

## Popular culture in mainland Chinese education

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*The policy and practice of school education in mainland China have changed in response to the political and economic reformations and opening-up of the late 1970s. This paper argues that, despite the introduction and emphasis on popular culture in some areas of school education, traditional Chinese culture and values continue to consolidate the authority of the State. The paper first establishes a framework for the analysis of popular culture in education. Secondly, it enquires into the policy of incorporating popular culture in education and educational reform, in accordance with current social changes in China. Thirdly, the paper analyses three pairs of social and political relationships that shape education and cultural identity in the school curriculum: (a) between collectivist Communist education and individualist popular culture; (b) between the education of Chinese traditions and virtues on the one hand, and popular culture on the other; and (c) between schools' and teachers' attitudes toward popular culture, and students' reactions to classroom learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of the contentious political issues surrounding the integration of popular culture in education.*

Mainland China, popular culture, education reform, social change, challenge

### INTRODUCTION

The diversity of cultural engagements that learners bring to their education and the impact of mass media on learning and teaching have stimulated an increasing interest in the study of popular culture in education. For Bourdieu, culture is a field of struggle, in which agents (producers, consumers and distributors) take advantage of the symbolic cultural capital entailed in these various socially determined positions (Webb et al. 2002; also see Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986). In order to build on Bourdieu's work, we could explore a range of social categories derived from media and popular culture that are deeply embedded within a particular group of children's daily literacy experiences at home (Couldry, 2005). In the light of actual classroom experience, the notion that teachers might 'liberate' students through rational ideology critique has been increasingly questioned in practice (Callahan and Bronwen, 2004; Hunt and Hunt, 2004). McCarthy et al. (2003) argue that educators should pay special attention to developments associated with cultural globalisation, and the rapid migration of cultural and economic capital and electronically mediated images. They also suggest that pedagogical interventions that privilege popular culture as a site of legitimate critique can open up new avenues of exploration and investigation within a radical, progressive democracy premised on the basic values of love, care, and equality.

The influence of popular culture on today's youth has been a subject of intense debate and public interest for a much longer time, and has led scholars to examine the integration of popular culture into the school curriculum. For example, there are studies by Rose (2003) on developing a general science course called 'Biology in the Movies', Ashcraft (2003) on incorporating popular culture

into sex education through an analysis of the teen film *American Pie*, Buckingham (1998), Bloustein (1998), Willett (2005), and Xu (2002) on youth culture and media literacy, and Grugeon (2005) on developing insights into the role of socio-dramatic play for relating children's expertise outside the classroom to their literacy practices in school. The most obvious example of the Harry Potter phenomenon is that popular culture has lured children from computer screens to books, and caused them to identify with familiar themes of school, teachers, friendship, family and competitive sports (Nicola, 2001; Rowling, 2000, 2003, 2005). Through an eclectic mix of digital and interactive media technologies, children engage in cultural and expressive practices and thereby engage in new forms of social interaction (Brignall and Van Valey, 2005; Dyson, 1993, 1997; Jenkins, 1988; Newkirk, 2002). It is also argued that, if we are to come to an understanding of the impact of educational policies and developments, we must take into account the cultural experiences of children and youth both in and out of schools (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Fain, 2004; Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999).

The changing patterns of culture resulting from changing demographics and a highly interconnected world, complicate the understanding of any curriculum-related change. With special reference to mainland China this paper examines under-researched relationships between social transformation, popular culture, and educational reform. The transition from a planned to a socialist-market economy in the mainland since the 1980s has involved many aspects of social and cultural life, and posed new challenges for education development in the twenty-first century. This paper begins by challenging contemporary debates concerning popular culture in school education by asking two key questions about the dynamics of developing a culturally relevant curriculum for students in the mainland: (a) how is popular culture integrated in the selected school subjects; and (b) what are the challenges to mainland China's incorporation of popular culture into the classroom and the larger school culture? The paper also examines the very different type of challenges that the China state has faced in the attempt to move beyond traditional oppositions between culture and power, tradition and modernity, and the global and the national, by pointing out the vital role imagination plays in popular culture and the construction of its contemporary and future education.

### POPULAR CULTURE ARTIFACTS IN CHINA

Mainland China is a multi-ethnic society, comprising 56 different ethnic groups within a population of 1.3 billion, the largest in the world. Ninety-two per cent of the population is of the Han ethnic group. Although many of the ethnic minority groups have their own languages, the official language is Putonghua, which is based on Beijing pronunciation. China's traditional values were contained in the orthodox Confucianism that has been taught by academics and tested in the imperial civil service examinations. In the late imperial, republican period of China, the popular fiction, films, cartoon magazines and spoken dramas (as opposed to traditional Chinese operas) that have flourished in Chinese cities, particularly in Shanghai, were regarded as the new forms of popular, or mass culture (Lee and Nathan, 1985; Link, 1981; Liu, 1997). The Cultural Revolution (1967-1976) was launched by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong to secure Maoism in China as the state's dominant ideology. During this period, people were encouraged to criticise cultural institutions, and to question their parents and teachers in ways that had been strictly forbidden in Confucian culture. Mao appealed to students to "smash the four olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits). In response to Mao's address, high school students began forming groups called the Red Guards. Chaos resulted from the Red Guards' wholesale destruction of artworks, books, temples and anything associated with traditional or foreign cultures. With the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping stated that liberation of thoughts was required within the party. The goals of Deng's reforms were summed

up by the Four Modernisations of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. Vast social, economic and cultural transformations have swept over China since 1992 when Deng made his strategic tour to southern China in order to promote deeper economic liberalisation.

China today is being globalised economically, socially, and culturally. Throughout the 1990s, global retailers such as Carrefour, Walmart and Ikea invested massively in China, and Chinese urban residents became “consumers of transnationally branded foodstuffs, pop-music videos and fashion” (Davis, 2005, p. 692). By the end of 2004, more than 50 per cent of the nearly 3,000 state-owned or state-controlled large major enterprises had changed into stock-sharing companies (*People’s Daily News*, 13 July 2005). The economy has also been increasingly market-wise, with the rise of imported products from its capitalist neighbouring places of Hong Kong and Taiwan (see Chua, 2001; Hopper, 1994). Cultural exchange and the importation of technology were one of the unquestionable by-products of the mainland’s modernisation. Artists in Chinese literary and cultural circles are contributing to this international development and recognition (see Morton and Lewis, 2005, pp. 279-281). Although economically highly interdependent, Taiwan and mainland China are nevertheless antagonistic in the political arena (Chao, 2003). Clearly the phrase “the rise of China” governs the significance or otherwise of China’s culture for its neighbours and beyond (Wang, 2004, p. 311). In particular, the so-called ‘Korean wave’ (or *Han Rue* in Chinese) refers to the popularity of Korean TV dramas, movies, popular music, fashion, food and celebrities in the mainland. The airing of *Dae Jang Geum* (or ‘A Jewel in the Palace’) has been called the most watched television show in history and in many major Chinese markets. Along with success in drama, Korean singers such as Baby Vox, H.O.T., NRG and An Jae-wuk are gaining popularity among Chinese youth. Recently, a primary school in Shanghai called for student drawings for a painting contest for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Among the nine selected paintings, two imitated the style of Japanese and South Korean cartoons (*Beijing Review*, 27 July 2005). A teacher of a Shanghai secondary school said that it is common to find primary and secondary school students imitating the style of Japanese and South Korean cartoons (*Beijing Review*, 27 July 2005).

As the political transition from the post-Mao to the post-Deng eras has become well underway, the so-called third generation of post-Deng leaders, headed by Jiang Zemin, has gradually shifted its strategies to focus on the ideological and cultural arenas. As market mechanisms were introduced into its economy, basic education of primary and junior secondary schooling in the mainland has experienced phenomenal development in the reform era from the late 1970s. Plans for nine-year compulsory education (Grades 1 to 9) conducted in 1985 are regarded as a commitment to modernisation. In this new China world of rapid, globalising cultural fluidity, popular culture in the school curriculum has become problematised in terms of the ways in which the mainland has been addressed. With particular reference to primary and secondary school education, the purpose of this article is to probe the intersection of popular culture, education, and cultural politics.

### **POPULAR CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE CHINESE SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

Unlike during the Mao era, when educational development was wholly administered by the central government, there has since been a compelling tendency to decentralise and diversify education in accordance with the general shift towards a market economy (see Law, Forthcoming; Turner and Acker, 2002). The reform was launched on a trial basis in 2001, when the Ministry of Education issued a circular entitled ‘Guidelines for Curriculum Reform of Basic Education’. Now curriculum reform was expected to emphasise the importance of bridging the distance between schools and society, and enabling students to acquire an ability to do practical work while

accumulating the necessary knowledge to be useful to society (*Xinhua News Agency*, 6 October 2005; also see Huang, 2004). The aim of current educational change is also to make education more pleasant, more useful and, above all, to challenge students to think for themselves (see Lu, 2000; *The Economist*, 25 January 2003). Professor Liu Jian, assistant director of the National Centre for School Curriculum and Textbook Development under the Ministry of Education, said that the core of the curriculum reform was an attempt to cultivate “new, advanced cultures and concepts to spread in schools and the society at large ...” (*Xinhua News Agency*, 6 October 2005). There should be a more integrated and life-oriented approach to help students solve social and daily life problems.

On this account, a new educational philosophy, innovative curriculum materials and the renewal of educational experience, along with respect for and encouragement of students’ independence, their activities and cultural perspectives, suggest a more expansive social sense. In respect to curricular reform in the new century, this section explains the learning areas that integrate popular culture into the school curriculum. These reforms cover the revision of textbook reading materials in the Chinese language and other areas, the subject of music, new textbook materials for sex education, and the inclusion of online learning materials and other software for general education. These revisions and newly published materials are very significant for this paper, because they relate the world in which students live to what they are learning, and bring the culture they know into the classroom.

In China the state, as the sole authority to create and approve textbooks, has a role to play in the curriculum development process because it has significant leverage over publishers with respect to school textbooks. Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has reinforced collectivism as the only correct value to be prescribed by school textbooks. Under the new system, however, the China state, or the local government in question, only approves textbooks; while any individual or institute is empowered to produce and distribute textbooks after approval (Huang, 2004). Recent examples have spawned much debate on revisions of textbooks for Chinese language, sex and music education. As argued by Li (2004), Chinese textbooks should not only include “heroes of bygone times”, but also contemporary heroes (p. 343). Today, China’s citizens should be seen in modern terms, and education should aim to develop a ‘modern consciousness’, a ‘modern moral character’, and a ‘modern intelligence’ (Huang cited in Huang, 2004, p. 104). By early 2005, a newly-updated Chinese language textbook for fifth grade pupils in Shanghai drew controversy by including photographs of Liu Xiang, the Shanghainese men’s 110m hurdles champion in the Athens Olympic Games. At the same time, a text titled *Five Heroes of Langyashan* (a story about five soldiers of an army under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party from 1937 and 1945, who fought bravely during the Sino-Japanese War) was removed from a new edition of a Chinese textbook published in Shanghai. The editors revealed that the removal of the five heroes’ story was due to society’s increasing need to keep in touch with contemporary China’s heroes, such as Liu Xiang or the NBA star Yao Ming, since these would elicit more interest (Feng, 2005; also see *Beijing Review*, 16 May 2005). According to a questionnaire survey conducted by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), Chinese secondary school students from six Chinese provinces and the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Henan, Shanxi, Liaoning and Hunan, aged between 13 and 18 years, rated Liu Xiang to be the fifth most popular hero among 443 boys and 575 girls (*China View*, 27 May 2005). It is argued that young people today can learn about modern heroes from the mass media, and that textbooks should, given contemporary social changes, remove the stories of the five heroes of Langyashan because they are so distant from students’ modern life (*Beijing Review*, 16 May 2005).

The martial art fictions in new Chinese school textbooks have also given rise to heated debates in the school curriculum. The two excerpts of the Chinese language that have drawn most debate are excerpts from Wang Dulu’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which won an Oscar for Best

Foreign Film of 2000, and *The Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils* (*Tian Long Ba Bu* in Chinese), by Hong Kong martial art novelist Jin Yong. The popular selections appear in two separate lessons of a Chinese textbook for senior middle school students under the category of 'Magical Martial Arts'. The selection was well received among Chinese students. In a Sina.com fast vote, 81.6 per cent of the 18,794 voters expressed their support for the new textbook as part of reading assignments for middle school students (*Xinhua News Agency*, 3 March 2005). Liu Ximing, a research fellow with the Education Science Institute of the Beijing People's University, said that martial-arts stories promote the triumph of good over evil, and thoughtfulness for the poor and weak, both of which are supported in school education (*Xinhua News Agency*, 3 March 2005). Currently, the most controversial change for Chinese scholars is a cartoon version of advocated textbook materials. Twelve well-known Chinese writers' newest creations are intended to be processed into cartoon plays by six domestic cartoon companies, and will cover a wide range of subjects including ancient poems, fairy tales and foreign novels (*Xinhua News Agency*, 13 October 2005).

Because love and sex were not open to public discussion in traditional Chinese culture, students received inadequate sex education. Though the Chinese government maintains an active interest in preventing users from viewing certain web content, both sexually explicit and non-sexually explicit, students still have access to sexual websites. According to an official survey, 80 per cent of Chinese middle school students obtained their sexual knowledge, not from their schools and parents, but from books, magazines, TV programs, and the internet, all of which are likely to be disingenuous (*People's Daily News*, 23 November 2001). In the academic year of September 2004 more than 50 Shanghai secondary schools adopted new Chinese textbooks on love that were based on stories and poems by both ancient and contemporary Chinese and foreign writers (*People's Daily News*, 1 September 2004). These textbooks were intended to provide better understanding of beautiful human feelings, and encouraged students to hold frank discussions about love. The TV series entitled *How Can I Tell You This?*, which was presented by a group of junior high school students in the eastern province of Jiangxi to generate the whole society to look out for children's sexual health, received widespread attention in 2003. In order to improve poor sex education, comprehensive courses have been made available in middle schools in more than ten major Chinese cities, including Chongqing, Guangzhou, Harbin, Shanghai, Wuhna, and Xi'an since 2001. These cities produced their own textbooks on sexual behaviour, ethics, procreation and contraception, anti-drug warnings, and AIDs prevention. A textbook titled *Thoughts for Teenagers* was introduced to high schools in Ningbo, which is in China's eastern Zhejiang province (*China Daily News*, 10 September 2004). Borrowing the idea from South Korea's series of books entitled, *I Want to Know Myself*, which was popular among primary and middle school students, China published its first cartoon book series on puberty and sex education in April 2002. China translated the books and revised some contents to suit the needs of Chinese young people (*Xinhua News Agency*, 26 December 2004). The Ministry of Education has broken the nation's thousand-year-long taboo by adopting popular culture to promote the formal educational discussion of sex.

For a long time popular culture was prohibited in China's school music education for fear of spiritual pollution by Western culture, against which, furthermore, mainland China introduced a strong revolutionary orientation (Ho, 2003; Ho and Law, 2004a, 2004b). The renewal of music practices and materials in school music education has come about because of rapid changes in Chinese society. A love of Western musicals has swept the cities. For example, *Les Miserables* was given 21 performances at the Shanghai Grand Theatre and *The Phantom of the Opera* was given 96 in 2002 and in 2004 respectively (*China Daily News*, 16 December 2004). In response to the popularity of Western musicals, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the Shanghai Theatre Academy introduced a new major in musicals in 2002. The inclusion of songs from

popular Western musicals and Taiwanese popular songs is certainly a step towards learning about students' interests. A few songs in English are included in the textbook materials, such as 'Do You Hear the People Sing?' and 'Any Dream Will Do' from the musical *Les Miserables*; 'Hand in Hand', the theme song for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul; 'Power of the Dream', the closing song for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics; and 'A Whole New World' (composed by Alan Menken with words by Tim Rice) (Shanghai Educational Publisher, 2004; Shanghai Music Publisher, 2004; Xiaonian Yitong Chubian She, 2003; also see Ho and Law, 2006). The inclusion of music identified with sport in the textbook materials echoes the educational missions of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Despite political dilemmas between China and Taiwan, mainland textbooks include the song 'Tomorrow Will Be Better' by Taiwan's songwriter Luo Tayu (Shanghai Music Publisher, 2005; Shaonian Ertong Publisher, 2002); and the newly compiled list of 100 patriotic songs for Shanghai secondary schools has sparked controversy because it includes some songs that encourage individualism rather than a traditional collectivist and heroic dedication to society. The most controversial song in this collection is 'Snail' by the popular Taiwanese singer Jay Chow, the lyrics of which encourage young people to pursue their own success in difficult times.

The theory of learning for life invited educators, curriculum planners and teachers to develop new approaches and techniques for teaching. These were designed to liberate students from the heavy pressure of examinations, and to inspire their creativity and self-directed learning through the use of the internet and web-based instruction. According to Article 50 of China's education law, radio and TV stations must design educational programs to promote the ideological, moral, cultural and scientific capacities of students (Ministry of Education, 1995; also see Ministry of Education, 2001). By mid-2002, China had become the second largest user of the internet in the world with 45 million users, compared to just half a million in October 1997 (*BBC News*, September 26, 2002). According to the most recent study that was published in 2005 by the internet Network Information Centre, China had 94 million internet users, nearly half of whom had broadband access. An online education site providing multi-media materials such as movies, music and the 3-D pictures used in the computer-assisted learning (CAL) software is now available for students from primary to senior high schools. The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information Industry jointly recommended a number of so-called 'premium online games' to students for the 2005 summer vacation list (*Xinhua News Agency*, 1 June 2005).

All these recent textbook revisions, newly published materials, and recommended technological resources for introducing popular culture are designed to make education truly meaningful to Chinese youth, and to help them to break free from the limitations of traditional education, and to reconstruct learning experiences with links not only to society, technology, but also to students' lives (Huang, 2004, p. 104). The Ministry of Education has marked down or diminished so-called 'outdated knowledge' in extant teaching materials and encouraged education that goes beyond the cognitive growth of students, and which is related to the understanding of social contexts.

### **CHALLENGES FOR CHINA'S EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

There are concerns about how the formation of cultural identity, popular culture, politics and school education intersect with the multiple relationships and dynamics of power between the China state, teachers, and students. Critical theorists such as Apple (1990, 2002), Segarra and Ricardo (1999) argue that competing pedagogical ideologies are the result of the fact that education is inherently a 'political act'. As noted by Law (2002), despite national leaders' high expectations, the use of law to effect or consolidate educational reform in mainland China is affected by both legal and extra-legal factors such as politics, economics, and social norms and cultures. Modernisation in the school curriculum is being perceived as part of the process of transformation in Chinese political culture from collective communism towards openness to popular culture. Some knowledge among teachers of current popular culture is a step towards

learning about students' interests. However, this move has resulted in three dilemmas for the transmission of cultural values and political or national beliefs in school education: (a) conflict between the co-existence in the curriculum of communist and political education and the individualist tendencies of popular culture; (b) between traditional Chinese values and culture, and the moral challenges to these values in popular culture; and (c) between schools, teacher education and student interactions in response to the presence of popular culture in the classroom.

When Deng Xiaoping opened China to the forces of global capitalism, Chinese society went through unruly changes in its socio-economic, political and cultural realms. Stockman (2000) argued that Chinese society was becoming more complex and differentiated in the course of modernisation; and that indigenous popular-culture products, such as state-sponsored MTV, larger networks, such as China Central Television (CCTV) and Shanghai TV, popular concerts, TV soap operas, and *kung fu* fiction, were allowed and even encouraged to prosper and to compete with Western commercial popular culture. The state has to weaken the tensions and conflicts that arise between increasing mass demand and ideological control in school education. Chinese youth are criticised as having down-played the collective well-being of the official ideology. Survey data on Chinese college students also show that they thought that "the biggest happiness in life" was, in the rank order, "a successful career, a happy family, and good friends, all of which were concerned with individuals"; while "contribution to society" was sixth on the list (Qian, 2003, p.30). The development of a market economy has resulted in students' materialist and individualist value orientation becoming more and more apparent in the mainland. When Beijing teenagers were asked to rate their desired occupations, the order was entrepreneur, scientist, movie or TV star, teacher, soldier and model worker, and most thought money very important (Li, 2000a, 2002b). Whereas college students in the past listened to and appreciated a few famous revolutionary singers for their ideological stance, now they admire Bill Gates or Alan Greenspan for their affluence, while school students adore film and sport stars (*People Daily News*, 28 January, 2003; Ho and Law, 2004a; Li, 2002a and 2002b). Education has run into a direct confrontation with popular culture, as in the case of the famous Chinese actress and singer, Zhao Wei. When the nation discovered that Zhao had worn a mini-dress printed with a war-time Japanese flag bearing the inscription health, peace, happiness and hygiene" for a Chinese state-run *Shizhuang* fashion magazine published in September 2001, millions of Chinese were infuriated (Gries, 2005; Ho and Law, 2004a). The incident reawakened the bitterness that many patriots still feel about Japan's aggression towards their country in the 1930s and 1940s. A critical study of Zhao Wei in the mini-dress has been incorporated into the newly published civic and moral educational textbooks of the Hubei Province that are used as supplementary texts by pre-school, primary, and secondary students nationwide. The controversial incident is set as a negative example of patriotism in a chapter with the heading, 'She is Wong'. This publication revealed problems of internationalisation and the emergence of popular culture, and indicated the re-education of the weak points of the new generation.

Moreover, the state strongly supports the transmission of official popular songs, such as 'The Great Wall Is Long', 'I Belong to China', 'Today is Your Birthday, China', all of which promote the political ideology of unity, nationalism and other official values (Baranovitch, 2003, p. 204). In this sense, the central State only welcomes popular music with revolutionary ideas composed by State supported song writers, while popular songs outside the State's approval are treated as lacking educational values. This is not so much a conflict between popular music and classical music in terms of musical styles but one between state ideology and market-driven popular music (Ho and Law, 2004a). In September 2004, the Ministries of Culture and Education and other government organisations promoted 100 patriotic songs, 100 patriotic films, and 100 patriotic books to young students. In particular, the national anthem, 'March of the Volunteers', is still used to nurture students to serve the people by means of socialism (Lu, 2003).

In spite of such challenges, by and large, Confucianism continues to dominate the content of traditional Chinese education. The theory of a 'harmonious society', an ideal from traditional Chinese culture, is diametrically opposed to the orthodox Marxist-Leninist view of class struggle. Previously, Chinese traditions and morality were underplayed and even denounced, particularly during the cultural revolution. Alarmed by rapid economic development and its embroilment in international affairs, a revival of Confucian values is apparent (Keane, 2005). Since 1989, the Chinese People's Congress has contributed greatly to the rise of the nationalist discourse based on cultural and ethnic identity, by "creating a wide-spread awareness of the myths, history, and linguistic tradition of the community" (Guo, 2004, p. 5). Smith (1986, 1995) explains how and why nations emerge from those ethnic ties and identities that usually form their cultural basis. Social imaginative ideas are described as the "constructed landscapes of collective aspirations ... now mediated through the complex prism of modern media" (Appadurai, 1990, p.2). These ideas, which act as so-called 'meta-narratives' about culture, the people, and their desires, are knowledge and power systems (Foucault, 1970, 1980) that create "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1982) of belonging in the modern world. China promotes traditional Confucian respect for families as units for the production of values, moral disciplines and personal ethics (Wu, 1994; Keane, 2005). Such values can now fill the moral "ideological vacuum" created by the promotion of *laissez-faire* market forces (Law, 1998, p. 581). As noted by Xu (2005), the China state attempts to change "the cohesive force of national cultural affiliation" into a belief in political unity; while the new nationalist ideology is expected to use Confucianism to reinforce modernisation in socialist China (Xu, 2005, p. 146). Now a "Confucian-based" cultural China promotes "ethnicity as cultural and as identity" (Chua, 2001, p.114).

In an information age, it is even more important for the mainland to retain the national treasure of Chinese traditions and virtues. The 1995 revised publication *Outline of Moral Education in Secondary School* widened the content of patriotism to include such topics as Chinese culture, national unity, and revolutionary heroes (Editorial Committee, 1995; Lee and Ho, 2005). Primary and secondary schools in many regions, such as Beijing, Guangdong, Hebei, Shanghai, and Liaoning, introduced traditional Chinese values and norms by means of books such as the new three-word classical text (*Xin Sanzijing*) in 1995 (Kuan and Lau, 2002). In 2001, the People's University in Beijing was the first university on the mainland to erect a giant statue of Confucius. Filial obedience and communal solidarity are chosen as good traditional Chinese virtues in the *Implementation outline on Ethic Building for Citizens*, the newly revised student conduct code, and in textbooks (see Law, Forthcoming; Ministry of Education, 2004; Wang, 2004). In order to encourage the teaching of the cultural heritage and to strengthen cultural memory, many schools in China have included calligraphy in extra-curricular activities (see Li, 2004). Recently an official circular promoted traditional festivals, such as the traditional Spring Festival (or Chinese Lunar New Year), the Dragon-boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, was issued. The promotion of traditional festivals is intended to cultivate the spirit, affections and feelings of the Chinese nation, and to create solidarity among the people of different ethnicities on the mainland (*People's Daily News*, 25 June 2005).

National music is thought to be the 'mother tongue' of Chinese music culture (Ho and Law, 2004a). No matter where you go, the love of national music does not change, like the phrase in a song, "Even as I wear foreign clothes, I still have a Chinese heart; my ancestors already put a Chinese stamp on my everything" (Jin, 2003, p. 49). Since 2003, the Chinese Government has earmarked 46 million *yuan* (US\$5.6 million) for a specific project conducted to preserve important cultural forms (*People's Daily News*, 13 June 2005). This money is mainly for collecting traditional libretti, creating new plays, supporting public performances, promoting the opera institution, and training and rewarding professionals. Many Chinese youth criticise traditional Chinese operas such as Beijing opera, Kunqu opera, and Shanghai opera as being

boring and out-of-fashion. In order to attract a more youthful audience, Chinese artists apply colourful stage designs and present new, younger stars for visually sensational productions of the operas (*People's Daily News*, 21 November 2005). With the help of modern computer and video technology, a national audio and video database for Chinese traditional operas is being set up to preserve traditional Chinese operas. For Chinese students, traditional Kunqu opera will no longer be just described in textbooks, but a part of school culture. In 2005, for instance, the Ministry of Culture asked each of the country's seven professional Kunqu theatres to present each year 20 free public performances at Chinese colleges (*People's Daily News*, 5 January 2005). The sinification of socialism represents the Chinese People's Congress admission of the significance of Chinese traditional cultures, not only to socialism, but also to the modernisation of China (Law, Forthcoming).

To urban students, the internet seems to be a mixed blessing. Nine million people were online in China at the beginning of 2000, and much of what is available on the internet is in "sharp moral contrast to the traditional Confucian system of values" of social harmony and character development (see Bockover, 2003, pp. 159-163). In September 2003, Beijing Haidian District surveyed at random 100 minors in custody, and discovered that 66 per cent were frequent visitors to computer game shops, 30 per cent to internet bars and 61 per cent to porn websites (*People's Daily News*, 28 March 2004). As Xu (1993) commented in *Chinese Youth* (a popular magazine published by the League of Communist Youth), "The market economy is an 'angel', because it transforms the world into a colourful place; it is also a 'devil' because it puts existing values and social order in complete disarray" (Xu, 1993, p. 22) (Wong, 2002). China's youth under 18 years of age account for nearly a quarter of the country's 1.3 billion population, and are set to become the backbone of society; thus it is time to provide good education to promote the healthy growth of youth in the increasingly complex social environment. Understanding how technology, popular culture, and identity are related to learners' eagerness to read, write, listen and communicate is a first step toward developing the sort of technology-rich, interactive writing and reading activities that the so-called 'net-generation' students find motivating and meaningful in the classroom.

One increasingly common idea is to bring popular culture into the educational context. In an attempt to compete with social powers and to create individuals who are prepared to work within these powers, schools have tailored their educational philosophies to the mainstream (Gingell and Brandon, 2000; Noddings, 2005). The more challenging approach is to make changes to the fundamental social dynamics of learning within and without the school environment. If Chinese society want an open-minded, far-sighted and innovative generation, textbooks should be tolerant of diversity and be relieved of the heavy responsibilities of education. Problems that have existed for over a few decades in the school curriculum are expected to be rectified by developing students into citizens with an ardent love for the motherland, social ethics, and a respect for the law. If Liu Xiang, an Olympic champion, becomes a role model, it only shows that the latest edition of Chinese textbooks for school students are in touch with reality, and that the classroom is oriented towards life (*Beijing Review*, 16 May 2005). It is argued that Liu Xiang is a hero of the times and textbooks should be encouraged to represent the best of the people (Feng, 2005). As a result of the government's open economic policy, culture and politics are striving and innovatory, and changes have been brought about, and will continue to bring about, new concepts and practices in education. For example, the main innovations in the contemporary reform of the primary moral education curriculum, including lifelong moral education, are hoped to foster the development of children's morality by using everyday life events as source materials for textbooks (Lu and Gao, 2004).

As argued by Vygotsky (1986), learning is a socially constructed process that students experience in the classroom, and learn when they are able to integrate what they know with new ideas and understandings. Great importance is being given to the professional development of teachers in

accordance with the innovation of nationwide or local curriculum planning, which keeps up with both the common values and attitudes of modern society as well as new scientific and technological advances (Huang, 1995, 2004). However, as highlighted by Li (1999), teacher education in China still responds to the need to speed up the modernisation of the country. Teachers should be interested in building connections between students and spending time in students' cultural worlds (Hunts and Hunts, 2004). For Giroux and Simon (1989), the challenge of using popular culture in classrooms is that it can place teachers at an intellectual and pedagogical crossroads. Teachers may shy away from student popular culture, and feel that they have a moral responsibility for keeping popular culture out of the official school world. However, it is suggested that teachers should be creative in their integration of student popular culture into teaching as a possibility for liberation and to address social issues (see Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Grossberg, 1994; Ozman and Craver, 2003). Teachers need frameworks for reconceptualising popular culture and their school curriculum in ways that both reflect and build on the digital-based experiences that students have already acquired, and consider the role of this digital material and popular texts in the construction of their new learning.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores how the Chinese government values the introduction of the popular culture needed for its reform of education within broader social contexts. It will be these changes that have brought about, and will continue to bring, new ideas, beliefs and practices to China's schools. Given the cultural and political developments over the past 20 years, popular culture in China's education is facing many challenges and new opportunities for its students that demand investigation. For many youth, much of their experience within the cultural realm is orchestrated by the mass media. Teachers must constantly search for opportunities to promote and encourage appropriate social interaction for students at all levels of schooling.

This paper considers popular culture as an arena of contestation, noting the contradictory impulses of both attraction and repulsion, as well as the phenomena of differentiation and assimilation in contemporary education in mainland China. It suggests some changes in the orientation of the school curriculum that would meet the needs and interests of students. Some of these changes can be found in the revisions made to teaching and learning materials, as well as in the introduction of new materials for learning both traditional subjects, such as language and music, and the non-traditional subject of sex education.

Improving students' ideological and political quality, and fostering the building and extension of the socialist drive are of far-reaching strategic significance in fully implementing the national strategy to achieve China's socialist modernisation. When officials all over the country launched a new wave of campaigns to assimilate popular culture into school education, what remained unchanged was the zeal with which the state always strove to transform popular culture into something, be it political ideology or an integration of socialist and Confucian educational ideals. Three pairs of interactions and confrontations can be seen with respect to: a) the collectivism of communist value education and the individualist tendencies of popular culture; b) traditional Chinese values and culture and the bad influence of popular culture; c) and the interactions between schools, teachers, and students towards popular culture in classroom learning. The interwoven relationship between popular culture, national education, Confucian education and traditional culture is determined by the power exerted by the party state. Although the use of popular culture has become common in school education, patriotic education, Confucianism, and the learning of traditional Chinese culture have all been taken as frameworks for educational developments. However, the inconsistency of values education and cultural education, and the shifting of the goals of education as political policies change is now encouraged. Confucius, for example, was honoured for thousands of years, then banned during the Cultural Revolution, and is

now reinstated. According to Goodman (2001), the party state still longs to be a powerful publisher and producer of culture, and the “mechanics of the relationships between politics and cultures” are considered to be continual as well as changeable (p. 247). From a macro perspective, national curricular policies, which are representative of the interests of the party state, play a decisive role in determining the degree to which international trends are reflected, and who or what will take the leading role in the future of the People’s Republic of China remains to be seen.

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