to 16% or more. For instance, 20% of the courses at No. 2 Affiliated School of East China Normal University are local school curriculum (He, 2003, p. 4).

3. *Innovative approaches in teacher development have been developed.* Teachers of basic education in China have, as stated at the beginning of this article, experienced a couple of waves of curriculum change since 1949, but they have rarely faced greater challenges than they do today. Thus, teacher development has been unprecedentedly emphasized as the infrastructure of curriculum reform in every pilot district. As a result, quite a few innovative approaches beyond the traditional training institute or ordinary workshop for teacher development have been developed in the pilot districts.

One of the widely accepted new approaches is "Big Name Teacher Studio" (BNTS). Each BNTS is named after a local experienced and excellent teacher (e.g., "Steve Teaching Studio" or "Susan Teaching Studio" etc.). The studio hosts are selected and named by the district. Usually, the number of studios covers all subjects (math, science, Chinese, English, etc.) in basic education. Each host makes a one- or two-year contract with the district. The district provides a studio with funding and other necessary resources while each host delivers his or her craft knowledge by mentoring a group of promising young teachers in the same subject from neighboring schools, and giving on-line presentations and on-line question-answer sessions for all teachers in the district (Xinhua, 2004).

4. *A positive tendency in the learning and teaching process is emerging.* In December 2004, the MoE published the results of The Third Evaluation of Curriculum Reform in Basic Education (TECRBE). It shows that a positive tendency in the learning and teaching process is emerging in pilot districts after implementing the new curriculum system. For example, many teachers have learned to reflect upon their classroom behavior after teaching, so as to improve the quality of their subsequent teaching; the instructor-learner relationship in the classroom has become

more harmonious than it was; the drop-out rate is obviously decreasing (Zhao, 2004). A 2004 survey showed that over 90% of school teachers in the pilot districts acknowledged and supported the new curriculum standards (Li & Zhao, 2004).

### *Current Problems*

There is little doubt that the curriculum reform under the policy framework described above is playing a positive role in China's school effectiveness and improvement. But curriculum reform—just as Fullan and Miles (1992, as quoted in Hanson, 2003) pointed out—has another side we have to face:

Changing is a learning process that is loaded with uncertainty. No one should ever be fooled into thinking that the change process works the way it is supposed to. “Anxiety, difficulties, and uncertainty are intrinsic to all successful change.” (Hanson, 2003, p. 331)

The same situation as Fullan and Miles described has turned up in China's recent curriculum reform: anxiety, difficulties, and uncertainty are accompanying the progress of this reform. As a result, a series of explicit and implicit problems are gradually emerging in the pilot districts.

*1. The curriculum standards are not flexible enough.* China is a country with a large population of school-age children. According to the statistics in 2003, there are 203 million students and 10 million teachers at 506,000 elementary, middle, and high schools distributed in different parts of the country under different economic levels of development (MoE, 2004b). As many qualified and experienced teachers choose to move to schools in big cities, it is hard for teachers in small towns and rural areas to successfully implement the curriculum reform because they lack the capacity to meet the new demands (Song, 2002; Chen, 2005). Thus, it is very necessary for the government to make the curriculum standards more flexible.

*2. Teacher workloads have increased.* With the implementation of curriculum reform, the requirements and expectations for the role of a teacher are accruing. In traditional Chinese culture, the primary responsibility of a teacher is not to teach students the knowledge and skills of subjects but to guide the process of socialization for students. Therefore, the term “educator” is quite different from “instructor” in the Chinese cultural context because an “educator” is not only an “instructor” but also a “moral guide.” If a teacher only acts as an “instructor,” he or she will be seen as an unqualified teacher. In this sense, when the question of “who is a qualified teacher?” is raised, the traditional answer is very simple: A qualified teacher is an educator. Recently, the answer has changed to “not only an educator but also a learner.” Even more recently the answer has become “an educator, learner, innovator, facilitator, researcher. . . .” Consequently, teacher workloads have been rapidly increasing with the endless requirements and expectations from the reform (Feng, 2003a). This raises serious questions for teachers and their principals: What is the peak load

for a teacher? Will a teacher collapse or even burnout some day? Such questions still remain to be answered.

3. *Student interests and parents' voices are somewhat ignored.* Generally speaking, this recent reform is much more concerned about student development and interests than before. However, student interests are still ignored in some cases and to some degree (Feng, 2003b). For instance, one of the characteristics in this curriculum reform is that school teachers are encouraged to develop instructional materials for their school curriculum. This is likely to be one of the new ways for teacher development. Yet, it is so hard for some teachers at some schools to work effectively on this task by themselves. Is it harmful for student learning if these teachers are left to their own devices? Furthermore, will students' interests and welfare be undermined if every teacher has the right to develop instructional materials without any preconditions?

In other cases, the parents' voices are ignored, too. A typical case of this is from a radical decision of an elementary school. A couple of years ago, the principal of the elementary school decided to ax math from the subjects of the first four grades to make room for more hours of language learning and leave the unlearned math contents for the fifth grade. He argued that it was an effective way to improve student learning outcomes because he believed—based on his classroom observations as well as his personal experience—that young children were unable to think logically until they were promoted to the fifth grade (Jin, Zhuang, & Peng, 2004). Maybe the result of this radical decision is not bad in a technical sense. But such a “reform” still needs questioning: Does a principal need to hear parents' voices when he or she makes a decision, particularly a radical decision? Do parents have the right to say something about “what” and “how” their children are to be taught at school?

4. *School leaders experience cultural dilemmas.* With the progress of implementing curriculum reform, school leaders at pilot schools have recently begun to introduce Western leadership and managerial approaches such as Distributed Leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM) into their schools to assure the facilitation of curriculum reform at the school level. However, these leadership and managerial approaches are based on Western culture. In other words, Western assumptions and values of leadership are embedded in such leadership and managerial approaches. Hence, the introduction of Western leadership and managerial approaches into schools brings about a new phenomenon that the traditional Chinese culture of school leadership is confronted by the Western culture of school leadership.

Basically, the traditional Chinese culture rooted in Confucianism is quite different from the western Judeo-Christian culture (Walker & Quong, 1998). For example, in contrast to the “original sin” of Judeo-Christianity, Confucianism believes that “man, by nature, is good.” With this fundamental assumption about man, a school leader's priority, according to the Confucian perspective of leadership, is not “supervision” but tapping the natural moral source from his or her subordinates and

bringing every positive factor into play. This school leaders' priority is apparently contradictory to the school leaders' priority in TQM.

Taking another example, facing various challenges from the recent curriculum reform, a school principal may be expected to apply the distributed leadership approach in his school. But Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, said in *The Analects*, "He who holds no rank in a State does not discuss its policies" (Confucius, n.d.). In the light of this saying, a true gentleman, even in his thoughts, never departs from what is appropriate to his rank. That is, leadership in a school is the principal's job and no other's business.

Thus, an individual school leader sometimes finds that he is working in a cultural dilemma: to attain the objectives of the curriculum reform at his school, the school leader needs to introduce the distributed leadership or other Western leadership and managerial approaches into his school. But doing this is most likely to cause cultural resistance from his subordinates and other stakeholders. Or, to be more exact, a school leader will be likely to fail to lead his school to attain the planned objectives of the curriculum reform if he does not apply some Western leadership and managerial approaches. On the other hand, the school leader will, most probably, meet strong resistance and fail to carry out the curriculum reform at his school if he decides to adopt Western leadership and managerial approaches based on Western culture (Feng, 2005).

5. *It is not clear whether the curriculum reform should proceed rapidly or gradually.* In his comment on the social pressure for American educational change, Daniel Griffiths writes:

My basic premise when thinking about what to expect from a national reform effort is that education is not amenable to radical change. This is an important premise, because Americans have been conditioned by media hype to anticipate big, exciting results from everything. If the results are not new, extreme, or radical, then the reform has not been worth the effort—so it would seem. This kind of thinking eliminates the possibility of change by improving quality, because changes in quality usually occur in small increments. (Griffiths, 1999, p. xviii)

By the same token, Chinese educators in this recent curriculum reform are pressed for providing visible and exciting results in limited time. In a word, people think that the reform should be a great leap rather than a gradual process. Reviewing the list of authorized projects in 2001, the author of this article found that most of the research projects on reform of basic education funded by the MoE were slated to last only one to three years (Feng, 2004, pp. 94–95). This short duration mirrors the country's impatience with educational reform because the project applicants, too often times, propose such a typical research duration of "one to three years" not based on the real time necessary for a project but to cater to the preference of the Project Reviewing Committee, the MoE. As every applicant knows, the government is usually eager for visible and exciting outcomes from educational reform in the short run because of the higher and higher expectations for educational reform from the society.

Should the curriculum reform be a great leap or a gradual process? To answer this question, Confucius' advice for his students is worth repeating, "Do not try to hurry things... If you hurry things, your personality will not come into play" (Confucius, n.d.). Those words were delivered three thousand years ago, yet they still count today as they remind us that there is no primrose path to successful reform if we do not make enough time for it.

### **Conclusion**

The recent curriculum reform of basic education launched by the Chinese central government at the turn of the twenty-first century is really a significant and profound change from Chinese education in the second half of the twentieth century because it occurs in the transformational time of China's economic and political systems. Under the changed context and revised assumptions and values for education, this curriculum reform is moving toward the policy orientation of decentralization indicated by the style change of governance as well as the increased ratio of local and school curriculum. This new policy orientation has encouraged the local authorities to develop various innovative approaches for teacher development, and resulted in a positive tendency in learning and teaching processes in schools of the pilot districts.

With the progress of the curriculum reform, a cluster of problems still awaits resolution. These problems, from the perspective of this author, can be categorized as explicit problems and implicit problems. It is not very difficult for the Chinese government to recognize and deal with the explicit problems. For example, in 2004 the MoE organized an expert panel to develop the revised edition of the national curriculum standards in order to improve the flexibility of the curriculum standards. Also, attention has recently been given to the problem of overload for teachers. Surveys on teachers' workload have been conducted in the last three years by several provincial teachers' unions. Consequently, the policy regarding the workload has been influenced by the results of these surveys. The government of Guangdong province, for example, is going to reduce teachers' workload by increasing the number of teachers for elementary, middle, and high schools (Zhang, Wei, Wang, & Ren, 2006). On the other hand, in recent years individual schools have developed various indirect ways to reduce the workload for teachers. For example, a middle school in Shanghai has recently developed a strategy called "co-authored script." This school encourages individual teachers to prepare a selected script for a 45-minute class session. This script will be passed among their fellow teachers in the same department by e-mail. Every teacher who receives the script is required to revise or refine the script based on his or her understanding and experience for teaching and learning while the original text of the script is still preserved. When the e-mail forwards back to the original author weeks later, he or she will receive a number of revised or refined editions of the script in which other teachers' intelligence and experiences are embedded. Through this way of making use of collective intelligence, individual teachers, particularly the teachers at their early service stage, can save time in their class preparation. It is one

of the indirect ways to reduce the workload for teachers (“Achievements,” 2006). Based on efforts such as these, the problem of overload for teachers is likely to be solved in the foreseeable future.

Comparatively speaking, both central government and local authorities have not as yet paid the necessary attention to implicit problems in the curriculum reform, such as the problem of cultural dilemmas for school leadership that result from the conflicts between Western and traditional Chinese cultures. In the meantime, there is only a very small body of educational literature on the theme of cultural conflicts or cultural dilemmas of school leaders in China. As far as this author knows, the reasons underlying the conflicts and the solutions for the dilemmas have seldom been carefully analyzed and explored. Thus, the most critical issue in achieving the goals and objectives of China’s curriculum reform is not to solve the explicit problems. Rather, the foremost challenge for educational researchers and practitioners in China is how to identify the reasons behind the implicit problems and how to explore and create effective solutions for these implicit problems. For this reason, the next stage of China’s curriculum reform of basic education will largely depend on support from empirical research on these cultural conflicts and dilemmas.

Just as U.S. President Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg in 1863, “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here” (Lincoln, 1863). No matter what comment there is on this reform, and no matter what end it meets, the practice of this reform will, without doubt, go down in the educational history of China.

### End Note

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term “curriculum reform” exclusively refers to curriculum in the field of basic education. Normally, “basic education” in China includes K–12 education, but in this article, it is exclusively limited to the scope of 1–12 education because there are no official curriculum requirements and formal instructional programs in China’s kindergartens.

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