Handbook of education in China

Helen Hanna


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BOOK REVIEW


Introduction

This edited volume is a highly comprehensive handbook that contains everything a beginning scholar in Chinese education might need to know. Over 23 chapters it deals with historical and fundamental aspects of education (origins, ideologies, governance, finance); the stages of education (early childhood, primary, secondary, technical and vocational, higher, teacher and distance and lifelong education); key problems and policies (citizenship, inequality, special and inclusive and minority education, private tutoring, education and the labour market, education for migrant workers and their children, Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) education, environmental and international education); and, finally, education in the Special Administrative Regions of Macao and Hong Kong. Setting itself against the backdrop of rapid economic growth, massive expansion of education and a growing interest in recent developments in China within ‘Western’ societies, this handbook offers a blend of historical, theoretical and empirical research insights, at times highly critical. It brings together viewpoints from both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars to showcase the variety of research in a new and interesting way that makes education in the People’s Republic of China accessible to scholarly, English-speaking audiences.

Given its scale, there is not sufficient space here to review each chapter. Therefore, I will focus on highlights from the four key sections. Section one (Chapters 1–2) sets the context with a highly detailed historical and ideological overview of how and why the education system in China evolved to its current point. An interesting insight can be found in its illustration of the extent to which Chinese education has been influenced by philosophies both local (Confucius, Mao) and global (Japan, the former USSR, the USA). The ‘reader’s guide’ in Chapter 2 was particularly helpful for those wanting to dig deeper into the ideological aspects of education in China.

Section two outlines the contemporary Chinese system, with the expansion of all sectors coming through as a key point. Chapter 3, on the structure, governance and finance of education, offers some very useful translations of Chinese texts that are not often available to non-Chinese speakers, highlighting the role of local governance and finance in managing education in this vast country. Chapters on the stages of education offer some critique in terms of key issues faced within their sectors; of note are Chapters 5 and 6 on primary and secondary education, which emphasise the extensive curriculum and examinations reforms, and the role that education in China has played in reducing poverty and gender inequality, combined with the reality of rural-urban disparities, the latter being a theme that appears often in this handbook. The sheer enormity of the school system is staggering: readers learn that, at secondary level, Chinese students number just under 88 million, the largest student body in the world. Another interesting point that emerges is the difficulty the government has faced in shifting the schooling culture away from examinations, homework and lack of physical activity and the consequent ‘battle over school choice’ (128). With regard to higher education, the rather complex system of ‘projects’ (Project 983, Project 211) aimed at developing higher education in China are well explained and the issues of socially inequitable access to higher education and that of state control over university aims are presented. The chapter on distance and lifelong learning makes interesting...
reading for a UK-based scholar, given China’s pioneering work on radio and television universities, Mass Open Online Courses and universities for the elderly.

In section three (Chapters 11–21) the book moves into a more critical analysis of a wide range of key problems and policies. In terms of citizenship education, tensions between nationalism and globalisation, development and preservation of cultural heritage, ethnic diversity and national unity, and person-making and citizen-making are explored critically. Educational inequality (and subsequently, labour market access) emerges as a key point in many chapters, with much revolving around the *hukou* system of residency that determines where one may live and what educational and health services one can access, and the university entrance exam (*gaokao*). Authors highlight that this disproportionately affects less wealthy, rural, ethnic minority and migrant learners. Relatedly, Chapter 13, on special and inclusive education, illustrates that, despite the international trend towards inclusive (mainstream) education, only students with particular disabilities are permitted to attend mainstream schools due to a fixed and medical model of disability that informs guidelines on which subjects students with particular needs should or should not study. Chapter 17 presents research on migrant workers and their children, which could be informative and helpful to a non-Chinese audience grappling with migration issues, but who may not have considered internal migration. Significant barriers to education emerge in terms of the certification required for each student and school fees even in low quality private schools. The authors provide a long list of recommendations. Against the background of China being the world’s leading source of international students, the final two chapters consider empirical research into the area of Chinese students studying overseas – choosing their destination and their experiences of studying and then returning home. Authors of the thorough systematic review in Chapter 20 indicate the underemphasised role of friends, family and *guanxi* (social relations) in influencing students’ choice of destination in the Chinese context, while Chapter 21 brings to the fore theories from transnationalism that inform their view that studying overseas results in ‘profound identity transformation’ (470) for Chinese students. The chapter also offers a very welcome opportunity to hear from Chinese students themselves, with extensive excerpts from interviews foregrounded. Although some critical analysis is offered in certain chapters in this section, deeper critique across the board would offer readers a more nuanced understanding of key debates.

Finally, section four (Chapters 22 and 23) addresses education in the Special Administrative Regions of Macao and Hong Kong, providing highly detailed whistle-stop tours of the distinctive education systems in these two regions, with the two key drivers of diversity and autonomy highlighted by the authors.

In summary, this volume meets its aim of providing a comprehensive survey of the many facets of education in China. It offers highly detailed chapters with some significant areas of critique, which will be of interest to the non-Chinese scholar. Students and others who are new to Chinese education will find it an essential handbook.

Helen Hanna
*Leeds Trinity University*

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