

## ❖ ONE ❖

## CHINA'S ONLINE EDUCATION:

*Rhetoric and Realities*

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Although little is currently known of distance education in China, especially in Western educational circles, there is a long-standing well-established instructional television system of distance education that has flourished in China since the 1960s (Howells, 1989). In fact, one of the world's largest education systems is the Dianda system in China, a combined radio-television university system capable of enrolling upwards of 100,000 learners (Keegan, 1994). With the advent of online education, however, China must face a brave new world of innovation. This chapter examines the political rhetoric surrounding the allocation of funds and energies to online learning, considers the critical components of that rhetoric, and discusses the impacts on the way China adopts the new online learning technologies. As you read this chapter, please reflect upon the following questions:

- How does the political rhetoric match or mismatch the reality of online education in China?
- How does the regional economical divide impact the implementation of online education in China?

- What would you question about China's online education as envisioned in the political rhetoric?
- How does online education in China differ from that in the United States? What causes such differences?
- What are the major challenges China is facing in its endeavor with online education? What would you suggest the Chinese government do to overcome the challenges?

It is clear from recent political statements that China is prepared to leverage distance education to reach a broader audience through the Internet. The latest survey on Internet development in China (China Internet Network Information Center, 2003) shows that as of June 30, 2003, there were 25.72 million computers through which at least one person has accessed the Internet and over 68 million Internet users in mainland China. The Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) anticipated more than a million Chinese being able to access distance open higher education starting in fall 1999.

The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (1999) clearly emphasized the importance of the emerging educational technology in "Decisions on Furthering Educational Reform and Advancing Quality Education":

*Part 2, item 15:* take full advantage of the modern distance education network to provide lifetime learning opportunities for all social members, to provide appropriate education needed in rural areas and outlying districts.

At the Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the national leadership (Jiang, 2002) emphasized again the strategic importance of education in national development and the strategy of using technology to leverage education at all levels. The MOE (2002b) made it clear in its Focuses for the Year of 2003:

[Focus on] piloting the network technologies and traditional face-to-face teaching methods . . . conducting research on multimedia and network-based courseware. . . . Actively develop the web-based public service system in education, create and share quality educational resources.

## INTERNET DEMOCRACIES

The Ministry of Education (2002b) made the value of open access very clear in its goal statement:

[One of our goals is to] achieve equal access to education and fairness in education, [to ensure] everyone in the country has the opportunity to receive good education . . . establish an open educational system and a human resource development system that cover the entire country, both cities and rural areas, to create multiple-leveled, multiple-formed learning opportunities for all people.

At the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2002, President Jiang (2002) again stressed the strategic importance of education in his report to the congress, and mentioned in particular the great needs for more accessible and improved education in rural China:

We should . . . promote quality-oriented education to cultivate hundreds of millions of high-quality workers, tens of millions of specialized personnel and a great number of top-notch innovative personnel. . . . We should continue to make nine-year compulsory education universal across the country, intensify vocational education and training, develop continued education and set up a system of life-long education. We should increase input in education, give more support to rural education, and encourage nongovernmental sectors to run schools. We should improve the state policy and system for aiding students in straitened circumstances.

Thus, distance education is seen as a way to transcend social class, and it seems relatively clear that vocational/occupational education is an important component of Jiang's vision of China's education. In a similar fashion, Wei Yu (1999), vice minister of the Ministry of Education at that time, recognized the following as one of the key elements in developing China's modern distance education:

To provide more technologies for the peasants, to apply modern educational technology to promote education in our outlying districts, poorer areas, minority nationality regions, and less-developed areas. For those areas, the first and foremost is to promote nine-year compulsory education and to de-illiteracy, and then to improve the educational level gradually to advance economic development there.

In general, the educational level of people in rural China is significantly lower than that of the city populace, and so is the technology availability. Therefore, when the big cities are ready for Internet-leveraged distance education, the rural poor may just not have the technology or the knowledge

and skills required for online learning. Precisely which areas would benefit from the advanced technologies, particularly the Internet, is not entirely clear despite the rhetoric. In a speech offered by Wei (1999), the importance of radio and television for rural areas seems clear:

We think that, although TV, as the major distance education deliver medium, is one-way broadcasting, it costs much less, especially given the fact that TV is highly accessible—in rural areas the average ownership of TV sets is ninety-two percent in 1997. In addition, currently the costs for the computer networking systems in our country are fairly high, and (the network systems thus) have limited availability. Therefore in the near future, especially in the rural areas, satellite TV education will still be playing an important role. However, as CERNET (the Chinese Education and Research Net) and other computer networking technologies develop, distance education is developing with a trend to be multimedia and interactivity. . . . As a developing country, we must watch the trends closely, and actively conduct related research. Also we must explore a development path based on our own situations. . . . Considering the regional imbalance in economic development, the Chinese government will develop informationized education through three stages: the first is to develop educational technologies, focusing on multimedia, and to promote school applications; the second is to spread knowledge on networking systems, to learn to take advantage of online resources; and the third is to develop Modern Distance Education, to build and provide enormous online resources, so to satisfy the ever-growing needs in the society for lifetime learning.

Thus, it would seem that while radio and television will continue to be the major educational media in rural China, it is not clear if many poor areas will benefit from the Internet connections in the near future. The three-stage development plan (Wei, 1999) seems to be based on the current status of the relatively developed regions, yet in reality, there is a serious shortage of schools, teachers and other basic facilities in rural China (MOE, 2002b), and not only are computer and network technologies not widely accessible there, but also the populace is not well prepared with knowledge and skills for online learning. The State Council (2003) has re-emphasized the importance of education in rural China and has specified that the key task there is to ensure education to all school-aged children by building more schools, making facilities and teachers available, and providing financial support to the poor families. Based on the real needs in rural China, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Education (2002) specify the allocation of educational funds from the central government

to the rural areas in the following fashion: school construction and maintenance (60%), information technology and teaching facilities (10%), purchase of desks and chairs (10%), books and fee waivers for the poor (10%), and professional development of teachers and principals (10%). Although it is envisioned that online learning will reach larger audiences and help fulfill the educational needs across China in the political rhetoric, the reality appears more controversial and challenging with the dramatic differences between the cities and the rural areas in terms of the educational needs and readiness for Internet enhanced education.

### RURAL CHINA: LEFT BEHIND?

The Chinese government attempts to provide equal access to education nationwide, as clearly stated consistently in the political rhetoric (Wei, 1999; Jiang, 2002; MOE, 2002b; State Council, 2003). However, the regional economic conditions vary, drastically in many cases, and the immediate needs for education in those areas vary significantly as a result. The central government realizes the economic divide and attempts to resolve the unhealthy imbalance. The 16th National Congress has put more attention on the development of western regions, which are generally rural, remote, and poor areas. Many policies are established to help speed up the economic development in the western regions, and more money is allocated there for economical and educational development from the central government (State Council, 2003). Online education has been identified as one of the strategies to narrow the educational gap between urban and rural areas. One of the major efforts is to build a computer network system in 152 universities in the western region, with 900 million RMB Yuan (approximately US\$108 million) special fund from the central government (MOE, 2003). However, it is not clear how Internet technology will serve the needs for basic or 9-year compulsory education in the rural areas, which is indeed critically needed, as the government recognizes.

China's Education and Research Network (2003) has identified three distance education models that are currently practiced in rural China: (1) educational CD display centers, (2) satellite TV learning centers, and (3) networked computer labs. Clearly the TV distance education system is, and will still be for a long time, a very important part of the distance education system in rural China, especially for the 9-year compulsory education.

In an important document titled "State Council's decision on Improving Education in Rural China," the State Council (2003) specified the educational goals in rural China, which focus on 9-year compulsory education, vocational education and adult education for the rural populace. In addition to financial investment from all levels of government and fee waivers for the poor, the government is working to establish and to continuously improve a one-to-one educational support system. This support system involves two types of collaboration between the schools and cities/counties in the eastern (developed) and the western (less developed) regions. One type of collaboration is between the eastern schools and their sister schools in the western region; another is between cities and less developed sister counties/cities in the same province.

Through the one-to-one support system, some universities in the developed cities have provided free software, hardware, courseware, and satellite technologies to universities in the western region, such as Shanghai Jiaotong University and Xi'an Jiaotong University to Tibet University (Liu, J., 2003). They have also sent over technicians to help set up the technologies. More courses from the universities in better developed regions are made available to students in the sister universities in the less-developed areas (Liu, J., 2003). At the same time, the MOE is calling for excellent courseware nationwide and will select 1500 quality courseware programs from the pool and make them available to all schools and the general public, free of charge (Feng, 2003). More schools in rural China are getting networked, by satellite or cable, to the Education and Research Network, which provides free teaching and learning resources, and they are also getting free courseware and other resources from their sister schools (Shi, 2003). In Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region alone, since the implementation of the "All Schools Connected Project," over 3,000 schools have built a distance education network system, benefiting 100,000 students in the remote areas (Shi, 2003).

Teachers in rural schools are also learning to use the Internet resources available through the distance education systems to prepare and improve teaching (Liu, W., 2003). However, the policy-driven support system seems to be limited and may not necessarily lead to long-term collaboration. It is not clear if the one-on-one support system will be evaluated or rewarded in any way, or if there are any incentives involved except for the political policies. Rural China is not attracting as much private investment in education as the developed cities are. As a self-regulating governmental behavior in the more and more market-driven economy, it is very hard to ensure or sustain such collaborations to operate

effectively in the long term. More social sectors in addition to the government need to be involved in the tough campaign for equal access to education across the country, online or in person.

## MEETING THE DEMAND: MOTIVES

The motives for Chinese distance education expansion and funding are quite different from those of the Western countries. While some facets of the movement are similar, the motive is strongly rooted in the ability of the government to educate adequately large masses of people (as opposed to trying to make a profit from the learners). As Gao (1991) points out:

In a country like China, which has 1.2 billion people, the demand for education is so great that traditional education cannot be expected to meet the needs. (p. 54)

Thus, while many universities in the United States are trying to find ways to capture this huge distance learning market, it is recognized in China that traditional education cannot possibly serve the entire adult education market, and instead, alternatives must be pursued.

Such a mammoth effort at providing basic education to millions of learners requires differentiated staffing. In order to ensure excellent teaching, only the best university teaching models are offered the opportunity to instruct at a distance. Tutors are employed locally to help with interaction and guidance not provided by radio or TV broadcasts (Zhao, 1988). Web-based distance education in China will also likely rely on a differentiated staffing pattern such as this. It is an economical way to handle large, even huge, numbers of learners. In much the same way that the current U.S. system employs adjuncts and part-time instructors rather than full-time, tenure-track faculty, differentiated staffing patterns can be extremely flexible and economic.

Naturally, given the motives to educate large masses of Chinese in basic education, literacy and work skills, the orientation of this education is information presentation and skill training. The vast majority of offerings via Chinese distance education to date has been highly vocational in nature. As an example, when looking at the number of subjects offered at Central Radio and Television University (CRTVU), there are sixty-five specialties in engineering, while there is only one in Chinese language and literature (Zhao, 1988). Recent trends,

particularly in online learning, are toward the “hot” topics such as information technology, computer science, management, and English language.

### DEMOCRACY REVISITED: OPEN ACCESS

While the rhetoric of democracy is clear through political speeches cited previously here, the reality of implementation is likely to leave the rural poor behind. First, far more access to radio and television exists in rural China than to Internet connections, and this raises questions of open access. While reportedly more than 70,000 public schools employ computer education programs in China and more than 10 million students have mastered basic computer skills, most computer technologies are still available primarily on school grounds and most of these schools are in the cities, with not many in the rural areas. In the relatively developed regions, many schools’ public libraries have Internet connections, and these resources are openly available to all in the community. There are currently four major networking systems in China, including China’s Education and Research Net, which provides regional networking centers devoted to education and research. Thus, access is relatively available, but mostly in centralized locations, such as in working places, offices, and public Internet cafés. As far as individual homes are concerned, it is available mostly in the cities and very rarely in rural China.

One of the recent changes in China’s distance education system can also be seen in the United States. The melding of traditionally residential, high status universities and traditionally distance universities is beginning. The official Web site of the Ministry of Education for the PRC states that the most recent distance higher education will be delivered through a cooperation of the CRTVU and several high-status, traditional universities including top schools like Tsinghua University. This move is surprising given the fact that the distance learning degrees are equivalent in the eyes of the government to traditional degrees.

The rhetoric is clearly centered on open access and social equalization. The reality of economic development for most rural poor will likely not include huge infusions of funds in the form of Internet connections, servers, and computers. The reality is that in rural China the immediate needs are to build more physical schools, to fix the classrooms in dangerous condition, to have more teachers, and to make sure that school-age children can and do go to school (Jiang, 2002;



MOE, 2003; State Council, 2003). Thus, it's clearly stated in the State Council (2003) and MOE (2003) documents that the allocated government money will be used to address the above issues, and only 10% of the special fund is allocated for information technology and teaching facilities (Ministry Of Finance and Ministry Of Education, 2002). The cities are the likely winners in this game of haves and have-nots of Internet technology. The cities are seen by many in the Chinese population and government as the place where technological innovation is most likely to serve two purposes. First, masses of the population perceived as somewhat educated (as opposed to the rural poor with more illiteracy and less education) will be able to leverage their learning via distance education. Second, placing technology in the hands of learners will create a tertiary effect in terms of technological development and economic development. It is hoped that the increase of access to high technology and the application of technology in education will stimulate the development of technological industries, such as software development, hardware manufacturing, and other technology advancement. And the development of computer technology and associated industries, in return, will push back the frontier of online education. Thus despite all the nice hope to narrow the regional gap through online education, it may on the contrary cause more severe imbalance between urban and rural China, when the rich areas benefit from more quality online education while the poor are left behind with low-tech distance education.

## POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The Chinese government has assured all students involved in distance education degree seeking that the rewards for their degrees are equivalent to those earned at traditional universities:

After graduation, in-service (distance) students are recognized as having equivalent status to that of conventional college graduates . . . They receive the same salary as conventional college students . . . When they are assigned a new job, they will be treated equally as conventional college graduates. (Zhao, 1988, p. 225)

Clearly, the government values distance learning outcomes (degrees, certificates, etc.) at the same level in terms of hiring and promotion. However, because learners are often employed full-time while pursuing part-time

education programs, they emerge from the distance learning experience with far more work experience, which gives them an actual advantage in the job market over traditional college students.

This situation has prevailed throughout the radio and television distance learning era. There is no cause to consider that the procedures will likely change dramatically when utilizing the Web as a delivery medium. Thus, what are the likely impacts of this approach, particularly on a society that has a traditionally strong hierarchical education (and employment) system? Of particular interest here is that this system in the past has always been one in which social prestige is based on your educational level and that is based on testing very early in life which tracks learners into specific educational programs. Internet learning, like radio and television learning, can allow many more students to pursue higher education degrees, and it seems that as long as they are able to complete the requirements, they will earn equal status with traditional university graduates.

In many ways, the Chinese distance education history and future plans are relatively progressive. Not only does the government fund the establishment of the online learning centers, but other interests contribute by giving time off, benefits, and salaries to distance learners. From one perspective, this may be seen as unfair. Those in distance programs graduate in a shorter time period with work experience to back up their education, making them highly desirable on the job market. Also, they enjoy pay while they learn as well as equal status with traditional university students. Residential students in China must pay higher tuition fees, earn little or no salary during their education, and typically take more time to complete their programs even under full-time conditions. In essence, the traditional students graduate from a prominent residential Chinese university with the status of the brand name associated with their universities, and little other advantage. Some would argue that this is precisely the elimination of elitism that democratic goals of distance education seek. Perhaps it is, but has it in its current form of TV and radio broadcasts, or will it, in future Internet forms, create more power in the hands of the individuals equally?

## CUSTOMIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Recently, many online education offerings became available in China from the United States and other overseas institutions. However, these attempts are not culturally grounded. The Chinese government values scholars with degrees

from overseas universities, but in many cases, the credibility of a foreign degree via the Internet is questioned in China. Typically, learners enrolled in Internet courses with high-status Chinese universities must take exams in person at an assigned location with photo ID to prevent them from cheating. With strict test administration, the universities offering distance education via the Internet try to maintain their high status by ensuring the same high credibility of their distance degrees as well as the residential ones. Currently, most U.S. online education programs do not require similar ID checks, and many Chinese are thus skeptical about the quality and credibility of these online degrees from a foreign country.

Naturally, Chinese and English are completely different, not only in terms of language but also culturally, and not all Chinese know English well enough to take a course in English, in person or online. Thus it is very likely that if Chinese learners have the opportunity to obtain a degree from a top university in China, they will not choose a barely known Internet-based university overseas in another language. To the extent that universities with stronger brand recognition in China get into the online education game, there may be more of a market for Chinese learners.

## PUBLIC FUNDING AND ALTERNATIVES

For those who are able to access distance learning opportunities, there is a great financial benefit in store. As indicated in an interview with Liu Zhipeng (1999), the associate director of the Higher Education Department within the MOE promotes the Modern Distance Education (MDE) project in order to achieve two goals: (a) to extend the scope of education so that more people can have the opportunity for higher education, and (b) to improve the quality of education with advanced technologies. In the future, the state will invest 360 million RMB yuan (equivalent to U.S. \$45 million approximately) in education on the MDE project, and it will actively seek sponsorship from international organizations and domestic and overseas enterprises as well. The cost to the students, however, is extremely economical. Two traditional, high-status Chinese universities (Shanghai Foreign Language University and Shanghai Jiaotong University) have recently been offering online courses to the public at a cost of between US\$1.00 and US\$1.50, excluding fees for learning materials. This is perhaps one of the most progressive plans in distance learning; the burden of the system is borne primarily by the government. Also in several recent

government documents, it is clearly stated and reconfirmed that the government will increase the investment in education substantially in the years to come.

Several top universities in China have been building and implementing a distance education network, including Web-based degree and non-degree programs. Hu'nan University has developed an online college through collaborative efforts. As of February 22, 2002, the MOE had approved 66 universities to pilot MDE with Internet technologies (MOE, 2002a). Traditionally, distance education in China uses satellite TV networking, simultaneous TV conference, and correspondence as the major delivery methods. And now the Internet is introduced as a powerful leverage to make education available to more audiences with more flexibility. With consistent financial investment to develop online education, the government also encourages corporations, organizations, and other social units to participate in the MDE project, with financial or technological investment or any other form of contribution.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the distance education system employed in China, primarily radio and TV broadcasts in the past, has created a huge distance learning network. This network is being leveraged by the Internet, but its implementation is likely to occur more in the cities and among relatively educated populations. The increasing disparities are only now beginning to emerge between the haves and have-nots in Chinese society. Even with substantial government investment and supportive policies, the development of modern distance education in rural China is far more challenging than it is in the cities. Open access has not been met for online learning activities in China yet, as many individuals do not own computers or have access to the Internet connections at home. Therefore, online education has to be accessed at central locations and/or in the learning centers. In rural areas and less developed regions, the learning centers, existing and new ones, will be leveraged with the Internet, mostly through satellite technologies. The system is highly vocationally oriented, including many topics in information technology. And it is hoped that the teaching and learning of technology will promote the related technology industries, most likely in the cities. Yet in rural China, the critical need is still to secure 9-year compulsory education and to make the basic facilities available. To bridge the gap between the cities and the rural areas will be a long-term,

challenging task (MOE, 2002b), and the market economy makes it even harder to achieve such a goal without heavy investment from the private businesses and industries. While the system as it is currently constructed is highly progressive, with very low cost to the learners, the global capitalism and the commercialized economy certainly challenge such an operational model. With the controversy between political rhetoric and social reality, China yet needs to figure out a system to develop a healthily balanced economy and education across all regions and classes as well.

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