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Constructing a modern theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Well-developed educational system leads to a strong country. The Chinese government has emphasized and clarified the priority of developing the Chinese educational system, and it has accelerated efforts to modernize it to position China as one of the world leaders in education. This essay discusses the priority of developing the Chinese educational system, and it outlines the main factors for the construction of a modern theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics. It argues that this construction should be based on the actual practice of education in China in the new era, it should be deeply rooted in the methods and wisdom of traditional Chinese education, it should incorporate the educational ideology and concepts nurtured by the modern Chinese revolutionary culture, it should draw on the latest scientific advancements and achievements throughout the world and keep pace with the development of the times, and, finally, it should be informed by the study of the nature and development of human beings with special attention to the theoretical issues embedded in educational activities themselves, which relate to the deepest levels of a philosophical worldview.

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At present, the world is undergoing a great change unprecedented in the last century. However, in the midst of turbulent international changes, China's economy and society are developing with relative stability, and the prospect of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is becoming more clearly visible day by day. There is a general consensus with the idea that a well-developed educational system leads to a strong country. As early as in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping realized the important function of education, and he wrote: 'From a long-term point of view, we should pay attention to education and science and technology [...] we should try every way to expand education, even if it means slowing down in other fields' (Deng, 1994, p. 274). Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era that is characterized by a new historical orientation for China's development. In this new international and domestic situation and in the face of new patterns of continuously deepening reforms and continuously expanding opening up, new and higher requirements for education and learning have been put forward in order to achieve socialist modernization and the promotion of the people's overall development and social progress. Therefore, the Chinese government has recently taken the lead in making strategic plans and designs for accelerating the modernization of education in order to position China as one of the leading powers in education with a higher historical position, a broader international vision, and a deeper strategic vision.

The government is intent on giving priority to developing education as an important 'first move' to promote the development of various national undertakings in China to make education more adaptable to the development of the country and meet the expectations of the Chinese people. It also strives to have education match in degree China's comprehensive national strength and international status to play a more crucial, sustainable, and reliable role in progress of modernization.

Concretely speaking, the strategy prioritizing the development of education will necessarily lead to the need to construct a theoretical system of education. This essay introduces the Chinese priority of developing education, and it then outlines some of the important considerations that will affect the construction of a modern theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics.

1. The priority of developing the Chinese educational system

There are multiple significant factors involved with the Chinese priority of developing the Chinese educational system; they include:

First. The priority of developing the Chinese educational system intends to accelerate the modernization of education and build China from a big country in education to a leading power in education, thereby to provide a continuous supply of human resources with a high competence for social development.

Historical experience shows that education is an important foundation for national rejuvenation and social progress. To build a skyscraper, the foundation must be solid; likewise, the foundation for promoting the well-rounded development of the Chinese people and cultivating their talents in various fields still lies in education. The basis of social development is the improvement of the level of productivity, which relies most on the talents who master new knowledge and high technology. Education in the new era carries the heavy responsibility of the times in order to spread knowledge, ideas, and truth, and to shape the soul and vital life of future generations. Without first laying a solid foundation of education, it is impossible to improve the competence of people from generation to generation to achieve the increase of productivity, the development of society, and the progress of civilization. Thus, it can be seen that the vigorous development of education is a virtuous project that is beneficial to both present generations and future generations.

Although China is a large country replete with human resources, the amount of talent is not synonymous with an increase in the number of people, but with the improvement of the competence of people; the people, in the same number but with different levels of competence, will have different degrees of creativity and productivity. In the same number, people with higher competence can bring about quite different outcomes in their work. In the process of modernization in China at the present time, the renewal of industries, the emergence of new industries, and the improvement of product quality all depend to a large extent on the enhancement of the competence of the people and the development of human resources.

The realization of China's goal of building a modern nation in the 21st century primarily concerns the training of hundreds of millions of qualified workers and tens of millions of people with professional skills, since this will give full play to the advantages of China's immense human resources and turn a country large in human resources into a country powerful in human resources. As always, public respect for teachers and public support for education should be vigorously encouraged. By popularizing scientific and technological knowledge through the development of education, the whole nation can be guided to establish the firmest belief in science, which will motivate more people to master scientific methods, encourage creativity and invention. This will lead to an increase in mass scientific and technological activities that can rely on science to overcome feudal superstition and ignorance and backwardness, thereby

to minimize all kinds of pseudo-scientific activities in order to improve the scientific and cultural competence of the whole nation.

Second. It is important to accelerate the implementation of the strategy of ‘developing the country through science and education’.

At present, the world’s scientific and technological revolutions, notably with information science, information technology, space science, artificial intelligence and life science as its main pillars, is still in its robust early progress. Knowledge-based economies have greatly altered the historical processes of human development, and modern science, including philosophy and the social sciences, has brought profound changes to social production, social interaction and personal lifestyles. Therefore, scientific and technological progress has become a decisive factor in economic development; mastering knowledge of national culture and merging it with the strength of science and technology has become an important indicator of the strength of a country’s comprehensive power, even as the soft power of culture has become an important component of national influence.

All these require a commitment to the priority of developing education, and serve as a ‘first move’ in the field of education. In this sense, we may understand the reasons that many countries in the world, especially developed countries, are in the process of formulating and implementing development strategies for the 21st century, as they strive to seize the high ground in scientific discovery, technological innovation, and industrial upgrading. As one of the measures of the Chinese priority of developing the educational system, China in recent years has moved faster to build up its world-class universities and that focus on world-class disciplines. China continues to promote collaborative innovation in the complex of industry-university-research, and it actively pursues implementation of innovation-driven development strategies that focus on training innovative, all-round and application-oriented talents, so as to make greater contributions to national competitiveness in science and technology.

Third. It is vitally important to truly adhere to the principles of putting people first and meeting their higher needs for a better life in the new era.

In the report of the 19th National Congress of the CCP, President Xi Jinping recognized that socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved. The contradiction that China now faces is between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life. China has steadily met the material needs of food and clothing for over one billion people; on the whole, China has achieved a moderately prosperous society and will soon realize the formation of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. This causes people to have more extensive needs for a better life, with higher demands not only for material and cultural life, but also for democracy, rule of law, fairness, justice, security, and the environment.

Solving the problem of the people’s need for food and clothing, their further needs for development gradually become highlighted. Whether to improve their cultural taste or to participate in public affairs, they need to acquire more knowledge in science and culture, so strengthening cultural education for the whole nation is pivotal. Thus, the problem of unbalanced and insufficient development in the field of Chinese education has become a major constraint in meeting the growing needs of the people for a better life. To promote the all-round development of the people, it is necessary to give priority to developing education, and continuously push forward educational reform and educational innovation to make it fairer and more available. It is also important to strengthen the quality of education rather than its scale, and to promote the balanced development of regional, urban and rural areas with respect to various types of education at all levels, so as to support national modernization in tandem with educational modernization.

Fourth. It is important to accelerate the implementation of new innovation-led development concepts to achieve a sound social development.

Since reform and opening up, China has relied more on studying and borrowing the developmental experiences of other advanced countries while also maintaining the basic principles

of socialism in order to achieve its own rapid development. After more than forty years of such practice, China has made remarkable achievements on the road to socialism with Chinese characteristics and has become the second largest world economy with fairly prosperous standards of living. In the succeeding stage of development, certainly, China will continue to learn from the experiences of other countries, but it is imperative to move toward the path of independent innovation. It is no longer possible to rely mainly on learning from other countries to promote its own development, so China must rely on the modernization of education to promote innovation in science and technology. That is to say, China should develop itself mainly by original innovation.

At the same time, in the early days of reform and opening up, development was often driven through the expansion of the amount of production factors. Of course, in a certain sense, development in that period was unsurpassed. However, the development model has reached an inflection point, which should not be maintained as the original model and ought to be updated. This requires giving priority to developing education in order to cultivate more innovative talents and spur the momentum of science and technology innovation. In other words, it is necessary to give full play to the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of all the people on the level of institutional innovation, which requires education to take the lead in improving the scientific and cultural competence of all Chinese people to cultivate their talents through original innovation. Only with the development of education and the cultivation of the advanced competence of citizens can the high-quality development of society be truly realized.

Fifth. It is important to demand the modernization of education to transform China from a big country in education to a leading power in education by providing lasting momentum for the revitalization of national culture and the enhancement of cultural soft power.

The revitalization of national culture depends first of all on the restoration of national confidence, and the influence of national culture should be based on the confidence in national culture. Only when education has been developed as a national priority can it be confident that education is on the right track. Only when confidence in education is achieved can people have confidence in national culture and thus be cultivated by it. China must continue to prioritize its important educational mission to serve national rejuvenation and cultivate new generation of capable young people who can take on the responsibility of national rejuvenation. National rejuvenation requires the elevation of culture and values. In order to revitalize national culture, it is necessary to integrate the project of fostering virtue in relation to all aspects of mental and moral education, as well as cultural education and education in social practices.

2. On the construction of a modern theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics

Along with the development of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, the Chinese academic circles are also currently pushing forward the construction of a knowledge system with Chinese characteristics. During this process, it is a particularly important task to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics in the new era, because all knowledge systems need to be merged with and developed by education. In this sense, the discipline of education is one that is fundamental and coherent.

It can be said that the construction of a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics in the new era is a matter of the implementation of the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, the independent innovation and sustained competitiveness of science and technology in China. This entails the construction of a Chinese knowledge system in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences, together with the development and continuation of the Chinese cultural lineage, ultimately leading to the realization of the goal of national rejuvenation capable of building China into a great modern socialist country. Therefore, great

efforts must be made to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics in the new era, which requires more effort and exploration based on the reality of the new era. We put forward some suggestions on the ways to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics as follows:

First. The construction of a modern theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics should be based on the practice of education in China in the new era.

Obviously, the practice of education in the new era is based on the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics and serves the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, in addition to adhering to the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics in education, there are other distinctive features of China's educational practice in the new era. Education in China has developed rapidly in the process of meeting high standards and has already caught up with the trend of educational development throughout the world. In the process of catching up in education, China has gradually moved from the status of following others to running in parallel with others, at least in some aspects, and already has had a strong influence in some other aspects.

In the process of matching the trend of world modernization since modern times, China has gradually integrated the essence of Western education into its own educational process. It can be said that, to a certain extent, what has been absorbed from abroad has been digested and processed with Chinese characteristics.

China is a large country with a population of 1.4 billion people, with a large number of educated people and people engaged in educational activities or occupations. As a large country in the process of catching up, the Chinese educational system is comprehensive in all aspects, from the humanities to the social sciences, from knowledge transmission to high-tech innovation, and from civilian life to the military. Therefore, the reality of China shows that it is impossible to follow the blueprints of other countries in everything. China must formulate a plan for the path of development and a map for educational innovation according to its own reality and based on its own needs. It is for this reason that the issue of constructing a knowledge system with Chinese characteristics has been raised in all aspects and in all disciplines. And in the field of education, it is necessary to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics.

Second. China ought to be deeply rooted in traditional Chinese educational methods and wisdom and seek from them the mental and conceptual qualities that are of great value in the genetic makeup of the Chinese nation so as to form a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics.

We believe that China's educational system has unique characteristics. China has produced the historically earliest educational practices that have become embedded in its cultural practices, which serve as an automatic reflection and summary in its educational wisdom by forming an educational system with Chinese characteristics. Stretching for thousands of years without interruption, China's educational system has its own genetic continuity, and it is imbued with the educational wisdom of the Confucian tradition of education, which still survives as the mainstream contemporary educational practice. For example, it maintains a focusing on moral education by emphasizing 'being human', attaching great importance to the education of children, and so on. The development of a nation's educational system, like the development of a person's consciousness, must begin with its own situation as a basis. Where there is no basis, there is no beginning and development. As Xi Jinping remarked, 'We must never forget our history; only then can we open up a new era. We should know how to inherit before we become good at innovation. Outstanding traditional culture is the root of the heritage and development of a country or a nation. Renouncing it is tantamount to severing our cultural lifeline' (Xi, 2017, p. 341).

To be good at carrying forward fine traditional educational methods and wisdom and developing contemporary educational theories in an organic and closely combined way is conducive

to developing contemporary educational theories while inheriting traditional educational methods and wisdom. People understand new situations and issues based on the structure of their existing understanding in the past; in a similar way, a country's theoretical system of education must be based on its own educational reality in order to develop new educational methods and wisdom. Fine traditional Chinese culture and educational practices are rich resources for the development of China's education. Only by being deeply rooted in its own cultural and educational traditions can a country maintain the continued vitality of its education.

Third. Chinese educational systems should innovate with relation to the educational ideology nurtured by the Chinese revolutionary culture since modern times. Since its establishment, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has held high the banner of Marxism; it has led the Chinese people in continuous and unrelenting struggle, and it has continuously modified its revolutionary stances in tandem with its democratic revolution, its ideas of national salvation, and the cause of the people's liberation. The CPC has adapted the basic tenets of Marxism to China's specific reality in selecting from various ideologies and solutions for saving China.

During the process of opening up the road of the Chinese revolution, educational concepts and practices have also been formed. These concepts and practices, closely related to the revolutionary tradition, continue to shape the processes of Chinese education. Marxism brought an epoch-making leap to China, not only by allowing the Chinese people to truly realize their aspirations to be masters of their own country and the Chinese nation to regain its independence in the path of development, but also by allowing China to rapidly catch up with the developmental trends taking place throughout the world. The theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics is required to reflect the educational philosophy developed in the revolutionary tradition, which is precisely the important foundation of the socialist nature of the theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics.

Fourth. The Chinese educational system ought to draw on the latest and most advanced scientific achievements from throughout the world and keep pace with the development of the times. Since ancient times, China has been rich in educational methods and wisdom, but unfortunately it lacked a theoretical system in education. Therefore, the essence and methods of the world's educational theories must be called on to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics in the new era. However, the various educational theories from throughout the world should not be swallowed wholesale without digestion, but be carefully selected in accordance with China's reality as the main focus; this pertains to the essence of educational methods and wisdom, the appropriate educational methods of study, and an awareness of the special attention that needs to be paid to the impact of the new technological revolution, especially with regards to information technology and artificial intelligence.

In China, Marxism is the most fundamental methodology of contemporary philosophy and the social science with Chinese characteristics. However, there are also important background courses that must be studied in order to truly master the essence of Marxist methodology. The main reason for this is that before Western knowledge systems were introduced in China, most of China's knowledge systems were still based in empiricism. In comparison with theoretical knowledge, empirical knowledge has two basic characteristics: first, it is less efficient, often relying on the long-term accumulation of experience, in which teachers lead the students in the learning process; second, it is limited in relation to the effective scope of education, for example, those who learn carpentry do not know how blacksmithing works, and vice versa. Knowledge in theoretical form pertains to the universal validity of abstract principles, thus making systematic education feasible, and this greatly improves its efficiency and effective scope; as the Chinese saying goes, 'Math, physics and chemistry are the strongest powers to the world'.

In fact, knowledge in theoretical form is ideally compatible with large-scale and systematic education in modern society, allowing it to be universally spread. In the past, education based

in empiricism was the common form of education directed to practical activities, in which the outcome of education was measured by the successful accumulation of experience. To develop education with Chinese characteristics, it should be based on the tradition of Chinese education, but it should also go beyond this tradition into modernization, which requires theorizing and systematizing, so as to form a systematic system of knowledge. For example, in his work *Capital*, Marx did not criticize capitalism only in respect to morality, as the utopian socialists did, but rather his criticism was meant to constitute a logical argumentation and narration through the most basic and simple concept of 'commodity', thereby to reveal the essence and laws of capital. Today, the theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics in the new era must be based on such a principle or even a system that can be deduced, which is the ideal goal of the theory of education with Chinese characteristics.

Fifth. It demands to study the nature and development of human beings, and special theoretical issues embedded in educational activities themselves, which relate to the deep level of philosophical worldview.

According to Marx, practice should be the main purpose of theorists, 'Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 6). The process of transforming the world reflects the relationship between the subject and the object. However, in the practical activities of education, people may encounter a special subject-object relationship—the relationship between subject and subject, or the relationship between mutual subject and object. In teaching activities, teachers are not faced with absolutely objective objects, but objects with independent consciousness, free will, emotions, and a creative mind.

With age, this kind of subjectivity becomes stronger and more self-conscious. Therefore, in teaching activities, one must not only recognize the traditionally familiar notion that 'teaching is learning', but also the possibility that, from time to time, some students will come up with more creative ideas than teachers. It means that teachers can inspire students to come up with new and creative ideas, which is, on the contrary, a sure proof of the real success of education. In this sense, education is not only a process of knowledge transmission, but also a process of mutual stimulation of innovation of ideas and knowledge.

We should also mention here that what is at stake involves the internal structure and system of education itself. Xi Jinping emphasized at the National Conference on Education¹ that efforts should be made to construct an educational system for cultivating students who have an all-round foundation in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor studies in order to form a higher level system for cultivating talent.²

That is to say that it is necessary to construct a comprehensive and holistic educational system, rather than to simply highlight one aspect of overall education and rather than to divide education up into separate components. Only by constructing an educational system for students to acquire an all-round development in a comprehensive and holistic way can China truly accomplish the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and realizing the sound development of education.

3. Conclusion

China's education ought to be directed to the fundamental task of fostering virtue and cultivating a new generation of capable young people who can take on the responsibility of national rejuvenation. This is a noble mission for China's educational system on the basis of the changing world landscape. The modernization of society is first and foremost the modernization of people. Only by cultivating generations of people with ambitious ideals and modern knowledge and skills can sufficient human resources be available to achieve the goal of building a great modern socialist country. In-depth consideration should be directed to issues involving the competencies

of future generations capable of shouldering the responsibility of national rejuvenation and the best ways to cultivate high-competence talents, because these issues are of both practical and theoretical importance at present.

Education is a complex process. The establishment of an open theoretical system based on historical traditions and educational practices is the best way to construct a theoretical system of education with Chinese characteristics that meets the needs of the new era. Constructing a forward-looking theoretical system of education with universal guidance will establish China's educational system in the process of modernization and contribute to the dream of building China into one of the leading powers in education.

Notes

1. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-09/10/content_5320835.htm.
2. I believe labor education is the essential part of modern Chinese education to cultivate students' all-round talents. I had a brief discussion on this theme in *Reclaiming the Necessity of Education through Labor*, see *Contemporary Chinese Marxism: Social visions and philosophy of education – An EPAT collective project*, Volume 54 (2022), Issue 10, pp. 1550–1559.

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