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Curriculum Studies in China

Retrospect and Prospect

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The issue of curriculum occupies a central position in educational systems. The most basic and broad project in educational reform in contemporary China is curriculum reform, which calls for serious curriculum research. The process of curriculum research is a process of seeking curriculum wisdom embodied in the true, the good, and the beautiful, and of understanding curriculum history, reality, and process. To be in search of curriculum wisdom and curriculum exploration constitutes our vocation as Chinese curriculum scholars. Therefore, we intend to make a historical reflection of ancient curriculum wisdom, depict a comprehensive picture of the development of curriculum studies in the twentieth century, and look ahead into the prospect of curriculum theory in contemporary China.

Three Kinds of Curriculum Wisdom in China

Curriculum wisdom is being in-the-world. It has local character. In this era of globalization, it is particularly important to understand the locality of curriculum wisdom (Smith, 1997, 2000). The idea of place is important in the seeking of curriculum wisdom. Curriculum wisdom is also a historical being. The history of curriculum discourse dwells in the reality of curriculum. The conception of historicity becomes also important.

Chinese cultural traditions are nurtured and shaped by three main philosophies: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Correspondingly, there are three main traditions of curriculum wisdom in China: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. When we explore these three traditions of curriculum wisdom, we are not limited to what ancient philosophers said about education. We intend to understand what curriculum meanings and curriculum questions can be derived from the discourses of ancient philosophers. In other word, we base our study in hermeneutics, not positivism.

Confucian Curriculum Wisdom The Chinese term for curriculum is *ke-cheng*. The term curriculum (*ke-cheng*) first appeared in Confucian classics during the Tang Dynasty.¹ There are two syllables in the word *ke-cheng*. Before the Tang Dynasty, these two syllables *ke* and *cheng* appeared independently. According to the most authoritative book of Chinese etymology, *Xu Shen Exploring Etymology of Chinese Words* (in the Eastern Han Dynasty), *ke* means “function” and *cheng* means “many persons gathering in one room and sharing.” Both the original meaning of *ke* and the original meaning of *cheng* are very different from today’s meaning of curriculum.

The first man who created the word *ke-cheng* (curriculum) was Kong Yingda. One of the most famous Confucian philosophers in the Tang Dynasty, he is the author of *Understanding the Five Confucian Classics*. In it, he discusses some of the important Confucian classics: *Book of Songs*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. While explicating one sentence from *Book of Songs*,² he created the word “*ke-cheng*” (curriculum). In the *Book of Songs* (The Lesser Odes: Slanderous Talks), it is written:

Magnificent indeed is the temple,
Which has been constructed by the moral person.

Kong Yingda explained this sentence as follows:

It is the moral person
Who must plan, supervise, and uphold the curriculum
(*ke-cheng*).
That is legitimate.

In ancient China, “temple” did not only suggest architecture, it also symbolized a “great cause,” or “great contribution.” So, curriculum (*ke-cheng*) originally pointed to “temple,” signifying “great cause,” “great contribution.” In the Tang Dynasty, curriculum was not limited to school

curricula, it included all the great undertakings in society (Zhang, 2000c, p. 66).

One of the greatest Confucian philosophers in the Song Dynasty,³ Zhu Xi, frequently used the word *ke-cheng* (curriculum). In *Complete Works of Zhu Xi On Learning*, he wrote, “You should provide plenty of time for students, and make good use of the time to teach the curriculum.” He also said, “You should develop curriculum not in many books, but focus on what’s chosen for learning.” Zhu Xi’s conception of curriculum is limited to school curriculum. School curriculum is a “great cause” (Zhang, 2000c, p. 66).

How can we understand the temple metaphor in Confucian conceptions of curriculum? What is the meaning of “great cause”? To answer, we must turn to Confucian metaphysics. What are the intrinsic features of Confucian metaphysics? Confucian metaphysics are moral metaphysics. Confucian metaphysics are based on morals. If we have to summarize Confucian metaphysics, we can say: Cosmic order is moral order. Because Confucianism is moral metaphysics, Confucian philosophy is also a philosophy of the subject. This “subject” integrates and internalizes the heaven (*tian*). This is the Eastern subject, Chinese subject, not the Western subject. The most important theme of Eastern culture is the unity between the subject and heaven. That is the most crucial difference between Eastern culture and Western culture (Mu, 1997).

The very nature of the subject is “benevolence” (*ren*). Benevolence is the core idea of Confucius and of the most important Confucian classic *The Analects*. According to Xu Shen’s *Exploring Etymology of Chinese Words*, the original meaning of benevolence (*ren*) is intimacy. Intimacy is not limited to family relatives. It is extended to the society. Confucius said, “Benevolence is to love all men” (Yan Yuan, *The Analects*). Benevolence is not limited to human society, either. It is extended to all beings. Xunzi said, “Benevolence should be extended to loving all things.” Through benevolence and caring, the world goes into a new state of the “unity between heaven and man.”

How does Confucianism view being (ontology)? Being is the “unity between heaven and man.” In the first chapter of *The Doctrine of the Mean* is written the following:

What is endowed by heaven is called the nature; to follow that nature is called the way; to cultivate the way is called education. One cannot depart from his way for a moment, what can be departed is not the way. A moral man is always discreet and vigilant when he is beyond others’ sight, apprehensive and cautious when beyond others’ hearing. One should never misbehave even when he is in privacy, nor should he reveal evil intentions even in trivial matters. So a moral man remains circumspect especially when he is alone.

Confucians paid great attention to “remaining circumspect especially when one is alone.” That means the unity between heaven and man is a process of conscious moral practice.

What does Confucianism say about the question of becoming (cosmology)? In *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Chapter 26) is written the following:

The way of the universe can be completely described in a single sentence: as it is constantly taking honesty as the only proper course, its way of bringing up all things is extremely subtle because it creates one thing as the only thing, and it creates things unpredictably.

What an insightful description of the way of creation! The world is an organism, not a clock. Every thing is the only thing. All things are co-emergent. This is the cosmology of Confucianism.

What curriculum horizons can Confucianism open up for us? First, Confucian curriculum is based on moral metaphysics. The unity between heaven and man is the basic platform for understanding curriculum. The ideal of unity between heaven and man is the highest level that curriculum can attain. To cultivate moral persons is the purpose of curriculum. Is this ideal mysterious or unreachable? No. According to Confucianism, the state of unity between heaven and man is possible through ordinary life. Confucius said, “Is benevolence indeed so far away? If we really wanted benevolence, we should find that it was at our very side” (Shu Er, *The Analects*). When we cultivate our benevolence from ourselves, we are starting the journey to this ideal state.

Second, curriculum is a social, political text. Confucianism emphasizes the idea of mean-harmony (*zhong-he*). It has founded a sociology of mean-harmony. Confucius said, “How transcendent is the moral power of the mean! That it is but rarely found among the common people is a fact long admitted” (Yong Ye, *The Analects*). *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Chapter 1) extended Confucius’ thought:

Feelings like joy, anger, sorrow and happiness are in the state of the mean when they are kept in heart; they are in the state of harmony when expressed in conformity with moral standards. The mean is the fundament of everything under heaven, and harmony the universal law. With the mean-harmony, the heaven and the earth move orderly, and everything thereon grows and flourishes

So, Confucian curriculum is also based on the sociology of mean-harmony. This curriculum sociology focuses on balance, harmony, interaction, and communication. This is quite different from the various conflicting curriculum discourses in the Western world (Pinar et al, 1995, Chapter 5).

Finally, according to Confucianism, curriculum is a moral event. Curriculum research is a values-laden process. Every aspect of the curriculum process as well as curriculum research is permeated by values and moral elements. So, efforts to find universal and value-free laws and models of curriculum development are naïve, even impossible, considering what this ancient wisdom teaches us.

Confucian curriculum wisdom is a curriculum discourse based on moral metaphysics. To build a harmonious society and eventually reach the state of unity between heaven and man—these are the basic and ultimate aims of curriculum research and curriculum processes. This is the meaning of “great cause” and what the temple metaphor implies. Confucian curriculum wisdom is of growing interest in Chinese contemporary curriculum theory. Several Chinese curriculum scholars have begun to explore the contemporary meaning of Confucian curriculum wisdom, among them are Wang (1999) and Zhang (1996, 2000a).

Taoist Curriculum Wisdom In order to understand the essence of Taoist curriculum wisdom, we need focus on Taoist metaphysics. What is the intrinsic feature of Taoist metaphysics? In one word, Taoist metaphysics is the metaphysics of Nature. In *The Book of Laozi* (Chapter 25) is written the following:

Man follows the way of Earth,
Earth follows the way of Heaven,
Heaven follows the way of Tao,
Tao follows the way of Nature.

If man does not go against the way of Earth, he will be safe. If Earth does not go against the way of Heaven, it will be complete. If heaven does not go against the way of Tao, it will be in order. To follow the way of Nature is the intrinsic character of Tao. So, in the Taoist view, Nature is the *noumenon* of the cosmos. What is the meaning of Nature? Nature is a transcendent spiritual state of freedom, independence, and autonomy. Tao is not only the core of Nature, but it is also the realization of Nature. In the first chapter of *the Book of Laozi* is written the following:

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless (*wu-ming*) is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The named (*you-ming*) is the root of all things.
Therefore, the subtleties of Tao are always apprehended through their formlessness,
The limits of things are always seen through their form.
These two (*wu and you*) have the same source but different names.
Both of them can be called profoundness (*xuan*),
The most profound, the door of all mysteries.

This is the meaning and character of Tao. As the realization of Nature, Tao (the Way) is dynamic and moving. It is the origin and mother ground of all things. Tao has double character: *wu* (no-thing) and *you* (being). When artificial things are excluded, a pure, vacant, and quiet spiritual state will manifest. This state is called *wu* (no-thing). *Wu* is the basis for the change of all things. *Wu*, as an infinite and universal state, has a tendency to point to a certain being. So *wu* generates *you* (being). *You* is the concrete content of *wu*. Laozi said, “All things under Heaven come into being from you, and you comes into being from *wu*”

(Chapter 40). *Wu* is one, *you* is many. There is a dialectical thinking in Taoism. *Wu* is the *wu* of *you*. *You* is the *you* of *wu*. The dialectical unity of *wu* and *you* is called *xuan* (profoundness). *Xuan* (profoundness) is the realization of Tao. Profoundness is the door to all mysteries. According to Taoism, Nature is the unity of Tao, Heaven, Earth, and Man. Taoism also honors the state of unity between heaven and man.

How does Taoism view becoming? In the Taoist view, the nature of every thing is good. The nature of every thing should be kept and actualized. So Taoism advocates the principle of actualization. For Taoism, it is not so much to say “creating” a thing as to say “returning” to a thing. Laozi said (*The Book of Laozi*, Chapter 16):

Try the utmost to make the heart vacant,
Be sure to hold fast to quietude.
All things are growing and developing,
And I see thereby their cycles.
Though all things flourish with a myriad of variations,
Each one will eventually return to its root.
This return to its root means “tranquility,”
It is called “returning to its destiny.”
“To return to its destiny” is called “the eternal,”
To know “the eternal” is called “enlightenment.”
Not to know “the eternal” and to act blindly (will necessarily) result in disaster.

Returning to the root of a thing and returning to its destiny is the process of actualization. This is the essence of growth and development.

How can we interact with things? The main points are *wu-wei* (doing nothing), *jing-guan* (tranquil observation), and *xuan-lan* (profound insight). *Wu-wei* means not to act blindly, but to realize Nature, to attain the state of Nature. *Wu-wei* is not inaction, but to act with Taoist wisdom. Laozi said, “Tao invariably does nothing, and yet there is nothing left undone” (*The Book of Laozi*, Chapter 37). “Doing nothing and nothing left undone” concentrates Taoist practical wisdom. *Jing-guan* (tranquil observation) and *xuan-lan* (profound insight) are the methods of understanding. To understand things is to be integrated with things. In order to attain this ideal state, we should “make the heart vacant,” “hold fast to quietude,” “keep the unity of the soul and body,” and “achieve gentleness like an infant.” Laozi wrote (*The Book of Laozi*, Chapter 10):

Can you keep the unity of the soul and the body without separating them?
Can you concentrate the vital energy, keep the breath and achieve gentleness like an infant without any desires?
Can you cleanse and purify your profound insight without any flecks?

Since both Confucianism and Taoism honor the state of unity between heaven and man, what are their differences? First, the Confucian unity between heaven and man is the inevitable outcome of moral metaphysics. Confucianism

bases the unity between heaven and man on morals. It focuses on the harmony of human relations. Taoist unity between heaven and man is the metaphysics of Nature. Taoism bases the unity between heaven and man in Nature. It focuses on the state of Nature. Second, Confucianism emphasizes benevolent action as the way to realize the unity between heaven and man. Taoism, on the other hand, proposes that the state of *wu-wei* is the essential way to achieve the unity between heaven and man. The state of unity between heaven and man is not an artificial product, but an internal quest and an inevitable outcome of Nature and Tao.

What curriculum horizons does Taoism create for us? First, if we understand curriculum as a Taoist text, we should borrow Taoist metaphysics of Nature to reflect on today's curriculum field. Do not more and more miscellaneous school materials go against Nature? Are not increasingly abstract curriculum discourses artificial? According to Taoist curriculum theory, all the school materials and curriculum discourses need to be thoroughly deconstructed.

Second, what Taoist curriculum wisdom provides for us is the meaning of Nature. The educated man, according to Taoist curriculum wisdom, is authentic man (natural man). From John Dewey (1897, 1899, 1902) to Ralph Tyler (1949) through today, paradigms of curriculum development have been based on anthropocentrism. This paradigm posits nature as being conquered, dominated, and utilized by human beings. The anthropocentric character of curriculum development is one of the main reasons leading to curriculum alienation. Taoist curriculum wisdom based on the teleology of nature can open up a new vision for curriculum development and curriculum theory.

Finally, can we introduce the methods of *jing-guan* (tranquil observation) and *xuan-lan* (profound insight) to the methodology of curriculum research in order to transcend the positivist character and technical orientation in present curriculum research? We think Taoist methodology and the Western qualitative methodology (for example, phenomenological methodology) point out new directions for curriculum research.

Buddhist Curriculum Wisdom In all the traditions of Chinese wisdom, Buddhism is the most complicated and abstruse. If Western philosophy has been struggling with the wisdom of being and self-identity, Buddhist philosophy, on the contrary, has been struggling with the wisdom of non-being. That is the intrinsic feature of Buddhist philosophy (Mu, 1997, 1998). So the general principle of Buddhist philosophy is causal occasioning (*yuan-qi*) and nature emptiness (*xing-kong*). Causal occasioning means that all beings come into existence dependent on conditions. Nature emptiness means that all beings do not have eternal nature and they keep changing. All beings are causal occasioning because of nature emptiness. The nature of all beings is empty (*kong*) because of causal occasioning. In the Buddhist view, all things that Western philosophy has

been pursuing (essence, being, self identity, personality, independence, freedom, God, etc.) and the pursuit itself are attachments needing to be emptied. When the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, died, he told his disciples, "You should behave as if I were alive: sit decorously together, neither rush about nor refrain from movement, think neither of life nor of annihilation, neither of coming nor going, neither of right nor wrong, neither of abiding nor departing. Just be still. That is the supreme Way" (*Platform Sutra*). So when all the attachments and blind will are thoroughly emptied, the supreme Way will manifest itself.

How does Buddhism view becoming? Because all beings are causal happenings as such, all beings immediately emerge and immediately disappear. That means all beings change and transform forever. The time when a thing emerges is the time when the thing disappears. The body, thinking, feeling, and behavior of human beings are not eternal. So, the world is always changeable, like floating clouds and flowing water. What can we do in this changeable world? The only choice is to know our own mind, discover our nature, and attain the moment of enlightenment in seeing Buddha. Huineng said (*Platform Sutra*):

Without enlightenment, a Buddha is just like any other man; but in a moment of enlightenment, any man can become a Buddha. This means that the Way of Buddha is in one's own mind. So why do we not discover our own nature of suchness in the instant of revelation in our minds?

"The nature of suchness" means to treat the world as such. Embrace the world and let it go. "The nature of suchness" means the pure and tranquil mind, the non-ego self. In the moment of enlightenment, you see Buddha, all things in the world come from the same source, and they return to the One.

What curriculum horizons can Buddhism expand? First, Buddhist curriculum wisdom can help us to purify today's curriculum field. There are many external wills controlling the curriculum field—among them political interests, economic interests, cultural hegemony, and so on. On the one hand, "everything for children's interests!" is demanded. On the other hand, children's rights are sold by imposing adults' benefits and wills. In the process of curriculum reform, more often than not, adults' obsession with national interests, technological advancement, and scientific superiority are projected onto our young children, forcing them to carry unbearably "heavy" schoolbags. What would it be like if both the attachments to selves as human beings and the attachments to selves as things were emptied in the curriculum field?

Second, in the view of Buddhist curriculum wisdom, "the educated man" is the enlightened man. The enlightened man is not a knowledge cabinet, but a man of spirituality. Wonder, awe, reverence, imagination, transcendence, quietude, empathy, and caring are essential

elements of spirituality. Can we find them in our curriculum? Our curriculum is so disenchanting. Both curriculum theory and curriculum practice need to be re-enchanting if we do not want to produce one-dimensional persons and dull souls.

Finally, Buddhist pedagogy is quite instructive and enlightening. It is a real pedagogy of wisdom. For example, “to teach through the mind not through the written word,” “Zen meditation,” “to know your own mind and to discover your own nature,” and “to work things out for yourself” express the core of pedagogical wisdom and make today’s technology-oriented instructional methods look simple, dull, and impoverished.

In the Western curriculum field, there are wonderful studies on Buddhism. For instance, David Smith’s (1996, 1999) exploration on the question of identity in the conduct of pedagogical action and Hwu Wen-Song’s study (1998) on the comparison of Zen/Taoism and post-structuralism (1998) are fascinating. We believe David Smith’s study is a milestone in the East/West dialogue of the curriculum field.

Relationship of the Three Kinds of Curriculum Wisdom A spiritual state of unity between heaven and man is the common theme of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist curriculum wisdom. What is the educated man? Confucianism understands the educated man as a moral man. Taoism understands the educated man as a natural man. Buddhism understands the educated man as an enlightened man. In other words, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism realize their ideal of spiritual state of unity between heaven and man from the angle of society, nature, and self, respectively. But confirming relatedness and co-origination as the essence of the world is the common intrinsic character of the three theories of wisdom.

If we want to utilize and learn from Chinese ancient curriculum wisdom to inform contemporary curriculum theory and practice, it is necessary to transform our traditions and ask questions relevant to our own time: How can we get rid of instrumental rationality (the logic of control) and imbue the present with wisdom? How can we create possibilities of dialogue between Chinese curriculum wisdom and Western curriculum theories and form a dynamic relationship between the two? How can we create possibilities of dialogue among Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist curriculum wisdom in order to provide fertile soil for its further growth into contemporary Chinese curriculum studies? How can we create possibilities of dialogue between the ancient curriculum wisdom and today’s curriculum practice in order to provide insights to transform curriculum practice?

Five Stages of Contemporary Curriculum Studies

During the twentieth century, with the tortuous journey of social changes and educational development in China, Chinese curriculum studies has experienced the following

stages: learning from the United States, learning from the Soviet Union, the re-emergence of the curriculum field, and seeking for the independence of Chinese curriculum studies.

Stage I: Learning from America; Making the Curriculum Field Relatively Independent (1900–1949) During the first half of the twentieth century, the main social and historical mission of Chinese people was to “save the nation from extinction.” A group of persons with breadth of vision looked on education as a main way to save the nation from extinction. This function of education was embodied in the national spirit of reconstruction. The core of spiritual reconstruction was “democracy” and “science.” The concrete strategies of reconstruction consisted of two aspects: one, plunging into rural areas and organizing educational activities in accordance with the semicolonial, semifeudal Chinese social reality; the other, drawing fully on the experience of Western educational ideas and institutions, of which the United States was a representative, and transplanting American educational culture into China.

In early twentieth century America, with the rapid growth of educator training programs during the “progressive period” and the increase in curriculum-making literature, “curriculum studies” became a professional field within the education sciences. Franklin Bobbitt’s *The Curriculum*, published in 1918, was generally considered as the inauguration of curriculum as a field. At almost the same time, Chinese scholars undertook curriculum research in China. These studies included:

(1) Translating the U.S. curriculum literature into Chinese. Bobbitt’s *The Curriculum* was translated by Zhang Shizhu and published by Commercial Press in 1928. It was part of the series of translation works entitled *Modern Famous Works of Education* and was widely read. Another Bobbitt book—*How to Make a Curriculum*, first published in America in 1924—was translated by Xiong Zirong and published by Commercial Press in 1943. F.G. Bonster’s *The Elementary School Curriculum* was translated by Zheng Zonghai and Shen Zishan and was published by Commercial Press in 1925. These translations widened the horizon of Chinese curriculum research.

(2) Research concerning the general principles of curriculum development. The earliest Chinese curriculum scholars not only attempted to learn from U.S. curriculum studies, but they also explored the general principles of curriculum development in the context of Chinese curriculum reform. As early as in 1923, Chinese scholar Cheng Xiangfan’s *An Introduction to the Elementary School Curriculum* was published by Commercial Press. Although focused on elementary school curriculum, this work contributed greatly to the study of general principles of curriculum development (Cheng, 1923), and only five years after Bobbitt’s *The Curriculum*. Wang Keren’s *The Principles and Methods of Curriculum Construction* was published in 1928; it explored the general principles and

methods of curriculum making (Wang, 1928). Zhu Zhixian's *Research on the Elementary School Curriculum* was published by Commercial Press in 1931, which systematically elaborated the conceptions, principles, and strategies of curriculum making (Zhu, 1931). Zhu published another book with the same title with the same press in 1933 and another book with the same title in 1948, therefore making a considerable contribution to the field of curriculum studies. Xiong Zirong's *The Principles of Curriculum Construction* was published by Commercial Press in 1934; it expounded the function, research fields, and principles of modern curriculum making as well as school curriculum making strategies at different levels. It was one of the most systematic works compiled and written by Chinese curriculum scholars in the first half of the twentieth century (Xiong, 1934).

(3) Further research on specific fields of curriculum studies. Early curriculum research in China did not only study the general principles of curriculum development, it connected the study of general curriculum development principles with the study of particular principles of specific fields. During this period, Chinese scholars studied in depth the questions of elementary school curriculum development in connection with practice and published a great number of research achievements. The study of elementary school teaching materials occupied several curriculum scholars' attention (Sun, 1932; Zhu, 1932; Wu and Wu, 1933; Yu, 1934; Wu, 1934).

(4) Research on curriculum history. Chinese curriculum research emphasized the study of curriculum history and connected curriculum development with the study of curriculum history. As early as in 1929, Xu Zhi's *The Evolving History of Chinese School Curriculum* explored Chinese curriculum history, attending to well-established Chinese curriculum traditions. Sheng Langxi (1934) wrote *The Evolution of the Elementary School Curriculum*, which focused on the history of elementary school curricula. Chen Xia's *The Developing History of the Elementary School Curriculum in Modern China* was published by Commercial Press in 1944. These works laid a foundation for the study of Chinese curriculum history.

These early studies of Chinese curriculum theory and history not only emphasized theoretical construction, but also addressed practical needs. They not only respected Chinese traditions, but also made use of American curriculum theoretical achievements. They not only explored the general principles of curriculum development, but also studied the issues of specific curriculum fields. Responding to the need of educational reform, curriculum research was fully developed and expanded Chinese educational theory. Curriculum research enjoyed substantial achievements, becoming a conspicuous, relatively independent research field during this period. It might not be an exaggeration to say that curriculum research in China led the world during the first half of twentieth century. At the least, it was not far behind the most advanced field in the world. Unfortunately, this great tradition did not continue,

and curriculum research in China almost became extinct during the second half of the twentieth century.

Stage II: Imitating the Soviet Union; The Curriculum Field Is Replaced by the Instructional Field (1949–1978) A new period of socialism started after the People's Republic of China was founded. China modeled herself after the former Soviet Union and built up a highly centralized socialist system. Although a great divergence in ideology occurred later between China and the former Soviet Union, a highly centralized socialist system remained intact in China. A socialistically planned economy lasted for almost 30 years in China. Under this system, education was regarded simply as social superstructure, so it had no independence and could only act as the mouthpiece of economy, the loudspeaker of politics, and the defender of culture. In a planned economic system, central authorities determined curriculum—the core of education—and curriculum specialists could not deal with curriculum development issues directly. Curriculum administration was also centralized. The authorities managed curriculum by bureaucracy through a centralized “teaching plan,” “syllabus,” and “textbook;” principals and teachers had no power to make curriculum decisions.

During this period, education research followed the Soviet Union model, composed of four sections: foundations, instruction, moral education, and management. Curriculum was treated as teaching content within the instructional section. Since curriculum was made by the central government, it was unnecessary for others to explore its values, orientations, and principles of design. What was needed was to rationally interpret the curriculum documents, such as teaching plans, syllabi, textbooks, and so on. Curriculum studies disappeared. Curriculum as content was separated from instruction: curriculum was aims and orientations while instruction was processes and means.

During this period—from 1949 to 1978—curriculum studies blossomed in the Western world. In the year when the People's Republic of China was founded, one of the most famous American curricularists, Ralph Tyler, who is praised as “the father of modern curriculum theory,” published *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. The book was called “the Bible” of curriculum development and indicated that curriculum development had reached a new stage. But the achievement of curriculum studies in Western countries was kept from coming into China for almost 30 years due to ideology. The tradition of curriculum research in the first half of twentieth century was discarded. Chinese curriculum research declined and fell behind the Western world.

Stage III: The Resurgence of the Curriculum Field (1978–1989) After the Third Conference of the Eleventh National People's Congress, China began the new period of all-round societal recovery, of which economic development was the core, with reform and opening to the outside

world accented. This provided new opportunities and challenges for education. In 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China declared its *Decision about Educational System Reform*. It attempted to change malpractice of the educational system (such as too many regulations and restrictions and inflexible management under centralized control) and enlarge the grass-roots power of educational institutions, making principals responsible for schools. In 1986, China promulgated the Compulsory Education Law. To implement the decree, *An Instructional Plan for Full Time Students at Primary Schools and Junior Middle Schools in Compulsory Education* was drawn up in 1988. In 1986, a significant event happened in the history of Chinese curriculum development. The first authoritative organization for the examination of subject matter was set up: the National Committee for the Examination of Subject Matters in Elementary and Secondary Schools. The Committee enacted a curriculum policy of one guideline with many textbooks and with examinations and subject matter development separated. Since localities now had the power to make their own decisions to develop curriculum materials, the tide of curriculum and instructional reform surged.

When curriculum implementers have the power to make their own decisions in curriculum development, the importance of curriculum theory becomes obvious. In this stage, the curriculum field started to recover in China. First, specialized academic periodicals and academic organizations focused on curriculum research and development were established. In 1981, the first organization whose main mission was to conduct research on curriculum theory and guide the practice of curriculum development—the Study Workshop of Curriculum and Subject Matters in the People’s Educational Publishing House—was founded. This study workshop established the first academic curriculum journal *Curriculums, Subject Matter, and Instructional Methods*. This journal studied not only the general foundations of curriculum and instruction, but also the specific principles of subject curriculum and instruction; it became an important theory frontline in curriculum studies. In 1983, the Chinese Ministry of Education approved the founding of the Institute of Curriculum and Subject Matter, under the control of the Chinese Ministry of Education and the People’s Educational Publishing House. The original Study Workshop of Curriculum and Subject Matter was upgraded to the Institute of Curriculum and Subject Matter. The study of curriculum and subject matter was strengthened not only in quantity but also in quality. In addition to specialized curriculum academic organizations, specialized scholars engaged in curriculum studies in many educational departments and institutes of educational sciences at many universities. The Specialized Committee for Instructional Theory in Chinese Educational Academy undertook curriculum research, too. Curriculum sections were established in many academic educational periodicals.

Second, foreign curriculum research was reintroduced to China. In 1985, the People’s Educational Publishing House started to publish a *Curriculum Research Series*. Curriculum research from England, Japan, America, and the Soviet Union were translated into Chinese, among them Lawton’s *Theory and Practice of Curriculum Studies* (1978) and Beauchamp’s *Curriculum Theory: Meaning, Development and Use* (1961). These works supported the recovery of the Chinese curriculum field.

Third, several important academic achievements concerning curriculum were accomplished. During this resurgence of curriculum studies as a field, many influential academic works were published (Dai, 1981; Chen, 1981; Shi, 1984; Chen, 1985; Wang, 1985; Xiong, 1985; Ban, 1988; Zhong, 1989b). These works analyzed the subject and scope of curriculum research, explored the direction for the future development of curriculum theory, discussed the basic questions of curriculum development and reform, and did critical research concerning current conditions. They established curriculum theory as an independent field within the education sciences.

The call of curriculum reform provided the basic animation for this resurgence in curriculum research. Given this call, the development of curriculum theory was mainly to respond to the urgent needs of curriculum practice. Although scholars appealed for the independence of curriculum theory from instruction, professional activities and academic research were not enough to achieve it. At large during this period, research on curriculum theory occurred mainly within the framework of instructional theory.

Stage IV: The Re-independence of the Curriculum Field and Its Initial Prosperity (1989–2001) Chinese reform has accelerated since 1989. Society has turned its attention to building a socialist market economy. Curriculum reform at elementary and secondary schools caught on like fire in Shanghai and in Zhejiang Province as well as other places. After more than 10 years of curriculum reform and research, the time for curriculum theory to become independent from instructional theory had arrived.

The year 1989 was an important year in the history of Chinese curriculum theory. In March 1989, the People’s Educational Publishing House published Chen’s *Curriculum Theory*, the first systematic work on curriculum theory in decades. Chen Xia (1989) had studied curriculum theory extensively, drawing from curriculum theory in the former Soviet Union and Western countries while at the same time maintaining close ties with Chinese curriculum practice. He identified the following aspects of curriculum: 1. The intent, the subject, and the method of curriculum studies; 2. Histories of school curriculum in China and Western countries; 3. Different schools of curriculum theory; 4. Factors influencing school curriculum development; 5. The position and role of school curriculum in cultivating the student as a whole person; 6. The relationship between educational aims and natures, roles, types, devel-

opment, implementation, and assessment of curriculum; and 7. Directions of curriculum development.

In April 1989, the Shanghai Educational Publishing House published Zhong Qiquan's *Modern Curriculum Theory* (1989a), the most complete, systematic and detailed book dealing with the fundamental questions of curriculum theory thus far. It can even be called an encyclopedia of curriculum research. In this book, in a style of narrating rather than assessing, Zhong presented the fundamental achievements of curriculum theory and curriculum practice and their latest trends in Western countries, tracing these back to Greco-Roman traditions and extending into the late 1980s. He expounded the history and basic schools of curriculum theory. He especially explored the fundamentals of curriculum development and new forms of curriculum. He also conducted cross-cultural and comparative studies on curriculum systems and policies.

Chen Xia's *Curriculum Theory* and Zhong Qiquan's *Modern Curriculum Theory* share similar titles but demonstrate different styles. The former explored the principles of curriculum development in terms of the particular features of Chinese educational practice; the latter investigated the principles of curriculum development internationally. The former proceeds via theoretical thinking and reasoning; the latter illustrates principles based on evidence. The former was published in Beijing, the latter in Shanghai. Both books replenished each other and laid the cornerstone of Chinese curriculum theory. It can be said that these two books, published separately in March and April of 1989, symbolized the moment when Chinese curriculum theory became independent from instruction.

Since then, Chinese curriculum theory sprang up like mushrooms. Among its achievements are as follows: First, research on general principles of curriculum development was conducted by Liao Zhexun (1991), Jin Yule (1995), Shi Liangfang (1996), Zhong Qiquan and Li Yanbing (2000), and Zhang Hua (2000c; 2000d). This research represented a platform for the conversation between curriculum theory and practice. Second, research on specific areas of curriculum theory was undertaken by Zhong Qiquan (1993), Zhang Hua (2000a), Cui Yunhuo (2000), Jin Yule (1996), and Huang Fuquan (1996). These works provided depth to the study of Chinese curriculum. Third, research on Chinese curriculum history was conducted, as evidenced in Lu Da's *The Modern History of Chinese curriculum* (1994) and Xiong Chengdi's *Research on the School Subjects in Ancient China* (1996). Fourth, research on subject curriculum was undertaken by Zhang Yongchun (1996), Zheng Jun and Yu Guoxiang (1996), and He Shao-hua and Bi Hualin (1996). The study of subject curriculum in China is still at its beginning but has a brilliant future. Fifth, we have introduced representative curriculum of the world to China and launched international curriculum conversations between scholars in China and those in other countries. The Institute of Curriculum and Instruction at East China Normal University is the national center for curriculum research. It is a window of communication

between China and many other countries in the curriculum field. It has translated many contemporary curriculum works, among them Doll's *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum* (translated by Wang Hongyu), Smith's *Globalization and Post-Modern Pedagogy* (translated by Guo Yangsheng), van Manen's *The Tact of Teaching* (translated by Li Shuying) and *Researching Lived Experience* (translated by Song Guangwen et al.), Pinar et al.'s *Understanding Curriculum* (translated by Zhang Hua et al.), Pinar's *Curriculum: Toward New Identities* (translated by Chen Shijian et al.), and Noddings' *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (translated by Yu Tianlong). Meanwhile, Chinese curriculum scholars are participating in international conversations of curriculum discourse and trying to make their own curriculum theories international (Zhang Hua et al., 2000b). Sixth, curriculum theories were constructed in a Chinese style. One of the founders of the Chinese curriculum field, Zhong has been establishing a curriculum theory for quality education (Zhong, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001). His theory makes individual development the core of curriculum and individualized curriculum an important and necessary part of reforming curriculum structure. Zhang based his curriculum inquiry on Chinese ancient curriculum wisdom and contemporary Western curriculum discourse. He has constructed a theory of lived experience curriculum (Zhang, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000a). Wang conducted a study on the dialogue between great Chinese Confucians such as Confucius, Zhu Xi, and the great French philosopher Michel Foucault in an attempt to build a theory toward a curriculum for creative transformation of selfhood (Wang, 1999). These curriculum theories contributed to a possible transition of the Chinese curriculum field toward the paradigm of "understanding curriculum" (Pinar et al., 1996).

Those works mentioned above are unprecedented not only in scope but also in depth in the history of Chinese curriculum theory. Under the contexts of long-term curriculum reform and rigorous pursuit of continuous curriculum research, the Chinese Educational Society approved the founding of the National Committee of Curriculum Theory in March of 1997. This is the first national and professional academic organization for curriculum research. It provided the organizational support to make the curriculum field advance toward specialization and independence.

Stage V: The Internationalization and Diversification of the Curriculum Field (2001–2012) On June 7th, 2001, the State Council of China issued *The Guidelines for Curriculum Reform of K-12 Education* (Try-out Version), which marks the starting point of the latest curriculum reform that continues at present. This has triggered a wave of learning from foreign curriculum theories among Chinese scholars who are eager to build a new curriculum system that creates a new generation of prosperity of the state. However, their endeavors have never stopped at the mere introduction and application of those theories, but

rather are extended to the indigenization level, attuned to the unique characteristics of Chinese educational context. Meanwhile, traditional wisdom is being reconceptualized in new ways so that their inner values can be identified and preserved for the improvement of educational quality. As a result, in the arena of curriculum studies in China, varied theoretical discourses coexist and are engaged in an ongoing conversation with each other. China has now entered into a “golden age” of curriculum studies. In the following text, we will select five of these discourses and give readers a very brief introduction as to how they are being developed among Chinese scholars.

Confucianism

As the mainstream ideology in the past thousands of years, Confucianism has exerted its influence on every aspect of Chinese society and constitutes an indispensable part of our identity as Chinese. However, after undergoing a century of humiliation, many Chinese intellectuals remain hostile to Confucianism, regarding it a barrier to the modernization of the nation. During the past decade, whether and how to bring Confucianism back to the front stage appeared as an issue with which every politician, intellectual, or civilian is concerned. In the field of curriculum studies, the issue has attracted the attention of many scholars. Among those reinterpreting traditional Confucianism are Ma (2011) and Qin (2009), who state that, from the perspective of Confucianism, the ultimate aim of curriculum should be to cultivate virtue, not only intellectual growth. The teaching principles of Confucius and Mencius recommend that we adjust teaching to suit the unique requirements of each pupil and in accordance with his/her aptitude, connecting learning and thinking, knowing and practice, and providing methodical and patient guidance to students (Liu, Chang, and Zheng, 2011; Wang, 2009; Qin, 2009; Ma, 2011).

The thirst to revive Confucianism may involve misinterpretation, over-application, and the imposition of modern terms on ancient Confucian figures. The doctrine of the mean (*zhong yong*), viewed as the main moral principle and methodology in Confucianism, is applied to represent all types of balance or harmony: student's subjectivity and teacher's domination, teaching subject knowledge and developing creative thinking skills, and the predesigned plan of one lesson and the emerging contents in the teaching process (Hu, 2011). Praise and encouragement is one of the pedagogical tactics of Confucius, but to generalize from it as a means of making every student happy (Qin, 2009) would be misleading. In Confucius' teaching, music is not an amusement or device to enhance instruction, but rather one of the fundamental subjects every disciple has to learn in order to foster their humanity (Qin, 2009).

At the same time, not every inspiration of Confucianism is uncontroversial. The doctrine of the mean might be reduced in practice to an attitude of rejecting competition and multiplicity, preventing the curriculum from producing

creative talents (Sun, 2010). With its universal aims of cultivating humanity and participating in social governance, curriculum could prove disadvantageous to the students' free development based on their own interests, personalities, and abilities (Wang, 2008). In addition, with regard to the teacher-student relationship in Confucianism, though associated with democratic and egalitarian features (Ma, 2011; Qin, 2009; Wang, 2009), several scholars still accuse it of overemphasis on teacher's authority and the suppression of students' dignity (Sun, 2010).

To our delight, the curriculum thoughts of varied Confucian figures in history—Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Zhu Xi, Wang Shouren, and Wang Chuanshan, to name a few—have all been redefined according to the modern discourse. And the dialogue between Confucianism and curriculum studies as a research field and foreign curriculum theories begins to unfold. One of the forerunners, Zhang Hua, has laid the theoretical foundation for the appropriation of Confucianism in the development of curriculum theory. He has tracked the original meaning of curriculum in ancient Confucianism books and has underscored that to understand curriculum as a Confucian text means to regard curriculum as a moral enterprise constructed by moral creativity and a means to employ experiential metaphysics as its research methodology (Zhang, 2004). The complementarity between Confucianism and postmodernism is also rudimentarily analyzed in Fan and Jin (2007) and Li, Xu and Feng (2006).

Taoism

Like Confucianism, Taoism is analyzed primarily through its relationship with the current Chinese curriculum reform. Theorists realize that Taoism, which already shares many characteristics with the curriculum reform, has special “bright spots” that can illuminate the enterprise of “reconstructing curriculum culture for basic education” (Li, 2004; Wu, 2008; Li and Jin, 2005). Its illumination focuses on the following three categories. (1) *The aim of curriculum reform*. Following nature is the key idea of Taoism. Nature's rules do not need perfecting. The universe works harmoniously according to these rules; it is only when people exert their will against these rules that harmony is harmed. Besides, humanity as a living thing is inherently unified with the whole of nature and contains the original will of the universe. And being natural is humanity's most fundamental attribute. Thus, returning to nature is both the requisite for the development of the universe and for the realization of humanity. To achieve this aim, we have to uphold the principle of *wu wei*, literally meaning “nonaction” or “action without intention.” From this point of view, education should be an activity respecting the nature of students and facilitating their natural development (Wu, 2008; Zhao, 2008). And the ultimate aim of curriculum reform ought to be the integration and harmony between the human and nature (Li, 2004, p. 41).

Taoism was severely underestimated in older times, but now, curriculum researchers are re-evaluating its epistemology and identifying its peculiar value. Zhu (2001) and Li and Jin (2005) comment that the so-called anti-intellectualism in Taoism had to do with Laozi and Zhuangzi's opposition to the concrete knowledge and rituals governors manipulated to enslave their people and remain their authority. Only the knowledge unfolding the profound meaning of Tao and attending to human's spiritual life can be spoken of as real and trustable (Zhao, 2008, p.93). If Confucianism is considered as a "moral philosophy," Taoism could be defined as a "spiritual philosophy" (Li and Jin, 2005, p.33). Due to the tradition of examination in Chinese society, students have become the "slaves" of book knowledge. This fact supports Chinese curriculum theorists' efforts to construct a new epistemology informed by Taoism where curriculum knowledge becomes a "nutrient" rather than the aim of learning, becomes a stimulus to uplift students' spirits instead of a means to control students' brains (Li and Jin, 2005; Wu, 2009).

(2) *Curriculum implementation.* In Taoism, nonexistence has ontological significance. Laozi stated, "All things under heaven sprang from It as existing (and named); that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named)" (*The Book of Laozi*, Chapter 40). Interestingly, Li and Jin (2005) compare this idea to the technique of "white cloth" in artistic creation, which helps to explicitly highlight the theme of certain artifacts. Here is a new way of improving the creativity of curriculum they call "poetic imagery of curriculum." It means to consciously set aside "blank space" between two lessons or two parts of the textbook in order to raise students' impulse of creation (Li and Jin, 2005, pp.34).

Laozi advocated that "The skillful traveler leaves no traces of his wheels or footsteps; the skillful speaker says nothing that can be found fault with or blamed" (*The book of Laozi*, Chapter 27). He also said, "the sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech" (*The book of Laozi*, Chapter 2). These ideas are widely cited in Chinese literature to encourage school teachers to empower students and be influential as a model of moral speech and behavior (Zhao, 2008; Li and Jin, 2005; Shao and Liu, 2005). Meanwhile, in his classic *The Book of Zhuangzi*, Zhuang Tzu told stories to indicate that everything and every person in the world have their unique advantages and thus need to be respected. This inspires researchers to deepen curriculum reform by promoting personalized models of teaching and learning (Chen, 2004; Xu and Zhang, 2009). Finally, two principles proposed by Taoists are also applicable to classroom teaching: the principle of "planning before things happen" and the principle of "anticipating things that are difficult while they are easy" (Shao and Liu, 2005; Zhao, 2008).

(3) *Curriculum management.* Taoism's technique of state governance is *wu wei* as well. Laozi indicated that "When there is this abstinence from action, good order is

universal" (*The book of Laozi*, Chapter 3). This has encouraged some scholars to rethink the current "three-layer" system of curriculum management. Li and Jin (2005) declare that the prevalent philosophy of curriculum management is still "control-based." Therefore, they endorse a new management philosophy in which the local educational bureaus and schools are regarded as subjects able to initiatively and creatively make curriculum policies. The model of the central government should be altered to service-based (p. 35–36). However, Xu (2006) argues that while underlining the significance of *wu wei*, Taoism has intentionally overlooked the importance of the centralization of power and weakened the function of administration (p. 58–59).

Constructivism

Constructivism was first introduced into China in late 1980s and early 1990s. As a theoretical weapon to counter the traditional curriculum system of China, constructivism has been featured in thousands of academic and practitioner journals and books and has played a significant role in policy making and teaching in various educational arenas (Yang, 1999; Zhu, 2010; Liu, 2012). Many other educational ideas prevalent in China, such as subjective education, student-centeredness, cognitive apprenticeship, personalized learning, random access instruction, and project/problem-based learning, are all generated from or influenced by constructivism (Lv and Gao, 2007; Gao, 2001). Constructivism has become one of the cornerstones of current curriculum reform.

Why is constructivism so famous and popular in China? Several researchers have pointed out that in the current developmental phase, the main problem of Chinese education is its failure of producing creative skilled workers. Among all theories, only constructivism suits the cultivation of students' creative consciousness and ability, which highlights learners' subjective construction of knowledge, encouraging contextual, cooperative, and problem-based learning (He, 2004; Zhu, 2010). For others, the main significance of constructivism is its revolutionary learning theory that positions students in the center, thereby undermining the traditional teacher-dominated curriculum system (Liu, 2012; Zheng, 2004; Zhang, 2003).

Because constructivism is not a unified perspective and is redefined by educators with differing theoretical views and classroom practices, the debate around its application to Chinese education seems unavoidable. Among the primary issues are what constructivism means to the teacher and what the teacher should really do in constructivism-based practice. Some interpret constructivism as discovery learning and that any conclusive knowledge should not be directly lectured to students; if any teacher dares to break this rule, they are in fact objecting to the new curriculum reform (Chao, 2011; Zhang, 2003). In this view, student-centeredness is assumed as the main tenet of constructivism. Others try

to reconceptualize the teacher-student relationship by creating a “teacher-as-dominator, student-as-subject” model. They argue that without teachers’ designing every step, constructivism-based teaching is hardly possible (He, 2004). Constructivism does not necessarily refer to discovery or inquiry-based teaching, teacher instruction can be constructed as well (Zhou, 2003); there’s no conflict between students’ self-condition and their learning from others (including the teacher and the textbook) (Zheng, 2004). Chao (2011) even declares that constructivism is more applicable to high-level learning, not elementary education.

Another controversial issue concerns the epistemology of constructivism. Many educators present their strong critique of constructivism’s denial of the objectivity of knowledge and truth. Other scholars hold the opposite position. They explain that constructivism reminds people how knowing happens and what boundaries it has (Lv, 2009); it is no simple solipsism that denies the existence of the real world and truth (Lv and Gao, 2007). Even with varied versions of knowledge and the world constructed by different individuals, a consensus can still be reached among them (Chi, 2009).

On occasion, constructivism is construed as a cognitive theory of learning, of which Piaget and Vygotsky are two prominent pioneers, and then applied to different subject areas (Liu, 2012; Lv, 2009). The different branches of constructivism, such as social constructivism and radical constructivism, still await a full investigation (Zhang and Zhu, 2004). Since constructivism does not provide a series of operating procedures for teaching and learning or a set of standards by which it can be identified, many classroom practices are described as constructivist simply because teachers have allowed students to think or inquire by themselves (Zhou, 2003; Chao, 2011). It is urgent to establish a constructive dialogue between Chinese culture and Western constructivism so that more acceptable and appropriate versions of constructivism can grow in Chinese soil.

Multi-Intelligence Theory

Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory (MIT) was first introduced at 1991, but it became a hot issue among Chinese educators when the latest curriculum reform was launched. Generally speaking, MIT is widely welcomed, even adored; most Chinese scholars believe MIT is able to provide valuable insights for curriculum reform. Mei (2003) identifies four: (1) making an “entrance” for the implementation of qualities education, (2) offering strategies for curriculum innovation, (3) finding solutions to the problems of curriculum evaluation, and (4) building multiple teaching models. Wan (2009) provides two more: (1) exciting students’ potentials and (2) facilitating teachers’ professional development. While MIT is considered illuminating for each aspect of curriculum change, scholars are primarily concerned with its contribution to these three fields.

The first is curriculum evaluation. Though the new curriculum reform established a new evaluation system for students’ all-around development, the real situation is that most schools are still loyal to old ways of evaluation. He (2010) and Li (2010) summarize four characteristics of this evaluation practice: (1) the teacher as the only evaluator, (2) the examination as the primary evaluation method, (3) an overemphasis on students’ logical-mathematical intelligence, and (4) the supremacy of scores. Hence, MIT should continue to play the role of enlightenment mentor. Specifically, the aim of evaluation should be to understand the unique needs and learning style of each student and create opportunities to fully develop their potentials, rather than differentiate and paste labels on students (Long, 2006). The methods of evaluation should be diversified, including process-and-outcome evaluation, performance-based evaluation and traditional tests, teacher evaluation and peer evaluation, and appraising students’ learning portfolios, artifacts, and other personal productions (Li, 2010; Long, 2006). In addition to the academic achievement—which usually reflects one’s linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities—students’ bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential intelligences should also be the objects of evaluation (He, 2010; Long, 2006).

School-based curriculum is a brand new consequence of the newest curriculum reform and this constitutes the second field connected to MIT. Informed by MIT, school-based curriculum should be diverse, contextual, emerging, and personalized (Wu, 2006). It should address the development of each student’s multiple intelligence, select teaching materials accordingly, and combine various means of instruction (Hu, 2011; Li, 2005). Then, the views of school staff members of students, teaching, and research can certainly be transformed (Xu, Lai, He, and He, 2007). Although assessment of the concrete values of MIT for school improvement is still rare, some schools claim, citing some statistic data, that the achievement of their students has significantly improved (Xu, Lai, He, and He, 2007; Wu, 2006).

What does MIT mean to Chinese teachers? What challenges do teachers have to face if they truly accept MIT? These are the questions the third field usually asks. MIT is considered positive for the development of school-teachers’ professional practice. It offers teachers a stage of reflecting on their own intelligences and teaching and students’ learning styles, motivating them to personalize their teaching and classroom management and supporting collaboration with colleagues (Li, 2008; Liu, 2002). But it also challenges teachers to adopt new roles in classrooms: facilitator, collaborator with students, observer and listener of students, and developer of the multi-intelligence curriculum (Dang, 2007). Often, due to internal and external factors, teachers are unable to implement an MIT-based curriculum. Teachers accustomed to playing the traditional authority role or those who are in the early stages of their careers are believed to have strong resistance to MIT

(Liu, 2002). The emphasis on logical and linguistic intelligences and the score-dominated evaluation system can act as barriers to experimenting with a multi-intelligence curriculum (Yang and Zhang, 2006).

The localization of MIT in the Chinese educational arena proves complicated. In terms of the classroom practice, two types of “mutations” often occur: transcendental mutation (adapting MIT to the changing educational conditions) and reductive mutation (formalizing multi-intelligence teaching) (Yang and Zhang, 2006). Many misunderstandings prevail within MIT lab schools. Sometimes the nine intelligences are taught simultaneously in a single short lesson, and sometimes the study of basic subject matter is deliberately ignored or becomes secondary (Chen, 2003). On other occasions, MIT is misconceived as the aim of education, as a “panacea” that is capable of solving all educational problems (Zhu, 2007). Several scholars, however, have begun to rethink MIT from a cross-cultural perspective. Zhu (2007) suggests that past application of MIT is the result of a “collective unconsciousness,” of believing “the more updated a theory is, the more scientific it is.” He advises researchers to explore more the interrelationship between Chinese culture and MIT, and upon this build a truly Chinese multi-intelligence curriculum. Li (2005) indicates that to make the development of MIT school curriculum possible, we have to separate ourselves from any Western MIT teaching model and design a new version of curriculum adaptable to the unique subculture of specific schools.

Postmodernism

The positive value of postmodernism to the new curriculum reform is also universally recognized among Chinese educators. This value has been generally summarized into the following seven aspects: (1) curriculum foundation (from closed to open), (2) curriculum aims (from unitary to multiple), (3) curriculum structure (from independent to integrated), (4) curriculum content (from static to dynamic), (5) curriculum implementation (from predetermined to emerging), (6) student-teacher relationship (from unequal to equal), and (7) curriculum evaluation (from single to diverse) (Zhong, 2002; Li, 2009; Luan, 2011). Postmodernism has made a significant impact on the policy and practice of recent curriculum reform in China; several famous experimental schools (such as Dulangkou Middle School) are even identified as ideal applications of postmodernism (Cui and Pan, 2008). Postmodern theory can also prompt the healthy development of curriculum studies in China. Zhang (2004) argues that the postmodernism could help Chinese curriculum researchers overcome the simplicity tendency, build an attitude of critical thinking and reflection, increase the social status of marginalized cultures, eliminate gender discrimination, and facilitate an equal conversation between curriculum researchers and the subjects investigated.

However, as a foreign curriculum theory, postmodernism is unlikely to take root in Chinese soil without

encountering resistance and dilemma. In the first place, the complexity of the idea, the lack of a unified perspective, and the borrowing of too many terminologies from other academic fields have made postmodernism difficult for Chinese researchers to understand (Wang, 2003; Li, 2009). Secondly, informed by Marxism’s theory that economic foundation determines the superstructure, many scholars question the real benefits and applicability of postmodernism to China (Zhang, 2003; Li, 2009). Due to the failure of postmodernism to establish an operative system of curriculum development, they argue that it’s hard for Chinese educators to fully change their ideas and practice in the short run (Li, 2009). In fact, modernism is still deeply ingrained in people’s minds in various regions and schools (Chen and Liu, 2010). And at the policy level, the definitive way of evaluating students’ achievements, that is, examinations, particularly college-entrance examinations, has never been replaced (Chen, 2012). At last, the diversity, uncertainty, and de-authorization that postmodernism advocates are basically contradictory to traditional Chinese cultural beliefs (Li, 2009; Chen, 2012) and the ideology of the current Chinese political system.

The reflection does not stop at the tension of postmodernism as a theory and its practice in China, but has extended to the inner problems of postmodernism per se. Zhang (2004) criticizes that an overemphasis of postmodernism could lead to a “swamp” of relativism and nihilism, a chaotic state of agnosticism, and an attitude of pessimism in curriculum studies. Pointedly, Zhou (2003) comments that the judgments of postmodernists are arbitrary and reflects their “cultural interests” or “subjective experience;” and the disconnection with the practical fields has made postmodernism a cluster comprised of theorists, post-graduate students, academic journals, and publishing houses. He also mentions the possibility of postmodernism as a new knowledge power and questions whether every student in a different context should build their life hope upon the “cultural emancipation” that postmodernism highlights.

Features of Chinese Curriculum Research Looking back upon the one-hundred-year development of Chinese curriculum theory, we can reflect on these four basic features: (1) Curriculum research started early in China and has undergone a very uneven journey. At the beginning, Chinese curriculum research followed the example of America, where the discipline of curriculum theory was born. At that time, Chinese curriculum research kept close ties with the advanced studies in the world. However, when China followed the model of the former Soviet Union, the research tradition stopped. Chinese curriculum research fell far behind the Western world. At the turn of the century, the lost tradition of Chinese curriculum theory was recovered, which made the curriculum field independent from instruction theory. Chinese curriculum research will have a bright future.

(2) Chinese curriculum research is bound up with ideology. Chinese curriculum theory was uneven because it

was tied to the mainstream ideology during certain historical periods. In the 1950s and 1960s, curriculum studies were into policy annotation and could not be referred to as a “study” at all. Of course, curriculum theory cannot develop in a vacuum. It is not surprising that it is influenced by certain ideologies. But it should keep its own relative independence. Regarding the relationship between the two, curriculum theory is not only influenced by ideology, but it also can influence the development of ideology. Interaction rather than one-way influence provides a good basis by which to form a dynamic relationship between curriculum theory and ideology.

(3) Chinese curriculum theory depends on curriculum practice excessively. Curriculum research did not flourish until curriculum reform demanded theory. To a certain degree, curriculum theory followed the needs of curriculum practice. The discipline of curriculum theory exhibits a strong practicality. Undoubtedly, there exists an inherent relationship between curriculum theory and practice. However, without the critical ability to reflect on practice, curriculum theory cannot be called “theory.” Without a strong theoretical orientation, Chinese curriculum theory cannot participate in reform and practice in creative and critical ways. Therefore, Chinese curriculum theory needs to be independent of curriculum practice rather than dependent on it in a simple way.

(4) The Chinese curriculum field emphasizes the study of curriculum history. The whole process of developing Chinese curriculum theory is accompanied by the study of curriculum history. Several great works of curriculum history appeared during the twentieth century. During the long history of Chinese civilization, curriculum discourses arising in different historical phases interacted with each other and formed vigorous curriculum traditions of curriculum wisdom, influencing today’s curriculum theory in an implicit or explicit way. Curriculum traditions are the roots of today’s curriculum discourses. Therefore, the study of curriculum history is an indispensable part of discipline construction in curriculum theory and of the development of curriculum practice. Chinese curriculum researchers understood this point from the very beginning and paid close attention to the study of curriculum history, which may make its own contribution to curriculum theory worldwide.

Prospects of the Chinese Curriculum Field

After exploring Chinese curriculum concepts, curriculum wisdom, and curriculum studies, we can think about the future of Chinese curriculum studies: First, the study of curriculum development as the dominant paradigm of Chinese curriculum research will last for a long time. China is now engaged in an unprecedented curriculum reform. How to develop curriculum effectively is an urgent call for Chinese scholars. The Chinese curriculum field has lost touch with the technology of curriculum development,

which needs to be rethought and re-utilized. Chinese curriculum reform is confronted with many questions: How to develop curriculum standards? How to develop subject matters? How to define curriculum objectives? How to select curriculum contents? How to organize curriculum contents? How to evaluate curriculum? How to adjust curriculum policy in order to adapt the need for new curriculum? So, the study of curriculum development will dominate the Chinese curriculum field or at least coexist with the efforts of theoretical (such as cultural, social, political, aesthetic, and spiritual) explorations of curriculum in the near future.

Second, the paradigm of understanding curriculum is the future direction of the Chinese curriculum field. In China, the traditional study of education and instruction that served mainstream ideology has come to a close. In its place, the curriculum field has become a new and vigorous research area. This area has assembled many researchers and nearly every teachers’ university or college has established departments of curriculum and instruction or centers for curriculum research. All these expansions and transitions provide a solid infrastructure for possible new theoretical explorations in an increasingly interdependent and changing global society. We seek to understand what it means for Chinese to know and to be educated based upon reflection of our own traditions as well as international conversation. Such an undertaking cannot be conducted without cultural, political, economical, global, and spiritual understandings of curriculum. An understanding of curriculum at a deeper level must be accompanied by the difficult task of transcending the direct and instant needs of curriculum practice so that the critical and creative potential of theory can be released. The Chinese curriculum field will keep up with its good tradition of historical studies, attempt to inform curriculum research by traditional curriculum wisdom, participate and contribute to worldwide curriculum discourses, reflect on the reality of curriculum practice, and construct its own distinctive curriculum theories.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Hongyu Wang for her careful reading, wonderful alterations, and her great help in English phrasing. In addition, we will never forget Professor William F. Pinar for his kind encouragement and valuable suggestions.

Notes

1. The Tang Dynasty ranged from 618 to 907.
2. Book of Song is a general collection of the most ancient Chinese poetic works. This book consists of 305 pieces. All the poetic works included in the book were produced over a period of about 500 years, ranging from the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty (the eleventh century BC) to the middle part of the Spring and Autumn Period (the seventh century BC).
3. The Song Dynasty ranged from 960 to 1279.

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