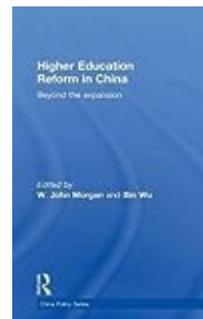




W. John Morgan, Bin Wu. *Higher Education Reform in China.* Oxon: Routledge, 2011. 174 S. ISBN 978-0-415-56413-7; ISBN 978-0-203-82895-3.



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Sammelrez: Higher Education in China

While China is becoming an important player in the international arena, including the field of education, more and more countries and regions are keen to follow the Chinese education development, learn more about Chinese education and culture, and try to strengthen the cooperation with Chinese education. In recent years, especially since the 1990s, China has undertaken profound reforms in education, but a comprehensive overview of Chinese education and its development is not readily available to most international educational policymakers, education professionals and researchers for two reasons. First, the Chinese education system is indeed complex due to its unique cultural and historical context as well as the diversity within the system. Second, there are few studies in English providing a comprehensive review of the system. In this regard, both edited books published in 2011, *Education Reform in China: Changing concepts, contexts and practices* edited by Janette Ryan and *Higher Education Reform in China: Beyond the expansion* edited by W. John Morgan and Bin Wu are im-

portant sources for international readers to better understand Chinese education, particularly its social and cultural context, dynamic changes as well as potential opportunities and challenges. The two books complement each other: while the former focus solely on primary and secondary education, the latter deals exclusively with higher education.

Education Reform in China presents the state-of-the-art of Chinese primary and secondary education with a primary focus on issue relating to curriculum and pedagogy. The book is structured according to a number of key topics, such as curriculum policy and practice, educational quality and access, educational values and beliefs, reform and internationalization, and mutual learning and adaptation between China and the West. It has the potential to become a textbook for Western readers, both academics and practitioners in the field of education, to learn about Chinese school education and reform as well as the cultural foundations, if they have the time and pa-

tience to read its detailed thematic reports in different chapters.

So far, it has been commonly observed that in China students learn by rote, suffer from a heavy workload, and lack abilities for independent learning, innovation and linking their study to social reality. As a consequence, many Western universities have indeed encountered challenges when educating Chinese students, especially those who go abroad for study straight from Chinese high schools. For western educators, there are few sources of information for them to thoroughly understand what goes wrong in Chinese education, how the Chinese authorities and schools reflect upon their problems, and, most importantly, to what extent China is improving its system and catching up with the advanced countries mainly in the West. For that reason alone, Ryan's book deserves a careful reading, as it provides detailed reports and well-structured answers to these questions. Another merit of it is that it also tends to give implications, though not explicitly, on what lessons can be learnt by Western educators by exploring cross-cultural views between China and the West not only in the two chapters in Part V: Mutual learning and adaptation, but also through co-authorship between Chinese and Western scholars in most other chapters.

Higher Education Reform in China narrows its focus onto the expansion of higher education in China, but examines the issue from broad perspectives, such as the demand-supply perspective, the interest relationship perspective, the social justice perspective, and the global perspective. Compared to primary and secondary education, higher education in China is more complicated and difficult to explain due to its structural diversity and state of flux. Its expansion is a key feature underlying the Chinese higher education development since the 1990s, and many other reforms during the same period are either to support the expansion or because of it. To date, this is the most comprehensive book published in English documenting and analysing the different dimensions of the massification of higher education in China, as well as its background, challenges, and societal and economic consequences.

This book, as indicated by the subtitle 'beyond the expansion', does not discuss only the expansion as such. Rather, it is addressed in the context of social and economic development, though with different emphases across the chapters. Indeed, higher education and economy are two dynamic forces that affect each other's development. While the expansion certainly supports the

fast economic development in past decades by providing knowledge and human resources, the reforms are associated with problems that not only backfire on the higher education expansion but also hamper China's efforts at making the transition from a labour-intensive economy to a knowledge-based economy driven by innovation and international competitiveness. These problems, also discussed elsewhere by Yuzhuo Cai, *Chinese Higher Education Reforms and Rendencies. Implications for Norwegian Higher Education in Cooperating with China*, in: K.G. Pettersen (ed.), *SIU Report*, vol 4, 2011, URL: http://www.siu.no/nor/content/download/7700/79536/file/Chinese_higher_education_reforms_and_tendencies_-_til_publicisering.pdf (last access 4 July 2014) 1, include: a lack of sufficient resources and measures to ensure quality, a lack of capability to cultivate top-notch innovative talents, a lack of diversity in terms of educational missions among Chinese higher education institutions, a rise in the unemployment rate of university graduates, unbalanced distributions of higher education resources between regions, and unequal access to higher education between different social groups.

Anyone with an interest in Chinese education must read the two books and possibly another one published by Routledge in the same year by Janette Ryan (ed.), *China's Higher Education Reform and Internationalisation*, London 2010. 2. In addition to using them as good references or handbooks, one finds in them considerable food for thought. However, it would be more beneficial to readers if the editors of each book could add a conclusion chapter, highlighting the most essential issues in Chinese education from the perspective of Western educationalists and summing up the major lessons to be learnt. Nevertheless, some implications can be drawn from the books when it comes to understanding Chinese education. Firstly, the rhetoric of educational reforms does not necessarily lead to real practices in Chinese education. Secondly, the problems and challenges in Chinese higher education can hardly be properly understood without knowing the specific and unique Chinese contexts. Thirdly, the Chinese educational issues/problems of various kinds and between the educational levels cannot be contemplated separately. Rather they are interrelated and influence each other.

Finally, it must be noted that the two books have not taken into account the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) issued by the State Council in July 2010. This is possibly because the manuscripts of the books were prepared before the launch of the Outline.

Nevertheless, both books have laid solid foundations for understanding the context and impetus of a new round of reforms since 2010.

References:

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