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Author(s): Jing Shi-Bo and Zhou Nan-Zhao

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Comparative Education in China

JING SHI-BO AND ZHOU NAN-ZHAO

The emergence of comparative education as a distinct area of scientific inquiry in educational studies is a twentieth-century phenomenon; in China, it has a shorter history and is only at an initial stage of development. In an age of internationalization, however, and during a new period when China is striving for modernization and unswervingly following a policy of opening to the outside world, comparative and international education has been attracting increasingly wide attention and interest in this old civilization. Deng Xiao-ping, one of the highest-ranking Chinese leaders, recently pointed out, "Education should face modernization, face the world, and face the future."¹ This is illustrative of the new orientation of Chinese educational development and of the role that comparative education is to play.

The goal of Chinese educators is to build a socialist educational system that suits China's conditions. Yet we are fully aware that no nation can hope to develop in isolation and that rational, overall educational planning and policy can be effectively made only from a broad, comparative perspective. As problems in national educational development can be better understood and solved in the light of both positive and negative experiences of other countries, comparative education is now playing an important role in China.

This article is intended to provide a general overview. Although comparative education is traditionally regarded as the empirical study of education in other countries (as indicated by the title, *Foreign Education*, for the journal of the Chinese Comparative Education Society), the field is more strictly defined within the professional circle as an independent branch of educational sciences devoted to the comparison of one or more aspects of educational theories and practices of different systems. This article focuses on the current situation of the field of comparative education as a disciplinary study as well as a practical activity in the broad sense. We will describe such aspects as the guiding policy for comparative studies, research priorities, methodology, institutions and personnel, publication and distribution of research results, curriculum and instruction at the university level, functions and activities of the Chinese Comparative Education Society, and international academic exchanges in the field.

¹ An inscription written by Deng in 1983 for Beijing Jingshan School.

A Recent Phenomenon

Although China has a long history of maintaining cross-cultural contacts and exchanges in its educational development,² the legitimation of comparative education as a field of study has been a recent phenomenon. Beginning in the early twentieth century, books and journals on world education systems were published,³ monographs by Western comparative educationists translated,⁴ and a course in comparative education offered at certain universities. The field was nevertheless at an infant stage, and nearly all publications remained descriptive. There were few scholars who devoted themselves exclusively to comparative studies, and they usually isolated themselves from each other in their research efforts. There were neither professional institutions nor corresponding academic organizations.

The evolution of comparative education since the founding of our People's Republic in 1949 can be roughly divided into three stages: (1) from early post-liberation years to May 1966; (2) the "Great Cultural Revolution" years, 1966–76; and (3) from the downfall of the Gang of Four in 1976 to the present.

For a considerable period after liberation, comparative and international education was little valued. Only the educational experiences of the Soviet Union were studied, and educational developments in other countries were neglected. Not only was very little study made of Western educational works, but comparative education itself as a field of study was consigned to limbo. Nevertheless, in the 1950s and early 1960s energetic activities centered on learning from Soviet educational theories and practices. A large number of foreign, mainly Russian, educational studies were translated and published. Divisions (or units) for foreign education studies were established in some normal universities and educational research institutes. Journals such as *Waiguo jiaoyu yecong* [Educational translation series]⁵ and *Waiguo jiaoyu dongtai* [Foreign education developments]⁶ were published on a regular basis. The former was distributed nationally to university

² See, e.g., Mao Li-rui, *History of Ancient Chinese Education* (Beijing: People's Education Press, 1979); Gu Shusheng, *Educational Systems of China in Different Dynasties* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press, 1981); Shu Xincheng, *History of Modern Chinese Education* (Beijing: People's Education Press, 1980).

³ In 1901 a special journal, *World of Education*, started publication in Hubei Province. Among the books published between 1910 and 1935 were: *Current Status of World Education* by Lu Feikui (1911); *Comparative Studies of Education in Various Countries* by Zhuang Zexuan (1929); *Comparative Education* by Chang Dao-zhi (1930); *Comparative Education* by Zhong Lu-zhai (1934); and *Comparative Education* by Chen Zuo-liang (1934).

⁴ For instance, a Chinese version of Issac K. Kandel's *Comparative Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933) was published in China in 1935.

⁵ A journal edited by an editorial board in the Education Ministry and published by the People's Education Press.

⁶ A bimonthly started in 1965 and edited by the then Unit for Studies on Foreign Education at the Institute of Foreign Studies in Beijing Normal University. In 1979 the unit's name was changed to the Institute for Studies of Foreign Education.

faculty members, research personnel, and education administrators at national, provincial, and municipal levels. The latter had a more restricted circulation. To a certain extent, these activities promoted the development of comparative education in China.

As is well known, the so-called Great Cultural Revolution was a major setback to many aspects of Chinese national development. Severe damage was done to schools and universities of all types and to educational sciences. Everything foreign was condemned; there was no escape for comparative studies in any academic field. The few institutions studying foreign education were disbanded or at least forced to stop operating. The limited number of comparative educators had to be "reeducated" by workers and farmers and were transferred to other fields of study. For a decade, Chinese educators were kept ill informed of and out of touch with educational developments in the outside world.

The downfall of the Gang of Four in 1976 meant the end of 10 years of internal turmoil and the beginning of a great transition. With political transformation, economic developments, and wide social change came a rebirth of the study of comparative and international education. The field quickly expanded. New policies encouraging comparative studies were formulated and implemented; comparative educators are now getting increasing support from relevant government agencies and educational institutions. An unprecedented number of comparative and international education institutes or units have been set up at national, municipal, and university levels. More educators and graduate students are coming into the field. Many books and journals on the subject have been published. A course of comparative education is again offered at education departments in normal universities and teachers' colleges after an absence of nearly 30 years. Graduate programs in the field have been established. A national society for comparative educators was formed, and intracountry and international academic exchanges are increasing. Major study projects have been chosen as part of top-priority projects in the national social sciences development program or the Education Ministry's educational studies program during the Sixth or Seventh Five-Year Plan periods (1980–85 and 1986–90, respectively).

Current Status

The following subsections describe eight aspects of the current status of comparative education studies in China.

1. Policy

In learning from the experiences of other countries there were two erroneous tendencies over the decades, one often concealing the other. One was blind opposition to everything foreign. The other was blind faith

in things imported and indiscriminate imitation of foreign models. Hundreds of years of bitter experience had taught us that copying foreign examples would never lead to complete success, whereas closing the country to international intercourse could lead only to backwardness.

China is a developing country with an enormous population of over one billion and a relatively underdeveloped economy. Within the country there is a great imbalance of development among regions. To build a socialist educational system suited to the specific conditions of contemporary China requires not only a critical appraisal of our own educational legacy of about 3,000 years and the scientific summing up of our own experiences in educational development but also creative borrowing and adaptation of successful experiences of other nations while benefiting from their failures.

In the light of historical lessons and present conditions, comparative education studies in China are undertaken according to the principle of "making foreign things serve China," relating studies to actual conditions and needs of national educational development. World experiences are to be studied theoretically and empirically, and the effectiveness of educational practices compared in an attempt to explore common principles governing educational development in various countries. The comparative studies mainly serve educational authorities in planning and policy-making that are aimed at improving and modernizing the Chinese educational system. Research projects focus on issues related to major educational reforms under way or to be made in the near future.

To encourage free discussion and promote academic development, the policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" is also being carried out. Different viewpoints are respected, and scholars are urged to seek truth from facts and to relate their work to the needs of educational development of their own nation.

2. Personnel and Institutions

In China a comparative educator is usually defined as one who is engaged full-time or part-time in research or instruction of comparative and international education. Most comparative educators are in national and provincial educational research institutes, normal universities and teachers' colleges, comprehensive universities, and specialized higher education institutions. Apart from them, a limited number of staff members in some government institutions and education administration organizations also do comparative studies. For example, certain staff members in the Office of Policy Study and the Education Information Unit in the Ministry of Education, the National Higher Education Society and other professional organizations, and administrators at provincial and municipal education departments or bureaus are active in comparative studies. The majority

of writings are produced by full-time educators and researchers, but part-time comparativists, who outnumber the full-time people, are playing indispensable roles.

In terms of their university education background, most Chinese comparative educators are from humanities and social sciences fields, especially education and foreign languages. Many who came from education studied in the Soviet Union in the 1950s or earlier in Western countries; all are proficient in at least one foreign language. Most who majored in foreign languages had teaching experience at educational institutions; some transferred from institutions of international studies in other fields; still others had worked as editors of journals or textbooks. Those in the third group have taken education courses or seminars organized by education departments at normal universities or teachers' colleges or through self-study, thereby improving their professional qualifications.

Among the major institutions where comparative educators are working are comparative education divisions or institutes in the Central Institute of Educational Sciences,⁷ Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University, South China Normal University, Northeast China Normal University, Shanxi Normal University, Fujiang Normal University, Honan Normal University, Harbin Normal University, Hangzhou University, Hebei University, and Tongji University. Centers for the study of higher education are set up in Beijing University, Qinghua University, Xiamen (Amoy) University, Wuhan University, Beijing Normal University. Other major universities also undertake comparative studies. In the 209 higher teacher education institutions and the dozens of educational research institutes in certain provinces and municipalities, there are an increasing number of faculty members and research workers who devote themselves to comparative studies. Although full-time professional comparative educators are limited in number, part-time comparativists amount to thousands. Also, more and more teachers, educational administrators, and economic decision makers read and use comparative education literature. In recent years a trend of recruiting university graduates in natural sciences to the field of comparative education has emerged. This is a result of increasing attention to the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

While much is done to bring into full play the wisdom and competence of senior comparative educationists, more efforts are being made to train a new generation of comparative study workers. Young and middle-aged research workers are provided with opportunities to attend advanced courses, to participate in seminars, and to make study visits abroad. Since 1979, seven universities have enrolled graduate students in comparative education. The enrollment is increasing annually. According to incomplete

⁷ A national education research institute affiliated to the Education Ministry.

statistics, in the fall of 1984, 31 graduate students were admitted to comparative education programs at Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University, and Hebei University. These graduate programs are at the master's level; preparations are being made to establish doctoral programs in the near future. A few graduate students and scholars are sent to the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France, West Germany, and the Soviet Union for either advanced degrees or short-term study.

To promote and coordinate comparative education studies and to facilitate academic exchanges in the field, the Chinese Comparative Education Society was established in Shanghai in 1979. It was the first national nongovernmental organization in Chinese history devoted to comparative education research. In the past 2 years comparative education associations have been set up in provinces such as Shanxi, Heilongjiang, and Jiling. The Chinese Comparative Education Society now has 343 members, of which most are individual and some are institutional ones that might consist of dozens of comparativists who do not apply for individual membership. The individuals are either full-time researchers or university teachers.

Comparative educators have more opportunities to study and travel abroad than those in other branches of education. One reason is that the nature of their work requires first-hand information through on-the-spot observation and investigation; another is that they are better qualified in foreign language proficiency as well as knowledge and understanding of educational development in the country to be visited. In recent years, many Chinese comparative educators have participated in international meetings and study visits organized by such organizations as Unesco, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEP), and the World Council of Comparative Education Societies. Bilateral exchanges with colleagues in North American, Japanese, West German, British, and French educational institutions are also increasing.

In organizing comparative studies, the current policy is to encourage the cooperation and coordination of full-time professionals and part-time researchers. Now a contingent of comparative education teachers and researchers has been formed, with the senior specialists as advisors, the middle-aged research workers as the backbone, and the young as successors. Still, much remains to be improved, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to meet the demands of national development. Various measures are being taken to train and retrain comparative educators and researchers.

3. Priorities in Research

To render better service to current modernization efforts, comparative education studies focus on important issues of practical significance to

China's educational development and reform. Although there is no neglect of basic theoretical research of comparative education as a discipline, applied topics are emphasized.

The essential aim of educational reforms under way in China is to train more and better qualified personnel, who develop intellectually, morally, and physically to meet the needs of the modernization program. In accordance with this general aim and the tasks set in the educational development program of the Sixth Five-Year Plan, the primary topics of comparative education research in the next few years will include the following: interactions of education and national economic development; experiences of universalization of primary education in other countries; diversification of secondary education structure, namely, the development of vocational and technical education with general education; the strengthening of links between education and the world of work; higher education structures in various countries; reform of college entrance examinations; innovations in educational content, methods, and techniques; formulation of educational legislation in advanced countries; theories and practices of educational administration and management; and world experiences in integrating formal education with nonformal and informal education. Thus studies will deal with various aspects of educational development, involving study at both the macro and micro levels. Target countries now under study by Chinese comparative educators are six developed countries (the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, Great Britain, France, and West Germany) and a few developing countries that have conditions similar to China's.

The advisory role of comparative education through the provision of relevant information on policy options and the analysis of effectiveness of different educational practices in a comparative perspective are much valued by educational administrators at all levels. At the Second National Conference on Educational Sciences Development Planning, convened in May 1983,⁸ projects of comparative education studies were selected and listed among either national or the Education Ministry's "key projects" during the Sixth Five-Year Plan period.

4. Methods of Research

We rely on both individual, independent work and collective efforts in joint projects. As research aims, policies, and principles are made clear after open discussion, there is usually a consensus among scholars on topics of priority. Individual researchers can select, according to their expertise and interest, topics that they think are of theoretical or practical

⁸ The First National Conference on Educational Sciences Development Planning was convened in Beijing in 1979. Both conferences were sponsored by the Education Ministry.

relevance. For certain comprehensive projects that require joint efforts of specialists from different disciplines or areas of study, research teams may be organized.

Chinese comparative educators highly value the various creative approaches adopted by distinguished comparative scholars in the world and consider each to be making a unique, indispensable contribution to the development of the science.

In our comparative studies of education, historical and dialectical materialism functions as a guideline, which provides a scientific methodological basis. To us, the method cannot be separated from the content of study, and the discipline of comparative education can be defined through an integrated perspective relating the methodology to the subject matter. When doing research, we emphasize systematic collection of objective, precise, and comparable data from the country or countries being studied. In classifying and interpreting the data we emphasize: (a) the relationship of educational development to social, political, and economical development in different phases and aspects; (b) intrinsic analysis of the forces or factors determining the nature of education, namely, the mode of production of material life that governs the whole social, political, and spiritual life; (c) a dynamic outlook of relativism, viewing education through its course of development at a certain time and space and under certain conditions; and (d) correct judgment of the relevance of foreign educational theories or innovations by the criterion not of dogma but of social practice and its effect and, on this basis, the borrowing or adaptation of successful experiences of other countries for the improvement of national educational modernization.

5. *Publication of Research Findings*

Research findings and study reports are disseminated through the following main ways:

Journals and newspapers.—At present there are five journals devoted to comparative education and distributed nationally: (a) *Waiguo jiaoyu* [Foreign education], a bimonthly jointly edited by the Chinese Comparative Education Society and the Comparative Education Division of the Central Institute of Educational Sciences; (b) *Waiguo jiaoyu dongtai* [Foreign educational developments], a bimonthly edited by the Institute for Studies of Foreign Education at Beijing Normal University; (c) *Waiguo jiaoyu cankao ziliao* [Foreign education: information and reference materials], edited by East China Normal University; (d) *Waiguo jiaoyu yanjiu* [Studies of foreign education], edited by Northeast Normal University; and (e) *Waiguo zhong-xiaoxue jiaoyu* [Secondary and primary education abroad], edited by the Education Institute of Shanghai Teachers College. Most have circulations of over 10,000; the largest is about 27,000.

Some national newspapers, including *Guangming Daily*, *Wenhui Daily*, and *Zhongguo jiaoyu bao* [China education news],⁹ and many education journals such as *Educational Research*, edited by the Central Institute of Educational Sciences, have special columns for comparative education.

Books.—In recent years the People's Education Press, the national textbook publisher affiliated with the Education Ministry, has edited and published more than 30 titles in the Foreign Education Series, including *Education in Six Countries*, *American Education Today*,¹⁰ *Japanese Education Today*, and *World Higher Education: Present Status and Future Trends*. The Education Sciences Press, established in 1980 in Beijing, also has a line of books on comparative education. A dozen provincial and municipal publishing houses, such as Human Education Publishing House and Shanghai Education Publishing House, have published a number of books in the field.

Most of the authors of the books and journal articles mentioned above are members of the Chinese Comparative Education Society. We estimate that at least 70 percent of papers submitted to annual meetings of the society are published as books or articles.

Academic lectures.—Members of the society are often invited to present lectures on topics of comparative education at colleges, universities, or local teachers' assemblies. Reports indicate that they are welcome among faculty members and education administrators.

6. Curriculum and Instruction

In June 1978 the Education Ministry convened a symposium on liberal arts teaching and formulated a teaching syllabus for education departments in teachers' colleges and normal universities, which stipulated that comparative education be offered as part of the curriculum in higher teacher-training institutions. Beginning in 1981, education departments in many of these institutions have offered this course either as compulsory or as an elective. Comparative education has become a popular course, attracting the attention of many education majors. The offering of this course has played a positive role in broadening the students' view, enlivening their thinking, and improving their abilities in independent study and research. The problems in instruction are threefold. First, many instructors lack sufficient knowledge and experience of foreign countries, resulting in much abstract instruction. Second, there is a shortage of reference materials and audiovisual equipment. Third, teaching is limited to 30–60 hours for the course, so there is not enough time to deal fully with certain aspects of interest in the field.

⁹ The only national newspaper devoted exclusively to education. It is edited by the Education Ministry in Beijing.

¹⁰ Teng Da-chun, *American Education Today* (Beijing: People's Education Press, 1981).

The first contemporary textbook compiled by Chinese comparative educators, *Comparative Education*, was published in July 1983 and is a significant achievement in the development of the discipline in China.¹¹ Efforts will be made to revise and improve the text. In addition, more attention will be devoted to research on methodologies of comparative education, with the goal of a systematic, scientific methodology based on dialectical and historical materialism.

7. *Functions and Activities of the Chinese Comparative Education Society*

The national society organizes and supervises various kinds of academic activities, which supplement those sponsored at local and institutional levels. Two types of events are organized: annual/biennial meetings and symposia centering on a specific topic.

Through early 1984, four national meetings have been convened. The first, held in 1978 in Beijing prior to the formal founding of the society, was attended by only 50-some participants, with about 20 papers submitted; the second, in 1979 in Shanghai, with around 80 participants attending and 70 papers submitted; the third, in 1980 in Baoding, Hebei Province, with over 100 participants and 140 papers; and the fourth, in 1984 in Changchun, Jiling Province, attended by more than 120 comparative educators and with more than 200 papers, which reflected how comparative education studies have flourished in China.

The national meeting is convened approximately every 2 years. Its agenda usually consists of (a) report on work of the society since the previous meeting; (b) review of research results, exchange of views, and free discussions; and (c) election of the council of the society. The meeting usually lasts 5 days and, as deemed necessary and appropriate, concentrates on three or four topics. For example, the fourth meeting was organized into four subcommittees: disciplinary research of comparative education, universalization of compulsory primary education, the combination of education and work, and structural reforms in higher education in various countries. Moreover, group discussions were organized on educational development trends in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, North America and Western Europe, and Japan. The society published the proceedings of the Third National Conference on Comparative Education Studies and is preparing for the publication of selected papers from the fourth meeting.

Between biennial national meetings several local seminars and small-scale national workshops usually occur. For example, four symposia were held in 1982: (a) evaluation of the educational thoughts of Soviet educationists Kairov and Zankov, (b) studies on college entrance examinations in foreign countries, (c) theory and practice of combining education with

¹¹ Wang Chengxu, Zhu Bo, and Gu Ming-yuan, *Comparative Education* (Beijing: People's Education Press, 1983).

productive labor in other countries, and (d) curriculum development for comparative education. Each was attended by fewer than 20 people, among whom were staff members from the Education Ministry and local education authorities, as well as comparative education specialists who presented papers. In this way, educational theorists meet educational practitioners, integrating theory with practice, foreign experiences with domestic innovations.

8. *International Academic Exchanges*

The strengthening of international exchange and communication is most necessary for the development of comparative education as a field of study. Along with the implementation of China's open-door policy, there have been more and more exchanges between Chinese comparative educators and their colleagues in other countries.

Chinese scholars attended the fourth and fifth conferences of the World Congress of Comparative Education, held in 1980 and 1984, and developed friendships with many comparative educators from other countries. In 1982 a Chinese comparativist was invited to attend the forty-first Conference of the Japanese Association of Education and deliver an academic report. In 1983 two Chinese professors of comparative education, with financial support from Unesco, made study visits to England and France. Many others have participated in various international exchange activities. Meanwhile, individual comparative educationists and delegations from other countries visited China.

In recent years the Chinese comparative education circle has established close contacts with Unesco and its Institute of Education in Hamburg, the International Bureau of Education in Geneva, and the Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok. In Unesco's second midterm program period (1984–89), China will participate more actively in international ventures related to comparative studies. At the same time, our programs of exchange with the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France, West Germany, and selected developing countries will be further strengthened.

Since 1978 China has sent more than 30,000 students and visiting scholars abroad, among whom were a number of comparative education researchers and graduate students. It is certain that more Chinese comparative education workers will be involved in cross-cultural activities and international exchanges, resulting in even wider cooperation. The Chinese comparative education community most heartily welcomes their colleagues in every other country for study visits to China.