

Curriculum Reform and the Writing of High School History Textbooks in China

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The world has changed rapidly since the end of the Cold War. Globalization demands a much higher intellectual standard of people in a country. At the same time, the trend toward pluralistic cultures in many countries has lessened confrontations among peoples of different ideologies. Compared with the twentieth century, in this new era, the peoples of the world have made more efforts to pursue peace, oppose wars, reach a common understanding, and strengthen cooperation. Both geographically and culturally, the information age has broken down the boundaries between nations. Communication within the “global village” is both readily available and convenient.

Recognizing this trend, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has taken steps to catch up with the rest of the world. In this new century, international competition is a competition to foster new skills and attitudes in young people. An important question is, What role can history education play? How to play that role is a crucial topic for China’s leaders and educators.

Since the 1990s in particular, significant changes have taken place in the field of history education. In 1996, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the PRC issued the *Outline of History Teaching for High Schools*. Compared with other outlines issued since 1949, this new outline had many improvements, including fresh concepts and ideas.

The ultimate goal of history education is to foster students’ determination to support reform and open up to the world.

The *Outline* emphasizes that “history education should lead students toward

a correct international consciousness and encourage them to participate in international cooperation and competition.”¹ The *Outline* also enhances the concept of “patriotism” and shifts from “education of internationalism”² to “education of international consciousness,” which aims at increasing student understanding of cultural traditions throughout the world. It also advocates assimilating cultural achievements of the world and understanding the development of the world. In addition, the *Outline* combines the “education of China’s state” with “the education of the state of the globe” on the basis of history and reality.

Moreover, the *Outline* states, “We should pay attention to helping students strengthen the belief and a sense of responsibility in safeguarding the peace and development in the world and helping them to participate in international cooperation and competition for the progressive course of mankind.”³ It also requires students to “understand the course of the world’s changing from

separation and isolation to a closely-linked whole.”⁴

Instead of giving priority to political history as in the past, the textbooks based on this Outline include more content about social life and culture and technology. The modern history of the world plays an important role in bringing to the students fresh ideas and points-of-view.

The *Outline* maintains, “the teaching of modern history of the world should aim toward reality and reform. It promotes the idea that by studying history students can understand a truth after considering the following opposing concepts: reform vs. sticking to the old ways, opening-up to the world vs. isolating themselves from the outside world, progress vs. looking backward. These opposing concepts have affected the entire process of human history.” Since social progress is irreversible, the *Outline* insists on reform, opening up to the world, and pursuing social progress.⁵

Conforming to these new ideas, textbooks now have more space devoted to the history of the world and of some western civilizations. Furthermore, the comments on some historical events tend to be more objective and balanced.

Examples include events related to the periods of the Great Discoveries, Enlightenment, Renaissance, Human-

ism, and a series of revolutions and reforms in modern history that occurred in the Western world, including the Meiji Reformation in Japan.⁶ While positively evaluating the significance of these events, the textbooks make a comparison with China during the same period. An excerpt from a text reads:

However, the major feudal countries in the world, including China, secluded themselves from the outside world and were going downhill. Consequently, they began to lag behind the tendency of the rapidly changing world day-by-day, and finally resulted in a situation whereby the Eastern world was subordinated to the Western world.⁷

Curriculum Reform and the Development of History Standards for High Schools

In 1999, the Third National Education Conference of China issued a document, *Decisions by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and State Council on Deepening Educational Reform and Promoting Quality-oriented Education*. It points out:

We should continue to follow Deng Xiaoping's thinking that 'education should keep modernization, the world, and the future in view' to further promote quality-oriented education by putting emphasis on students' creativity and practical ability.

It also draws upon the general goals for compulsory education:⁸

Education should give priority to fostering students' views and attitudes. In order to meet the challenges of our era, we should stress the development of a student's healthy personality, sense of responsibility, scientific attitude, creative ability, and human spirit—and the values of pluralistic cultures.⁹

As China entered this century, officials in the MOE noted that although Chinese students in the last century had gained a solid basic knowledge of school subjects, they came up short when compared with their American and some European counterparts in terms of practical ability and critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.

The leaders of the MOE, therefore, initiated a new round of curriculum reform. These reforms were not limited to the history curriculum; they covered all courses offered in secondary education. They carried forth the best of China's educational theories and combined them with new ideas in Western pedagogy. The general aim of this reform included readjusting the goals of student training and changing the methods in training. Concrete tasks were designed to reduce the emphasis on pure knowledge by placing more emphasis on critical thinking.

In addition, Chinese educators paid attention to the research on theories of history teaching in order to promote curriculum reform and the development of teaching materials. In the last decade, educators paid attention to achievements by our counterparts in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Japan, and Korea. For example, parts of the *National Standards for History* of the United States have been translated and have had an influence on China's history curriculum reform. Many ideas from these standards (for example, the emphasis on a broad-minded global view) inspired Chinese history educators.

They also analyzed the textbooks of some Western countries, including a number of them used in American high schools. As a result, Chinese history educators deepened their understanding of history education. They recognized that history education is key in training students' good qualities that are required in a rapidly changing world. It is with this in mind that *History Standards for Compulsory Education* and *History Standards for High Schools* were issued by the MOE in 2000 and 2003, respectively.

The Impact of Reform on the Writing of High School History Textbooks

Changes in the Structure of the History Curriculum

The reform in history education in high schools, which began in 2003, is actually a revolution in the sense that it completely changed the way of teaching since the founding of the PRC. The new system and structure of the history curriculum is characterized by three distinct changes:

- The curriculum is in a modular structure with a topical, or thematic, history.
- There is a division of required courses and an optional course. The former has three textbooks: a political history of the world, an economic history of the world, and a cultural history of the world. The optional course has six textbooks: the themes include reforms, democracy, and wars and peace.
- The third change is in the mixture of Chinese history and world history. The new history curriculum increases the time spent on world, as opposed to Chinese, history. Moreover, within the world history, the European and American components occupy a large percentage.

Changes in the Writing of History Textbooks

Another characteristic of the reform is that for the first time in the history of the PRC, detailed requirements and regulations for textbook writing are raised in the *Standards*. This is a great breakthrough in the relationship between the writers and the readers. Traditionally, China's textbook writers have taken a condescending tone in their writing. *History Standards for Junior Secondary School* insist, "We pursue a style of equal dialogue and avoid using empty preaching."¹⁰ *History Standards for High Schools* stresses, "The compiling of history textbooks should be beneficial to the development of students' personalities. It should provide conditions for those who are interested in this course and want to

Questions for Students

Who writes high school history textbooks in China? Who publishes them? Who approves them? Students should compare the procedures in China with those in the United States.—*Patience Berkman*

study history as a career in the future.”¹¹ This is a positive step representing fundamental change in the nature of history textbooks.

- ***The academic quality of textbooks is improved.*** A number of professors, university PhDs, and research fellows all contributed to every phase of the reform. As a result, the new textbooks have caught up with the progress made in history research in China, thus improving the academic quality. To assure that textbooks are practical as well as intellectually sound, the writing team included a number of excellent middle school teachers with strong academic backgrounds and rich experiences resulting from their teaching careers. At the same time, the main responsibility for publication remained with the professional writers in publishing houses, such as People’s Education Press (PEP), which was established in 1950.¹² These professionals are most familiar with the norms of textbook writing; they understand the practical needs of teachers and students in secondary education, and they know how to keep a balance between academic standards and the realities in secondary education.

- ***The quantity of teaching materials is increased.*** From 1949 to the 1980s, there was only one outline and one textbook system. All students in China’s secondary schools used textbooks compiled by a single publishing house, PEP. This situation changed in the 1990s. Because of the gaps in economic and educational development between different regions of China, the MOE instituted a new policy of one outline and multi-version text-

book in junior secondary education. (Although PEP continued to occupy between 70 percent and 90 percent of the market, a number of local publishing houses published their own textbooks. For example, Shanghai issued its own textbooks, and Beijing Normal University Press published those used by schools in Shandong province.) Today there are nine versions of history textbooks for junior secondary education. However, the publishing of high school history textbooks is still dominated by PEP.

- ***The new text books reflect the spirit of our era.*** First, they reflect new ideas of reform in pedagogy, which puts the student at the center of the learning process. In short, history teaching aims at helping students develop their own ways of studying and problem solving. Second, they present the latest in the best methods of historiography and archeology in China. Third, they reflect the new view on the role of the textbook, which is no longer regarded as a “Bible” by students and teachers for preparing for the examinations for entering higher education; instead, textbooks are vehicles for students to demonstrate their creativity. Finally, the progress made in textbook writing is a demonstration of the principle of equality between teachers and students. There is room for independent thinking, and students are encouraged not to jump to conclusions too quickly.

Problems Resulting from the Reforms

Although the reforms that have been implemented in the past decade have achieved many of the desired results, there are a number of shortcomings that

must be addressed. Because the reform is revolutionary, many teachers and learners who are affected by the changes object to the fact that much in the curriculum has been completely overturned.

Teachers have complained that the new materials are not time-sequenced, which makes it difficult to organize their classes. Both students and teachers report problems with transition between the curriculum of the junior high and the high schools. They also complain that the new curriculum standards are too vague and voluminous.

In summary, although the curriculum reform has made many breakthroughs, it still leaves much to be desired. The next few years will witness another revision of curriculum standards so that they will become more objective, reasonable, and learning-oriented. This will necessitate a rewriting and revision of history textbooks. The task ahead is arduous. 🌐

Notes

1. In the early 1990s, called the Commission of Education of the People’s Republic of China.
2. Prior to the 1980s, known as “proletarian internationalism.”
3. Curriculum and Teaching Materials Institute, *A Collection of Outlines and Standards for Elementary Education of China in the 20th Century: History Volume* (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2001), 7.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 705.
6. History Department of the PEP, *A Modern and Contemporary History of the World*, Vol. I (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 1997), 49.
7. Ibid., 1, 18.
8. A nine-year education system, from grade one to nine.
9. Qi Chen, *A Superficial Exploration on Deep Ocean of History* (Sichuan Education Press, 2006), 282.
10. The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, *History Standards for Fulltime Compulsory Education* (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2001), 32.
11. The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, *History Standards for High Schools* (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2003), 32.
12. It is also titled Institute of Curriculum and Teaching Materials.

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